

**Wednesday
8 May 2019**

**Volume 659
No. 297**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 8 May 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Devolution Settlement

1. **Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910698]

2. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910699]

3. **Ronnie Cowan** (Inverclyde) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910700]

6. **Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910704]

7. **Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910706]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to mark the 20th anniversary of the first elections to the Scottish Parliament? Three current Members of this House were elected to that Parliament back in 1999, including me, but, far more importantly, it is a good time to reflect on devolution and the potential of the Holyrood Parliament to improve the lives of the people of Scotland.

The UK Government, including my Department, continue to engage in frequent and extensive discussions with the Scottish Government in a number of forums to discuss all aspects related to EU exit. Leaving the EU will of course result in substantially increased powers for the Scottish Parliament.

Pete Wishart: The Secretary of State reinvented history at the weekend when he said:

“I reject the...myth that people were told they would stay in the EU if they voted to stay in the UK”.

The truth is that Scotland voted to stay within the UK but is being dragged screaming and shouting out of the EU against its national collective will. Better Together in fact said:

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

What part of that tweet did he not quite understand?

David Mundell: I was inclined to vote for the hon. Gentleman to succeed your good self, Mr Speaker, before that intemperate question, although I note from his manifesto that he would no longer support independence if he was in your Chair.

I would point the hon. Gentleman to the debate around the EU at the time of the independence referendum, when the former First Minister of Scotland asserted that Scotland would automatically be in the EU as an independent country. That statement proved to be false.

Alan Brown: It is because of nonsense like this and Brexit being imposed on Scotland that many Scots now want a say in their future as regards independence. The Secretary of State's Government accepted the Scottish National party motion on the Claim of Right, which states that it is the sovereign right of the Scottish people to decide their form of government and their constitutional future. Does he still agree with that principle?

David Mundell: Of course I agree with that principle, but I would point the hon. Gentleman to the recent opinion poll showing that only one in five people in Scotland want another independence referendum before 2021.

Ronnie Cowan: In the four parliamentary elections in Scotland since the 2014 referendum, the people of Scotland have voted overwhelmingly for pro-independence parties. Will the Secretary of State recognise that mandate and support moves for indyref2?

David Mundell: My recollection of the 2017 general election is that the SNP lost 500,000 votes and 21 seats and came within 600 votes of losing another six.

Alison Thewliss: During the Scottish Tory conference, Ruth Davidson told STV that she was getting ready to fight an independence referendum. Is there something the Secretary of State would like to tell us? Has the Tory party finally realised that it cannot deny the people of Scotland their right to have a choice over their own future?

David Mundell: As I myself told that conference, there is only one guaranteed way to get an independence referendum off the table and discussion of independence away from the Scottish Parliament, and that is to elect Ruth Davidson as the First Minister of Scotland. [*Laughter.*]

Patrick Grady: It's comedy hour in the House of Commons.

I am not sure whether the Secretary of State fully recognises the implications of accepting the Claim of Right, as he did last year. Can he really believe that

20 years after devolution, once the Brexit process is complete constitutional perfection will have been reached on these islands? Is he really channelling Charles Parnell in reverse and saying to Scotland, “Thus far shalt thou go but no further”?

David Mundell: I am channelling the Edinburgh agreement, which said we would have an independence referendum in 2014 and that both sides would respect the result.

Ross Thomson (Aberdeen South) (Con): As part of our devolution settlement, air passenger duty was devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 2016, but yesterday Nicola Sturgeon broke her promise to cut APD. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me and business bodies that this tax disproportionately hits Aberdeen and the north-east and that, despite Derek Mackay trying to blame Westminster, the SNP would be better served arguing against this APD U-turn than arguing for independence?

David Mundell: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend that the SNP Government would do better to focus on the domestic issues that are important to the people of Scotland rather than on independence. As we reach this 20th anniversary of devolution, there remains some scepticism about the Scottish Parliament, but I remain very positive about the Parliament; it is the Government in that Parliament who are not delivering for Scotland.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Given the Scottish Government’s failure to take on the welfare powers that have been devolved under the Scotland Act, what confidence has the Secretary of State that they will be able to take on the vast range of powers that will come to them as we leave the European Union?

David Mundell: It is obviously a matter of concern that welfare powers are being delayed, some of them until 2024. However, my hon. Friend may not know that this morning Derek Mackay, the Finance Secretary in the Scottish Government, asked for VAT assignment to be delayed until 2021. It does not seem to me that the Scottish Government are focused on taking on these powers; instead, they are focusing on their independence obsession.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): How much funding for Brexit preparation has been received by the Scottish Government, and how much of that has been passed on to councils in Scotland?

David Mundell: The sum is in the region of £100 million. As far as I am aware, none of it has been directly made over to local government in Scotland, although I am sure that the Brexit Secretary and Mike Russell will discuss that topic when they meet in Edinburgh this morning.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): What really matters to Scotland, and to many parts of the north of England, is the Union of the United Kingdom. Does the Secretary of State agree that initiatives such as the borderlands growth deal can enhance the economic success of the Union? Does he also agree that part of the success of that initiative was due to the work done by MPs, councils and Ministers, and that perhaps the SNP Government could learn something from that?

David Mundell: I commend my hon. Friend—as I have done previously—for his work on the borderlands initiative, which demonstrates that in the south of Scotland and the north of England, so much more binds us together than drives us apart. The one thing that would be absolutely disastrous for the borderlands area is the introduction of a separate Scottish currency, and my constituents have made it very clear that they do not want Nicola Sturgeon’s chocolate money.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I have the honour to be one of those three people who were first elected to the Scottish Parliament in 1999, and I am very proud of that. As the Secretary of State will recall, during the years that I spent at Holyrood I spent a lot of time arguing for the interests of my constituency, which we often felt was being neglected by all Governments, including one of my own colour. Today my constituents still feel that they are being left behind by the Scottish Government, who seem to be interested only in the central belt. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is crucial for the interests of all parts of Scotland to be brought to the fore and acted on under devolution?

David Mundell: I commend the hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace), the two other Members who were in that first Scottish Parliament back in 1999. I am very aware of the hon. Gentleman’s efforts to promote the highlands in those days. It is a great disappointment to me, given the range of powers that have been devolved to the Scottish Parliament, that this Scottish Government are one of the most centralist Governments in history, seeking to draw power to the centre rather than to devolve it within Scotland.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Now the SNP says that in its independent Scotland we would have a brand-new currency. Does the Secretary of State agree that the people of Scotland do not want a bureau de change at Berwick, and that the people of Stirling still want to use sterling?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. It is completely ridiculous to suggest that my constituents in Annan should use one currency to get the bus to Carlisle and another currency to get the bus back. This is a ridiculous proposal, and the people of Scotland already see through it.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Two weeks tomorrow the people of Scotland go to the polls, and the Scottish National party will be fighting that election not just resisting the shambles of the Tory Brexit but demanding that the voice of Scotland be heard and the people of Scotland be given a choice over their own future. If my party wins that election, will the Secretary of State abandon his resistance to the Scottish Government being able to consult people on their own future?

David Mundell: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman’s definition of winning that election will be, but that election is to elect Members from Scotland to the European Parliament for as short a period as possible, and that should be the focus of that election.

Tommy Sheppard: That does not answer the question, and it certainly does not sound like the response of someone who believes in the Claim of Right. Is it not

really the case that it does not matter how many elections we win and it does not matter how many times the people of Scotland demand a say in their own future, because the Secretary of State is part of a crumbling Government and his party, which has the support of one in five people in Scotland, will continue to deny them the opportunity to determine their own future?

David Mundell: The fundamental issue is that when the people of Scotland determined their own future in the 2014 referendum and voted decisively to remain in the United Kingdom, the hon. Gentleman and his friends did not like the answer, and their position is to keep going—to challenge that result until they get what they want. But I have been very clear: this Government will not agree to another independence referendum before 2021.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, contrary to the manufactured myth of a power grab, on our leaving Europe the Scottish Government will receive significantly more powers?

David Mundell: That is absolutely the case, and the power grab myth has been deconstructed on many occasions. The reality, as we have heard in previous questions, is that significant powers on welfare and VAT are going to the Scottish Parliament, and the Scottish Government are asking for those powers to be delayed.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I share the Secretary of State's sentiments in reflecting on the second decade of the Scottish Parliament. As someone who has served in both Parliaments he will be well aware of the importance of the Barnett formula, which is the financial mechanism that ensures that the resources of the UK are pooled and shared across each nation based on the needs of the population. In March the UK Government announced the stronger towns fund, which allocates £1.6 billion of funding for towns in England. However, no Barnett consequential has been announced with respect to Scottish towns. So can the Secretary of State enlighten us on how much Scottish towns will receive from this fund, when they will receive it and who will administer the payments?

David Mundell: An announcement on the Scottish towns fund will be made shortly.

Universal Credit: Low-income Families

4. **Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the effect on low-income families of the roll-out of universal credit in Scotland. [910701]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Evidence shows that universal credit is working. We are working closely with the Scottish Government to help them achieve their goals on UC flexibilities. UC Scottish choices are now available to all claimants in Scotland on full service who are not in receipt of a Department for Work and Pensions alternative payment arrangement.

Ruth George: The Scottish choices do not help people to be paid differently if they are receiving less, and Citizens Advice Scotland has raised numerous concerns about the process of migrating on to UC. In one case a

24-year-old single parent was left £90 a week worse off. What are the Government doing to ensure that those on natural migration are aware of their entitlements and do not suffer like that financially?

David Mundell: I am always willing to look into individual cases, and we are working extremely closely with the Scottish Government on their proposals to make the changes they are able to make under the Scotland Act 2016, but of course the Scottish Government are also able to make additional payments to any individual if they choose to do so, but so far they have not chosen to do so.

Lesley Laird (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab): First, I would like to associate myself with the comments made in relation to the 20th anniversary of the Scottish Parliament—undoubtedly Labour's finest achievement.

Universal credit is subject to a two-child cap and the subsequent rape clause. In the Scottish Parliament the Tories called it a fair policy; their Scottish leader calls it a “box-ticking exercise”. Can the Secretary of State for Scotland explain why his Government believe it is fair to force the survivors of rape to relive their trauma to claim the support they and their children need?

David Mundell: As the hon. Lady knows, this issue has been debated frequently in this House and in the Scottish Parliament, and the justification for the process has been set out: it is actually to help people in those circumstances. As she knows, the Scottish Parliament has the power to do something different, and if it does not agree with this policy, it could do something different right now. Instead, it is focused on independence rather than on bringing in new welfare arrangements.

Lesley Laird: That is a pathetic response to what really is a callous and cruel policy. The reality is that the right hon. Gentleman's Government chose this policy; they chose to cut support to the poorest while giving tax cuts to the richest. They say that the best route out of poverty is a job, but under this Government, jobs are paying less than the living wage and often involve zero-hours contracts. At the weekend, Ruth Davidson talked about the Scottish Tories not wanting anyone to be left behind. Can the Secretary of State explain how cutting tax credits for working families and forcing them to go to food banks is not leaving anyone behind?

David Mundell: What a surprising contribution from the hon. Lady—I would have thought that if she believed that, her colleagues in the Scottish Parliament would be advocating it. Instead, we learned recently that Richard Leonard's keynote policy for Scottish Labour is an NHS pet service.

European Elections: Voter Registration

5. **Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of arrangements for voter registration for the forthcoming European parliamentary elections in Scotland. [910702]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I am content that the arrangements are robust. The UK Government have worked to ensure that the “register to vote” website, which has been running since 2014, is secure against malicious attacks and robust enough to manage traffic in line with registration deadlines.

Martin Whitfield: If it is robust enough, how come only 288 of the 2,000 non-UK EU citizens in East Lothian have managed to register? Is that really the foundation of the Secretary of State's democracy?

David Mundell: If the hon. Gentleman can bring forward details of any citizens who have tried to register but not succeeded in doing so, I will obviously look at that. There have been many campaigns to encourage people to register, and I particularly commend the *Daily Record* newspaper for its efforts in that regard.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a big advocate of the Prime Minister's Brexit deal. If he has such great confidence in that deal, why does he not have confidence in the people and allow them to decide whether it is a deal that they want?

David Mundell: The people of Scotland made their decision in 2014; the people of the United Kingdom made their decision in 2016.

Leaving the EU: Devolution Settlement

8. **Deidre Brock** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910707]

9. **Mhairi Black** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910708]

10. **Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910709]

11. **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What recent discussions his Department has had with the Scottish Government on the potential effect on the devolution settlement of the UK leaving the EU. [910710]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I refer the hon. Members to my answer to Questions 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7.

Deidre Brock: It has emerged that the polling company Ipsos MORI has been commissioned by the Cabinet Office to conduct polling in Scotland on the state of the Union. That is surely a sign that this Government are deeply rattled by the growing support for independence. Was the Secretary of State made aware of this, and will he support the full publication of this taxpayer-funded polling?

David Mundell: It might surprise the hon. Lady to learn that all Governments, including the Scottish Government, poll on their policies.

Mhairi Black: The Secretary of State asked for context in an earlier answer. The House of Commons Library has a Government-issued leaflet from 2014 explaining

why people should vote against Scottish independence. Under the heading "An influential voice in important places", it says:

"As one of the EU's 'big four' nations, the UK is more able to protect Scottish interests".

Ruth Davidson herself said that voting no meant that we would stay in the EU. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to get his story straight?

David Mundell: To give the hon. Lady some context, David Cameron made it very clear in 2013 that there would be an EU referendum. The SNP and the former First Minister's assertion was that Scotland would automatically stay in the EU if it became independent. That was not correct. The question for those advocating a yes in 2014, as it is now, is how an independent Scotland would become a member of the EU.

Brendan O'Hara: Many of us in Argyll and Bute have been trying for a long time to pin down the Secretary of State on this question. Will he now take the opportunity to spell out exactly what he believes the economic benefits will be, specifically for my Argyll and Bute constituency, of ending freedom of movement?

David Mundell: We are engaged in a year-long consultation on the immigration White Paper. I am happy, as part of that consultation and engagement, to come to Argyll and Bute, just as the Home Secretary went to Aberdeenshire last week, to hear what businesses and people there have to say.

Drew Hendry: It was reported at the weekend that the Secretary of State could not even get toast out of a toaster. We cannot get an answer out of him. Are there any circumstances whereby he would support the right of the Scottish people to determine their own future through a referendum?

David Mundell: I support the right of the Scottish people to determine their future through a referendum. They already have—on 18 September 2014, when they voted decisively to remain in the United Kingdom.

Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): They asked for more powers over welfare and they have delayed them or handed them back to the Department for Work and Pensions; they asked for the power to cut air departure tax and they have U-turned; they asked for power over VAT assignment receipts and they have postponed it. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, rather than moaning about all the powers they do not have, Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish Government should get on with using the extensive powers they do have to make the lives of my constituents in East Renfrewshire better?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. The Scottish Parliament has tremendous potential to make a difference for the people of Scotland, but it will not do so as long as it is bogged down in the SNP's independence agenda. We hear about further legislation being introduced on that rather than on issues that matter: health, education and transport.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): People in Corby are overwhelmingly pro the United Kingdom Union, but voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union. What impact does my right hon. Friend believe that ignoring referendum results and not leaving the European Union would have on the devolution settlement?

David Mundell: I am absolutely clear that the results of both referendums—in 2014 and in 2016—should be honoured. The Government are determined to do so.

Child Poverty

12. **Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab):** What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the level of child poverty in Scotland.

[910711]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I have regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on a range of issues and we are committed to action that will make a meaningful difference to the lives of disadvantaged children and families. This goes beyond a focus on the safety net of the welfare system to tackle the root causes of poverty and disadvantage. The UK Government will work with the Scottish Government on their child poverty strategy given that this spans both devolved and reserved interests.

Hugh Gaffney: In a recent report, the Resolution Foundation projected that the Scottish child poverty rate will hit 29% by 2023-24—the highest rate in 20 years—and concluded that the Government's welfare reforms are to blame. Will the Secretary of State take a stand in the Cabinet against policies like the unfair benefit freeze or will he allow more children to fall into poverty?

David Mundell: I do not accept that analysis. Of course there is concern about the number of children in poverty in Scotland, but, as I outlined in my initial answer, the best way to resolve it is for the Scottish Government and the UK Government to work together and focus on a really important issue rather than constantly discuss the constitution.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): While the Secretary of State gives false assurances about child poverty in Scotland, the Trussell Trust tells me that in my constituency it is giving out more and more food parcels to families and children. How is he using his power to ensure families in Scotland are not relying on food banks?

David Mundell: The first thing, as I have outlined in virtually every answer today, is to get the political debate in Scotland off the constitution and on to the issues that really matter to ordinary families. The idea of bringing forward a new independence referendum Bill in the Scottish Parliament, which would take up time when the Scottish Parliament could focus on issues such as this, is the problem right now.

Scotch Whisky: Economic Impact

13. **Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con):** What assessment he has made of the findings of the Scotch Whisky Association's "Scotch Whisky Economic Impact Report 2018", published on 30 April 2019.

[910712]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): I am very pleased to see how this important sector is thriving. The UK Government are supporting the Scotch whisky success story by freezing duty on spirits again this year. That demonstrates clearly how the UK Government are taking the right decisions on taxes and delivering for the businesses and people of Scotland.

Douglas Ross: The report highlighted that the Scotch whisky industry's contribution to the UK economy has increased by 10% to £5.5 billion. Due to the UK Government's welcome announcements, the industry has reinvested £500 million over the past five years in production, distribution and tourism. Does the Secretary of State agree, however, that we can do more to ensure a fairer taxation system for the Scotch whisky industry?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend represents the constituency with the most distilleries in the United Kingdom and is a very powerful advocate for the industry. We consider it to be of very great importance, and we will look at any proposals it cares to bring forward in that regard.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [910748] **Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab):** If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 8 May.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in offering our heartfelt condolences to the family and friends of Guardsman Mathew Talbot of the 1st Battalion Coldstream Guards, who sadly died in anti-poaching operations in Malawi.

I am also sure Members from across the House will want to join me in sending my very best wishes to Their Royal Highnesses the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on the birth of their son.

Monday marked the beginning of Ramadan—a time of peace, devotion and charity. I know Members from across the House will want to join me in saying to Muslims in the UK and across the world, "Ramadan kareem". Later today, I will host a reception to celebrate Vaisakhi and the immense contribution that the Sikh community makes to this country.

This week marks 20 years since the 1999 Scottish Parliament and National Assembly for Wales elections. Two decades on, we remain committed to strengthening devolution within the United Kingdom. As we leave the European Union, we will bring new powers and responsibilities to Holyrood and Cardiff Bay.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Janet Daby: I agree with all the tributes paid by the Prime Minister.

Data from the TUC suggests that 780,000 people are on zero-hours contracts, and that two thirds of them would prefer guaranteed hours. A constituent of mine lives in privately rented accommodation and works two jobs on zero-hours contracts. After getting his third job on a

zero-hours contract, his rent went up. He and his family survive, but only by using a local food bank. Will the Prime Minister end these burning injustices and ban zero-hours contracts?

The Prime Minister: The party that recognised the issue with zero-hours contracts was the Conservative party in government. The Labour party did nothing about them; it was the Conservatives that banned exclusive zero-hours contracts.

Q3. [910750] **Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con):** School funding is a huge issue on doorsteps in Lewes, because for decades schools in Lewes have had significantly less funding than neighbouring authorities such as Brighton and Hove. Last year, schools in Sussex got a 6% increase in funding, and this year schools such as Priory School in Lewes should be getting a 7.6% increase in their per-pupil funding, but the council is keeping back £64,000 of it. Will the Prime Minister do all she can to ensure that schools get the funding they have been awarded?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We recognised that we have been asking schools to do more and responded with the highest level of school funding on record, and we introduced the new national funding formula to make the distribution fairer, but of course it is still the case that local authorities are responsible for determining individual schools' budgets from the overall sum they have received. They have a responsibility, and I am sure that hon. Members will look to their local authorities to make sure that where schools should be receiving extra money, the local authorities are passing it on. But I will also ask those at the Department for Education, who will have heard my hon. Friend's question, to write to her in more detail about it.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in sending condolences to the family and friends of Guardsman Mathew Talbot, who died while on anti-poaching activities. It is a reminder of the diverse work that the armed forces do, and we thank them for it and for the help they are giving to the people of Malawi. I join her also in welcoming the birth of the baby to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, and, along with all of us, in recognising and enjoying Ramadan and Vaisakhi at this time. It is important to show the diversity of this country and celebrate all religious festivals.

I hope the whole House will also join me in congratulating a great football team: Manchester City, on winning the women's FA cup. In view of Liverpool's amazing performance last night, perhaps the Prime Minister could take some tips from Jürgen Klopp on how to get a good result in Europe.

Our national health service is our country's greatest social achievement. Its staff show amazing dedication, but this Government's failures are taking their toll. An NHS staff survey found that 40% of staff had reported suffering work-related stress in the past year alone. Can the Government explain why staff are being so severely let down by this Government?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to the right hon. Gentleman that when we look at the Liverpool win over Barcelona last night, we see that it shows that when everybody says, "It's all over and your European opposition

have got you beat. The clock's ticking down, it's time to concede defeat", actually we can still secure success if everyone comes together.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about staffing in the NHS. For too long Governments have failed to produce the proper workforce planning to give our staff in the NHS the care they deserve. It is this Government, with their long-term plan, who are ensuring that we give that care to staff. NHS staff work hard, caring for patients, and this Government will care for NHS staff. It is only because we are able to give the NHS its biggest cash boost in its history and to give it that long-term plan that we will deliver for NHS staff.

Jeremy Corbyn: Under the last Labour Government, NHS investment rose by 6% a year, but under this Government it has barely reached 1.5%. Five thousand nurses and midwives from European Union countries have left the NHS in the past two years, and there are 100,000 staff vacancies across the NHS in England alone. The Royal College of Radiologists recently said the shortage of cancer doctors "puts care at risk". What is the Prime Minister doing to remedy this dangerous situation?

The Prime Minister: What have seen this year? We have seen the numbers of doctors and nurses in the NHS at their highest level in its 70-year history. As I say, our NHS staff work hard 24/7 and their dedication is second to none. I am proud of our NHS. The right hon. Gentleman talks down our NHS. Let us just remember this: at the last general election, the Labour party promised to give the NHS less money than the Conservative Government are giving it. The Labour party in government would crash the economy, which would mean less money available for the NHS. And who is the only party in government that has cut funding to the NHS? It is the Labour party.

Jeremy Corbyn: Nobody on this side of the House ever talks down the NHS—it is Labour's greatest achievement. The principle of healthcare free at the point of need as a human right was a Labour achievement, and every Tory MP voted against it.

Today is World Ovarian Cancer Day. As for all cancers, the early diagnosis of ovarian cancer is essential. In February, almost a quarter of patients waited more than two months to start cancer treatment following a GP referral—the worst performance on record. Will the Prime Minister apologise to the thousands of cancer patients who are enduring weeks of unbelievable stress and worry while they wait to start the treatment that, to have a better chance of survival, they should be able to start quickly after they have been referred?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of the early diagnosis and treatment of ovarian cancer, of other cancers and of other conditions as well, which is why a key part of the 10-year plan—the long-term plan for the NHS that is being put forward under this Government—is about early diagnosis. We recognise the importance of that. The right hon. Gentleman might like to reflect on the fact that there is a part of the United Kingdom in which the urgent cancer treatment target has not been met since June 2008. Where is that? In Wales, under Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: Under the NHS in Wales, more people are surviving cancer than ever before. We should welcome the work that has been done.

The Royal College of Radiologists said, “our workforce projections are increasingly bleak”, and almost half of all women with ovarian cancer reported having to visit the GP three times before they were referred for a test. Today, we learned that GP numbers are experiencing their first sustained fall for 50 years. GPs often play the vital role in the early identification of cancers and other serious problems. Does the Prime Minister think it is acceptable that one third of people who need an urgent GP appointment on the day that they ask for one are being turned away because of the shortage of GPs?

The Prime Minister: We recognise that GPs are a vital part of the NHS, and there are actually more GPs in the NHS today than there were in 2015. We have made it easier for people to access their GPs by ensuring that GP surgeries are open for more days of the week. We are incentivising GP trainees to work in hard-to-recruit areas and making it easier and quicker for qualified doctors to return to the NHS. Under our NHS long-term plan, we will see—for the first time in its 70-year history—the proportion of funding for primary medical and community care increasing as a percentage of the NHS budget. That is because it is this Government who recognise the importance of primary care in our national health service, and it is this Government whose careful management of the economy means there is money available to put into our national health service.

Jeremy Corbyn: Mr Speaker, if you go to any A&E department in the country, you will find that staff are under enormous pressure precisely because there is a shortage of GPs available to see people in the first place. At the same time as he promotes private GP services, the Conservative Secretary of State for Health and Social Care is overseeing the biggest drop in NHS GPs for 50 years. One in 10 GPs are now seeing twice as many patients as is safe for them to see—that is the pressure they are under. The NHS has failed to meet its A&E waiting time target for nearly four years. In March this year, more than one in five patients waited more than four hours to be seen. Will the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government, apologise to the tens of thousands of people waiting for too long in deep distress just to get seen at an A&E department, because of the pressure A&Es are under?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the importance of these targets in the NHS. That is why one of the elements of the 10-year long-term plan in the NHS—funded by the biggest cash boost in the NHS’s history, which was given by this Conservative Government because of their good management of the economy—is to ensure that we are improving those targets. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman would like to stand up and apologise for the fact that the A&E waiting-time target has not been met not for four years, but for over a decade under a Labour Government in Wales.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that, under a Tory Government, spending and investment in the NHS is less than it was under Labour, and, even with the Prime Minister’s funding announcements, that remains the

case. The complacent attitude and platitudes hide the reality that, under the Tories, our health service is going through the longest funding squeeze in history: 20,000 jobs in mental health units are unfilled; public satisfaction with GP services is the worst on record; cancer treatment delays are the worst on record; A&E waiting times are the worst on record; and, tragically, infant mortality is rising. Will the Prime Minister admit that the Government have failed the health service, failed NHS staff, and, therefore failed the patients who rely on the NHS?

The Prime Minister: There are more people alive today because our cancer treatment has improved than would have been the case in 2010. At the previous election, someone said that an extra £7 billion for the NHS would

“give our NHS the resources it needs to deliver the best possible care for patients.”

I wonder who that was. It was none other than the Leader of the Opposition. Are this Government giving the NHS £7 billion? No! Are they giving it twice that—£14 billion? No! They are giving the NHS £20 billion. I am proud of this Government’s record and the Conservative party’s record on the NHS. It is the Conservative party that is giving the NHS its biggest cash boost in its history. It is the Conservative party that is giving it a sustainable 10-year long-term plan to ensure that it is there for people in the future. Under the Conservative party, we have seen more nurses and more doctors in our national health service dedicated to caring for patients. That is only possible because it is the Conservative Government who manage our economy and manage our public finances. A Labour party in government would crash our economy, meaning less money for the NHS, less money for its staff and less care for its patients.

Q4. [910751] **Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): May I join the Prime Minister in congratulating the Duke and Duchess of Sussex on the birth of their son? Was it not wonderful to see Prince Harry bursting with happiness as he shared the news with the nation? I do hope that he will be taking some time off to spend with Meghan and the baby, but statutory paternity leave is just two weeks and take-up of shared parental leave is low. Will my right hon. Friend consider introducing a longer period of paid parental leave just for partners, which will be good for new dads, mums and their children?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue and I thank her for doing so. I recognise the importance of this for many parents. Currently, parents can use the shared parental leave and pay scheme to take up to six months off work together, or to stagger their leave and pay so that one of them is always at home with their child in the first year. We are evaluating the shared parental leave and pay scheme. We want to see how we can improve the system for parents. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy hopes to publish findings on this issue later this year.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I also congratulate the Duke and Duchess of Wessex—*[Interruption.]* Sussex. We have had 113 days since the Prime Minister’s deal was rejected by Parliament—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Members are rather over-excitable. The right hon. Gentleman's question must and will be heard.

Ian Blackford: It has been 113 days since the Prime Minister's deal was rejected by Parliament. A month of Tory talks with Labour, and we are still no further forward. The clock is ticking down and yet the Prime Minister is silent. When exactly will this House have an update from the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I had hoped that the right hon. Gentleman would join me in congratulating the Earl and Countess of Dumbarton on the birth of their child.

We are indeed talking with the Labour party. The public gave this House a very clear message last week—that they want us to get on and deliver Brexit. It is absolutely right that we do so, and we are working on an agreement that can command a majority of this House. If the right hon. Gentleman is so keen for us to get on with delivering Brexit, why did he not vote for the deal in the first place?

Ian Blackford: Scotland does not want a Labour-Tory Brexit stitch-up. Scotland voted to remain, and once again—with no Scottish representation in the talks—our nation is being ignored. Does the Prime Minister think that this is good enough for a supposed Union of equals? She must confirm today that any deal will be put back to the people for a final say.

The Prime Minister: I have had talks with the right hon. Gentleman in the past on the issue of the Brexit deal. I have also discussed the matter with the First Minister of Scotland, and it has been made clear that any discussions on these matters should be with the First Minister. On the question of a second referendum, I remain absolutely of the view, as I have always been—I am not going to change my answer to him—that we should be delivering on the result of the first referendum that took place.

Q10. [910758] **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): Mr Speaker, the whole House—and, indeed, the nation—knows that you are an Arsenal superfan, but other teams are available. One such team is AFC Fylde, who have reached Wembley not once, but twice this season. May I ask the Prime Minister to join me in congratulating and wishing them well, not just for their performance on the pitch, but for their excellent work in the schools and prisons in my community, and may I urge the Government to support AFC Fylde in their endeavours?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to congratulate AFC Fylde, who I believe are known as the Coasters, on their recent success. We wish them the best for the play-off final at Wembley. AFC Fylde is a very good example of how clubs can engage with their local communities. We want to see these partnerships taking place, as they lead to excellent work in communities. We are currently investing more money than ever in community football programmes and facilities, and we fully intend the funding levels in this area to continue. We have regular meetings with the FA and Premier League to encourage this activity at a local level, but my hon. Friend is right to congratulate AFC Fylde not only on their success on the pitch, but on the changes that they are making to lives in their community through the work they are doing there.

Q2. [910749] **Eleanor Smith** (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): I am the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on adult social care, and I would like to know when the long-awaited Green Paper on social care will be published. We have been waiting years for this. In January, the Health and Social Care Secretary said that it would happen “before April”. It is now May. Will the Prime Minister tell me when it will finally be available?

The Prime Minister: I commend the hon. Lady for her work on the APPG. We are working on providing the Green Paper on social care. She complains that it has been delayed for a matter of months, but may I remind her that the last Labour Government had 13 years to deliver a sustainable social care system, and they did absolutely nothing?

Q13. [910761] **Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister will be aware that many countries now require petrol to contain 10% ethanol. The effect of that measure in Britain would be a reduction in emissions equivalent to taking 700,000 cars off the road, and it would also secure jobs in the ethanol plants of the north-east of England. Will the Government move swiftly on this environmental measure so that we can have E10 here?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the work that the all-party parliamentary group for British bioethanol is doing on this issue. E10 would help to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but it is not approved for use in all petrol vehicles. Any decision to introduce the new grade of petrol must balance the needs of consumers with the emissions reductions it could help to deliver. We will be publishing our next steps on E10 petrol later in the year. I am sure that the Department for Transport will study with interest the findings of the APPG's inquiry into the issue.

Q5. [910753] **Joan Ryan** (Enfield North) (Change UK): People are fed up with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition blaming each other and only caring about a Brexit that suits them. Meanwhile, in Enfield, 34,000 children live below the poverty line and face a Brexit future that offers them nothing. Parliament is gridlocked. When will the Prime Minister do the right thing and go back to the country with a people's vote?

The Prime Minister: I answered the question about a second referendum earlier and my view has not changed in the few minutes since I did so. I believe that we should deliver on the first referendum. But can I challenge the right hon. Lady on what she said? It is not right that outside the European Union those children have no future. This country has a bright future outside the European Union, and that is the message she should be giving to her constituents.

Q14. [910762] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): Today the Government introduce the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill. Is my right hon. Friend aware of the growing concern at the demolition of the award-winning, listed Richmond House to make way for a permanent replica House of Commons where MPs could be parked for many years? Given that the decant may now be delayed until 2028, will her Government ensure that for reasons of safety we get on with the work

as quickly as possible, and that when a decant becomes necessary it is for as short a time as possible into a temporary, cost-effective Chamber?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend has raised an important issue, because obviously the Palace of Westminster is recognised all over the world as a symbol of democracy, and the decision that was taken by Parliament to approve the restoration and renewal programme was a huge step towards its protection. As he says, we will be introducing the Bill today, and I am pleased that we are able to do that. The decision to move to Richmond House was of course a matter for Parliament. I understand that although Richmond House will be substantially redeveloped, the proposals will retain Richmond Terrace and the Whitehall façade. I am sure that, as he indicated at the end of his question, he will agree with me that it is imperative that Parliament keeps the total bill as low as possible.

Q6. [910754] **Sandy Martin** (Ipswich) (Lab): My constituent Carla Cotton struggles with ME and fibromyalgia. Her eight-year-old son has severe hypermobility problems and cannot feed or toilet himself. When his higher rate disability living allowance was stopped last August, Ms Cotton also lost her carers allowance and the severe disabled child element of child tax credit. Her appeal is not set to be heard until the end of this month, and in the meantime her washing machine and oven are set to be taken away for non-payment of debts. What will the Prime Minister do to prevent families waiting for appeals from falling into abject poverty?

The Prime Minister: Obviously the hon. Gentleman has set out a very specific case and I will ensure that the Department looks at that case. It is—[*Interruption.*] I will ensure that the Department looks carefully at the case that he has set out. It is an important issue. The Department for Work and Pensions has been doing work to ensure that appeals can be heard in a timely fashion to give people that confidence and reassurance.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): In the light of last week's debate in this place and the advice of the Committee on Climate Change, could the Prime Minister indicate whether the Government will be legislating for net zero emissions by 2050?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend, who is a regular and consistent champion on these issues of environment and climate change. We are looking at the result of the review that was undertaken by the independent committee in relation to our targets for the future. We have, as I am sure she would agree, a good record in our decarbonisation and changes to emissions that we have been undertaking over recent years. We will look very carefully at the report and make a formal response to it in due course.

Q7. [910755] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In Sheffield we have seen youth services cut by 64% as a result of the Government's austerity agenda. At the same time, we are seeing an increase in knife crime. The report by the APPG on knife crime that was released yesterday highlighted this link across the country. When will the Prime Minister recognise that this is for real and that the decimation of

youth services is leaving our young people vulnerable to crime? What will she do to restore these vital services that should be there to support them?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the concerns about the level of knife crime. That is why I will be chairing the first serious violence taskforce this afternoon, following the summit we held a few weeks ago, bringing all parts of Government together to ensure that we are putting all efforts into dealing with this issue. Diverse elements need to be addressed, and we need to ensure that we turn young people away from violence. That is being done in various ways across the country, and Government are clear about the need for us to work with local authorities and others across the board to deal with this very difficult issue.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I know the Prime Minister will welcome the news that Asia Bibi, who was persecuted for her faith, is on her way to Canada, which has offered her sanctuary. I think everyone wants to know the Prime Minister's answer to this question: why did Canada offer sanctuary to Asia Bibi, but the United Kingdom did not? Will future such cases of religious freedom be looked at differently by the United Kingdom?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the reports that Asia Bibi has been able to travel freely and can now make decisions about her future. Our concern was always her safety and security. We were in close contact with the Government of Pakistan and a range of international partners who were considering the offers that would be available to Asia Bibi. Canada made this offer, and we felt it was right and appropriate that we supported that offer. That is important. We have a proud record of welcoming people here who have been persecuted because of their faith, and we will continue that record, but in individual cases like this, it is important for international partners to work together with the key aim constantly of ensuring that the safety, security and best interests of the individual are put first and foremost.

Q8. [910756] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): When 12-year-old Zac Gormley, a family friend, is the latest victim of an after-school mugging, which has traumatised him, and in the same week another family are terrified by masked robbers in their own home, leafy Ealing and Chiswick feel like they are becoming the wild west. The Prime Minister said that austerity is over, so when will we get back the 21,000 police officers—300 locally—cut on her watch?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Lady knows, we are making around £1 billion extra available for police this year, which includes a significant amount of extra money available for the Metropolitan police. Extra money is also being put into violence reduction units in hotspots around the country, including London, to ensure that we deal with the issue of serious violence, which the Government take very seriously and will be dealing with in a number of ways across Departments.

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has tried her best. Nobody could fault or doubt her commitment and sense of duty, but she has failed. She has failed to

deliver on her promises. We have lost 1,300 hard-working councillors, and sadly the public no longer trust her to run the Brexit negotiations. Is it not time to step aside and let someone new lead our party, our country and the negotiations?

The Prime Minister: First, may I say to my hon. Friend that I am sorry that we saw so many good Conservative councillors lose their seats last week, often through no fault of their own? I have been a councillor; I know the hard work and dedication that it takes. I have also been a councillor who has stood in an election against a difficult national background under a Conservative Government, so I know what that feels like as well. I thank all those councillors for their hard work, and I congratulate those Conservative councillors who won their seats for the first time across the country. May I also say to my hon. Friend—*[Interruption.]* No, wait for it. Actually, this is not an issue about me, and it is not an issue about her. If it were an issue about me and how I vote, we would already have left the European Union.

Q9. [910757] **Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am pleased that the Prime Minister acknowledged, when prompted, the achievements of Liverpool football club. I hope she will also congratulate Sheffield United on their rightful return to the premiership under the inspirational leadership of Chris Wilder.

In March, I brought 14 Sheffield headteachers to meet the Schools Minister and deliver a letter to Downing Street signed by 171 of their colleagues. The reply did not address their concerns that the 8% real-terms cut in funding since 2010 has brought our schools to a tipping point, reducing subject choice, limiting support for special needs and leaving them unable to cope with growing mental health demands. The changes in the national funding formula do not address the crisis, so what will the Prime Minister do to ensure that our children get the education they deserve?

The Prime Minister: At the risk of starting a trend, we have had Liverpool, AFC Fylde and now Sheffield United, and I am happy to congratulate it in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests.

On the issue of education, as I have said, more money is available. We are making more money available in every area for every school. That is what this Government are doing. In his own area, he sees several thousand more children in good and outstanding schools; that is important. The Labour party may talk constantly about the money going into schools, but what matters is the quality of education that children receive. More children in his area in good and outstanding schools, the disadvantage attainment gap narrowed and more disadvantaged young people going to university—that is a good record. It is a record this Government can be proud of.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I, too, congratulate the Duke and Duchess of Sussex? As a former member of the Coldstream Guards, may I pass on my sympathy to the family of Guardsman Mathew Talbot, who has recently been killed?

May I congratulate the new Secretary of State for Defence on her appointment? It is a highly privileged position to be in, and she will be responsible for sending our brave men and women into dangerous positions.

To do that, she must gain their respect and get to know them. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is, in itself, a full-time job?

The Prime Minister: First, may I take the opportunity my hon. Friend has given me to commend the former Secretary of State for Defence for his commitment to the armed forces—the men and women of our armed forces?

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that, obviously, as Secretary of State for Defence my right hon. Friend will be needing to get to know the men and women of our armed forces. I have to say that I think my right hon. Friend, as a former Minister in the Ministry of Defence and a Royal Naval reservist, starts from a very good position to do that. May I also say to my hon. Friend, on the implication of his question, that there is a lot to be done in our armed forces on the questions of equality? I think my right hon. Friend is absolutely the right person to be dealing with that issue, as well as ensuring that she is speaking up for and promoting the best interests of the brave men and women of all our armed forces.

Q11. [910759] **Mary Creagh** (Wakefield) (Lab): Liverpool manager Jürgen Klopp is an optimist, which is why he supports a public vote, and every football fan knows that the biggest prize lies in Europe. There is no stable majority for the Prime Minister's deal in this place without putting it back to the people, and even the former chair of her party, Eric Pickles, and members of the Eurosceptic ERG are now saying the same. Why does she persist in saying that they are all wrong and that she is right; and if she is right, what on earth is her plan?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady makes out as though I am the only person across this House who thinks we should not have a second referendum. In fact, this House has consistently rejected a second referendum.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the 2017 law requiring everyone in China to co-operate with that communist country's intelligence services, would it not be naive to the point of negligence to allow Huawei further to penetrate our critical national infrastructure, and should we not be grateful to all those Ministers, present and former, who have opposed this reckless recommendation?

The Prime Minister: We are taking a robust risk-based approach that is right for our UK market and network and that addresses the UK national security needs. The UK is not considering any options that would put our national security communications at risk, either within the UK or with our closest allies. No one takes national security more seriously than I do, and I say to my right hon. Friend that I think my record speaks for itself.

Q12. [910760] **Jo Platt** (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): Labour Members constantly raise the burning injustices that are going unchallenged by this Government—gender inequality, pay inequality and social inequality. Now we see yet another emerging inequality: the Centre For Towns has found that 55% of digital jobs are in the south-east, with just 12% in the north. Is this Prime Minister going to do anything to help to renew our post-industrial northern towns, such as Leigh, with the

emerging digital and cyber sectors, or has the Tory party's psychodrama killed off any attempt at bringing together the north and the south?

The Prime Minister: It is under this Government that we see the lowest gender pay gap. It is this Government that introduced the race disparity audit, which is, finally, properly shining a light on public services and what is happening for people from different communities. On the issue that the hon. Lady raises about jobs in the digital sector, the industrial strategy deals with AI and digital as one of its grand challenges. The industrial strategy is exactly about ensuring that the economy works for everyone and that the sorts of jobs that she is talking about are available for people across this country.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I was pleased to welcome the Prime Minister to North East Lincolnshire last Friday evening to mark success in the local elections. It is good to know that the Cleethorpes constituency now has two Conservative-controlled unitary authorities. The Prime Minister will recall that the new council leader, Philip Jackson, and I mentioned to her the Greater Grimsby town deal. I know that she will want to push that forward as part of the industrial strategy, which she has just mentioned. Will she agree to facilitate meetings for me and the new council leader to push it forward?

The Prime Minister: I take this further opportunity to congratulate the new leader of North East Lincolnshire, his new councillors and the whole Conservative council group on taking control of North East Lincolnshire last week, and indeed to congratulate my hon. Friend on his work in campaigning to secure that excellent result. He is absolutely right; he and the council leader made that point about the town deal, and I will facilitate meetings between my hon. Friend, the council leader and the Ministers responsible.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I call on the House to celebrate 20 years of devolution, and I look forward to the nation of Wales taking our proper place among the nations of Europe.

Today, 32-year-old Imam Şiş of Newport is on his 143rd day of indefinite hunger strike, and the condition of his health is now critical. He is one of many Kurds on hunger strike around the world, including four others in the UK, protesting the treatment of Kurdish leader Abdullah Öcalan, who is imprisoned in Turkey and whose human rights are clearly breached by the Turkish Government. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) and I, along with 48 other MPs and Welsh Assembly Members, have today written to the Foreign Secretary asking him to apply pressure on Turkey to uphold the human rights of the Kurds. I am confident that the Prime Minister respects the urgency and gravity of the situation. Will she please commit to intervening?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady has raised an important issue. We absolutely expect Turkey to undertake any legal processes against prisoners fairly, transparently and with full respect for the rule of law. That includes ensuring access to appropriate medical treatment. The British ambassador in Ankara has discussed the wider issue of hunger strikes with the Turkish authorities, but we will continue to encourage the Turkish

state to uphold the human rights of hunger striking detainees, including access to medical treatment. As the right hon. Lady says, she and others have written to the Foreign Secretary, and I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary addresses the issue urgently.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Our GPs are a very special group of public servants, and it is good news that we have recruited them in record numbers over the last two years. Will the Prime Minister do everything she can to make sure that we look after their job satisfaction, and specifically to help them with the pensions penalty that some of them face in their mid-50s, which is driving some of them out of the profession?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments about GPs. They are indeed a vital part of our NHS—they are the bedrock of our NHS—and that is why, as I indicated earlier in response to the Leader of the Opposition, I think it is so important that the long-term plan includes extra investment in primary and community care. The new, historic five-year contract for general practice announced in January was developed in partnership with the BMA, and it will provide greater certainty for GPs to plan ahead.

Another way in which we can help GPs is by providing funding, which we will see, towards up to 20,000 extra staff in GP practices, helping to free up doctors to spend more time with the patients who need them. As my hon. Friend has indicated, we are committed to recruiting more GPs—an extra 5,000—as soon as possible, and to ensuring that they can maintain their careers and continue to provide services to their patients as they do, day in and day out.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): Medomsley detention centre in my constituency was a living hell for the boys and young men sent there from across the UK in the '70s and '80s. Rape and torture were commonplace. So far, 1,800 men have bravely come forward to say they were affected. Some of those young men reported that abuse decades before the first person was convicted for some of the crimes committed. Nearly a year ago I met the Home Secretary, along with a victim of abuse at Medomsley, to make the case for a public inquiry. Many of the victims are not covered by the inquiry into child sexual abuse because of their age. We need to know what happened at Medomsley. We need justice for survivors and we need to make sure it never happens again. Will the Prime Minister please say that we will have an independent public inquiry into the abuse at Medomsley detention centre?

The Prime Minister: I take very seriously the issue the hon. Lady raises and what happened at Medomsley detention centre. The independent inquiry into child abuse is looking into historical cases of abuse in state institutions. It is doing so on a step-by-step basis in the areas it is looking at. I am surprised at the statement she made that the Medomsley detention centre cases were not able to be covered by that inquiry and I will certainly look at that issue.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Along with Scottish colleagues, I was pleased to welcome the Prime Minister to Aberdeen on Friday. The Prime Minister will be aware that the SNP Scottish Government want to postpone

devolved VAT powers and delay social security powers, and have U-turned on the air departure tax. Does the Prime Minister agree that it is time for new leadership in Scotland? It is time for Ruth Davidson in Bute House.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. What do we see from the SNP Government in Scotland? We gave them powers over welfare payments, which they asked for—not used. It was an SNP manifesto

commitment to cut air passenger duty. They have the power. They are not going to use it. But what are they using? They have used their power to change taxes, so that people doing a job in Scotland are being charged more tax than those doing the same job south of the border. When given the chance to help people, they reject it. When given the chance to take more money out of people's pockets, they take it. It is certainly time for Ruth Davidson in Bute House.

Iran Nuclear Deal

12.48 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. To ask the Government to make a statement on the status of the Iran nuclear deal.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): The UK notes with great concern the statement made by Iran today concerning its commitments under the joint comprehensive plan of action. We are analysing the detail of it and are in close contact with the other parties to the deal. Today's announcement from Tehran is, I have to say to the House, an unwelcome step. We urge Iran not to take further escalatory steps, and to stand by its commitments. We are not at this stage talking about re-imposing sanctions, but one has to remember that they were lifted in exchange for the nuclear restrictions as part of the JCPOA. Should Iran cease meeting its nuclear commitments, there would of course be consequences, but so long as Iran keeps to its commitments then so too will the United Kingdom. It is critical that we maintain an open dialogue with Iran, and we intend to do so: for example, the Foreign Office's political director is visiting Tehran this week to discuss this and a range of bilateral issues. I myself hope to visit Iran in the coming months.

We recall our own firm commitments under the deal, including to lift sanctions for the benefit of the Iranian people. The lifting of nuclear-related sanctions is, of course, an essential part of the JCPOA. It aims to have a positive impact not only on trade and economic relations with Iran but, most importantly, on the lives of the many ordinary Iranian people who have had such a tough time over recent decades. We deeply regret the re-imposition of sanctions by the United States following its withdrawal from the JCPOA.

Along with the remaining participants of the JCPOA—Germany, France, Russia and China—we are committed to working on sanctions relief for Iran, together with third countries that are interested in supporting the JCPOA. We are determined to pursue efforts with European and other partners to enable the continuation of legitimate trade with Iran. The UK and our European partners met Iranian officials in Brussels only yesterday to discuss the next steps needed to operationalise the special purpose vehicle, INSTEX—instrument in support of trade exchanges—which aims to facilitate legitimate trade with Iran.

Even at this stage, we encourage all countries, including Russia and China as JCPOA participants, to make their very best efforts to pursue the sanctions relief that the agreement allows for through concrete steps. We take this opportunity to call on all parties that are not party to the JCPOA to refrain from taking any actions that would impede the ability of the remaining parties to fully perform their commitments.

Finally, it is important to remember that the UK remains very clear-eyed about Iran's destabilising activity in other parts of the middle east—including its ballistic missile programme, which must now be addressed. However, we see that that can best be done through the JCPOA remaining in place.

Mr Baron: It is now a year since the US Government unilaterally withdrew from the joint comprehensive plan of action, better known as the Iranian nuclear deal. The Trump Administration have recently announced the forthcoming expansion of oil sanctions to all countries that buy oil from Iran, and have dispatched an aircraft carrier to the Gulf.

This morning, the Iranian Government announced that they are suspending key parts of the 2015 deal, citing the effect of US sanctions against their economy. Among other actions, Iran has stated that it will keep stocks of enriched uranium and heavy water rather than selling them on the international market, but it has threatened to resume production of enriched uranium in 60 days if the other signatories to the Iran deal—UK, France, China, Germany and Russia—do not plot a way forward to help the Iranian economy to withstand the effects of the US oil and financial sanctions.

It does not take me to remind the Minister that reaching the deal took broadly 10 years of diplomacy. At the time, it helped to avert a regional conflict; the House will remember how close the US, the UK and Israel came to military strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities in 2012. You will remember, Mr Speaker, that I led a Backbench Business debate on the issue at the time, in which I called for more diplomacy and less sabre-rattling. The House should also remember that the United Nations has made it clear that as far as it is concerned, Iran has abided by the deal—this is a unilateral action by the US.

I ask the Minister what else the Government can do to ensure the continuance of this important nuclear non-proliferation treaty, because whatever they are doing is clearly not succeeding at this point. I do not think that I am alone in believing that if the deal fails, there is a real chance of nuclear proliferation across the region. If that happened, I doubt whether there would be any winners in the conflict.

I will add one further point. Yes, we know that Iran is up to no good with some of its other activities in the region—terrorist activities and so forth. In diplomacy, however, going from imperfection to perfection in international relationships cannot be done in one bound; it is a series of small steps. The important thing is to head in the right direction. If the deal is allowed to fail, it will make for conflict in the region and possibly an escalation of nuclear capabilities. That would be bad news not just for the region, but for the world. The Foreign Office has to do more to use its diplomacy with regard to the US.

Mark Field: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the JCPOA is a cornerstone. It is critical for our security, not least because nuclear proliferation in that region of all regions would be calamitous. We therefore remain committed to it—as he rightly points out, it is the result of hard work over more than a decade of diplomacy. In the 18 years that we have been Members of Parliament, he has taken great interest in these matters; I very much respect his thoughtful contributions.

I ask my hon. Friend, and all hon. Members, to be assured that diplomacy continues. I very much hope to go to Tehran shortly, where we have an outstanding ambassador in Rob Macaire. As I pointed out earlier, we are working tirelessly on a mechanism to ensure that trade can continue, and that prosperity can therefore return to Iran; we were doing that in Brussels in the past

[Mark Field]

24 hours. Continued work is very much on our mind. We believe that the deal is broadly working, and is therefore delivering on its goal to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme remains exclusively peaceful.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing it and for the consistency and clarity of his statements, which go back many years, about the need for peace with Iran.

Today is a deeply sad day for all of us, on all sides, who regarded the Iran nuclear deal as one of the crowning diplomatic achievements of this century and who saw it as opening a door to potential progress on all the other issues on which we have such grave problems with Iran—not least its human rights record. We very much hope for the contrary of what we fear, which is not just that the door to progress has been closed today, but that a very different door is being opened—one that leads us back to the past and to the threat of a new and devastating conflict in an already devastated middle east.

Let us make no mistake. The theocratic wing of the Iranian Government has always wanted the nuclear deal to fail, just as much as Donald Trump and the neo-con hawks who advise him. Frankly, this is not the day—tempting though it is—to berate those who are seemingly destroying the deal and throwing away the prospect of future progress. Today is simply a day to ask what our Government, our European Union and our United Nations can do together to prevent the slide back to confrontation and, eventually, war.

Iran is a country nine times the size of Syria, with a population three and a half times that of Syria before its civil war. Colin Powell's former top adviser, Lawrence Wilkerson, who helped to create the case for the Iraq war, saw a potential war with Iran as

"10 to 15 times worse...in terms of casualties and costs."

My only question to the Government today is the same question asked by the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay: what practical steps will they now take to get the nuclear deal back on track and avoid descent into a catastrophic new war?

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Lady. As she alluded to, it is appropriate, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo here in town to see the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister, to look at the narrow facts rather than try to make a broader political point, although she also did so in her comments.

As I said earlier, we believe that the deal is working and is delivering its goal to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme remains peaceful. That it is working has been confirmed by consecutive International Atomic Energy Agency reports, the most recent of which was published as recently as 22 February.

We accept that Iran's nuclear activities must be peaceful, and that it is imperative therefore that it continue to comply with its obligations under the JCPOA. We will do all we can, not just bilaterally but internationally, including at the United Nations. It is interesting, as I pointed out earlier, that both China and Russia understand the grave concerns of the international community about the major and damaging consequences that could come into play.

It was very fair of the right hon. Lady to point out that Iran has been a destabilising influence and remains so—look at Yemen, Lebanon and Gaza, where various proxies are in place—but equally we must work together with diplomacy. A lot of that work goes on quietly behind the scenes. Please be assured that those efforts will continue, not least because destabilisation in the region would have global consequences.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I do not always agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), but he has got this absolutely right, and I commend him for both the question and the way he put it.

The action of Iran today is not particularly unexpected, but it is incontrovertible that it drops at a time of much-heightened rhetoric around the situation between Iran and the US, and in a complex region where the risk of confrontation has now been increased. What appears to be missing is a channel between Washington and Tehran, however private, to start de-escalating some of this rhetoric and, with regard to allies in the region who take strong views on this, to move away from confrontation.

I note that there is a 60-day delay before the Iranians take further action. In a sense, that is an offer to make progress on negotiations. In the talks today between the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and Secretary of State Pompeo, can we start to explore, however privately—the Americans might not be able to say much about it—the urgent need for that direct back-channel link, which needs to be built if we are to move away from what the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) accurately characterised as the possibility of something catastrophic in the not-too-distant future?

Mark Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. He will appreciate that we do not comment directly on intelligence matters, but he will also understand that the discussions today in Downing Street and at the Foreign Office will inevitably touch on this, as well as other important bilateral issues. We share many of the US's concerns about Iran's destabilising activities in the region, and although it would not be proper for me to comment on intelligence matters, we will maintain an ongoing and deep conversation on this matter with all parts of the US Administration. As I said, the Foreign Secretary is speaking—at this very moment, I believe—with Secretary of State Pompeo. As was alluded to in the last two questions, it is understood that the US is deploying more military assets to the region. This is a matter for the US, and we share its concerns about Iran's regional activities, but equally we believe it important to de-escalate many of these tensions.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) for securing this urgent question and for his remarks. I agree that we have to note the painstaking diplomacy that led to the agreement.

These latest developments are incredibly concerning to all Members, who are worried about the impact on global and regional security, as the Minister mentioned. If the UK has influence, it must be used to urge the US and Iran to re-engage and, critically, to work towards not just an agreement, but a world free from these appalling weapons of mass destruction. Noting the

remarks of the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), which were considered, as always, I must say with great respect to the Minister, who has an awful lot on his plate, that dysfunction at the heart of Government should not be allowed to spread elsewhere. Does the Minister know when a Minister for the Middle East will be appointed? I say that with respect to him and all the work he has on his plate. What conversations has the Foreign Secretary had with his counterparts in the US and the EU on the need to get an agreement back on track and also to build a stable, nuclear-free world?

Mark Field: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his—I think kind—comments. I am perfectly happy being the interim Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, as well as holding the Asia and Pacific brief. He will appreciate that unfortunately we are all rather ensconced here, so travelling out to the far-flung bits of Asia is a bit of a no go, but, with my Foreign Office experience, I have been able to perform these two roles pro tem and I intend to do so to the best of my abilities in the weeks and months ahead.

The Foreign Secretary works closely on these issues with UN and EU partners, and we are actively looking at them. In my first comments, I touched on the work being done on the mechanism to maintain trade, which is an important part of balancing expectations. One of the concerns of many in the Iranian community over the last four years has been that they have not felt that they have had as much as they should have had of the economic benefits flowing from the sacrifices—as they see it—they made on the nuclear programme. We are very keen to keep those benefits intact on a sanctions-free basis. The Foreign Secretary and others in the Foreign Office are spending a lot of time trying to ensure that we get that into play. I think the hon. Gentleman can be assured that the Foreign Office is working very hard on these matters, and we feel that we are able to do so with the resources that we have.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I observe the interest of three notable parliamentary bigwigs—otherwise known as Chairs of Select Committees. What a delicious and inviting choice. I call Tom Tugendhat.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I am grateful that the former Minister for the Middle East, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), has made his views clear and shared with the House his, as ever, wise counsel. I welcome the Minister to his place, but I agree, I am afraid, with the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) that, though the Minister does a brilliant job, he himself I know is looking for a bit of extra support, although he gets a lot of support from his parliamentary friends.

How much of this is about an internal debate in Iran and concerned not so much with US relations as with the internal palace coups we have seen involving the mullahs, the elected Government, the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militias? The country is falling apart. There is a youth movement challenging authority in a way not seen in the 40 years since the Revolutionary

Guard established this extraordinary tyranny. We are seeing a fundamental change in the structure of what should be one of the greatest and most prosperous countries in the region. What is the Minister doing to encourage those for whom liberty is an opportunity and who do not see control as the only vector through which order can be established?

Mark Field: I will take that as a job application and will see that it is passed on to No. 10 Downing Street and the Chief Whip. I also had a whisper in my ear just then. It is only fair that I mention the great team of Parliamentary Private Secretaries and others who provide certain assistance on these matters. I have to keep in their good books at the best of times.

My hon. Friend makes some very wise and important points. It is probably unwise to speculate about the stability of a regime—no doubt there have been predictions in the last 40 years about the stability of the Iranian regime—but he makes a valid point. This is a country at the heart of the region. It is a country of 65 to 70 million people and is a hugely important player, but it is not fulfilling its potential, in terms of prosperity, for its people, in spite of its great assets both capital and human. We would obviously like to see a more stable Iran and Iranian Government. As I said, it would be unwise to make too many predictions at our end, but it is fair to say there is instability within the regime, although it is difficult to predict where that will lead. Suffice it to say that we view the JCPOA in all its facets—not just nuclear disarmament, but its economic aspects—as a cornerstone of the continued co-operation between our countries.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Iran nuclear deal is imperfect, but it is a significant achievement that helps to make our world safer, and it is too important for us to let it unravel. A key pressure point is obviously the soaring inflation that is hitting ordinary Iranians hard, although, as the Minister says, Iran has kept to its side of the bargain. What can the Government do to help to mitigate the effects of the reckless and short-sighted US sanctions on ordinary Iranian people, and to help to de-escalate the situation and get the deal back on track?

Mark Field: While I broadly agree with the hon. Lady, I think it fair to say that the destabilising impact of Iran in that region is not exactly part and parcel of the bargain either. We have had debates and urgent questions about what is happening in Yemen, Gaza, Lebanon and, of course, Syria, where Iran's influence has been profound, and we obviously have concerns about that destabilising influence. So things are a little more complicated than the hon. Lady has suggested.

We feel that the JCPOA is the only game in town. That is why, although the US has pulled out of it, we are determined to ensure that we remain actively engaged. As the hon. Lady said, the sanctions relief is the key incentive for Iran to remain bound by the restriction of its nuclear programme, which is why we are so keen to get the special purpose vehicle, INSTEX, in place at the earliest opportunity. It is not yet operational, but the E3—France, Germany and ourselves—are working to address all the technical and legal aspects required to make it operational, and once it is up and running, there will be great trade benefits.

[Mark Field]

There is genuine debate within Iran—we have no doubt about that—and we therefore feel that it is very important for the UK, with our partners, to engage through diplomatic channels, with the support of those who have a brighter future in mind for that country.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given the vital importance of the intelligence arrangements that we share with the United States, in the context of this particular crucial and worrying situation, will the Minister encourage the Foreign Secretary to persevere in his attempts to make sense prevail in the Cabinet, so that our intelligence relationships with the US and other Five Eyes allies are not put at risk by cosyng up to the communist Chinese Government for short-sighted commercial reasons?

Mark Field: My right hon. Friend and I have had many happy times in our five years together on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and have discussed a range of these matters. As he will know, intelligence issues should not be discussed on the Floor of the House, but he has made his view clear, and I will ensure that the Foreign Secretary is made well aware of it.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary is currently meeting the US Secretary of State, Mr Pompeo. What conversations are taking place about Germany? Is Mr Pompeo being encouraged to go back to plan A, which was to visit Germany and speak to his German counterpart—given that Germany was a key partner in the original JCPOA—so that we can form a united front in tackling the crucial question of nuclear disarmament?

Mark Field: I very much hope that Secretary of State Pompeo will be able to visit Germany at the earliest opportunity, or indeed to engage in high-level meetings with his German counterpart, whether at the United Nations in New York or elsewhere. In fairness, I think that he rearranged his programme very late in the day. It was considered important for him to be in Iraq to gain an understanding of what was happening on the ground in Iran, so his programme was reorganised at fairly short notice, but we will ensure that those heartfelt concerns are passed on.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): I certainly agree with the Minister that this development is extremely unwelcome, and that there is now a need for calm and for judgment. He mentioned legitimate trade. He will be aware that a significant number of jobs, both here and in Iran, have been created through various trade deals, which is obviously in the interests of both countries. Will he say a bit more about what he is doing to support the role of the INSTEX special purpose vehicle that will be set up under sanctions relief to encourage more legitimate trade?

Mark Field: Let me first thank my hon. Friend for all the hugely important work that he does. He is our trade envoy to Libya, which is obviously a difficult role, but in the past he was our Minister for Africa in the Foreign Office, and I know that his contribution there is remembered very fondly.

My hon. Friend has made a good point about the special purpose vehicle, which is important because it will ensure that we see genuine and lasting sanctions relief. The SPV is designed to facilitate legitimate trade under both European and international law. Its immediate focus will understandably be on the facilitation of trade where the immediate needs of the Iranian people are greatest—the humanitarian needs for foodstuffs, agricultural products, pharmaceuticals and trade in consumer goods. That will obviously have an impact on UK companies wishing to trade with Iran, as well as benefiting the Iranian people. The UK, France and Germany are the initial owners and shareholders of the SPV, but we are working with other interested EU member countries that may also wish to play a formal role in these initiatives.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): The millions of young people in Iran who have suffered under the oppressive theocratic regime were hopeful that the JCPOA would lead to an easing of sanctions, which would in turn lead to economic benefits, but because of the incompetence and corruption of the regime, that easing of sanctions has not had the economic impact for which they hoped. Can we send a clear message to the people of Iran that if we have to re-impose sanctions because their regime broke its word, we will not be acting against the Iranian people, and that we look forward to the day when they will be able to choose their Government freely?

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman has, perhaps, used slightly less diplomatic language than I might have used, but I think that the message to the Iranian people from all of us here is loud and clear: “We are very much on your side.” Iran remains a priority country for the UK in relation to its human rights situation, to which he alluded. On 15 November, the UN General Assembly Third Committee approved a resolution, co-sponsored by the UK, which urged Iran to address a long list of human rights violations, including the widespread use of arbitrary detention. We very much want to see a move towards democracy and all the opportunities that that will provide for all Iranians, not only in human rights but in the broader arena of prosperity.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I hesitate to disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), especially after he sponsored my swim in aid of my local hospital, but I have to say that when this agreement was reached, it was understood that Iran would stop supporting and funding Hezbollah and Hamas. Far from that being the case, support for Hamas, Hezbollah and other terrorist groups—which is also causing instability in the middle east—has increased to a major extent. May I urge my right hon. Friend the Minister to take those matters into consideration when dealing with Iran? I actually think that the sanctions for which the Americans have opted are the right way forward.

Mark Field: I understand that my right hon. Friend swam a long way—I am a non-swimmer myself—and raised a lot of money. I hope that in the two neighbouring parts of Essex he and our hon. Friend will be sinking rather than swimming. [Interruption.] I think I got that the wrong way round. I meant “swimming rather than sinking”. [Interruption.] I always thought I would be the straight man in the Foreign Office—that was certainly the case with the last Foreign Secretary.

As my right hon. Friend knows, he and I disagree slightly on this matter. We feel that the JCPOA is the only game in town. We feel that, broadly speaking, it has worked, and we wish to see it work. I know that my right hon. Friend takes a different, albeit very principled, view, but we will continue to do all we can to ensure that the JCPOA succeeds in its own terms.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Obviously the risk of an escalation in the middle east will be significant if Iran decides to resume its nuclear programme. What is the Minister doing to address the risk of a further escalation, with responses from Saudi Arabia and also Israel, and a potential arms race in the middle east?

Mark Field: I understand why the hon. Gentleman asks that. Clearly we want to de-escalate tensions in the region, so he will also understand why it would be unwise of me to speculate further at the Dispatch Box.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): No one wants nuclear proliferation in the middle east; anyone who does would have to be mad, and not even the so-called neo-cons in America want that. Can my right hon. Friend tell me why the Americans pulled out of this deal? I assume their decision was based on intelligence; have the British Government received that intelligence and do they agree with it, and if so why are we still pursuing this deal?

Mark Field: As my hon. Friend will understand, for obvious reasons I am not going to make any comment on intelligence-related matters. There was a concern at the time: the Trump Administration's view was that it was a bad deal for the US, and it had of course been negotiated by the previous Administration. Let me restate our view: we urge Iran not to take any escalatory steps and to continue to meet its commitments under the deal, but while Iran is in full compliance we shall remain fully committed to the JCPOA, and I know that position is shared by the French and Germans.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Can the Minister reassure the House that the British Government will continue throughout the stages of this crisis to align with France and Germany as opposed to the US Administration, who seem intent on escalating the situation?

Mark Field: I very much hope the US is not intent on escalating this, and I hope we will come to an agreement with all our close allies in this region. We are working very closely with the EU3, two members of which are on the Security Council: Germany is on it this year and next and France, like us, is a permanent member. We will continue to do so, but we would very much like to see the American Administration also supporting many of the aims, which are the only positive realistic route forward and would be good not just for the Iranian people but for the region as a whole.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I listen to this ongoing story of Iran and nuclear proliferation with a chill for fear of where it might lead, which is why I have stayed in the Chamber today. We have to put a stop to this. Does my right hon. Friend agree that strength can

come from working with the remaining partners in the JCPOA and that through them we must ensure this plan remains in place, and also that we must, working jointly through them, put pressure on the US to deal with its sanctions and potentially remove them?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments. It is worth remembering that Iran's ballistic missile programme is a great threat to the security not just of the middle east but of Europe, and that cannot be ignored. We will continue to urge Iran to abide by all relevant UN Security Council resolutions. We call upon all parties to report to the UN activities inconsistent with the resolutions, and we will continue to keep the pressure up.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): Iran's actions announced today are highly regrettable and are the inevitable consequence of President Trump's decision last year. However, I echo what the right hon. Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) said and say to the Minister that if, as it says, the Iranian regime wants to negotiate new terms it must also address its support for terror groups such as Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which together fired some 700 rockets, missiles and mortars indiscriminately at Israel from Gaza last weekend, killing four people. It is not acceptable to leave out the ending of that kind of behaviour if new terms are being demanded.

Mark Field: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. We first came across each other 22 years ago this week, but in a different context, as some will know. *[Interruption.]* For the avoidance of doubt for the rest of the House, she beat me in the 1997 election—and look where we have both ended up; isn't it terrible?

The right hon. Lady makes a serious point, and we were also deeply upset by the death of those four Israeli civilians last weekend and very worried about the potential for escalation. Thankfully, I think wise voices have ensured that that has not happened. She makes a good point, as I said, and a concern we have, shared by some in the US Administration, is that Iran being an ongoing destabilising influence in the region is not compatible with sanctions being lifted.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The JCPOA is headed entirely in the direction many of us told the Government it would be, and for me what is most disappointing is the millions of people in Iran whose future has been destroyed, and also the people in countries including Syria, Lebanon and Yemen who have been killed as a result of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and others taking the money released from the change in sanctions and putting it into death and destruction in the middle east. That has resulted in a destabilised middle east and a breakdown in international diplomacy. Importantly, we should now take the lead of Secretary Pompeo and say, "Let's reopen this negotiation." We should look not only at human rights in Iran and economic development in Iran, but at what the Iranian regime is doing with regard to its people and its future nuclear capability.

Mark Field: I disagree with my hon. Friend. I think the JCPOA has been an important attempt at least to try to bring stability to the region. The region was not

[Mark Field]

stable before the JCPOA was negotiated between 2005 and 2015. We believe not just that the deal is based on trust about Iran's intentions, but that it provides for rigorous verification and monitoring that allows the International Atomic Energy Agency access to Iran's nuclear programme, and in return we want to see some economic sanctions being lifted. I understand the concerns my hon. Friend has raised, but it would be wrong to think we could either walk away from this plan of action or feel that it is open for fundamental renegotiation, and I do not think that would be practical diplomatic politics either.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): But it is important to be clear about Iran's "destabilising influence", which the Minister euphemistically and diplomatically talked about. This is a regime that has been propping up the butchery of Assad, funding Hamas on an ongoing basis in killing Israelis with the intention of wiping them off the map and killing their own Palestinians, and funding the terror of the Houthis in Yemen. These are not inconvenient side issues not to be mentioned in the House; they actually show how deadly dangerous it would be if Iran were able to realise the long-held ambitions of some in the regime to hold the bomb. So I would like to hear a little more vigour from the Government about what they will do to make sure that sanctions and consequences are re-imposed, and I would like them to say that they will do whatever it takes to stop Iran getting a nuclear bomb.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman is right; he suggests I was being euphemistic, but I spelled out exactly where we have concerns. Those concerns have been raised by Members in all parts of the House and no doubt will continue to be raised; these are very live issues whether in Gaza or Lebanon, or indeed Yemen or Syria. We clearly feel that an escalation at this stage as a result of what Iran is proposing to do is precisely the wrong way forward, and we want to find every opportunity to utilise whatever diplomatic weapons we can. That involves acting internationally at the UN, with our EU partners and elsewhere. We will continue to make those efforts, because the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that it would be a calamitous escalation if there were any opportunity for Iran to restore and renew its nuclear capabilities.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Putting aside whether the nuclear deal should be dealt with separately from or in conjunction with Iran's aggressive behaviour in the wider region, my specific question to the Minister is as follows. He talked about Iran's profound negative influence in the region, whether in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain or Lebanon—and Morocco recently expelled the Iranian ambassador. The UK holds the pen on Yemen at the UN and knows about Iran's aggressive behaviour in the region; what specifically will the UK with its partners be doing to check that Iranian aggressive behaviour in the region?

Mark Field: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. We have only this morning received the letter from Rouhani, and we will reply to it. Fundamentally, we are urging Iran not to take escalatory steps, but to continue to meet all its commitments under the deal and indeed any broader commitments reflecting a country that wants to co-operate with others in the region and internationally. It is too early to talk about the direct consequences, but we are clear that our commitment to the JCPOA requires the full compliance of its obligations by Iran.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): This situation shows the importance of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office having stronger teams engaged in international treaties in the area of nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation. Can the Minister reassure me that that is the case, and that even though we want to work together with Iran to ensure that the treaty works in the long term, that will not dissuade us from taking up matters such as human rights, the persecution of minorities in Iran and individuals who are being unjustly detained there?

Mark Field: I can give my hon. Friend a full assurance on that. He makes a good point. It is important, particularly in—dare I say it—a post-Brexit world, that this country should engage as far as it can with a range of international organisations, including the United Nations, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the World Health Organisation, to name but three. On the issue of human rights, the interactive dialogue with the special rapporteur for human rights in Iran took place as recently as 11 March, and the UK's statement raised concerns about the judicial harassment of human rights defenders, the death penalty for child offenders under the age of 18 and the limits that are placed on freedom of expression, religion and belief. We continue to make those concerns very clear. The Foreign Secretary publicly shared his concerns about the sentencing of Nasrin Sotoudeh on 12 March, and we will regularly raise human rights issues with the Iranian Government at all levels and urge them to cease the harassment and arbitrary detention of all human rights defenders.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): The Minister has given the House a comprehensive list of important international organisations with which the UK must engage. May I add NATO to that list? What conversations has he had recently with our NATO allies with regard to the agreement?

Mark Field: My list was obviously not entirely comprehensive. My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I look forward to meeting him again in Westminster Hall this afternoon when we shall talk about West Papua in Indonesia. NATO is important, and what is happening in Iran and the potential for escalation on the nuclear side obviously have strong defence implications, so yes, NATO will very much be added to the list of organisations with which we will seek to engage on this globally important matter.

Point of Order

1.32 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During last week's Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy questions, the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore) told me in reply to a question about solar that the UK had installed

"more than twice as much solar capacity as any other European country—more than Germany, France and Australia combined."—*[Official Report, 30 April 2019; Vol. 659, c. 105.]*

Even if he meant Austria, rather than Australia, he is wrong either way. Germany alone has 46 GW of solar; the UK has only 13 GW. Germany, France and Austria together have four times the UK capacity at 56 GW, and Australia has 65 GW, which is five times the UK capacity. It seems that the joint Minister of State has failed on both Energy and Education. Mr Speaker, can I get your advice on how to bring the Minister back to the House to correct the record on this matter?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The answer to him is that responsibility for the veracity of statements made in this Chamber lies with each individual hon. and right hon. Member. The question of whether an error has been made that has caused the House to be misled is a matter not for adjudication by the Chair but for the judgment of individual colleagues. I feel sure that the contents of the hon. Gentleman's point of order will shortly be winging their way to the Minister, and if he judges that he has made a mistake, I feel sure that he will consider himself honour bound to correct the record. There are a number of ways in which he can do that. He could return to the Chamber specifically to attend to the hon. Gentleman's point, but I would not wish to encourage the hon. Gentleman to hold his breath. We will leave it there, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman feels that he has found his own salvation. The smiling countenance that he now shows to the House suggests that that is so.

BILL PRESENTED

PARLIAMENTARY BUILDINGS (RESTORATION AND RENEWAL) Bill

Andrea Leadsom, supported by the Prime Minister, David Lidington, Secretary James Brokenshire, Secretary Jeremy Wright, Secretary Chris Grayling, Secretary Rory Stewart, Elizabeth Truss, Kevin Foster, Michael Ellis, Sir Patrick McLoughlin and Valerie Vaz presented a Bill to make provision in connection with works for or in connection with the restoration of the Palace of Westminster and other works relating to the Parliamentary Estate; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 388) with explanatory notes (Bill 388-EN).

Mr Speaker: We come now to the ten-minute rule Bill, and the House will have noted the display of sisterly solidarity as I call Angela Eagle to move the motion.

Pension Charges

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.35 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require pension providers to publish standardised information on charges for pension products; to make provision for a cap on such charges; and for connected purposes.

My Bill will introduce greater transparency in the charges applied to pension savings by those who manage them on behalf of the beneficiaries, and introduce a mandatory cap on such charges.

The aim of the Bill is threefold: to drive down significantly the total cost of pension fund management; to achieve better value for money in what is currently a failing market; and to ensure that a higher proportion of pension savings will actually go to help the beneficiaries to achieve a comfortable retirement.

Currently, far too much of people's hard-earned savings is being siphoned off in hidden charges and costs, and without firmer Government intervention this is likely to get worse rather than better. As a former pensions Minister, no one knows better than me how quickly eyes can glaze over at the merest mention of this subject, but the wellbeing of our society demands that we get this right. Currently, 34 million of our fellow citizens are either paying into or benefiting from pension savings, and the welcome introduction of automatic enrolment has brought millions more into workplace pensions saving for the first time. The automatic nature of this saving means that there is a special duty on the Government to ensure that funds accrued in this way are used to generate pension benefits for savers rather than profits for fund managers and intermediaries.

Despite the welcome cap of 0.75% on costs in these pension funds, it is clear that much more needs to be done. All the evidence demonstrates that this is a failing market. It suffers from information asymmetry for both customers and regulators, it is characterised by very weak if not entirely dysfunctional price signals, and one of its most revealing features is persistent and very high profits for those who supply services, which is the classic sign of market failure.

The pensions being offered are complex by design. Providers are being allowed to conceal many hidden charges that eat away at the individual pension pots in defined contribution schemes, under the noses of their clients. One particular pension product was discovered by consumer champions Which? to contain 44 different charges that could be levied on the fund. Price signals are weak because small, innocuous-looking fee levels can eat up massive amounts of an individual's savings over time. As the Royal Society of Arts study led by David Pitt-Watson demonstrated in 2012, an annual fee of 1.5% can eat up a massive one third of a pension pot in 25 years.

Despite there being billions of pounds of savers' money under management, it is not yet possible for any individual workplace saver to find out how much it actually costs them to be a member of their pension scheme, let alone to be able to compare these costs with those levied in other schemes. Thus, astonishingly, when it comes to pension saving it is currently completely impossible to assess the cost of any one scheme against

[Ms Angela Eagle]

another. It is impossible to make any estimate of what the value for money of any particular scheme will be, yet this decision is crucial to an individual's future wellbeing and prosperity. Those 13.5 million members now automatically enrolled in defined contribution schemes are trapped in an employer-chosen fund where their only choice is whether to stay or to leave and forgo the valuable employer contribution. That is surely the definition of Hobson's choice. In reality, it is no choice at all. It is no wonder that the Office of Fair Trading pronounced the pensions market for buyers to be "one of the weakest" that it had analysed "in recent years." The answer to that problem is not more complexity and faux competition, but transparency of total costs and fees. There should also be a cap on charges.

Necessary transparency can be achieved only if charges and costs are comparable and easily understood across the sector. A mandatory cost disclosure framework defining how to calculate such costs is therefore vital. The results must then be a prominent part of the statements sent to every saver annually. My Bill would mandate transparency across the board on pensions charges by introducing a mandatory cost disclosure framework with independent verification. It would also establish a cap on charges during the accumulation stage of pension saving and crucially extend that to the decumulation stage, when the pension savings made are actually taken.

Pension products should quickly become more standardised and simplified, as they are in the Netherlands, where this reform has already been successfully introduced. In the Dutch case, introducing transparency led to an immediate and huge 31% fall in the cost of managing pensions per scheme. The beneficial impact for savers cannot be overestimated. Just as small increases in costs can eat up large amounts of a pension pot or fund over time, so small cost savings can lead to a huge improvement in fund size over the same period. Dutch regulators calculated that a cost reduction of only 0.25% would result in a massive 7.5% increase in collective pension assets over 40 years. Just think of the benefit that would accrue to all savers from a 31% fall in fund costs should that be achieved here in the UK.

My Bill aims to enable pension savers, rather than fund managers, to accrue a much higher proportion of the benefits generated over time by saving into a pension fund. Such practical and meaningful transparency also enables trustees to pursue their fiduciary duty much more effectively to achieve value for money for the beneficiaries. That makes them potentially a much more effective force for good.

Caps on costs also have a vital role to play in delivering better value for pension savers, which is why the Bill extends their use far wider than is currently allowed.

As Unison pointed out in evidence to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, 90% of total costs paid by pension funds are linked to asset management. Asset managers are making record profits, but analysis demonstrates that this is rarely as a result of high performance outcomes.

As I mentioned earlier, in the case of auto-enrolment, a cap of 0.75% has been introduced. That was predictably opposed by fund managers and there was a shift from active to passive fund management as a result. The outcome was that funds that tracked the market passively made better returns than those that had actively invested and charged far higher fees. Evidence demonstrates that both actively and passively managed funds did not outperform their benchmarks when fees and charges were taken into account. In my view, that shows the urgent need for caps on charges.

The advent of so-called "pension freedoms", which allow savers access to their money early, has created even more fertile ground for pensioner rip-offs. Yet there is no transparency and no caps are applied in circumstances of early drawdown. The cost of drawdown products, which now proliferate, needs to be included in moves to establish transparency and cap costs.

In 2016-17, £15.3 billion was removed early from pension savings—three times more than in the previous year, yet research by Which? has discovered wildly different charging structures and costs associated with the supply of those drawdown products. The highest prices are charged by some of the best-known providers, including by levying heavy fixed fees, set-up charges, administration charges and more general rip-off prices, exploiting the trust in a good brand name. That dubious practice would not survive price transparency and charge caps on drawdown products.

The Bill will mandate cost transparency and caps on charges to drive down cost and drive up value for money for pension savers. It is a timely and necessary reform. Without this further regulation, we will let down millions of pension savers and provide an ongoing bonanza of unjustifiably high profits for fund managers and intermediaries who exploit their power in a complex and failing market.

The time for the Bill is now and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Ms Angela Eagle, Maria Eagle, Debbie Abrahams, Stella Creasy, Ruth George, Tonia Antoniazzi, Rosie Cooper, Marsha De Cordova, Jack Dromey and Liz Twist present the Bill.

Ms Angela Eagle accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 389).

Opposition Day

[UN-ALLOTTED HALF DAY]

TV Licences for Over-75s

1.46 pm

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to honour the Conservative party's 2017 manifesto promise to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s for the duration of this Parliament by ensuring sufficient funding to do so and, should the BBC propose changes to the concession, to ensure that the proposed changes are subject to parliamentary consent.

The motion is in the name of the Leader of the Opposition, me and others, including the leader of the Liberal Democrats and the leader of the SNP.

The debate is about keeping a promise that the Conservative party made on page 66 of its election manifesto just two years ago. In case the Minister has not got a copy, I have managed to find a rare one, which was not shredded, in the Library. It makes for interesting reading. It is called "Forward Together" and claims to be a "Plan for a Stronger Britain and a Prosperous Future". On page 66, it states:

"We will maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this Parliament."

No equivocation, no ambiguity—the Conservative party promised to maintain free TV licences for the duration of this Parliament. Yet we are here today because that promise lies in tatters: 4.5 million older people in receipt of free TV licences could be betrayed unless the Government act.

For many older people, their free TV licence staves off poverty, isolation and loneliness all in one go.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend will recall that last week I asked the Prime Minister a question about TV licences and bus passes and got an extremely vague answer. More importantly, when that manifesto was drawn up, the Prime Minister and the Government already knew that they had handed over responsibility to the BBC. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a deception on pensioners, but that more important is the question of the triple lock for pensioners, which cannot be debated today?

Tom Watson: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for pensioners not just in Coventry but throughout the country. Last week, he exposed the ambiguity in the Government's position. Yet the Government made a promise in their manifesto—the Prime Minister's own manifesto; we are told that not many Front Benches got to see it in advance of publication.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab): If the concession for over-75s ends, more than 5,000 households in Slough could lose their TV licences. As my hon. Friend has pointed out, the 2017 Conservative party manifesto promised to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s until 2022, but the Government have now reneged on their promise and passed the buck to the BBC.

Loneliness is an increasing problem for millions in our country, with four out of 10 people saying that television is their main source of company. Does my hon. Friend agree that cutting free TV licences will merely exacerbate the national loneliness crisis?

Tom Watson: I agree, and I will come to loneliness a little later. Thankfully, the pensioners of Slough saw through the ambiguity of that manifesto and voted for my hon. Friend in the last election. We are very proud of his campaigning for pensioners.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Government claim to care about loneliness, but the issue of TV licences is a significant worry for my over-75 population. It is within the Government's gift to say that they will protect the free TV licence for over-75s. Does my hon. Friend agree that they should end their prevarication and do that today?

Tom Watson: I do. The Government's commitment to my hon. Friend's constituents was very clear: they promised that free TV licences would last for the duration of this Parliament. We are seeking to get the Minister to honour that promise.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Government are reneging not on a two-year pledge but on a 22-year pledge. When the Bill that introduced free TV licences went through the House of Commons, the then Opposition spokesman—Peter Ainsworth, Member for East Surrey—said:

"The Government will no doubt be interested to know whether the Opposition support the granting of free television licences to those over 75. In anticipation of that question, let me say at the outset that of course we give an enthusiastic welcome to any sensible measure that alleviates the burden of the licence fee on the elderly."—[*Official Report*, 10 April 2000; Vol. 348, c. 122.]

It is a 22-year rip-up by the Government, not a two-year one.

Tom Watson: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. He was part of the pioneering Government that gave this concession to pensioners because we believe that they deserve dignity in retirement and reward for their hard work and for paying their taxes.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): This pattern is becoming more and more prevalent in the Government. They are outsourcing responsibility for decisions, including council cuts and police cuts, to other institutions. Is that not indicative of a lack of leadership on the Government Benches?

Tom Watson: I am afraid it is, but in this case there is also the issue of a broken manifesto promise. We seek to expose that today and persuade the Minister that it is not too late to change her mind on this policy.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Almost 7,000 people in my area would lose the concession, were it to go. Does my hon. Friend agree that the over £1 million of costs to pensioners would take money out of already poor pockets? It is thus a double-whammy if the Government do not stick to their manifesto commitment.

Tom Watson: I agree: it is the most vulnerable and loneliest who will be affected if this policy is implemented. That is why we called this debate.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. In principle, should a multimillionaire receive a free TV licence?

Tom Watson: If we believe in universal benefits and that people who have paid into the Exchequer over their working lives are entitled to benefits, then yes. I hope the hon. Gentleman believes that his party should stick to its manifesto pledges.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way. He mentions the impact on the vulnerable. My constituent Elizabeth Tombling, who is 95 years old, says that her TV licence is one of the few bits of pleasure she has in her old age, particularly as she is housebound. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is unfair on her?

Tom Watson: It is not fair on my hon. Friend's constituent and the many hundreds of thousands of other pensioners who will lose out. Very often, it is the most vulnerable and the loneliest pensioners who depend on the free TV licence.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Tom Watson: I will give way for the last time, and then I will make some progress.

Jack Dromey: The great pensioner champion, Jack Jones, once made a speech in which he said that one in five of the over-70s never sees anyone from one week to the next; the television is their friend. Jack thought that a generation of progress would never be reversed. Does my hon. Friend agree that those great pioneers of the pensioners movement would be turning in their graves at the thought that the free TV licence might be taken away from them?

Tom Watson: What a great campaigner Jack Jones was. I thank my hon. Friend for raising his contribution. His legacy is the National Pensioners Convention, which is solidly against these proposals. I am sure we will talk about it later in the debate.

That is why the Government's refusal to honour their manifesto pledge and save free TV licences is so cruel. My co-signatories on this motion show the degree of cross-party consensus on this matter. We are calling on the Government to rethink and change course urgently. The threat to TV licences is part and parcel of the Conservative austerity agenda, which has weakened our social fabric and impacted the most vulnerable in our communities. Our social contract, whereby people who work hard all their lives are afforded comfort in old age, is being slowly but certainly unpicked. Free TV licences are a small but important part of that social contract. Taking them away will force older people into poverty and leave many more feeling isolated and alone. Rather than standing by their manifesto promise and standing up for dignity and comfort in old age, the Government are taking it away.

Now a little history. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) said, the TV licence concession for over-75s was introduced just over 20 years ago by the Labour Government as part of a robust package of reforms to support our pensioners and boost their quality of life. The universal benefit was a result of a long campaign to show our oldest pensioners society's appreciation. Some 4.5 million people over the age of 75 continue to benefit from free TV licences today. Although Labour did not commit explicitly in our last manifesto to continue that policy, our commitment was of course implicit. In case there is any misunderstanding among Ministers, let me be clear. If the Government fall before the natural end of the Parliament in 2022, Labour will honour the Conservative party manifesto pledge to protect TV licences until then.

Despite their manifesto promise of 2017, the Government had already set the stage for the concession to be cut, as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) said. In 2015, they outsourced the responsibility for the TV licence concession on to the BBC as part of the charter renewal process.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am interested that the hon. Gentleman is saying that a Labour Government coming to power before 2020 would restore the TV licence. Is he saying that a future Labour Government after 2020 will maintain the free TV licence for over-75s at a cost that, next year, will already have reached £745 million?

Tom Watson: My answer to the right hon. Gentleman is a complicated one. We are committed to 2022. I do not write or decide our manifesto. He knows I cannot do that. Our commitment to pensioners and protecting their benefits will be very clear. It is highly likely that we will be supporting pensioners after 2022, but I cannot give that commitment today. I will certainly make sure we do not outsource welfare policy to a public broadcaster.

The Government's outsourcing means that, as of 2020, the BBC will be fully responsible for deciding who gets a free TV licence, and for funding that concession. It is manifestly unfair. Labour opposed that at the time, and our position has not changed—first, because passing responsibility for free TV licences to the BBC is outsourcing an important social policy. The BBC makes some of the best TV content in the world, but it is not a political body—it is not an arm of the Department for Work and Pensions—and nor should it be. It is not elected, and nor should it be.

Secondly, we opposed the move because the Government deliberately saddled our national broadcaster with a cost that could lead to many skilled job losses.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. Is there not a more important point, which is that the cost that the public sector broadcaster—a major creative industry employer—is being saddled with from having to pay for free TV licence could prevent it from growing employment, particularly for young people? They find it difficult to find work in traditional industries, and the creative industries pick that up.

Tom Watson: Yes, and this is particularly exacerbated as we have massive technological flux in the broadcasting sector that requires the ability to invest in future content and platforms.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On giving a welfare policy to the BBC, a lot of footballing metaphors have been used in the past 24 hours, after Liverpool's glorious result against Barcelona last night, but does my hon. Friend agree that in policy terms this is the equivalent of a hospital pass?

Tom Watson: It certainly is for this Minister, who happens to be answering today. But it is not as if she, or other Front Benchers, did not have notice, because during the passage of the Bill that enabled this my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) made that very point.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): My hon. Friend said earlier that the BBC makes some of the best programming in the world, and we would all want to agree with that, but the difficulty is that if the BBC loses such a large chunk of its budget, it will be more difficult for it to do this in the future. We would lose our status in the world as one of the greatest broadcasting production houses in the world and other people, often American players, would be able to take up the British market. Is this not a gross dereliction of patriotic duty?

Tom Watson: I think it is, and my hon. Friend makes a good point. I would answer more fully, but I am already running over time.

Keeping TV licences free for all over-75s would require unprecedented cuts to the BBC's spending on broadcasting and content. This is political cowardice: if the Government want to cut free TV licences for over-75s, they should say so—they should include it in the manifesto and let the public decide on the policy. If the Government want to cut the BBC's budget by a fifth, they should say so—they should put it in the manifesto and let the public have their say at the ballot box.

The BBC has consulted on a range of options, from means testing, which would still see 3 million households lose out, to raising the qualifying age to 80, which would see 1.5 million households lose their free licence. The conclusions of that consultation are still outstanding, but one thing is clear: if these cuts go ahead in any of the suggested forms, the responsibility will lie firmly at the Government's door. Passing the buck to the BBC was not a decision made in the national interest, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has said, or for the benefit of older people; it was designed to give the Government political cover to cut a popular policy. This is austerity by stealth. The Conservative party made a commitment to the older people of this country, so now the Government should act and take both the policy and the financial responsibility for funding free TV licences for over-75s back in-house—the two should not be separated.

The BBC has been put in an impossible position by this Government, being asked either to make swingeing cuts to the programmes we all know and love or to take free TV away from older people. That is why when the National Pensioners Convention gathered to protest against scrapping the concession earlier this year, they did not convene outside Broadcasting House, but met outside the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Those protestors know the cost of losing free TV licences.

Age UK's analysis shows that scrapping the concession completely could push more than 50,000 pensioners below the poverty line. For many, losing £154.50 from their pensions is a frightening prospect and it could mean being forced to choose between heating, eating or having a TV at home. This debate over free TV licences is an indicator of the Government's broader policies for pensioners. For nine years, Tory austerity has saved money on the back of our most vulnerable citizens. By outsourcing responsibility for paying for TV licences, this Government will be cutting £745 million in 2021-22. That is in addition to the £220 million the Government will be saving in the same year through changes to pension credit. That is nearly a billion pounds of cuts the Government are making, coming directly out of the pockets of pensioners.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an important point about how this will hit the most vulnerable and needy of our older people. Joanne, a 78-year-old disabled woman from my constituency, wrote to me to say:

"I worked as a teacher for more than 30 years. I have never claimed benefit of any kind until I became disabled... When I was able I went to the theatre, cinema...etc... Now my only source of entertainment is reading...and TV. To take away the free licence I feel, given what we have put into the country...is mean, petty and very unfair."

Her wellbeing would be affected by not having TV, as would that of thousands of others. It is estimated that almost 6,000 people would be affected in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is outrageous and that we should be working in the opposite direction, in order to help our older people?

Tom Watson: Please tell Joanne that we are on her side and that we will be pressing the Government to honour their promises to her and the hundreds of thousands of other pensioners.

The number of pensioners living in poverty is rising—it is 1.9 million today, but it is forecast to pass 2 million by 2020. That is to this Government's shame. Their austerity agenda asks us to focus on the numbers, but we must not forget the human reality of what life is like for our oldest citizens. Social isolation is the scourge that is on the rise. New research from Age UK shows that half of the 4.5 million over-75s in the UK do not live with a partner, with two thirds having a long-standing illness that means they find it difficult to get out and about. The most heartbreaking of these new statistics is the fact that 400,000 people aged over 75 go a week without meeting up with or speaking on the phone to friends or family. Just one in nine over-75s say that they are not lonely.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I am proud to say that we are very supportive of the motion. The hon. Gentleman has outlined the characteristics of many people in the over-75 group. Despite all the things he has mentioned, these are the people who do get out to vote. What I am hearing from the many who have contacted me is that they want this House of Commons to get an opportunity to vote on the removal of this and for it not to be done in the way that is proposed.

Tom Watson: The hon. Lady makes an important point, and I am very grateful that she has aligned her party to the sentiments in this motion—it is very important.

[Tom Watson]

For millions of these people, television is a lifeline. Four in 10 older people say that TV is their main source of company, and this Government are about to take that away from them. The experiences of older people speak for themselves. A 94-year-old widower who is living by himself, with diabetes and dementia, told us:

“I cannot leave the house and rely on the television for company and entertainment.”

Another pensioner told us:

“I am on a small pension and if it came to a choice between food and TV, I would lose out and become isolated and alone. TV keeps me company.”

The truth is you cannot means test for social isolation; loneliness can affect anyone, anywhere. Any change to the current free licences will cause harm.

In conclusion, we know that the Minister will now give a speech saying this is all the BBC's responsibility and it is up to the BBC to decide the fate of the free TV licence. We do not agree. We are not fooled by the Government's attempts to offload and obfuscate their own responsibility. This is austerity by the back door. The public know that and pensioners know that. At the heart of this debate today is the question of what a manifesto promise means. I have always regarded manifesto commitments as one of the most basic and important of political pledges, not something that can be merely cast aside. Today, I urge the Minister to stand by that promise made by her party two years ago. She knows the parliamentary arithmetic; if she and the Member behind her tell the Government Front-Bench team they want to honour that promise, they would do so. So I urge every Conservative MP not to betray their promise to voters, not to betray the word they gave them at the 2017 general election. I commend this motion to the House.

2.9 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I thank the shadow Secretary of State for securing this important debate on the over-75 licence concession.

I wish to take a moment to recognise the hugely important role that the BBC plays in our national debate. As the shadow Secretary of State said so eloquently, as a constant companion for many people—especially older people—throughout the country, the BBC is indeed one of the UK's most treasured institutions and is a fundamental part of the country's social and economic fabric. Members will recognise that the BBC is a world-class broadcaster that produces a very high standard of television, radio and online content that is unparalleled in quality.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margot James: I will give way in just a moment.

From its impartial news and current affairs coverage of the day's events to its wide-ranging radio content, the BBC provides something for everyone, every day of the week, every week of the year.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margot James: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman behind the shadow Secretary of State. [Interruption.] I will just give way to each Member.

Maria Eagle: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, even if I am a bit flummoxed as to quite whether she was giving way to me. I agree with what she has said about the BBC, so does she think it is right that 20% and rising of the BBC's resource should in effect go towards fulfilling a Government policy on social security? It is just going to impair the BBC's ability to make classic programmes.

Margot James: It is important to see the decision that was made in the wider context of the licence fee agreement that was settled in 2015. It included several plus-points for the BBC that it had not had before—I shall come to the detail of them shortly—and it raised the BBC's income and for the first time put that income on a sustainable footing over a five-year period. In that context, the Government at the time took a reasonable position.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The TV licence concession is seen as a social security concession, so why should it be outsourced to the BBC?

Margot James: As I said to the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), it is a concession taken off the charge that everybody pays to the BBC, so it was thought fitting for the BBC to take responsibility. At the time, the country was in a severe financial situation—a very difficult fiscal situation, but I will not labour the point about the origins of the problems—which necessitated a number of difficult decisions. All public institutions and the whole public sector had to find efficiencies and reduce costs, and the BBC was no exception.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margot James: I shall make some progress, then give way in a few moments.

As the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport set out a couple of months ago, the BBC is a powerful example of how our public service broadcasters act as a force for good at home, performing in the national interest to deliver valuable news coverage and hugely popular shows.

Mr Jim Cunningham: To come back to the point I made earlier, if you have given the responsibility to the BBC, why did you include it in your election manifesto? That is the nub of the issue. Can you clarify whether you are going to honour the manifesto commitment or leave it to the BBC to make the cut that you are avoiding?

Mr Speaker: That was very naughty of the hon. Gentleman. The word “you” is intruding with increasing frequency. I did not have a manifesto and I did not make a promise on this matter, but I think the hon. Gentleman was referring to the Minister, and I am happy to vest the responsibility where it lies.

Margot James: I acknowledge that the manifesto commitment was made, but draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that Parliament had already voted in favour of passing responsibility to the BBC. The BBC had a responsibility to consult should it wish to make any change to the concession, as it was the Government's expectation that the BBC would continue to honour the concession.

I recognise the vital public service provided to people of all ages, but Opposition Members are quite right that the BBC is of particular value to older people, who value television as a way of staying connected with the world.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Will the Minister and the Government please honour the pledge on page 66 of their manifesto to stand up for the four in 10 who find this to be a lifeline?

Margot James: I have already answered that question in other ways, but I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the fact that no decision has yet been made. I was saying to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) that there was an obligation on the BBC to consult should it wish to make any change to the concession, with the Government's expectation being that the BBC would continue to honour the concession. The BBC has conducted an extensive consultation, the results of which have not even been published yet, so it is premature to sow all this fear in older people's minds.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I very much support the continuation of the concession, but is it not important to recognise that when the House passed the Digital Economy Act 2017, which transferred responsibility for the concession to the BBC, Opposition Members supported it?

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): No we did not!

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I will not get involved—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) that his volume is almost equal to the volume at which he sings with distinction in the parliamentary rock band. If he wishes to make his point, the conventional means by which to do so is via an intervention, rather than by yelling from a sedentary position.

Margot James: The key point is that in November 2016, the House passed the Digital Economy Act, including the important element that passed responsibility for the concession to the BBC.

Chris Bryant: The truth of the matter is that by passing that responsibility on the Government have, if the BBC is to implement the Government's pledge, taken a vast chunk out of the BBC's budget. My constituents want to know whether the BBC could do something better with that money—for instance, by making sure that we have a proper digital service across the whole of the valleys of south Wales. Why is it right that after the Government have stopped meddling with it, the national broadcaster ends up with a budget that is a fifth of the size of Sky's? How is that a national broadcaster?

Margot James: I take issue with the hon. Gentleman's asking whether the BBC could find something better to do with the money. Opposition Members have been full of reasons why it would be desirable for the BBC to continue to honour—

Kevin Brennan: Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will in a minute, but I am still answering the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), because the point he raised was rather moot. Let me address some of the other aspects of his intervention. The BBC enjoyed a significant increase in its income following the most recent licence fee settlement: it received the benefit of iPlayer users having to pay a licence fee and built-in year-on-year inflationary increases for the duration of the five-year licence fee agreement, and the number of licence fee payers grew over that time by at least 300,000. All that has increased the income available to the BBC.

Kevin Brennan: I am acting on Mr Speaker's instructions, because I wish to point out to the Minister and the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who I do not think was then a Member of the House, that at the time my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said in the Digital Economy Bill Committee:

“I rise to address new clause 38, which is in my name and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West. I am sorry to say that this is where any cross-party consensus on the Bill ends. We absolutely do not support clause 76 or any of the amendments to it. Not only the Opposition, but the more than 4 million over-75s in this country who currently make use of this benefit oppose the clause.”—[*Official Report, Digital Economy Public Bill Committee, 27 October 2016; c. 390.*]

Margot James: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for setting the record straight in terms of who voted for what and when, but the point is that Parliament passed this measure into law through the Digital Economy Act 2017. Of course the Government recognise the importance of providing both this valuable service and opportunities for older people to engage, which is why we launched our loneliness strategy last year. The Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), has done a fantastic job in promoting the various services that the Government are funding with new money to enable older people to get connected, whether that be online or through social and sporting events, in 140 hubs across the country. We do take our responsibilities to older people very seriously. We are trying to help combat the loneliness that, as Opposition Members say, is a scourge of the lives of too many older people.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): There is one thing that has not transpired in the debate thus far. We fully support the motion, but it seems to have escaped the notice of some people that, at the time the Act was passed two and a half years ago, Lord Hall on behalf of the BBC agreed to the proposal and therein lies some of the problem.

Margot James: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding me that Lord Hall welcomed the licence fee settlement, which was so ably negotiated by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). Indeed, Lord Hall said at the time:

“The Government's decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

I draw the attention of hon. Members to that quote. The hon. Member for Rhondda does not need to rise as there are other people trying to intervene.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margot James: I want to make a bit of progress, because I know that many hon. Members want to speak in the debate.

The BBC's brilliant public service and the role that it plays for older people would not be possible without the licence fee. Last year, the BBC received more than £3.8 billion in licence fee income, and it is that income that underpins the BBC's crucial role in making sure that everyone in the UK can access the content that educates, informs and entertains. The Government recognised the importance of the licence fee when we agreed the licence fee funding settlement with the BBC in 2015. We agreed a five-year licence fee funding settlement, which provided for the first time financial certainty and a sustainable income for the BBC and we committed to maintaining the current licence fee funding model for the duration of this charter period until 2027. We unfroze the licence fee for the first time since 2010 by guaranteeing that, each year, it will rise in line with inflation.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Surely the point is this: we cannot provide financial certainty for the BBC at the expense of the over-75s. Whether or not it was right to give power to the BBC in the Digital Economy Act is not the issue. We have to look at this on the basis of the outcomes, not the processes. Will the Minister not accept that, right now, the outcomes for the over-75s look pretty grim?

Margot James: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I am sure that the BBC will listen to those comments, with which I have considerable sympathy. This was part of a fair deal for the BBC. I have already quoted the director-general of the BBC, but he did also say at the time that it was a strong deal for the BBC and that it provided financial stability—that is important for all viewers, whatever their age—and Parliament agreed, which we have already discussed.

As the House will recognise, the Government have been clear about their expectations on this matter. The Government guaranteed the over-75 concession at least until 2020. We agreed with the BBC, and it was approved by this House, that the future of the concession was the BBC's decision, and the BBC is rightly operationally independent of the Government. Therefore, this matter is for the BBC. Given the importance of the issue, we have made our expectations clear. Let me just point out that the BBC has undergone a significant and extensive consultation, as it was required to do by law through the Digital Economy Act. The consultation closed in February of this year. It set out a number of options for the future of the concession and it is carefully evaluating the many, many inputs as a result of that consultation.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way. I am fully aware of the BBC consultation, but I am also aware of the volume of correspondence that I am getting from my constituents in Blaydon, who are telling me that this is not a matter for the BBC. They say that it was a promise made by the Government, and that her Government must abide by their commitment in the manifesto. On the impact of loneliness and the measures that the Government are taking, the evidence from my constituency is that people believe it is the

Government's responsibility to fund this measure, because watching the TV is a key way of avoiding loneliness for many older people.

Margot James: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I agree that watching television is a real way of combating loneliness for a lot of people, particularly older people, who live on their own, so she makes a good point. However, the point is that no decision has yet been made. I have also had a lot of correspondence on this matter mostly kindly sent to me by hon. Members from all parts of the House. The main point is that they want the concession to continue. I have not had a lot of comment about whose responsibility that should be.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The deal agreed with the BBC did establish its long-term financial footing, but does my hon. Friend agree that the financial responsibility of the BBC is not just to rely on licence fees, but to fully exploit its massive library of content? It should do so, and we should enable and encourage that commercial exploitation. It is currently worth well over £1 billion a year, but why should it not be £2 billion or £3 billion and therefore help cover some of the cost of this?

Margot James: I agree strongly with my hon. Friend. He makes a very good point. That is why I am encouraged by Ofcom's decision to loosen some of the controls under which the BBC has laboured, particularly with regard to iPlayer. There is an excellent opportunity there to sell more subscriptions around the world to watch the fantastic archived content for a lot longer than the very short period that exists at the moment—there was a constraint on the development of iPlayer for far too long.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Margot James: I will just make a bit of progress and then I will give way again.

The BBC consultation set out a number of options for the future of the concession and it set out that the BBC may choose to keep the concession as it stands—a free TV licence for those aged 75 and above. It also looked carefully at the case for removing the concession entirely. As many Members will be aware, it also had a number of other options in between those two points. They include a change to the eligible age for the concession, a discounted concession, a move from a free licence to that discounted one, and the introduction of means testing. I want to reassure any older people watching that the decision has not yet been made. The BBC has listened carefully to the concerns expressed throughout the consultation. I am thankful that the BBC has consulted so widely on the issue to seek the views of licence fee payers across the country.

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): Is not one of the cruellest things about this that it is younger people, by and large, who have a far greater choice when it comes to TV viewing, because many of them are now using subscription services, which actually do not require a BBC licence at all and, in many cases, those services are also cheaper? Older people do not have that choice, so is it not very cruel that those are the people we are trying to restrict in their TV watching, which, as others have said, might lead to more social loneliness?

Margot James: I do not necessarily agree that older people do not have that choice. I agree that many older people rely on the BBC more than any other channel—that is probably true—but older people have access to other channels in the same way as people of other age groups.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Many of my Moray constituents have contacted me, urging me to support this concession for the over-75s remaining in place. The Minister went over a number of options that the BBC is looking at. Does she understand that many people really do not agree that we should be talking about taking this TV licence concession away from the over-75s when there are so many celebrities and pundits on very high salaries?

Margot James: My hon. Friend makes exactly the same point that was made emphatically to me by a very good friend and constituent of mine. The BBC operates in a tough commercial environment. To our minds, such salaries might seem extraordinary—at times, ridiculous—but these are the salaries for very well-established celebrities, sportsmen and women, and a number of others. The BBC has to compete, but I take my hon. Friend's point; it is one that has been made well by other people who have written to me.

Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab): One of my Colne Valley constituents said to me, "The TV is the companion in the corner of the room for me, and I would be so lonely without it." Is the Minister happy to take that companion away from 6,750 over-75s in Colne Valley? [*Interruption.*]

Margot James: My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon has just reminded me that it is a decision for the BBC to make. I am sure that the BBC has listened to the hon. Lady and others across the House. I have also received such letters, and I do understand. I draw her attention to the fact that there is a range of options. I would gently say that not every older person over the age of 75 would be unable to afford to contribute to the future of our great broadcaster. It is important that we remember that, sadly, there have had to be efficiencies and reductions across the public sector, and the BBC has been no exception. The future of the concession is down to the BBC; it is no longer the Government's decision. I look forward to the BBC's final decision on the future of the concession, which I anticipate it will announce next month.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I call the Scottish National party spokesperson, let me say that colleagues will be aware that this is a very well-subscribed debate, so I expect Back-Bench speeches to be five minutes in length. That will mean that we can get everybody in.

2.32 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to speak in this debate but it feels as though, when I get on my feet in this place, it is increasingly because the Government appear to be completely abrogating their responsibilities towards our older people. Whether they are removing pension credits from mixed-age couples, or failing to keep their side of the bargain and pay the pensions due to women born in the 1950s who received little or no notice of the rise in the state pension age,

it seems that this is happening more and more. I wonder whether the Minister is comfortable with the undeniable narrative that is emerging.

Today we are talking about the UK Government's decision—and it is their decision—to have a go at the over-75s. I have already raised this matter several times in the Chamber and I have written to the Secretary of State, as have others; but I have never had a proper or meaningful response. Today I had been hoping for that response, but sadly we have just heard a wee bit more of the same. It is important to be clear that the Government have maintained—we heard this again today—that they are not scrapping TV licences for the over-75s, and that they are simply delegating responsibility for those licences to the BBC. This is a game of semantics that tells us that the Government want to scrap the free TV licences but do not want to take responsibility for doing so. It simply will not wash.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): At the hustings during the 2017 general election campaign, a member of the audience said to me that he felt that the Government were often punishing him for growing old, partly through the measures that the hon. Lady just mentioned. Does she agree that this was an opportunity for the Government to do something to prove that they do take into account the difficulties faced by pensioners and people aged over 75—the loneliness that not having television could provoke—rather than reinforcing the feeling of being punished?

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree. The Government have picked a fight with over-75s for no particular reason, and for no particular benefit that I can see. But not taking responsibility for this matter simply will not wash.

I ask the Minister, since when has the BBC become an offshoot of the Department for Work and Pensions? The BBC is a broadcaster. It should not, and must not, be charged with deciding how much support our pensioners should receive from wider society. The UK Government have undoubtedly abrogated their responsibility for TV licences, and have left the BBC to decide whether it will impose this charge on the over-75s. The BBC will have £745 million less to spend annually on programmes—the combined budget of BBC 2, BBC 4 and BBC Radio 3—if it continues with the free TV licences. Options being considered range across the BBC taking on the funding, seeking partial payment or removing the concession entirely, putting it in an impossible position.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): The hon. Lady is making a very good speech. The fact is that this benefit given to elderly pensioners is a benefit—I speak as someone with an interest, because I think I am the only person here who is over 75 and actually receives the free television licence—but a benefit should be paid for out of progressive taxation, whereby the rich pay most and the poor pay least. As everyone under 75 pays for our licences, some of those people are very poor indeed, effectively having to pay some contribution towards broadcasting, which should be paid for by the state.

Patricia Gibson: I agree. When we move away from progressive taxation we move into a system that is extremely unfair, and not the kind of society that most of us want to live in.

[*Patricia Gibson*]

Former BBC director-general Greg Dyke suggested that leaving the BBC to pick up the tab would impact on programme quality. He said:

“Let’s not kid ourselves this won’t have an impact on what the BBC will supply. It will.”

As well as the impossible choice that has been foisted on the BBC as the UK Government seek cover, this policy means that the Tories are rolling back on their manifesto pledge to maintain pensioner benefits, including free TV licences. How can older people—indeed, anyone—trust what they say in any future manifesto pledge?

Let us remember that the reason that all households with someone aged over 75 have been entitled to receive free TV licences, funded by the UK Government, is to help tackle pensioner poverty and isolation. The Tories have decided to cease funding completely from next year. If the free TV licences are scrapped, the consequences for my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, of whom more than 9,000 will be affected, will be far-reaching. Combating loneliness is very important when it comes to health outcomes for older people. To try to contract out that responsibility to the BBC is cowardly, fools no one and sets a dangerous precedent.

According to the BBC’s own figures, scrapping the over-75s concessionary licence will take an average of more than £22,000 a week out of the pockets of over-75s in every single constituency, and we know that many thousands of pensioners already struggle to make ends meet. Age Scotland’s “money matters” project found that four in 10 people over the age of 50 report feeling financially squeezed, and its survey on the housing needs of older people found that six in 10 pensioners who live alone report difficulties paying their fuel bills. We know that 70% of over-75s have a long-standing illness and 29% live below or just above the poverty line. Make no mistake: this Government are effectively asking our older people to choose between switching on the heating or turning on the TV. Having another bill to pay will push many more below the poverty line, or deeper into poverty. As of 1 April, the cost of the colour TV licence increased to £154.50. Age UK has warned that scrapping the concession would push 50,000 over-75s into relative poverty. That should cause the Government to hang their head in shame.

The financial strain can be further exacerbated by any disability or long-term health conditions that an older person may be living with. The proportion of adults with a long-term, limiting health condition is increasing as the population ages. More than four-fifths of people aged 85 or over have reported that their daily lives are limited by a long-term health problem or disability. That is important, as there are numerous extra costs associated with having a disability or long-term health condition, such as having to get taxis more often to get out and about, and extra heating costs. Many rely on their television for companionship and entertainment. For the considerable number who do not have the internet, TV helps them to stay up to date with what is happening in the world.

The Government have told this House repeatedly that they cannot pay women born in the 1950s their pensions because we are all living longer. Well, given that the Government recognise that we are all living longer, they cannot shirk their responsibilities and abandon those

who are living longest. The Government cannot have this both ways. The goalposts cannot be shifted depending on which particular group of society they wish to shaft at any particular time; it is simply not good enough.

For many older people, their television is not just a box in the corner—it is company. Television is a lifeline, particularly for those who are most vulnerable and older. If mobility issues mean that someone struggles to get out and about, the TV helps them to stay connected. When money is a constant worry and that is stressful, it is an escape. When people spend their days alone, it gives them something to look forward to, and they often identify closely with TV characters and personalities. Figures show that over-75s watch an average of 33 hours of television each week, compared with eight hours a week for those in their 20s. Imagine the loss of that lifeline for so many of our poorer pensioners, who simply will not be able to afford the cost of a TV licence.

Let us not forget—this has not been mentioned yet—that every year people are fined for non-payment of their TV licence. To potentially prosecute people in their 80s and 90s is completely unacceptable, and it could well happen if these free television licences are abolished. I ask the Minister: is this an example of addressing the “burning injustices” that the Prime Minister once spoke about? I believe it is vital to support our pensioners. Not only is the UK state pension the lowest in the developed world relative to wages; it has been further damaged by the Tory Government’s plans to reduce eligibility for pension credit, leaving some couples out of pocket by £7,320 every year. If we throw in their contempt for women born in the 1950s regarding increases in the pension age, it is clear that the Government have no intention of honouring the contribution that our elderly population have made over the years.

The BBC is a broadcaster. Public welfare is not its remit, and it should not be expected to decide whether older people have free TV licences or not.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank the hon. Lady for the very strong speech that she is making. As I said earlier, a lot of older people who have contacted me are deeply frustrated because they see this decision as having no democratic accountability. They want Members in this House to make a decision and then implement it. Because of the agreement made with the BBC some years ago, this decision has been delegated—put out of this place—and that is deeply frustrating. Does she agree that this must change, and that this House must take action on it?

Patricia Gibson: I absolutely agree. We have a worrying trend of Parliament being bypassed. I know that minority government is not a comfortable place to be, but if a party of government cannot come to the Chamber and sell its policies, maybe the policies are the problem, not Parliament itself.

The BBC should not be making this decision. It should not and must not become the responsibility of a broadcaster. Lord Bragg has said:

“The BBC is not an organisation that should collect taxes, of which the licence fee is one, for social purposes. Its money should be used for making programmes.”

Clearly, the UK Government disagree. I urge the Tories—I urge this Government—to honour this extremely important manifesto commitment, to do the right thing and to maintain pensioner benefits, including the TV licence,

so that elderly people can continue to watch television for free instead of having to choose between watching television and switching on their heating and/or potentially being criminalised in their twilight years for watching “Coronation Street”.

Some say—I have heard them say it today—that many pensioners could pay for their own TV licence. That is not an argument to impose a charge for free TV licences; it is an argument against universalism that takes us down an extremely dangerous road. It is a distracting diversion that is being used as a tactic to remove essential support. In any case, it does not matter whether one thinks that universalism as a principle is wrong—the fact is that this was in the Tory manifesto, and the back-peddalling and attempt to deflect responsibility on to the BBC is fooling no one.

This policy is perhaps the most mean-spirited policy of this Government so far—and that is saying something. The Government need to get a grip, stop attacking our older people, accord them the care and respect they are due, and stop making life more difficult for them. As we have heard, it is extremely important that this House is allowed to have its say on this policy, because every single MP in this place should have the courage to go back to their older constituents, look them in the eye and explain why they voted—if they voted—to remove free TV licences from them.

2.46 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate. As the Minister pointed out, I was the Secretary of State at the time when the licence fee settlement was agreed with the BBC, so I would like to set out some of the reasons why those decisions were reached.

As the Opposition spokesman said, the concessionary TV licence for over-75s is not a fundamental pillar of the welfare state—it was actually introduced by the previous Labour Government. It was introduced to address an anomaly that elderly people living in sheltered housing did not have to pay the full licence fee whereas others did. However, the Labour Government did not introduce free TV licences for all pensioners, on the basis that it was far too expensive to do so—they restricted it to those aged over 75 at a cost, at that time, of £365 million. It is important to realise that that money was not removed from the BBC—it was given to the BBC by the Department for Work and Pensions. It has always been the case, since then, that the cost of exemption from the TV licence is met out of the Government’s budget. The cost to the Government of doing so has risen steadily, so that by last year it had already reached £660 million.

I had the task of negotiating both the new BBC charter and the licence fee settlement. Personally, I would have much preferred that the licence fee had been included within the charter negotiations, since the licence fee settlement, to some extent, pre-empted decisions that we took as a result of the charter review process. However, as the Minister rightly pointed out, we were in very difficult financial circumstances thanks to the profligacy of the previous Labour Government, and we had to take a lot of very difficult decisions. The then Chancellor was clear that we should seek to achieve savings from the BBC, as a publicly owned institution funded by the Government, in the same way that all other public

institutions were being asked to find savings. So we agreed with the BBC that it would take over the cost of funding the licence fee concession. However, we were also clear that we had given a pledge that the concession would be maintained until 2020, and therefore the agreement with the BBC was that it would take it over in 2020.

I have to say to the House that the negotiations with the BBC over that were indeed robust. I remember sitting down with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, with George Osborne and with Lord Hall, the director-general of the BBC, and we had some good discussions in which Lord Hall argued forcibly that this would have a detrimental impact on the BBC. Therefore, in recognition of that, we also included, as part of the licence fee settlement, agreement to address some of the things the BBC raised as its principal concerns. One was the freeze in the licence fee. The licence fee had not gone up at all for a number of years, and therefore the BBC was looking at a real-terms reduction every year. We agreed that the licence fee should be unfrozen. Secondly, a growing number of people were avoiding paying the licence fee by watching the BBC on catch-up, through the iPlayer. Under the law as it then stood, if someone watched the BBC a mere two minutes after the live transmission, they did not have to pay the licence fee. The licence fee was therefore extended to close what was called the iPlayer loophole.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the director-general of the BBC, Lord Hall, that the funding arrangements put in place with the BBC by my right hon. Friend and the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, represented a fair deal?

Mr Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, because he allows me to quote the director-general. As I say, our negotiations were robust, but we emerged from them with the director-general issuing a public statement saying that it was “the right deal... in difficult economic circumstances”.

He went on to say:

“Far from being a cut, the way this financial settlement is shaped gives us, effectively, flat licence fee income across the first five years of the next charter.”

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I do not know whether my right hon. Friend will mention this part of the licence fee deal, but it is worth making the point that the last Labour Government imposed on the licence fee a levy to fund broadband roll-out, and because of the success of the broadband roll-out under our Government, we removed that levy from the BBC. While there was a stick with free TV licences, there were carrots with the removal of some of the subsidies the last Government had asked the BBC to provide.

Mr Whittingdale: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who was also a key player at that time as a Minister in the Department. He is absolutely right. I mentioned two of the BBC’s requests at the time—the unfreezing of the licence fee and the closure of the loophole—but he is correct to point out that the BBC had always been unhappy about the top-slicing of the licence fee to fund broadband, which it saw as far removed from the purpose of the licence fee. That was another agreement we reached with the BBC, which I think was why the BBC felt that it was a fair and proper settlement.

Mr McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman is implying that the BBC was happy with all this at the time, but in the press statement announcing the consultation, the BBC said:

“The BBC could copy the scheme... but we think it would fundamentally change the BBC because of the scale of service cuts we would need to make.”

That is not the statement of an organisation that thinks it can easily absorb this.

Mr Whittingdale: The agreement with the BBC was that it would have responsibility for maintaining or amending the licence fee concession. The right hon. Gentleman quoted the BBC’s view about the cost of maintaining the concession as it stands, and that view is understandable, since the cost next year will be £745 million, rising to £1.06 billion by 2029-30. I am not at all surprised that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) was unable to give any commitment that a future Labour Government would maintain the concession at the cost of the taxpayer, since that would be a £1 billion public expenditure pledge.

In recognition of that, the BBC has put forward three different options. It has talked about continuation, which, as the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) said, it feels is not realistic, as that would amount to the current cost of BBC 2, BBC 3, BBC 4, the news channel, CBBC and CBeebies all put together. It has also suggested some amendment to the concession, or discontinuing it altogether. Each of the three possible amendments to the licence fee concession that the BBC has suggested has some attraction. It has talked about raising the age limit to 77 or 80, which to some extent would reflect the ageing population and maintain roughly the same proportion. A second possibility is to introduce a discounted fee, so that people over 75 would not have to pay the full cost.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): My right hon. Friend, who is an excellent neighbour, is making an excellent speech. Many of my constituents who are over 75 have emailed me to say that they want to continue to watch the TV with a free licence, but they are not necessarily also watching the BBC on multiple other devices, as many younger people are. Can my right hon. Friend see a case for older members of the public still being able to watch the BBC via a single device, while younger people watch on multiple devices? Would that sort of system work?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I reiterate that there is pressure on time, and interventions need to be short.

Mr Whittingdale: I will of course take account of your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, but my hon. Friend raises an interesting point, which I want to touch on as I conclude my remarks.

The third possible amendment would be to limit the concession to those in receipt of pension credit. That would address many of the concerns expressed by Opposition Members about those on very low incomes finding it hard to afford and would introduce an element of targeting, to ensure that those who will struggle to afford the television licence do not have to do so.

There is another change that I ask the BBC to consider, which is not included in its options. At the moment, households are entitled to a free television licence if a

member of the household is over 75. It is ridiculous that a household might have four adults of working age who are all bringing in an income, but because they happen to have their grandmother living with them, they do not have to pay for a television licence. I ask the BBC to consider a simple change, to restrict the concession to households that only consist of people aged over 75.

I want to end by saying that this raises fundamental questions about the future of the licence fee. Viewing habits are changing, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) indicated. Evasion of the TV licence is rising. It has gone up from 5.2% in 2010 to an estimated 7% now, with the advent of new services such as Netflix and Amazon, and soon possibly Apple and Disney. The old argument that every household needs to pay the licence fee because everybody watches the BBC is, I am afraid, beginning to break down, and we are reaching a position where many households watch the huge range of programmes available and never turn to the BBC.

That is why I have always believed that, in the long term, the licence fee is not sustainable. We addressed that at the beginning of the charter review. It is recognised by the director-general, who has said that the BBC needs to look at alternative models and has mentioned the possibility of introducing subscription services on iPlayer. At the moment, there is no alternative to the licence fee because we do not have a system where people who choose not to pay it can be cut off; that was why we reached the conclusion that the licence fee had to be maintained. But in the longer term, that will not be true. There will come a time when the licence fee cannot be sustained, but that will be the task of the future Secretary of State who has the job of undertaking the next charter review.

2.58 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Free TV licences for over-75s were introduced in 2000 by a Labour Government—one of the many policies introduced by Labour to deliver a better quality of life for the people of this nation. Many of the people who voted Conservative in the 2017 general election likely did so expecting the Tory Government to continue to provide free TV licences for people over 75, as it was in the party’s manifesto, alongside promises to keep free bus passes, eye tests and prescriptions for the duration of this Parliament. If the Government were one who kept their manifesto promises, I could happily end my speech now. Sadly, as with many of the promises made by this Government, that manifesto pledge has been broken, and it once again falls on Labour and other Opposition Members to explain to the Government why the policy of scrapping free TV licences for over-75s will cause great harm to some of the most vulnerable in our society.

As I expected, the Minister made out that it is not the Government’s decision to scrap free TV licences for over-75s but the BBC’s, and the BBC is now the one in charge of licensing. While that is technically correct, the reality is that this Conservative Government have unloaded their pledge to the elderly of this nation on to the BBC—outsourcing without the funding. Essentially, they are saying to the BBC, “You fund the free licences and decide whether they should continue”. The Tory Government know full well that the BBC will not have

the financial capabilities to maintain this programme and eventually will need to cancel the free TV licences. This is not the fault of the BBC. The expected cost of the free licences will be £745 million by 2021-22, but I would add that under this Government, due to austerity, life expectancy is predicted to decline.

To put the outsourcing by this Government into context, it is a fifth of the BBC's budget and the equivalent of what is spent today on BBC 2, BBC 3, BBC 4, the BBC News channel, CBBC and CBeebies. That would be the cost in funding and programming. A broadcaster should not be expected to take on the role that is clearly within the realm of a Government Department. This is a Tory Government using smoke and mirrors.

If free TV licences were to be scrapped, 2.4 million older people living entirely on their own would lose their TV licence, and a means-tested system would lead to 1.6 million losing their licence. In my constituency alone, 7,100 people could lose their licence, and £1 million would be robbed out of the pockets of those vulnerable people. Age UK estimates that over 2 million over-75s would need to go without a TV licence or be forced to give up essentials such as heating or even food.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Rimmer: No. I am sorry, but I will not give way.

This callous act has the potential to drive 50,000 pensioners below the poverty line. Age UK has found that 29% of over-75s live in poverty or just above the poverty line. Does my hon. Friend want to come in now?

Nick Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—eventually. Four in 10 older people say that their TV is their main source of company, and Age UK says that cutting their access to it would be an “unthinkably cruel blow”. Does she agree with me that the Government need to stop passing the buck, and need to honour their promises and keep TV licences free for our over-75s?

Ms Rimmer: I absolutely do. I have mentioned what Age UK has found about 29% of over-75s, and £154.50 out of a fixed income will push those just above the line into poverty.

Television is a bridge to the outside world for the 2 million people over 75, of whom almost half are disabled and many others have serious health conditions. When mobility is difficult and people struggle even to get to the end of their street, the TV will often be the only companionship, entertainment and stimulation available. The United Kingdom is facing a loneliness epidemic among our elderly, and it is not good enough that one in four see a television as their only source of companionship. In fact, the only human voices they hear are from the television, and it is important for our sanity that we hear human voices. It is fundamentally wrong for this Government, through this policy, to take away the little bit that people do have. Many of our elderly in this nation are not online, and those who are may struggle with technology, as I do.

This policy, which will do so much harm, is clear evidence that the Government have not brought austerity to an end, but are driving forward their heartless and

unnecessary austerity agenda. The UK is spending less on public expenditure as a percentage of GDP: it has now dropped to just over 40%—40.8%—from 48%. This is one of the lowest in the developed world when compared with similar nations such as Germany and Finland, which spend 4% and 12% more of their GDP than we do. How can this Tory Government justify not continuing to fund the financing required to maintain free TV licences for over-75s?

Labour has a clear alternative, which is not to force the BBC into an impossible position where it has no choice but to scrap or severely cut free TV licences for the over-75s. A Labour Government would commit to delivering free TV licences to the over-75s, providing support and company for some of the most vulnerable of our people.

I call on the Government to step in and to deliver their manifesto pledge and their promise to protect free TV licences for the over-75s to ensure that those people are not forced to make an unacceptable choice between what little companionship they have and living in the cold and having less food on their plates.

3.4 pm

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer), but I have to say that it is a shame this debate has descended into party politics. Actually, it should be about the future of the BBC—how the BBC's funding can properly abide by the strictures by which it has to abide and how it is to deliver its services in the future—but we seem to be having a debate other than the one that is sensible.

I love the BBC. I worked for the BBC on and off for 20 years, and it is the best broadcaster in the world. I would never support any sort of arrangement for the future funding of the BBC that I thought would do it damage or that I thought would lead to under-serving the people who deserve to be served by the BBC as the best public broadcaster in the world. The BBC produces some of the stand-out TV in what is now a global TV industry—with “Line of Duty”, which had nearly 10 million viewers on Sunday, as well as “Strictly Come Dancing”, “Bodyguard”, “Blue Peter” and “Match of the Day”—and it has its unrivalled news coverage, its radio, its online services, its children's programmes and all the research and development it does. I am a passionate supporter of the BBC, but we should be debating how we ensure the future security of funding for the BBC and the future security of provision of service for all the people who enjoy the BBC.

Let us be clear: as has been mentioned in the past, the funding deal the BBC accepted in June 2015 gave it financial stability for five years. It was a deal that saw a guaranteed, copper-bottomed, real-terms increase in funding for the BBC. That is the sort of arrangement private commercial organisations can only dream of. They would think it was all their Christmases come at once to have that sort of guaranteed income for five years. In addition, as was mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), as part of the deal the contribution that the BBC previously made to the roll-out of superfast broadband—it used to contribute £150 million a year—was cut to zero by 2020, and the iPlayer loophole was quite rightly closed, bringing in an extra £41 million a year.

[Peter Heaton-Jones]

The BBC was very happy with that deal. It welcomed the deal, and it accepted the deal. I have two quotes for the House, although I will not go over ground that has already been covered. Lord Hall, as I suppose we should properly call him, the BBC's director-general, said that "the BBC used this pre-budget window of opportunity to reach a fair deal".

Furthermore, speaking on the Radio 4 "Today" programme, one of the fantastic institutions that the public quite rightly pay the BBC to produce, he said:

"The government's decision here to put the cost of the over-75s on us"—

in other words, the BBC—

"has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC. My bottom line was, if I can use this as an opportunity to get back for the BBC things I think are really important—an inflation-set licence fee and an end to top-slicing—then I think that is really important. And that is exactly what we have done."

The BBC accepted this deal. It accepted this guaranteed, copper-bottomed funding increase and welcomed it, and it now needs to live within its means. I have to say, having worked on and off for the BBC for 20 years, that there are many ways, it is sad to say, in which the BBC does not do so. We have recently seen figures showing that there are now nearly 100 members of BBC staff who earn more than £150,000 a year, and some of them earn a lot more than that. We have recently seen that the BBC's programme for developing a new "EastEnders" set has gone £30 million over budget and will be delivered three and a half years late—it is almost as though they are building a railway line—and an entire technology project aimed at digitising all its programmes has had to be cut, after spending nearly £60 million. The BBC must look more carefully at how it spends its money and at the salaries it pays its staff. It must ensure that it can continue to deliver the concession that we are discussing, which it accepted in a deal from the Government.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I apologise for not being here for the opening of the debate. I am the chairman of the all-party parliamentary BBC group, and I want to speak in support of the BBC. Does my hon. Friend agree that although the BBC needs to live within its means, 20% of its budget will be too much for it to absorb, and therefore the BBC should be free to make this decision without political pressure?

Peter Heaton-Jones: I agree with the last part of what my hon. Friend has said. The BBC should absolutely be free to make this decision without political pressure and without the scaremongering that we have, sadly, heard from the Opposition.

A point has been made about loneliness. Of course, older people rely very much on the BBC. I represent North Devon, a constituency with a higher than average proportion of older people and people who live alone. I will not take lessons from anyone about how best to represent them and ensure that they get what they need.

I can tell that you are eager for a denouement, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I want to give other hon. and right hon. Members the opportunity to contribute. Let me conclude by saying that I am a huge supporter of the BBC. I love the BBC, and I love the programmes and services it delivers, but it must live within its means.

We must accept that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon has said, after robust negotiations the BBC accepted responsibility for the continuation of this concession. I call on the BBC to do so.

3.11 pm

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to add my voice to this significant debate. I make no apology for the fact that what I am about to say may cover some things that have already been mentioned. Scrapping the free TV licence for over-75s will have a significant impact on people's lives. For millions of over-75s, the TV is not just a box—or even a screen—in the corner; it is their constant companion and window on the world. For some, television is their main form of company, as we have heard, and it plays a central role in their lives.

The Tory manifesto stated that the party would maintain the promise to provide free TV licences for the over-75s, but the Government have changed their mind with no apology. They have created this situation by pushing the free TV licence scheme on to the BBC. For me, that shows disregard and disrespect for our older population. The BBC is considering taking away the rights of those people to free TV licences. This is the Government's responsibility, not the BBC's. We need to preserve the quality stations that the BBC presents.

If the change goes ahead, it could lead to increased loneliness among over-75s, because more than a million older people say that the TV is their main source of company. The change could cause poverty; research by Age UK has found that scrapping the free TV licence could push more pensioners into poverty. In my constituency, there are 4,790 households that include people over the age of 75.

The change will affect people with disability, because people with restricted mobility rely heavily on the TV for companionship and entertainment. It also ties in to digital exclusion. More than half of over-75s do not use the internet, and they rely on the television as a source of news and information. That plays a crucial role in their ability to be an active citizen in a democracy.

My elderly mother has a TV. She has it on in the background, and she listens to the radio. She watches her soaps, the news and debates from the House of Commons Chamber.

Thelma Walker: Poor woman!

Janet Daby: Some people enjoy that, obviously. For many of our older parents, friends, grandparents and other family members, the TV is crucial to their life and wellbeing, and it plays a significant role in their lives.

For me, the change that we are discussing raises questions about how the Government treat the older generation, and those questions are not limited to TV licences. Some 5,000 WASPI women in Lewisham East still await compensation following the unfair equalisation of the state pension. There is a crisis in social care, which the Government seem unwilling even to acknowledge. The voluntary sector, which is filling the gaps, is under severe financial pressure as grants from the Government have receded. The Minister and the Government need to take a long, hard look at the choices they are making, and how those choices are affecting our older population.

3.15 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby). I stood in Lewisham, Deptford in 2005 when my now neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), stood for Lewisham East; obviously, we have both been a bit more successful since then. It is the first time I have spoken after the hon. Lady, and I welcome her to the House.

I was not intending to speak, but earlier I intervened on the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson), to ask him a question that is fundamental to this debate. I asked him whether, in principle, a multimillionaire should receive a free TV licence, and he said, in effect, "Of course they should." I happen to disagree fundamentally with that proposition.

Kevin Brennan: In principle, should a multimillionaire receive free treatment on the NHS?

James Cartlidge: That is a completely different point, and let me explain why—[*Interruption.*] Calm down; give me a moment. The original response—the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) made this point, very fairly—was that it is about universality. The justification for providing free TV licences regardless of wealth is that they are a universal benefit.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) pointed out, however, eligibility for a free TV licence over the age of 75 was introduced only in 2000. There is no way that anyone could say it was a fundamental tenet of the welfare state contract—something that someone would expect to receive in exchange for their contributions—unlike treatment on the national health service, which has been there since just after the war and is very clearly based on the principle of paying into the system, sharing risk and receiving. I think most people accept that point.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Did the hon. Gentleman stand on the Conservative manifesto that promised to retain free TV licences for over-75s?

James Cartlidge: I did, but this is a debating Chamber—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) does not agree. I hope that she makes some original points when she comes to speak. I simply say that there will probably be a general election at some point in the next few years, and possibly before 2022. In this Chamber, we should debate policy; that is what we are put here to do.

I happen to think that one of the biggest questions we face concerns the fact that people who are going into work today will not receive an occupational pension, because such pensions have disappeared. Many retired people—good luck to them; my parents are in this category—receive good occupational pensions. Some of those people, although not most, would be regarded by many as relatively wealthy. In my view, therefore, we must look at the principle of taxing benefits that are paid out as so-called freebies—of course, the money has to come from somewhere—according to the recipients' means.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I want to expand on the point about the difference between the welfare state as originally devised

by the 1945 Government, and what we have now. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that it is a moveable feast? Things have been added and taken away over the years. For example, dentistry was included at first, and it is not now. We added the free TV licences in 2000, and David Cameron added universal infant free school meals—heaven forbid that anyone would try to take them away now. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the welfare state has changed and evolved over the years, and that is a good thing?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Lady makes a perfectly fair point. The welfare state has always evolved. At heart, however, it is about the contributory system. I think most people would expect that when they pay into the system, they will get what they were told they would receive. Obviously, anyone who was over 75 in 2000 and went on to receive a free TV licence cannot conceivably have been told, when they began paying contributions at the start of their working life, that that was one of the benefits that they would receive.

Of course, the obvious point to be made is this: does that mean that I think we should not have free TV licences for the over-75s? The short answer is that I do not think there should be a TV licence. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon that it is not remotely sustainable as a solution. In my office in Parliament, I have three young members of staff. We worked out that we have three subscriptions to Netflix, two to Amazon Prime and one to Now TV. The whole world of TV viewing in this country is changing very rapidly and the licence fee is deeply anachronistic. It is levied on people without any reference to their ability to pay and without reference to whether they even watch the BBC. It does not seem to fit the era in which we live or the direction in which communications is heading.

How should we pay for it? I do not imagine that I am the world's foremost expert on this point, but I think that—taking the principle of public service broadcasting, which I do believe in—everyone should contribute to some degree, based on their ability to pay. We should look at a core service for the BBC funded by, for example, a supplement on subscriptions to Netflix, to ensure that everyone who benefits from having a public broadcaster contributes to some degree.

In this Chamber, we could all stand up at any time and say the easiest thing. The easiest thing here is to say how wrong it is to take away this responsibility from the Government and put it on the BBC. The easy point to make would be to suggest that we as Conservatives are somehow taking benefits away from people or doing something harsh. The reality is that the welfare contract I have referred to throughout my speech is changing fundamentally.

Emma Little Pengelly: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Cartlidge: I will give way to the hon. Lady in a moment. It will be my last intervention, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We cannot ignore the fact that we have an intergenerational issue. That is no one's fault, by the way—no one intended it to be like that—but those entering work now will not receive occupational pensions or many of the benefits that those who have retired have done. The implications of that need to be debated at some point.

Emma Little Pengelly: When we look back over the comments from the BBC at that time, it is clear—many people have referenced this—that many people welcomed it because it was getting concessions elsewhere that they believed would offset that. The issue facing us here today is that they got those concessions and banked them. They have now changed their mind and it is older people who are going to suffer. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the ball was dropped and that a guarantee should have been put into the agreement that if concessions were going to be handed over there should at least have been a guaranteed period to protect free licences for older people or for the issue to have come back to this place?

James Cartlidge: I have always admired the hon. Lady and in particular her party when it comes to negotiations. They do tend to take a robust stance. I understand the negotiations with my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon were particularly robust, but she makes a very fair point.

I will conclude by saying that all universal benefits—the winter fuel allowance, the free bus pass and the TV licence—are coming under scrutiny because we are having to look at where we get the money to pay for social care and so on. We cannot spend the money twice. The money we give to someone who owns a vast estate and receives a free TV licence is money we could have spent on the social care of those with dementia and so on. We should not pretend. Public money is not finite and we should debate the fairest way to allocate it. When we look at the sustainability of the TV licence funding system and the sustainability of the welfare contract, we will find that in the years to come there will have to be change. It is time we started to debate that.

3.23 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge). I remind him that the BBC still reaches over 92% of the population every week. It is a great pleasure to support the motion, which is made the stronger by the fact that it is supported by all the major Opposition parties.

I want to put the motion in context. Democratic Unionist party Members talked about a lack of democracy. If we look back at how the licence fee settlement was reached—certainly the last two times, possibly the last three or four times—there has been a lack of parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. If there had been that accountability and scrutiny, we would be in a very different place today. Basically, this was presented as a done deal.

I listened carefully to the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale). His most important phrase was, “the Chancellor made clear”. He described Lord Hall—I do not know whether he was on his own—being surrounded by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and others. George Osborne is the villain of the piece here. In 2010, he had his first go at imposing this settlement on the BBC. He tried to get the BBC to accept responsibility for the over-75s. He was opposed at that point by the director-general, Mark Thompson, and the chair of the BBC Trust, Michael Lyons, who were supported, crucially, by the Liberal Democrats. The coalition Government was probably the difference between the situation in 2010 and 2015. George Osborne came back and imposed

his will in 2015. It was a good settlement, but only for five years. The BBC were bullied into accepting that settlement and the Chancellor got his way.

All the briefing at the time was that the settlement was throwing red meat to the Tory Back Benches, and that the BBC had been put back in their box. I am glad to see that recently, as the former Chancellor has taken a new job as the editor of the *Evening Standard*—there is joy in heaven, Madam Deputy Speaker, when a sinner repenteth—he put his name to an editorial the other day that praised the BBC. It could have been written by a BBC publicist:

“With the budgets for new content from the likes of Netflix and Amazon now many times that which are available to the BBC, we need to think more strategically. All the ingredients are there: a highly trusted news brand, a global reach, an amazing archive and original content”—

no red meat to the Back Benches there. Unfortunately, he concludes:

“A new mistake would be giving in to the predictable short-term pressure to exempt over-75s from the licence fee”.

He is wrong, because a solemn promise was made, in the full knowledge that the Digital Economy Act 2017 had been passed, and that the Government did not have the power to put that promise into effect. I have a great deal of respect for the Minister. Her best line, I think, was, “We have made our expectations clear to the BBC”. I wonder what those expectations are. I should be grateful if Ministers would make that clear. Are they pressurising the BBC to arrive at a certain outcome?

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend, like many other Members, has met the BBC. My main concern is that it will recoup the money through cuts, particularly to local radio, which is a lifeline to our communities given the death of local newspapers. Does he accept that that would be a real loss if that was what came out of this debacle?

John Grogan: The fundamental issue is the future of the BBC. We are not just talking about local radio. If the BBC is forced to continue with concessions and has to pay for them, the whole of radio will go. We are not talking about Gary Lineker’s salary; we are talking about the whole of BBC sport. Some 3% of total sports viewing is now produced by the BBC, but that includes the women’s World cup and women’s netball. All of that will go. It is not small beer.

Some might say that times have changed since 2000, and that pensioners are no more likely to be poor than the rest of the population. However, pensioners are more likely to be lonely, to be ill and to feel the cold at night. The great measures that Gordon Brown brought in—the winter fuel payments, the free bus pass and the TV licence—give pensioners dignity. They are a reward for their contribution to society over many years. Means-testing would completely change the nature of those benefits.

I will conclude with a plea to hon. Members on the Tory Benches, because I do not think this is over yet. A very important commitment was given today by the deputy leader of the Labour party: if there is a general election—as an MP with a majority of 249, I view the idea with mixed feelings, but every day is a bonus—we will go into it with a pledge to fund free TV licences for the over-75s. I will be proud to go into the election with

that platform, which I think will definitely be a winner. There will also be a Tory leadership contest, and I think TV licences for the over-75s will be an issue in the shires and among the candidates. Let us break free from the shackles of George Osborne and unite across the House to fully fund the licence fee concession for the over-75s.

3.29 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): In 2000, the Labour Government took the very positive step of exempting the over-75s from television licence charges. Millions of people have benefited; 5,220 pensioner households currently benefit in my constituency. In 2017, the Conservative manifesto promised those people and their families, in Burnley and Padiham and throughout the country, that that benefit would continue. That promise has been broken, those people have been betrayed, and I have heard nothing from Conservative Members to mitigate that.

The decision to outsource the commitment to the BBC is a betrayal. Shockingly, the decision was made in a closed room with no public consultation and no consideration of impact. More than £150 a year may not seem like an awful lot to Conservative Members, but for pensioners on a fixed income it is a substantial amount. Age UK estimates that more than 2 million pensioner households will cut back on food and heating to pay the licence fee, while others will give up their TV altogether.

Does the Minister understand that for many people over 75, particularly those who live alone, the TV is literally a lifeline? Loneliness and social isolation are reaching epidemic proportions, and older people are far more likely to be affected. Many rely on their TV for companionship: the Campaign to End Loneliness has found that 40% of old people cite TV as their only source of companionship. For those who are housebound, the TV may be the only voice that they hear; without it, the long, lonely evenings will be even lonelier. But it is more than that: for so many people, switching on the television set represents their only connection with the outside world. Less than 50% of people in the over-75 age group have access to online news, and the majority are unaware of social media and the vast array of online services. To all intents and purposes they are digitally excluded, so their access to TV is even more important.

The Government have outsourced the delivery of their manifesto commitment and are now sneakily and shamefully trying to outsource responsibility. There is a pattern here: the Government have a habit of outsourcing services but with no funding to go with them. We need look no further than the shifting of public health responsibility to local government—another short-sighted Tory shambles, which is destined to lead to more problems and an increased financial burden on the NHS.

The BBC has been placed in an impossible position. The cost of providing free TV licences for the over-75s currently amounts to £745 million a year, which equates to 18% of the BBC's service budget. A budget reduction of such magnitude, at a time when operational costs are rising and competition from Sky and Netflix is increasing, is unsustainable and can be managed only by reducing the channels and services offered to customers. The BBC is at the forefront of the UK creative industries, with an enviable reputation right across the world. Forcing it to take this financial hit is a blow to the entire industry sector, which contributes more than £100 billion a year to the UK economy.

I am also mindful that withdrawing this benefit will be yet another blow to the economy in my constituency. Withdrawing free licences for all over-75s will take £785,610 out of Burnley. If the benefit were means-tested instead, and only those pensioners who claim pensioner credit were allowed to keep their free licences, the cut to Burnley would still amount to more than £500,000. It really is a scandal. The Government must think again.

The central point is that it is not the BBC's responsibility to fund this benefit. Free television licences for the over-75s are a social benefit, which should be funded by the Government. The Government are trying to shirk their responsibilities. This is yet another broken election promise that makes an absolute mockery of their claim that austerity is over. If austerity is over, they should do the decent thing, keep their promises, fund this universal service and give our senior citizens the support that they deserve.

3.33 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): It is great to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who made an excellent case.

By failing to protect the free TV licence for over-75s, the Government are shamefully breaking their own 2017 manifesto pledge. According to Age UK, nearly a third of over-75s are living in poverty or just above the poverty line. If the free over-75 TV licence is scrapped, finding the money needed to pay that additional bill will be impossible for those struggling to make ends meet. At a time when social isolation and loneliness are on the rise, that could mean the loss of their main form of company.

I want to put on the record the views of some of my constituents who got in touch after I issued a consultation for over-75s on this issue. One constituent told me:

"It is often the only company that I have, and I feel as though if it were to be scrapped then it will be penalising those who have already contributed many years towards the country".

Another wrote:

"I, like many other people over 75, have worked and paid tax and insurance for approximately 60 years. Many of these people are on small pensions and we have served the country with dignity and honour. The TV may be the only form of entertainment and to scrap the licence is a kick in the teeth and a disgusting move".

I agree wholeheartedly with my constituents. The TV licence is an important benefit for pensioners, who suffer disproportionately from loneliness and social isolation. If TV licences are ended or means-tested, millions of older people, almost half of whom consider television their main source of company, will have to pay to keep the little company they do have.

The Government were elected on a manifesto promise to maintain all pensioner benefits, including TV licences. Those who have given so much to our country deserve better than broken Tory promises. When will the Government admit that they must do right by over-75s in this country, stand by their promises and take back responsibility for the TV licence?

3.36 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spennings) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). I am pleased to speak in this important debate, which I thank my hon.

[Tracy Brabin]

Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) for securing, and which is timely, considering that a decision is expected next month on the future of free TV licences for over-75s.

We have heard powerful contributions from across the House that have demonstrated how damaging it would be for older people if the Government broke their 2017 manifesto commitment. In my constituency alone, 6,000 older people would lose out if the free TV licence were scrapped. I am sure many in the House will be familiar with Age UK's deeply troubling report released last month, "Struggling on: Experiences of financial hardship in later life". It details the shameful fact that 2 million pensioners now live in poverty—a shocking increase of more than 300,000 in the past five years—and that almost 1 million say they are one bill away from financial disaster, unable to find enough money to cover an unexpected bill of £200. If we have almost 1 million older people just a bill away from ruin, how on earth do we expect them to find £150-plus for something they have never had to budget for? Age UK researchers found that scrapping free TV licences could push more than 50,000 pensioners into poverty—and now the Government expect them to find another £150.

I am going to make this slightly personal now. My mum, Betty, is 88 years old. Like many of my constituents, she has lived alone for the last 15 years, and like others, she is involved with various community groups in the week, but that takes up perhaps one or two hours each day. The TV is undoubtedly more than just a box in the corner of the living room; it is a companion and it is entertainment. It is also a great conversation starter when people attend church or lunch club. "Deal or No Deal" keeps brains sharp. The news keeps us connected. "Line of Duty" keeps people on the edge of their seats. Betty, my mum, is in the fortunate position of being able to pay for her TV licence if she had to, but many in Batley and Spennings are not.

My mum is one of over 3.6 million older people in the UK living alone, 2 million of whom are over 75. Over 1 million of them say the TV is their main source of companionship. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of people who can go a week without speaking to another human being; people who might not have any interest in subscription-only channels and rely only on terrestrial TV; people for whom the TV is their friend, who might now have to choose between companionship and heating the house. It is a choice that will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable and create profound loneliness.

Thanks to the work of organisations such as Age UK, the Royal Voluntary Service and the Jo Cox Foundation, we have increased our understanding of loneliness by leaps and bounds. We now know that millions of older people are lonely, and the Government have shown leadership and a commitment to ending loneliness by giving us a loneliness Minister, so why on earth would they inflict such a devastating blow on the most vulnerable, while outsourcing the financial burden to the BBC—a burden that they know full well it cannot meet without making cuts elsewhere? The National Union of Journalists has said that such a burden, which would amount to £1 billion by the end of the next decade, would be "catastrophic" for the broadcaster.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful and important speech. Does she agree that what we are talking about is a valuable friend to so many lonely, perhaps elderly, people? We are talking about Auntie: we are talking about the BBC. By effectively cutting its funding, we are damaging the lives of people who listen to the radio, watch television, and depend on quality output from the BBC.

Tracy Brabin: I could not agree more. I am 100% behind what my hon. Friend has said. This is not just about being able to make brilliant programmes that challenge international players such as Netflix, Amazon and Sky; it is about giving the BBC the money to fund fresh talent pipelines and support local news, radio, and educational channels such as CBBC, CBeebies, Bitesize and Writers Room. We must not forget that the BBC is the only body that has an obligation to prove that it has entry-level schemes for people around the country and not just in London, which is important to many working-class young people in particular.

"A disgrace" and "deeply unfair" are two of the ways in which respondents characterised this move, and they are echoed in my inbox by many constituents. I am proud that the Labour party introduced free TV licences for the over-75s in 2000, and I believe it is shameful for the Government now to pass the buck to the BBC. The solution is clear, and it is in the Government's gift: they should honour the promise that they made in 2017. David Attenborough, our national treasure, who spoke out against the move while acknowledging that he would be in a position to pay if he had to, said:

"One has to remember that there are old people who aren't earning anything."

This is an opportunity to do the right thing for millions of people, and I sincerely hope that the Government take it.

3.42 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Members across the House will know all too well that loneliness and social isolation define the lives of many older people. I see that when I am out knocking on doors in my constituency, and I know that nine years of austerity has made it even worse. Older people are losing the social care support that they need to live active lives, and they also have limited access to leisure and social activities.

Last month, when I visited Age UK in Wandsworth, I spoke to staff and volunteers. They do fantastic work supporting older people in Battersea, and they are all too aware of the growing problem of loneliness and isolation among older people. Research shows that the main source of company for 40% of older people is the television. It was nothing short of cruel for the Government to open the door to ending free TV licences for over-75s and causing yet more loneliness.

The effects of this move would be considerable. It could hit more than 3,500 households in my constituency, and nearly 4 million households across the country. According to research conducted by Age UK, more than 2 million over-75s will be forced either to go without TV or to cut back on other essentials such as heating or even meals if the concession is scrapped, and 50,000 people will be pushed below the poverty line. As with so many Government cuts, disabled people will be severely hit. There are 1.6 million disabled people over 75,

many of whom have mobility issues, struggle to leave their homes, and rely on this concession. It was a Labour Government who introduced free TV licences in 2000 as part of the wider support package for our elderly, and for this Government to simply cut them after nine years of austerity is wrong and will only make the situation worse.

It is not just that: as my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) said, the Government are breaking their manifesto promise to retain TV licence support for the duration of this Parliament. They made that promise in their manifesto, but are breaking it so quickly. As my hon. Friend said in his opening speech, we have got into this mess because the Government are outsourcing their responsibilities for the licence fee concession to the BBC. The BBC is a public broadcaster; it is not there to administer social concessions—it is not its job to do that.

At the same time the Government are squeezing the BBC's funding, which in effect means that the Government are trying to devolve responsibility and blame for their cuts; the cuts are political choices. The Prime Minister has said that austerity is over, but we on the Opposition Benches know it is not. However, the Government can prevent yet another devastating effect of their austerity programme: they can honour their 2017 manifesto commitment and fund the TV licence concession for over-75s. For the sake of my Battersea constituents and all those who rely on the concession, I urge the Minister not to go ahead with this cut.

3.46 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova), and I agree with all of her comments and those made by others on the Opposition Benches.

I am pleased that we are having this debate today about a welfare provision that is currently received by more than 7,000 older people in Crewe and Nantwich—and I stress that this is a welfare provision. Effectively to outsource responsibility for welfare policy to the BBC, an organisation that is supposed to be independent of Government, is cynical and irresponsible. I am deeply concerned about the impact this decision will have on the older people I represent.

As we have heard, four in 10 older people say that television is their main source of company. Last year, the Prime Minister launched the Government's first loneliness strategy, saying:

“This strategy is only the beginning of delivering a long and far reaching social change in our country—but it is a vital first step in a national mission to end loneliness in our lifetimes.”

The Prime Minister also set out a number of commitments, including adding loneliness to the ministerial portfolio at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and promising to incorporate loneliness into ongoing policy decisions with a view to a loneliness policy test being included in the Department's plans. Can the Minister tell the House today whether this decision passed that test?

In addition to my concern that this decision will exacerbate our national loneliness crisis, I am concerned that it comes at a time when progress in tackling pensioner poverty has stalled. The estimated cost of funding this provision is more than the BBC's current annual spend

on all its radio services, and far more than it currently spends on its children's television services, CBBC and CBeebies. It is difficult to see how the BBC can ever fund this provision with its current level of funding without a significant impact on the range or quality of services it provides.

I am also concerned about the impact this decision could have on the wider UK creative industries. A report in 2015 concluded that the BBC directly invests more than £1.2 billion outside the organisation, benefiting at least 2,700 different creative suppliers. In addition, the skills and experience gained by those working at and with the BBC inevitably go on to benefit the whole sector, which made a record contribution of more than £100 billion to the UK economy in 2017.

Finally, however, I return to the point I made at the beginning of my contribution: the free TV licence for over-75s is a welfare provision. Political decisions regarding the future of any such provision surely rest with the Government and with the Department for Work and Pensions.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): Would it not be wrong for the Government to take a means-tested approach to the subsidy of TV licences for the over-75s, on the basis that the process would probably cost them more to administer than they would save?

Laura Smith: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's comment, and I am pleased to see that his party is standing with us today in saying that what the Government have done is wrong. I will continue with my comments and come back to that point in a second, if that is okay.

The Conservative party seemed to recognise the important fact that the free TV licence for over-75s was a welfare provision when it made a political promise to voters in its 2017 manifesto. To quote the manifesto directly, the Conservatives promised to

“maintain all other pensioner benefits, including free bus passes, eye tests, prescriptions and TV licences, for the duration of this Parliament.”

But we know that the Government had already set the stage for scrapping free TV licences back in 2015, which raises the question: why did they make that promise in 2017? How many of those other benefits can we expect to see outsourced as the Government continue to shirk their responsibilities to our pensioners?

Perhaps the most concerning factor is that this is just one of the Government's abject failures to stand up for older people in our communities. Alongside our loneliness crisis and the worrying signs around pensioner poverty, we have had a social care crisis that has simply been ignored. Years after they first promised a social care Green Paper, and after several delays, we still have not seen one. Professor Martin Green, the chair of the International Longevity Centre and chief executive of Care England, described the UK as “completely and institutionally ageist” in December last year. Today, the Government must acknowledge their failings and take the first steps towards restoring trust in politics by committing to honouring their promises to voters and funding free TV licences.

3.52 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith), and I want to

[Mr Pat McFadden]

begin where she left off. I agree with her that free TV licences were introduced as a welfare policy. That is very much how it was seen at the time, alongside benefits such as free bus passes and free eye tests. The Government's decision to pass responsibility for this on to the BBC in the knowledge that the BBC would be under this kind of pressure has two impacts. The first is on the BBC itself; the other is on the pensioners who receive the benefit at the moment.

Passing this responsibility on to the BBC is the policy equivalent of a hospital pass. The Government know that the BBC is under pressure. At the moment, the policy costs some £660 million a year, rising to more than £700 million in a couple of years' time, and asking the BBC to fund this out of its own resources will leave it facing a cut of around one fifth of its budget. As has been said, that is the equivalent of the budgets for BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, the BBC News channel and the children's channels. This will have a major impact and major implications for our national public service broadcaster at the very moment when the broadcasting and entertainment environment is changing and the BBC is under more pressure than ever from Netflix, Amazon and other providers. The direct impact of this on the BBC is that it will be faced with the awful choice of cutting quality or hitting pensioners.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

Mr McFadden: I am not going to give way, if that is okay, because there is a lot of pressure on time and others want to speak.

The first impact of the policy will be on the BBC itself. The second impact will be on pensioners, and it will be a dual impact—financial and social. The House of Commons Library estimates that there are around 5,600 households in my constituency with someone who is 75 or over. Looking at the options in the BBC consultation, we see that if the free BBC TV licence were restricted to pension credit recipients, 3,390 of those households would lose out, to the tune of £154 a year. If the qualifying age were raised to 80, around 2,200 households would lose out.

It has been said that we should means-test and restrict the benefit to those on pension credit. We are asked, "After all, what about the very wealthy pensioner with a huge estate?" The problem is that, as with changes to any universal benefit, it will not be just the pensioner with a huge estate who loses out. It is estimated that some 40% of pensioners entitled to pension credit do not receive it. If we go down the road suggested, not only the pensioner with the huge wealth will lose out, but some of the poorest pensioners in my constituency and the other constituencies that have been mentioned in the debate.

Then there is the social and cultural impact of cutting much-needed entertainment and information. What is the Government's justification? The Minister came close to saying in opening that the change was a consequence of the financial crisis and that the Government were ultimately asking pensioners, some of them the lowest-income pensioners in the country, to pay the cost of it 10 years on. That would be unjust and unfair to pensioners in my constituency.

The free TV licence is, after all, a benefit. The Government should fund it and keep the manifesto promise they made in 2017 to maintain it. They have told us that austerity is over. What better way to start proving that than by changing their minds about the TV licence fee?

The debate is not just a party political joust. Let me act for a moment as the Under-Secretary's political adviser and give him some friendly advice. If the Government go down this road, they will incur the wrath and lasting anger of pensioners, who have come to expect and are used to this benefit after the 20 or so years of its existence. It will do the Government no good to claim at the next election, "It wasn't us; it was the BBC." There is no evading the responsibility for the decision. It comes from and is owned by the Government, and the Government will pay the political price if they proceed with this policy.

3.57 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I think it was Mark Durkan who once described Opposition day debates as a bit like a silent disco. Today's debate is literally becoming a silent disco as it goes on.

I congratulate the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who have led the proceedings superbly and conveyed the feelings of the over-75s.

I particularly enjoyed the bit of the debate when my good friend the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) rumbled the distortions in the Scottish Conservative party crib sheet. Scottish Conservative Members told us earlier that all the Opposition parties and the Government went through the Lobby arm in arm, suggesting that it was okay to hand over the costs of the free TV licence to the BBC. It would be fair to say that the hon. Gentleman sent the Scottish Tories

"homeward

Tae think again".

The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) mentioned several quality TV programmes, and got to the heart of the debate. Should those who are 75 or over watch for free quality programmes such as "Pointless", "Match of the Day" or that great classic, "Poldark", or will the modern-day Warleggans opposite ask them to pay £154.50 a year to do so? We have heard a muddled position from Government Back Benchers so far. They say that not all those who are 75 or over should get free TV licences. Two Government Back Benchers, one a former Secretary of State, suggested that there are lots of millionaires who are over 75 and should pay the TV licence fee. I guess they know more millionaires than I do, but they gave no figures to show just how many of those aged over 75 are millionaires. The other suggestion was that many over-75s live in households where there are three, four or even more working adults, though again no figures were presented.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Like me, he knows that there are probably no millionaires living in Carntyne or Sandyhills, and that the Minister is entirely out of touch. Does he think it is just a bit strange that, in 2014, when Unionist parties were going round Glasgow telling people how great the UK is, they did not mention anyone losing their TV licences?

Chris Stephens: That is absolutely true. There was no suggestion that over-75s would lose their TV licences.

Let us examine some figures from some written answers about the cost to the public purse of providing free television licences to people over the age of 75. In the Glasgow South West constituency, the cost to the public purse is £700,000; in the Glasgow city local authority area, it is £4 million; and for Scotland, it is £50.5 million. In other words, BBC Scotland is being asked to find £50.5 million in its budget for the free TV licences.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP) *rose*—

Chris Stephens: I give way to my constituency neighbour. BBC Scotland has its headquarters in her constituency.

Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point. As the MP for Pacific Quay, I see the value of the high-end jobs based in BBC Scotland. The investment that the BBC has made in the new BBC Scotland channel has created jobs in the wider economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that removing that money from the budget would put at risk that brand-new venture?

Chris Stephens: I agree, and I have explored that with the shadow Secretary of State. I have very real concerns about the future of the creative industry, especially about employment in the BBC and its capacity to produce good-quality programmes if it is asked to bear the cost of the free TV licence. I sit on the all-party Youth Violence Commission, so I know that there are key benefits to young people finding employment in the creative industries. That is important, so we must continue to advocate and argue for it.

Many hon. Members mentioned loneliness and social inclusion as reasons why people over 75 should receive a TV licence. I agree. We are already seeing the impact of high and rising fuel bills on pensioners—particularly those who live alone. Age Scotland and Age UK report that six in 10 pensioners who live alone have difficulties paying their fuel bills. The number with health conditions and disabilities is increasing. More than four fifths of people aged 85 and over report that their daily lives are limited by a long-term health problem or a disability. Those things have a real impact because there are numerous extra costs associated with them, including taxis to medical appointments, medical equipment, and support and care, so it seems ludicrous that the Government are saying that people aged 75 and over will have to cough up for a TV licence. It really is incredible.

As Opposition Members rightly said, this commitment was in the 2017 Conservative party manifesto, and the Government then allowed the BBC to have a consultation. I did not hear from the Minister—perhaps he will tell us when he winds up—whether the Government will ignore the BBC consultation because they have a manifesto commitment not to take free TV licences off people aged 75 or over. If they will, they need to say so this afternoon.

4.3 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to debate free TV licences for over-75s. My mam, who I know will be watching, as a lot of pensioners do—I am sure lots of people besides our mams will be watching the Parliament channel—is very passionate about this issue because

she is turning 75 in January. To her, this is personal, as she keeps telling me. She feels it has been done deliberately to give her a hard time. It is also personal to the thousands of pensioners who will be worse off if the free TV licence for over-75s is revoked, curtailed or means-tested.

In March, I hosted and addressed the National Pensioners Convention in Parliament for its rally on the BBC's consultation. I share all of their frustrations about these proposed changes, because I know—I heard this at the rally, from the pensioners—how important their TVs are to their everyday lives. That is why I contributed to the BBC's consultation in February this year. I have received notification that my letter will be included in the consultation document, so I hope all my points will be taken on board by the BBC and, in turn, listened to by the Government.

The introduction of free TV licences in 2000 for those aged over 75 was one of the many great achievements of the last Labour Government. That is why I and many of my colleagues opposed the Conservative Government's outsourcing of this social benefit to the BBC as part of its 2015 royal charter. As we have heard, the cost to the BBC is roughly equivalent to the total it currently spends on all of BBC Two, BBC Three, BBC Four, the BBC news channel, CBBC and CBeebies, so I strongly disagree with what the Prime Minister said at last week's Prime Minister's questions in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). She said that

“there is no reason why the BBC, with the money made available to it, is not able to continue that.”—[*Official Report*, 1 May 2019; Vol. 659, c. 203.]

I am incredulous that the Prime Minister really believes the BBC can fund all of this without detriment. Even to try to do so would be extremely detrimental to the content the BBC is able to offer, and risks causing immense damage to the quality of the service that we all currently enjoy.

I agree with BECTU—the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union—which has said, in opposing the proposals to scrap or limit free TV licences:

“as a welfare benefit, meeting the cost of free licence fees should be the duty of the government”.

It is a disgrace that the Government not only feel able to wash their hands of the responsibility for providing this welfare policy, but are now refusing to rule out breaking the commitment they made in the 2017 Conservative manifesto to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s up to 2022. More than 5,000 households in my constituency are eligible for a free TV licence as they have someone over the age of 75. I am sure that those households will feel let down and unable to trust the Conservative Government if their free TV licence is taken away.

Alex Sobel: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The BBC is under a lot of pressure in respect of new services, and has introduced BBC Sounds, on-demand services and social media services. These services are less likely to be used by the over-75s, but the Government expect the BBC to introduce these services and take away the benefit for over-75s or take the costs. This cannot stand. Does she not agree that the Government need to pay for this, because the BBC needs to continue to innovate?

Mrs Hodgson: Exactly. I am pleased that my hon. Friend has made that intervention to make that point. The BBC needs to innovate, move forward and get better. This move would be to its detriment. It would be a huge backward step in terms of what the BBC would be able to provide in the future, and it just makes no sense.

As we have heard over and over again from Members in all parts of the House, the BBC is much more than just entertainment. Loneliness is blighting the lives of people across the country, with four in 10 people saying that their television is their main source of company. If the Government were serious about tackling the issue of social isolation, they would not be continuing their devastating programme of austerity cuts that affect the most vulnerable in our society. If free TV licences are ended, curtailed or means-tested, millions of older people, who suffer disproportionately from social isolation, will have to pay to keep the little company they have. I feel as though the Minister, his Parliamentary Private Secretary and the Whip are suffering social isolation today in this Chamber, because, as you will notice, Madam Deputy Speaker, they are the only ones here—here because of their roles. I do not think we could have any fewer Conservatives in the Chamber and be allowed to continue!

As with so many of the Government's policies, this is yet another cruel attack on the poorest and most vulnerable in our society. The Government must be honest with the country: austerity is not over. That is proved by the fact that the Minister said in her opening remarks that this policy change was dreamed up under the original austerity plans of Osborne—or rather, the former Chancellor—and it is just being implemented now. If austerity is really over, why can the Government not just drop this hugely unpopular and unfair cut?

As we have heard, the licence fee concession was guaranteed to be safe until at least 2022 in the Conservative manifesto. The Government are shirking their responsibility, breaking their promises and punishing pensioners. They must stop passing the buck, accept their basic moral duty, and stick by the manifesto commitment on which all Government Members were elected. That is probably why the majority of them are not present to front this up—because they cannot. The Government need to properly fund TV licences for the over-75s, and they need to do it now.

4.10 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—and hello to her mum.

Older people across my constituency will be watching this important debate closely. Recent election results have shown that public trust in politicians has fallen to historic lows. I am surprised that the Government have decided to further erode the public trust by breaking their promise on free TV licences for the over-75s. As we have already heard, there was a clear commitment in the 2017 Conservative party manifesto that free licences would be protected until the end of this Parliament, which is currently scheduled for 2022. That promise to our pensioners is now in tatters. The Government have chosen to outsource responsibility and the financial burden of free licences to the BBC—"Let's blame the BBC." The BBC cannot cope with the costs and has

been going through a consultation process on the future of free licences, and they now look set to be curtailed or completely scrapped by 2020.

The options in the BBC consultation will have a negative impact on households throughout my constituency. Locally, some 2,000 households will lose their free licences if the qualifying age is raised to 80; some 3,000 will lose their free licences if a mean test based on pension credit is introduced; and nearly 5,000 will lose out if free licences are ended entirely. My constituents will be paying the price of the Government's cynical decision to make a promise that they had no intention of keeping.

The previous Labour Government had many great achievements, including the introduction of free TV licences for the over-75s in 2000. I am proud of that achievement, which is why I join my colleagues on the Opposition Benches to call for more action from the Government. There are currently more than 440,000 over-75s in Scotland, with a projected 49% increase in this age group by 2041. *[Interruption.]* I am glad the Minister has come over to our Benches after what I just said. Age Scotland has found that four in 10 Scots aged over 50 currently feel financially squeezed. Six in 10 pensioners who live alone are struggling to pay their fuel bills. The Government's failure to protect free licences will undoubtedly push more older people into financial hardship and fuel the growth of pensioner poverty throughout Scotland.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech, and it is telling that there is no one really on the Government Benches to listen to it. That tells us about their shamefacedness in neglecting this debate and the important points raised. Not only are we facing pensioner poverty, which will only be increased by changes to the concession, but pensioners face significant social exclusion, especially in my constituency. For many, the only way they connect to the world is through television. Surely taking away the concession and putting the financial burden on pensioners will further alienate our pensioner population.

Hugh Gaffney: I agree with my hon. Friend. The Government's failure to keep their promise will also lead to greater loneliness among Scottish pensioners. Age Scotland has highlighted the fact that 100,000 older people feel lonely all or most of the time, with half of over-75s saying that their main form of company is the TV or a pet. I recently visited my dad. I asked him whether I could switch his telly over to another channel, and he said that he only puts the telly on to hear voices. He is 80 years old. Dad, I will make more visits.

Let us not forget that more than half of over-75s do not use the internet and greatly rely on television for news. The Government will therefore be forcing older people throughout Scotland into digital exclusion. We should not be surprised by yet another broken promise from this Government to the elderly. We need only look at the way that the WASPI women have been treated—I will continue to support their campaign for justice. The Government continue to pursue pension credit changes, which will hit the finances of mixed-age couples across Scotland. I call on the Government to learn from their past failures and to take immediate steps to protect free TV licences for the over 75s, or pensioners will rightly conclude that this is a Government that fails to look after their interests and their welfare and they will let you know how they think at the ballot box.

I have spoken to retired members from the Communications Workers Union and Unison. They have worked hard all their life and have earned the right to enjoy their retirement, which for them includes a free TV licence.

4.15 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We have had a very good debate with some excellent contributions from the Back Benches. Like other hon. Members, I wish to declare an interest at the outset, which is that although I do not qualify for the concession myself—a fact that is well known by the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), as we share a birthday, having been born on the same date in the same year—my mother does. Like the parents of other hon. Members, she is, with her free television licence in hand, a keen follower of the BBC Parliament channel. Like others, she could perhaps afford to pay for her television licence, but she is a miner's daughter who left school at 14 and worked hard in a factory all her life. It is the sort of concession that is extremely important to someone living on their own at that age. As other hon. Members have pointed out, it can be very lonely for those people. We should bear it in mind that there will probably be many people taking an interest in our proceedings today—I am told that there are often dozens watching the BBC Parliament channel—including many from the over-75 bracket.

We have had some excellent speeches today, including that of the right hon. Member for Maldon, the former Secretary of State. I thought he tried to give the impression that the BBC was delighted with the deal that was struck back in 2015, even though it has been described by others as a hospital pass. I am afraid that nobody really believes that, and deep down, I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman does either. He is entitled, I suppose, to believe that ultimately there should not be a licence fee, which is what he said—he felt that it was unsustainable. However, knowing him as I do, if he wanted that to happen he would probably believe that it should have been in his party's manifesto, and that it should have been consulted on, because it would be a major change in Government policy. Similarly on this—the potential ending of the free concession on the TV licence for the over-75s—it should have been in the manifesto if the intention was to end the free television licence concession, rather than pretending in the manifesto that it will be maintained rather than outsourced to the BBC.

Mr Whittingdale: To some extent I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I remind him that the charter review, which was carried out in 2015-16, was the subject of the biggest public consultation in the history of public consultations in terms of the number of responses that were received. Obviously, the same degree of interest will be generated before the next charter.

Kevin Brennan: We also know what actually happened in relation to the free television licence concession. Basically, as I will say later in my remarks, the BBC hierarchy were taken into a darkened room, rubber hoses were taken out by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, a punishment beating was administered, and they came out making the hostage statement that had been prepared for them, which was that they were delighted with the outcome of

these negotiations. I note that the right hon. Gentleman laughs at that, so perhaps my description is not as far-fetched as it might sound.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Ms Rimmer) pointed out that she could make the shortest speech on parliamentary record if the Government would simply honour their manifesto. We could have done without having this debate today. We would not have needed to be here at all if the Government had actually made real the words of their 2017 manifesto. Instead, as she said, they have used this smoke and mirrors approach to avoid their real responsibilities.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), who is unfortunately not in his place at the moment, worked for the BBC for many years and often participates in our discussions about the BBC. He said that the 2015 deal with the BBC represented, from the BBC's point of view,

“all their Christmases come at once”.

Well, I do not think that it was actually the intention of the former Secretary of State that the BBC should walk away from that negotiation thinking that all its Christmases had come at once; in conjunction with the former Chancellor, it was quite the opposite. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the deal on the funding for the future of the BBC, it was wrong in principle to pass on responsibility for this social policy to the unelected, unaccountable and undemocratic BBC.

Mr Sweeney: My hon. Friend is making a very important point about this classic insidious strategy that involves attacking core public services—the strategy of defunding, claiming a service is dysfunctional and then using it as an excuse to privatise. We have seen that happen not just with the pensioner costs being borne by the BBC instead of the state, but also with the defunding of the overseas World Service by the Foreign Office, which resulted in major damage to Britain's international profile.

Kevin Brennan: My hon. Friend accurately describes what is often the modus operandi of this Conservative Government.

The hon. Member for North Devon also said that the BBC had agreed to continue the concession, but that is not true. In the end, the BBC was forced to agree to take on the concession, but with the right to change it. That is the essence of why we are here today—because the BBC is consulting on doing that, and that agreement was made with the Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby) was one of many Members who pointed out that her mother watched the Parliament channel and was probably watching our proceedings today. I am sure that she would have enjoyed my hon. Friend's excellent speech, in which she pointed out the importance of the free TV licence concession to older people.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge) said that he had not intended to make a speech and was only prompted to do so by his own intervention on the shadow Secretary of State, in which he asked him whether, in principle, a multimillionaire should receive a free TV licence. In response to that, I asked him during his speech whether a multimillionaire should receive free NHS treatment. It is true of any universal benefit that it is available to all; that is the underpinning principle of a universal benefit. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly

[Kevin Brennan]

entitled to make the argument that the TV licence should not be a universal benefit to over-75s. I disagree profoundly with that argument, but it is a perfectly respectable one and he is entitled to make it; but he is not entitled to palm that decision off on the BBC. That is the essence of the argument today. Just like the former Secretary of State, the hon. Gentleman said that he wants ultimately to abolish the licence fee. Well, if that is what he wants, I hope that he would agree that he should come here as he did today and argue for it, put it in his manifesto, put it to the people at an election and see whether they support his proposal.

James Cartledge: We do not have time today to go into this issue in the detail that one would want, but let me say that the NHS is profoundly about risk-sharing. Even a multimillionaire would not be able to afford the huge cost they could face if they had to pay for NHS care for a whole manner of conditions. The TV licence is a set fee of £157, and the hon. Gentleman is arguing that someone who owns vast acres and many mansions should get that for free.

Kevin Brennan: As I said, the hon. Gentleman is entitled to make that argument but is not entitled to palm the decision off on the BBC. That is the essence of our point.

My old university friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan)—who is still, I think, the distinguished chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC—said that George Osborne is the villain of the piece. I think that many of us can agree with that, in many ways. I am looking forward to the rapturous coverage of my hon. Friend's speech in the *Evening Standard* tomorrow. He said that his majority is currently 249, I think. I am sure that he is going to romp home after his speech today when his older constituents read how he so ably supported them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) pointed out that for over-75s living alone, TV can literally be a lifeline. She mentioned the amount of money that will be taken out of the pockets of people in her constituency. That is the essential point. If this concession is ended, people in an already hard-pressed community will have to pay in full for their TV licence. That is money that should not be taken out of communities that are struggling at the moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) read out some of the quotes from constituents who had written to him and pointed out that they understand what the Government are up to and will not be fooled by the approach they are taking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) knows a lot about TV. Like my brother, she has appeared as an actor on "Coronation Street", and she knows what she is talking about when she says that TV is a friend to the lonely. The work that she has continued with the Jo Cox Foundation, which she mentioned, is to be commended. It is a pity that the Government are not rethinking their approach in the light of all the evidence about loneliness and older people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Marsha De Cordova) accused the Government of devolving their political responsibility for the cuts, and she is absolutely right—that is exactly what they are doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) pointed out that 7,000 people in her constituency receive this welfare provision, as she rightly called it.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) correctly pointed out that this policy has two effects—on the BBC through the hospital pass that it has been given, and on pensioners in the form of the stealth tax that it will represent if the Government do not act. He also pointed out that 40% of people entitled to pension credit do not receive it, so there will be a double whammy for them. He mentioned the Government's claim that austerity is over and gave them some political advice. I knew him when he was a political adviser to the former Labour Government, so I would advise the Minister to listen very carefully to what he said, because the Government will pay a political price if they do not.

The hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) quoted "Flower of Scotland" when referring to the fact that I pointed out that his Scottish Conservative colleagues had been completely wrong when they said that we—his party and my party—had not opposed this measure during the passage through this place of the Digital Economy Act. I can add to what I said about the Committee stage. On 28 November 2016, my colleagues and I tabled an amendment on Report in which we also opposed this measure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) told us about her own representations to the BBC's consultation. I hope that it will listen to what she said, but more importantly, I hope that the Government will listen, because ultimately that is where the responsibility lies. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) rightly said that this was a "Let's blame the BBC" policy, and that his constituents would pay the price for the Government's cynical breach of their promise.

I remind the House that we have consistently opposed this underhand stealth tax on older people and the creative sector. We strongly support the excellent campaign that has been run on this by many of my hon. Friends, but also by publications such as the *Daily Mirror*. It is wrong to outsource social policy to an unelected organisation whose historical mission is to entertain, educate and inform the country, not to decide who should be the beneficiaries of Government social policy. But if the Government believe that that should be part of the BBC's role, they should have argued for it. They could have put in their manifesto—

Mrs Hodgson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Kevin Brennan: Not for the moment.

The Government could have put in their manifesto that they intended to outsource to the BBC—an organisation that is not democratically accountable—a concession intended to help older citizens. They did not do that. They could have consulted civic society, such as the National Pensioners Convention, which my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) mentioned—I am sorry that I cannot give way to her at this point—or Age UK, which said in its briefing for the debate:

"Age UK firmly believes it is the Government's responsibility to look after vulnerable older people, not the BBC's."

Did they do that? No. Did they have the courage to make the argument for cutting the money that pays for free TV licences for the over-75s? No. Instead, they took the craven path of taking BBC management into a dark room, with the cynical intention of offloading their responsibility for helping older people on to our national broadcaster. The sheer brazenness of it is something to behold, even for the Tories. When combined with a promise in the party's manifesto to maintain a concession that it has already offloaded to a reluctant third party, it is even more brazen. You cannot pass the parcel with social policy like this and call yourself a responsible Government.

The Government say that this is now a matter for the BBC, but they hope and expect the concession to stay. That is cynical. They say that the BBC willingly agreed to take over responsibility for the licence fee concession, but only in the same way that the victim of a robbery agrees to hand over their wallet with a gun pressed against their head. The Government's whole approach to this has been underhand, aggressive and based on bullying. Many Members here today have been involved in trade unions as members, representatives or officials, so we know what a negotiation looks like, and this was not a negotiation. It is the kind of politics that gives politicians a bad name. If the Conservatives want to rid themselves of the cost of free TV licences, they should have the courage to say so and say that they are doing it.

This is a point of principle for us. We cannot accept a policy that takes responsibility for even a small part of our social security system away from Government and palms it off on an organisation with no accountability to the electorate. That is not principled political leadership. It is craven and cynical political opportunism, made worse by the false promises in the manifesto. Older people are not stupid. They will see this for what it is: a Tory stealth tax on the elderly, and a cynical, despicable ruse to pickpocket our older citizens.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): I would like to thank all Members who have brought this debate to life with passion and enthusiasm. We have had some amateur dramatics from Labour Members that would no doubt impress a BBC talent scout; I suggest that those on the Labour Front Bench should audition. It is a testament to the respect that Members across the House have for the BBC and its vital role in our society that we can debate it with such vigour. My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) was one of many who gave powerful speeches. This subject is particularly important when we consider the value of the BBC to all in our society, and particularly the older people across the United Kingdom who depend on television and radio for companionship and entertainment. They love the BBC, and they value it, as do the Government.

I want to take a moment to respond to some of the considered points raised by Members. A number of Opposition Members have indicated that they have been studying the Conservative party manifesto astutely. I can commend that habit to them. I am delighted, and I hope they read more about the benefits of Conservative policies such as low tax, a free market economy, social justice, keeping unemployment at the lowest level ever and respecting all in our society. There are a number of policies in that document from which Labour Members

could learn, so I commend them for having such close regard to the Conservative party manifesto and hope to see more of that.

Reference by Labour Members to pensioners is a little rich, if I may say so, given that the Labour party gave pensioners an increase of 75p in one year when they were in government. No doubt they will excuse me if I am not convinced by their argument. That is relevant when we are comparing Conservative policies to Labour's manifesto. Given that Labour is of course happy to spend £1 trillion and to get the country into huge debt, perhaps one should not be surprised. Labour's policy is to centralise and to tax—the state always knows best—but this Government have confidence in the BBC on this subject.

I want to make it clear that this is a decision for the BBC, not for the Government. It is crucial to the BBC's success that it is independent from Government, which allows it to deliver impartial and independent comment on the events of the day. That is the alpha and omega of what is important for the BBC, and I absolutely cherish it. It is entirely right that the BBC is operationally and editorially independent from Government, and the Government cannot, should not and will not intervene in the BBC's day-to-day operations.

I think Opposition Members may have forgotten—from hearing them, it appears that they do not recall it—that the Government and the BBC agreed in 2015 that responsibility for the concession for the over-75s would transfer to the BBC in June 2020. We have been clear for some time that the future of the concession is entirely the BBC's decision. It is for the BBC to decide whether it wants to maintain the current concession or to take a different path.

Mr Jim Cunningham: If what the hon. Gentleman says is right, why did he put this in his manifesto? We have to come back to that: why did the Conservatives put it in their manifesto knowing that they were not going to honour it?

Michael Ellis: As I have said, it is a matter for the BBC to make this decision. It was right and proper that it properly consulted the public across a number of months—this was a substantial consultation, and I understand that there were a number of participants and a wide range of options were discussed.

This was a fair deal, and was part of a very fair deal for the BBC. Again, Opposition Members have not recalled that the director-general of the BBC said at the time that the settlement represented

“a strong deal for the BBC”

that provided “financial stability”. Parliament agreed—transferring responsibility for the concession was debated extensively during the passage through the House of the Digital Economy Act 2017. The House will therefore recognise that the Government have been clear about their expectations on this matter.

Again, I want to make it clear that the House agreed in 2017 that it would be for the BBC to decide on the future of this important concession, and it is right that we await the BBC's decision next month. I very much look forward to seeing how the BBC will continue to support older people across the UK by providing them with companionship and a connection to the outside world.

Chris Stephens: Let us try to cut to the chase. If the BBC recommends something other than that the free TV licence for over-75s is maintained, will the Government intervene and say to the BBC that, no, in their view the over-75s should keep their free TV licence?

Michael Ellis: This is not the time for hypotheticals. The Government have made clear what is expected and hoped for, and we have confidence in the BBC. I want to make a point about another issue raised by several colleagues, which is loneliness and older people.

Tom Watson: To take the Minister back to his original point, there is nothing hypothetical about a manifesto pledge. Is he saying that if the BBC drops the concession, he cannot honour that pledge?

Michael Ellis: I am saying that we do not have the result yet. The BBC has not made a decision, so conjecture about what the BBC may or may not decide is just that—pure conjecture. The BBC is due to decide in June, and we will wait to see what it has to say.

Hon. Members have spoken about the importance of the licence fee concession in helping older people who experience loneliness, and I recognise that. The Government take loneliness very seriously, and we recognise that it affects a number of older people. That is why we have taken action. The Government's loneliness strategy, which was launched by the Prime Minister late last year, is the first such strategy; it is this Government who are acting. As part of the strategy, the Government have committed to a range of policies to help to tackle one of the greatest public health challenges of our time. In my Department alone, for example, the Government have committed to maximising the power of digital tools to connect people, particularly concentrating on digital inclusion for older people and disabled adults. We have also committed to embedding tackling loneliness in our new £400,000 digital inclusion innovation fund, which was launched in September 2018.

We await the BBC's decision on the licence fee concession, and it is right and proper that it has total independence in making that decision. For the reasons I have given, the Government remain committed to and respect the BBC as one of the essential institutions of this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House calls on the Government to honour the Conservative party's 2017 manifesto promise to maintain free TV licences for the over-75s for the duration of this Parliament by ensuring sufficient funding to do so and, should the BBC propose changes to the concession, to ensure that the proposed changes are subject to parliamentary consent.

Select Committee Membership

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We now come to motions 3, 4, 5 and 6 on the International Trade Committee, the Home Affairs Committee, the Justice Committee and the Women and Equalities Committee. With the leave of the House, I propose that we debate motions 3, 4, 5, and 6 together.

4.42 pm

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That Mr Chris Leslie be discharged from the International Trade Committee and Gareth Thomas be added.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this we shall consider the following motions:

Motion 4—Home Affairs Committee—

That Alex Norris and John Woodcock be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Janet Daby and Toby Perkins be added.

Motion 5—Justice Committee—

That Janet Daby be discharged from the Justice Committee and Andy Slaughter be added.

Motion 6—Women and Equalities Committee—

That Mr Gavin Shuker be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Stephanie Peacock be added.

Bill Wiggin: As the Chair of the Selection Committee, it is my responsibility to ensure that the Committee operates in accordance with the rules of the House. That is the case with motion 3, which I am moving in the usual way following its agreement by the Selection Committee. I do not have personal interests in moving it. It is a function of the fairness of the transparent and democratic system that allows Select Committees to continue their incredibly important work.

The Labour party has decided to change Select Committee membership, and it is for the House to confirm those changes. Unlike with General Committees, there is no Standing Order that requires Select Committees to be kept in proportion to the House at large. By mutual agreement, the membership of Select Committees is appointed in rough proportion to that of the House. That is why the Committee has discretion in proposing changes to Select Committee membership.

Across all Select Committees, MPs who come from neither of the main parties are slightly over-represented. Change UK—the Independent Group—is over-represented on Select Committees, compared with the number of members of the group in this House. Although that over-representation does not compel the Selection Committee to take action, it is enough to satisfy me that reducing that representation is in accordance with the practice of the House. I therefore move this motion for the approval of the House.

4.44 pm

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Change UK): I appreciate that we are discussing House matters, and I appreciate that the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Bill Wiggin) has the job of managing the membership of many Committees of the House.

The rules are not necessarily entirely set down—a lot is left to the usual channels. For those watching in the Public Gallery or elsewhere, the “usual channels” is the practice where the Whips from the main political parties decide among themselves how to proceed with business. That practice does not necessarily mean that other groupings, particularly new political parties, get a word in edgeways.

I have been a member of the International Trade Committee for several years. I have very much enjoyed attending the Committee, scrutinising trade policy and holding the Government to account. That is the job of Select Committees. My understanding of the 2010 Parliament reforms, when the usual channels were no longer responsible for selecting the Chairs or the membership of Select Committees, was of a general mood that Back Benchers should be given a freer say on the composition of Committees. There is an important difference between a Front-Bench role and a Back-Bench role. Front Benchers have a difficult job to do to ensure Government business is prosecuted. Those on the Opposition Front Bench have their set of policies to pursue, too. Most Members, however, are Back Benchers and it is important to recognise their independence.

The 2010 Select Committee reforms were supposed to mean that members of Committees were to be selected not by the Whips but by their respective party groups in ballots among Back Benchers. Importantly, the chairmanships of Select Committees were also given to Members across the House to ballot and to choose, free from that whipping arrangement. Select Committees have an important part to play. It would be a terrible shame if, by a lack of attention, we slipped back into the habit of the bad old days where the Front Benchers of the established parties end up carving up between them which Back Benchers can or cannot sit on Select Committees and then hold to account those very Front Benchers who are appointing them in the first place.

I accept, having left the Labour party in February, that the Labour party has its post-election allocation. I do not necessarily accept, however, that if independent Members are taken off Committees—we are not just talking about me, but my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South (Mr Shuker) being taken off the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) being taken off the Home Affairs Committee, and the recent loss of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) from the Foreign Affairs Committee—we have no right of redress. As a new political party, Change UK, we are not part of the usual channels conversations. It is strange that we have not been invited to join them. You might, Madam Deputy Speaker, draw your own conclusions on why that might be the case. There is quite a cosy cartel in the House of Commons between the main political parties. Why would any of those who hold the power ever wish to allow others to come into that and to see what happens within?

I believe the Select Committee system needs to be defended, and that is why I want to make the point today that being taken off the International Trade Committee is not my choice. I have done my duty as a member of that Committee. I have tried my best to hold the Government to account, particularly in relation to Brexit. The creation of the new Department for International Trade has been a very choppy and

rocky journey. The Secretary of State for International Trade made a number of pledges on its creation—for example, rolling over all 40 free trade agreements the EU had made with the rest of the world. For the past two years, I have taken it as my responsibility to hold the Secretary of State and his Ministers to account on whether those promises were going to be fulfilled. People might disagree with my particular take on Brexit, but it is important that members of the Committee take an independent view, and press and challenge Ministers on these issues.

Along with the other members of the International Trade Committee, who by and large operate in a non-partisan way, I have tried to look at: the UK's inward investment policy issues; what is happening with the establishment of the new Trade Remedies Authority; what on earth has been going on with the Trade Bill, which of course has been kicked into the long grass over a very long period; what developments are taking place at the World Trade Organisation; how we are going to scrutinise trade agreements when they come forward and what transparency there will be; and what sort of trading arrangements we have with the Commonwealth and developing countries. All those are incredibly important issues. Our Select Committee spent a lot of time looking at the idea that there will be some fantastic trade deal between the UK and the USA. It was quite clear to me that the myths about that possibility needed to be tested and prodded; as we know, the realities are quite different.

The Committee has explored many issues, and I regret that I will not be able to continue that work, but I will try my best to continue to scrutinise trade policy from the Back Benches and on behalf of my party, Change UK. I thank and pay tribute to my colleagues on the Committee and to its Chair, the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who has done such a sterling job of keeping it in operation.

It is a shame that we are letting independent voices on Select Committees slip away, and the public need to know what is going on. Change UK has only 11 hon. Members; we do not have the numbers to win Divisions in this place, and there are hundreds of other hon. Members in the main political parties who would not necessarily want us to continue to have a voice on Select Committees. There is therefore very little point in my pressing the motion to a Division, but I did not want to let it pass without saying my piece.

4.51 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): I rise to speak because one of the motions before the House affects the Select Committee on Home Affairs. Our Committee has discussed the proposal that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) be removed; I put on record the strong support expressed by all Committee members for his work, particularly on county lines and counter-terrorism. I must express our disappointment in the motion.

I do not want to get into a wider debate about the way in which places for Select Committee members are allocated, which our Committee has not discussed. Nor do I want to raise any questions about the hon. Members who have been put forward to serve on the Committee, both of whom are excellent Members of this House.

[Yvette Cooper]

I simply want to record, on behalf of the Committee, its concern and its recognition of the important work that my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness has done.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK) *rose*—

Yvette Cooper: I was not planning to say any more, but I give way to the right hon. Lady.

Anna Soubry: Given what the right hon. Lady says, especially in the light of her prominence and her chairpersonship of the Committee, it seems unfortunate that she cannot speak to the Labour Whips—because that is what it comes down to—and secure the presence of the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on it. If the entire Committee thinks that he should remain on it, why on earth can he not?

Yvette Cooper: I will not discuss on the Floor of the House the private discussions that I have had. I am simply expressing the views of our cross-party Committee on its behalf.

4.53 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): I thank the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), for her speech. Under the circumstances, it is really good of her to speak out. I will really miss being on the Committee. She will continue to be a superb Chair, holding the Government to account while playing a significant role in keeping the show on the road regarding the Brexit negotiations.

This is a matter of regret. I am really passionate about pushing the Government to do more to tackle terrorism and—as my right hon. Friend noted—the scourge of county lines, which is deeply affecting my constituents in Barrow and Furness. I will continue to do that in other ways.

We will not force this to a vote, though it is a matter of regret that the Whips have chosen to do it. It was a matter of regret that so many people on the Labour Benches who are still my friends went through the Division Lobby to kick out of their positions people among whose friends they would still count themselves, but that is the situation we are in.

We talked in the last debate on this subject about the decades-long precedent that Members who leave their parties for whatever reason keep their places on Committees. If those of us who have left the Labour party, for certain reasons, had not been so outspoken about the unsuitability of the Leader of the Opposition for the post of Prime Minister, would he have insisted that the precedent be broken and that we be kicked off? I will not stop speaking out in this Chamber and beyond about the fact that the shadow Chancellor praised the strategy of the ballot, the bomb and the bullet and explicitly praised the IRA; about the fact that the Leader of the Opposition invited the political wing of the IRA into Parliament weeks after the Brighton bomb inflicted such damage, including tragedy in this House; or about how he has consistently sided with the enemies of this country against our national security, doing damage as he does so, in his position as Leader of the Opposition and

previously as a Back-Bench MP. God help this country if he and his coterie are allowed to get their hands on the levers of power. The damage they would do to our national security does not bear thinking about.

Question put and agreed to.

HOME AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Alex Norris and John Woodcock be discharged from the Home Affairs Committee and Janet Daby and Toby Perkins be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

JUSTICE

Ordered,

That Janet Daby be discharged from the Justice Committee and Andy Slaughter be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Women and Equalities

Ordered,

That Mr Gavin Shuker be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Stephanie Peacock be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

Business without Debate

DRAFT DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL (JOINT COMMITTEE): INSTRUCTION

Ordered,

That, notwithstanding the Resolution of this House of 27 February, it be an instruction to the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill that it should report by 14 June 2019.—(*Jeremy Quin.*)

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) ACT 2018 (EXIT DAY) (AMENDMENT) (No. 2) REGULATIONS

Ordered,

That the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (Exit Day) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 be referred to a delegated legislation committee.—(*Jeremy Quin.*)

COMMITTEES

SELECTION COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Andrew Stephenson be discharged from the Selection Committee and Jeremy Quin be added.—(*Jeremy Quin.*)

ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Alex Cunningham be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Ruth Jones be added.—(*Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Selection Committee.*)

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has just been revealed to me in an e-mail that Clydesdale Bank plans to shut its Shettleston Road branch, which is in my constituency. Can you advise me what opportunities might be available

to me, as a constituency Member, to place on record that people in Shettleston will not stand for this closure, and that we will fight it every step of the way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He has asked me a question to which I can give a very direct answer. If he wishes to draw this important matter—and I appreciate how important it is in his constituency—to the attention of the House and of the appropriate Minister, there are various ways in which he can do so. I am sure that he will receive good advice from the Table Office, and I am sure that we shall hear more of this matter in the coming days.

Full-time Social Action

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

5.1 pm

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise this issue, and I thank my colleagues who have stayed for the debate. I also thank City Year UK and the National Youth Agency for their important work, and for their help with research.

I am pleased to have secured the debate, because social action and volunteering form a significant part of our national identity. We have all seen the value of volunteers in our own constituencies. In Mansfield, Mansfield Woodhouse and Warsop, our community benefits from dedicated volunteers who give their time to help a wide range of local charities and important causes.

I have met so many wonderful volunteers since I was elected that there are far too many for me to list individually, so I hope that I will be forgiven if I miss out some people, as I inevitably will. Let me, however, pay tribute to all those involved in supporting Framework, MIND, Mansfield Wildlife Rescue, The Beacon Project, Hetty's, NIDAS—Nottinghamshire Independent Domestic Abuse Services—John Eastwood Hospice, the Shed youth club in Warsop, and Mansfield Woodhouse Community Development Group. There are many more third sector and voluntary organisations in which people are giving their time and money to support amazing work.

Volunteering is often life-changing for those who participate in it. It can be incredibly fulfilling, and can bring about real change in communities. As a younger man, I was involved in scouting for more than 10 years. Through schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award programme, I became involved in all sorts of voluntary work in communities, which helped my own personal development. Social action and volunteering can be a great way for young people to learn new skills, build up valuable experience for their careers, and boost their confidence and communication skills. As MPs, we all know that volunteering in politics is just about the only way to get involved and to end up where we are today, in this place.

The debate centres on full-time volunteering, or social action. Working on a full-time social action project has a huge impact, and allows volunteers to immerse themselves in a new challenge. I want to focus specifically on the benefits for younger people, aged between 18 and 25, who volunteer to tackle our country's biggest challenges. It is hugely worth while, and has two benefits: the projects themselves make a difference, and the participants gain useful skills and experiences.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I have seen social action projects in my constituency at first hand, at Baguley Hall Primary School. Alongside the staff team, City Year UK does vital work in helping to increase attendance, improve behaviour and outcomes, and support pupils. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, and with the Holliday report, that the Government should be doing more to support social action, and to recognise and encourage full-time volunteers?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention and it is great to be able to recognise another group doing good work volunteering with social action. I agree that we can do more and I hope to touch on some of the opportunities as I progress.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The groups the hon. Gentleman has mentioned are to be commended. I have come across young people who help those with dementia—there is an interesting project in Coventry—and people who are blind. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree that we can do more to reinstate youth clubs, which played a vital role in the past. Does he agree that the Government should have another look at that, because that might offer a way forward in addressing knife crime for example?

Ben Bradley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those examples and agree that youth work is important; I am very involved in that through the National Youth Agency, which I will touch on later.

Full-time volunteers help in a wide range of projects for charities such as City Year UK, Volunteering Matters, The Scout Association and the Wildlife Trusts. These include schemes to support disadvantaged children to get better grades at school, projects helping homeless people and all sorts of environmental projects as well as those we have heard about from colleagues. There is a huge range of options to suit different interests and each project ensures that the volunteer learns and develops skills.

However, despite a proud heritage of volunteering and community action in the UK, we are behind some other countries in terms of realising the full benefits of this. I want to touch on some examples of where this works well before looking at specific issues, including the impact on employability and barriers in our current legislation.

Countries such as Germany, France and the USA have recognised the value of youth full-time social action by creating national programmes for young adults which attract upwards of 100,000 participants per year. France set up a Service Civique programme in 2010; just eight years later it was attracting 140,000 participants and it seeks to expand even more this year.

These initiatives can attract such significant numbers of young people because of the quality of the offer. The programmes come with a guarantee of excellence, and volunteers can choose a full-time project in line with their interests and undertake work on the project for up to a year. In return they receive financial support so they can stay involved and incentives to complete the programmes. These rewards mean that even young people from disadvantaged backgrounds can participate.

In America the AmeriCorps programme YouthBuild has had notable success in engaging volunteers from low-income backgrounds. In 2014 a report indicated that 93% of volunteers who entered the programme did not have a high school credential. As I have often said before, university education is not the right path for all young people and I have concerns that we are pushing too many young people down an academic route. I would like to see full-time social action as a possible path into work for young people and would like to see it recognised by the Government as an opportunity to bridge the gap between formal education and employment.

These initiatives provide value for money for the Governments that invest in them. Evidence from the USA's AmeriCorps programme shows that it returns \$4 for \$1 invested.

Evidence also shows that these projects improve youth employment and allow young people to explore different career paths while gaining experience and skills. Our Government have recognised the value of that on-the-job learning. Apprenticeships are a brilliant way to gain valuable experience, but volunteering is another path which offers young people the chance to learn skills and try different things.

Social action projects build resilience, improve communication skills, can be really creative and involve teamwork. These are the crucial skills that employers are looking for and which are required even in entry-level jobs. Particularly for those who have struggled with the academic side of school and left education with few qualifications, having work experience in a real-world setting can be genuinely life-changing.

City Year UK is a full-time social action charity that recruits 18 to 25-year-olds. Its programmes are proven to improve work-readiness and the employability of volunteers. Its latest report shows that 90% of alumni were in employment, education or training within three months of finishing the programme.

Under this Government youth unemployment has dropped substantially, including locally in my constituency of Mansfield. There are over 439,000 fewer young people out of work than in 2010, which is great as it means more young people have secured a job, but there is still more to do and I believe that social action is a good way to support those young people who are struggling to find work.

Having a recognisable Government-backed programme in place, rather than the current piecemeal approach, would ensure that businesses understand the experience and skills that young people had gained from their social action project, and it would become a recognisable achievement. While it is good that the Department for Work and Pensions recognises that volunteering can help people develop vital skills for work, I believe we could offer more support for people on full-time social action projects on a fixed term. Currently, full-time volunteers in England are categorised as not in education, employment or training—known as NEETs. In other words, they are seen as part of a problem that needs to be fixed. I believe it is time that the Government changed this status and did more to recognise the benefits of social action programmes. This is where simple changes could have a big effect. Even if we cannot offer financial support, we could remove barriers to participation that currently exist within our welfare system.

Unemployed people claiming jobseeker's allowance or universal credit are required to spend a certain number of hours per week searching for work. While outside these hours claimants can spend time volunteering, the system could be more flexible for those engaged in worthwhile community projects. Ultimately the volunteering they do can contribute much more than the cost of benefits in many cases.

Universal credit claimants can have their required weekly work-search time, which is usually 35 hours, reduced by half to accommodate voluntary work, but it is still difficult to fit a full-time social action project

around 18 hours of jobseeking. That will not be right for everyone: a lot of people want to get straight in to work, and some need to be pushed to put the time and effort into finding work. There is an opportunity to support others, particularly young people, through programmes like this and to deliver positive long-term outcomes for communities and individuals. Simply adding another category to say that they are volunteering and doing something productive and positive rather than being NEET would be a good step forward.

Under current guidelines, the charities that young people volunteer for are also unable to offer training beyond the essentials required for their social action project. That means that any extra training around employability or additional support for the young volunteers is not allowed, which hinders the effectiveness of those programmes. We could easily relax some of those rules at no cost, to help charities to support their volunteers and remove some of the barriers to establishing full-time social action programmes with a clear element of the programme that focuses on employability.

In December 2016, the Government launched the full-time social action review, which was chaired by former chief executive of National Grid, Steve Holliday. Mr Holliday published his findings in January 2018, and they acknowledged that youth full-time social action plays an important role in meeting many governmental priorities including social mobility, inclusion, careers education and skills development. The review called on the Government to better support, encourage and recognise full-time volunteers. It made several recommendations on how to achieve this, but I am keen to focus on what I believe is the most significant of the recommendations, which is to introduce a full-time social action pilot scheme for young people. The creation of a Government-backed pilot would be a huge step forward, and such a scheme might ultimately grow to emulate initiatives such as those in Germany, France and the USA. A Government-backed scheme would help to provide a new pool of easily identifiable, work-ready young people with real-world experience and a renewed sense of civic duty.

This kind of thing has regularly been discussed in Parliament. I have worked closely with the National Youth Agency as part of my work on the all-party parliamentary group for youth affairs and I am pleased that it supports Volunteering Matters in its call for HMRC to recognise full-time volunteering through awarding full national insurance credits. This would mean that volunteers did not lose out because they chose to volunteer and give back to their communities. I hope that the Government might also consider opportunities to support full-time social action using the Dormant Assets Youth Organisation, which has already committed to invest in programmes that help young people facing barriers to work. I would argue that a full-time social action programme would fit that remit perfectly. We also need to build on the APPG's recommendations for investment in a youth workforce of professional youth workers and skilled volunteers to support social action projects and provide leadership and mentors for young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The National Youth Agency's youth covenant is also worthy of support and recognition.

I am pleased that the Government support several programmes that enable volunteering opportunities, including the #iwill Fund, which aims to create more

opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to volunteer, and the Connected Communities Innovation Fund, which aims to tackle barriers to volunteering and mobilise more people. These are important steps, but it is time to look again at the benefits of full-time volunteering.

Polling conducted by Censuswide on behalf of City Year UK in 2016 found that over 90% of those polled thought that a recognised programme of full-time voluntary civilian national service should be on offer for young people in Britain. Over half of the 16 to 25-year-olds polled said that that would definitely be an option for them, and nearly a third would consider signing up for such a programme if it were Government-backed. A programme like that has the potential to build a platform for young people from different regions and socioeconomic backgrounds to serve together side by side for a common purpose while restoring national pride and a sense of duty and service. There is also an opportunity here to work with young people who are disabled or have special educational needs, to offer mentoring and guidance, help in to work where that is possible, and other support that might currently be lacking.

The Government's civil society strategy commits us to equip young people with

"the ability to help the country tackle its most urgent challenges" and to ensure that they have the

"opportunities to develop the skills, networks, and resilience that can improve their life chances"

and

"fulfil their potential".

What better way to achieve this than through a programme of full-time social action? The creation of such a programme would maximise public investment in the National Citizen Service, the Government's short-term social action programme for 16 and 17-year-olds. The NCS has laid a solid foundation on which to build a more intensive long-term offer. Nearly 100,000 young people engage with the NCS every year. Figures for 2016 show that more than 1,400 young people in Nottinghamshire participated in the programme. I helped to assess and judge some of their community work, working with Notts County FC Football in the Community, and I have met young people in Mansfield who have benefited from the programme. I know that many of them would be interested in full-time opportunities. A national full-time social action programme could ensure that the NCS is not just a one-off intervention, and that it instead creates a lifelong habit of social action.

Interestingly, the UK Government already support full-time social action for young people, but only for those who serve abroad in the International Citizen Service. The Department for International Development has allocated £8.5 million for the International Citizen Service next year, but no money is allocated to those choosing to serve their communities through social action here in the UK. If we could replicate that support so that young people could equally help and volunteer in our public services and good causes here in the UK, that could benefit those young people and their local communities.

If the Government need any further reason to act, an independent report by Pro Bono Economics found that encouraging 10,000 young people to volunteer full-time for a year could earn the UK economy between £28 million

[Ben Bradley]

to £119 million. A relatively modest investment in a Government-backed programme would pay off quickly, but I hope that colleagues agree that the benefits are far more than simply economic.

Offering, through independent volunteering and education, opportunities for young people to equip themselves with the skills they need to get on in life, and to be responsible for their own progress and their own decisions, is in my view an intrinsically conservative thing to do.

I encourage the Government to consider a pilot scheme, perhaps in a deprived area such as Mansfield—it might be the ideal place to do that—to see what impact full-time social action has on young people's employability.

I hope that, in her reply, the Minister can provide an update on what the Government are doing to support full-time social action since the publication of their response to the full-time social action review for young people last July.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Ben Bradley) on securing the debate. He is a great advocate in this House for the interests of young people. His dedication and enthusiasm in promoting the work of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs speaks volumes.

I, too, am on the record speaking of volunteers as my favourite people. Volunteers' passion and commitment shine through and raise some interesting thoughts cross-Government.

Let me deal with the intervention by the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham)—although he is in discussion at the moment—about youth crime. That is a complex issue, which is often tied to local factors. I have just met the Prime Minister and other Ministers following our summit on youth violence. We are absolutely committed to working on that through a multi-agency public health approach.

I agree with the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) about the value of social action and engagement in and through our schools.

It is worth taking a few moments, given that we have the Chamber to focus on the subject, to look at the broader picture of youth social action and why it is such an important part of our efforts to improve young people's life chances. In this country, we have a proud record of helping others. It is the cement that binds our communities together. Almost a quarter of the population formally volunteer at least once a month and many more do so informally. As we have heard, social action is about people coming together to help improve the lives of others and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It involves people giving their time in a range of ways—from volunteering and community-owned services to community organising or simple neighbourly acts.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Does the Minister agree that many of those projects help young people to find their way forward in life? Often, young people have not quite made up their mind about what they want to do in life.

There is therefore value from that point of view. Equally, we must remember that not everybody is academically-minded. People might have good skills but not necessarily be academically good. I sometimes think that we lose track of that when we go on about further education and university education. Volunteering is important and a key to some of the problems that we have with young people on some housing estates, particularly where there are acts of violence, burglaries and so on. The Government could focus on that much more.

Mims Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I responded earlier about the Government's focus on the taskforce on serious violence. I also absolutely agree with the earlier point about intergenerational understanding. Volunteering can support our young people, from giving them more opportunities to learn soft skills to gaining that intergenerational understanding, perhaps through soft mentoring. That should be encouraged in all our communities and I am sure that much goes on in our constituencies that we are not aware of, even as MPs. It is vital that we continue to support such activity.

A good example is the dementia friends programme run by the Alzheimer's Society. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport ministerial team recently had a refresher about how to support people living with dementia and turn understanding into action. That programme has been very successful, and many people have taken part in it. There are 2.5 million dementia friends working to create an environment in our communities in which people with dementia are able to live well and be cared for.

If we are to renew and refresh the spirit that keeps our communities vibrant, we must keep young people in a central role. It is absolutely vital that we support the latest generation of active and involved citizens, so I am pleased that the Government are developing a new youth charter and are doing broader work to support that activity. Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust recently recruited 15 young people to spend time with older people in their own homes, to help combat loneliness. In time, that project will grow to 200 young people. That is just one of the projects supported by the Pears Foundation and the #iwill Fund, which is backed by the Government and the National Lottery Community Fund. As we have heard, social action will help open doors for young people. Young participants will develop essential skills and the tools for work and life that we have been talking about. Such programmes will build their resilience, enhance their wellbeing and, more importantly, help them give back to their community.

In 2017, the National Youth Social Action Survey by Ipsos MORI found that young people who take part in social action have higher life satisfaction, improved job prospects and stronger personal networks. However, it is not the hours that young people spend doing social action that is crucially important to those individuals and our communities, but the quality of the social action and experience. For example, it matters that the social action is part of the community, is focused on a community problem and is shaped and owned by the young people taking part. We heard earlier about the soft skills learned through the experience of mentoring.

The full-time social action review, chaired by Steve Holliday, was an important and extensive piece of work. In total, 180 individuals and organisations were consulted,

and 48 pieces of evidence were submitted by charities, businesses, young people and youth sector stakeholders. Roundtable conversations were held for providers, economists and employment and regulation specialists. Vitaly, 77 young people also took part in the focus groups. Videos promoting the review reached more than 84,000 young people.

Young people painted a mixed picture of full-time social action opportunities. They found that some experience helped them through a difficult point in their lives and furnished them with new skills for their future. However, some highlighted that barriers prevented them from taking part in full-time opportunities. Important issues were raised, such as the availability of adequate financial support to cover living costs, and the negative implications for social housing, study and wider caring commitments. One person said:

“on balance, it would be a struggle to say it was worth it, by virtue of the short and long-term personal and financial repercussions...I do not regret the time I spent volunteering, but would personally not recommend anyone take a voluntary position unless they have significant financial backing.”

The review also states:

“The evidence demonstrating the impact of full-time social action in contrast with part time social action is currently very limited. Many organisations argue that quality of social action is more important than quantity”.

That last point is very important.

We are aware of the value that full-time volunteering can bring to those who participate. However, devoting limited resources to the expansion and further evaluation of an approach that the extensive review has told us has little additional benefit to other approaches is not the sensible way forward, especially as many of the barriers to full-time volunteering arise out of personal life experiences. The Government, rightly, welcomed the report that acknowledged those issues and, importantly, set out a series of steps to make sure that full-time social action opportunities are more accessible. In our response, we welcomed a number of the recommendations, including the excellent work led by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations to create good practice guidelines for organisations that provide full-time social action opportunities. Importantly, one recommendation in the panel’s report mentioned a proposal for a Government-backed full-time social action pilot, as has been mentioned. That is a well-intentioned proposal, but given the lack of clear evidence and the feedback currently from young people, we do not think there is sufficient evidence for a separate full-time social action fund.

As the House is aware, we back a number of high-quality programmes for our young people, and last year we published the civil society strategy. It sets out an important vision for the next 10 years and shows that there is a vital role that young people can play in tackling challenges and creating a better future in their community through this strategy. Our national flagship policy is the National Citizen Service, which is a programme open to all young people aged 15-17. It is designed to deliver a concentrated programme of positive activities and personal development.

Crucially, it includes the opportunity for social action for our young people. I am pleased to say that nearly 500,000 young people, from all social backgrounds, have so far taken part in NCS. Together, they have given more than 12.5 million hours of volunteer time. We also know that NCS graduates give back an additional 6.3 hours of volunteering per month compared with their peers who have not taken part in NCS.

It is also important that the Government listen to the views of young people. We know that young people care deeply about the environment, so as part of the 2019 Year of Green Action NCS has been asked to, and will, directly engage young people in many environmental projects, including Clean Air Day. NCS is especially good at involving a higher proportion of young people with special educational needs. For example, in 2018, 5% of NCS participants had special educational needs; the figure for the comparable population was 2%.

As we heard earlier, we are also supporting young people to participate in social action by backing the #iwill campaign, which is run by Step Up To Serve. The campaign involves crucial work with businesses, as well as with philanthropists, the voluntary sector and local institutions, to make social action part of life for our 10-year-olds up to 20-year-olds. In support of that work, and in partnership with the National Lottery Community Fund, we are working with other funders to create new opportunities for young people to participate in social action. The £40 million #iwill Fund has to date partnered with 20 match funders, and it is estimated that 650,000 new opportunities will come forward for young people.

As I said earlier, social action is not just important for young people; we have heard about the importance of the civil society strategy, in which the Government have set out the importance of mobilising the time and talents of people of all ages. The initiatives are wide and reflect the needs of communities. For example, we are working to train 3,500 more people in community organising via our place-based social action programme. We are also working with the National Lottery Community Fund to help local areas to create a shared vision to address local priorities and to shape volunteering, co-designed services and social action.

Let me pick up on my hon. Friend’s point about using dormant assets. The Department is absolutely doing that and is shaping the next stage of our strategy in respect of interventions for young people through the use of such assets. It is absolutely right that we do that.

In conclusion, we are aware of the huge benefits that social action can bring to young people. Although we are not looking to privilege a particular volunteering route, social action will be an essential part of our thinking as we examine ways in which we support our young people and their futures.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 May 2019

[ANDREW ROSINDELL *in the Chair*]

Children's Future Food Inquiry

9.30 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Report of the Children's Future Food inquiry.

The children's future food inquiry has for the past year listened to young people tell us about their experiences of food insecurity. The result is the children's #Right2Food charter, which was launched two weeks ago in Westminster with Dame Emma Thompson, who has done a fantastic job as the inquiry's ambassador.

I pay particular tribute to Lindsay Graham, who has been running holiday hunger schemes and lobbying for a long time—she was the inspiration behind this—the Food Foundation, which did a lot of the work, and particularly the young ambassadors, whose involvement was absolutely fantastic. A number of other Members present were members of the panel, as was I, so I do not want to take up too much time. It is important that they contribute, particularly as some of them were more involved than I was, so I will try to be relatively brief.

I will start by underlining the scale of the problem, which led us to feel the need to do the inquiry. One in three children in the UK—4.1 million—live in relative poverty, and the number living in absolute poverty has increased. UNICEF estimates that 2.5 million of those children live in food insecurity, meaning that at times their families cannot afford to put food on the table or cannot buy the full variety of foods needed for a healthy diet. The Food Foundation, using UNICEF data, says that the UK has the highest percentage in the European Union of children under 15 living in a severely food insecure household, which we ought to be deeply ashamed of as a country.

Hunger has an impact on children's mental and physical health; it affects their attainment at school, their attendance and their behaviour if they are too tired, too hungry or exist on a diet of junk food. Severe obesity at ages 10 to 11 is at its highest level since records began—I heard that we now have more obese 11-year-olds than the United States. Almost one in five children are obese by the time they start primary school, and one in three by the time they start secondary school. Typically, the most deprived areas have double the rate of childhood obesity compared with the least deprived, and one and a half times the rate of underweight children. It hits both ways; it is about malnutrition and obesity.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, which served on the inquiry panel, recently published an update to its 2017 "State of Child Health" report. Two years on, it highlights grave concern that no progress has been made on reducing child poverty and inequality in the UK. We cannot tackle these health problems, particularly childhood obesity, without tackling child food poverty.

Evidence for the children's future food inquiry was gathered from workshops with nearly 400 children in 13 different locations across the UK. It also included an academic review of child food insecurity, polling of young people, more than 100 submissions from people working with children, a UK-wide policy review and a secondary analysis of Government data on the affordability of a healthy diet. Children told the inquiry how debilitating constant hunger can be and how it affects their ability to concentrate in class. There were children who had been forced to shoplift, scavenge or barter, just so that they could eat.

Since securing the debate, I have been contacted by a number of people who wanted to add to the information that the inquiry was given. One new teacher emailed me and told me of giving Christmas dinner to

"a suspected severely neglected child"

who

"also has many learning difficulties. I have never seen a child eat his food so quickly (the term 'wolf it down' does not compare to what I saw). I asked him why he was eating it so quickly and he said that he hadn't had a meal this big in days. It was not a grand-sized meal in the slightest. Once he had completed eating the Christmas dinner, he pulled out one of those plastic Chinese takeaway boxes with the remnants of some broken-up crisps (they looked like Doritos) and he asked if he could then eat them. I said he had just eaten a full meal and was he still hungry—he said yes, he was and that he didn't know it was Christmas dinner day, and that they would have been his lunch."

The teacher goes on to say:

"It's awful the situation we are seeing. It cannot go on any longer."

Parliament's digital engagement programme has done a brilliant job of reaching out to people for comments using social media and has sent me a list of responses. Some are from people personally affected by food poverty while others are from people working at food banks, teachers or headteachers at schools, or people involved in trying to help families. Many of the responses highlight problems with the benefits system, particularly work capability assessments and sanctions, and especially the roll-out of universal credit. One respondent working in family law said

"families are poorer today than I have ever seen".

Another, who volunteers at a food bank, said

"this problem seems to be escalating at an alarming rate",

and that they are

"seeing a massive increase in referrals since the introduction of universal credit in the area".

Many of those experiencing food poverty were in employment. Some spoke of the particular difficulty in catering for special diets—for example if their children were gluten intolerant; a child with autism who had to have a special diet was mentioned—and others spoke of having to choose between heating and eating. Laura said:

"It has been the worst of times. Sat at home, considering if I should top up gas and electric; but then if I do, what will myself, my partner and my 2-year-old little boy eat? What is the use of having gas with no food to cook? But what is the use of having food but no gas?"

Another respondent who is in ill health with respiratory and arthritic illness, so has to keep the house warm, said:

"Our food budget is the only variable I'm able to hold back on. We feed a family of four on £100 a month".

[*Kerry McCarthy*]

A woman from Reading said that she and her young daughter

“are literally being fed by mum”.

She has a full-time job, but after taxes and childcare she takes home £30, which goes on travel to work. Sarah, a grandmother, says:

“I have become broke with debt trying to bail my daughter and grandchildren out.”

The children's future food inquiry has five key asks, as set out in the children's #Right2Food charter. First, we ask for the healthy lunch guarantee. Children said that the £2.30 free school meal credit was not enough to afford healthier lunches or to cover breakfast if they did not get it at home. The Minister was at the launch with Emma Thompson and the children ambassadors, so he will have heard a lot of this. Today we heard from Citizens UK that children on free school meals lose out on £65 million a year because they are not given change if they buy a meal that comes under that daily limit; the money is kept by meal providers at the end of the day, rather than being given back to the child to roll over and spend the next day.

Our inquiry found that 23% of children who are not eligible for free school meals—because their household income is deemed just that bit too high, or because they have no recourse to public funds because of their immigration status—go without lunch because they cannot afford it. Many families of children who have no recourse to public funds who approached their local authority for section 17 support were refused. Some schools step in and pay for the child's meals, but some, particularly in areas of high immigration, cannot afford to do so. We heard that packed lunches are often much less healthy than a cooked meal; just 1% of school packed lunches meet school food standards. I think the example that stuck in all our minds was that of the child whose packed lunch apparently consisted of just two cold fish fingers.

Many families struggle to feed children over the school holidays. The lost value of free school meals in the 13 weeks of holidays is approximately £150 per child, which is a lot of money for parents on low incomes to find, especially if they have more than one child. The inquiry makes a number of recommendations; it is quite detailed, and I am sure that other panel members will go into detail on some of the other recommendations, so I will outline only a few of them.

The inquiry recommends: providing free nursery meals to children who are entitled to free childcare, and introducing mandatory food standards in all nurseries, as in Northern Ireland; increasing the offer of free school meals to a wider group of children, including migrant and undocumented children without recourse to public funds; expanding the school fruit and vegetable scheme so that all children can benefit; and supporting holiday provision. Many of the details of the places that were successful in applying for this year's Holiday hunger pilots were announced earlier today. We are disappointed that Bristol did not qualify, which I will mention again later.

Secondly, we ask for the healthy food minimum, which is about supporting parents and carers to put healthy food on the table. The inquiry recommends

expanding the Healthy Start voucher scheme. At the moment it reaches only a third of young children living in poverty, and the voucher is worth only £3.10 a week, which I understand has not been adjusted since 2009. It is not index-linked, and it is not aligned with the Government's own estimates of the cost of fruit and vegetables, so clearly something needs to be done to ensure that it is meaningful.

We also need to look at housing. Nearly 2% of households in England live with children in private rented accommodation that fails to meet the decent homes standard. Families in bed and breakfast, such as those supported under section 17, will not have access to cooking facilities. Even in other rented accommodation, there can be limited access to such facilities or cooking equipment, or families cannot afford gas or electricity.

Thirdly, we are calling for a new, independent children's food watchdog, the role of which would include monitoring and inspection of school and nursery meals, development of a national menu designed by young people to meet school food standards, and looking at the school eating environment. I was surprised by the extent to which that came up during in the inquiry. Children, particularly in secondary schools, said that they were being rushed during lunchtimes, did not have time to finish their meals and were being forced to go back to the classroom having not finished eating. Such things could easily be looked at. Also, the Government still have not introduced their healthy rating scheme, which they promised in their childhood obesity plan would be introduced by September 2017. I hope that the Minister will update us on that.

The fourth ask of the children's #Right2Food charter is headlined “Health before profits”. It is about prioritising children's health before the profits of those big business that try to sell them junk food. We know what a pervasive effect they can have. That would include stopping marketing aimed at children on packaging, such as breakfast cereals with cartoon characters; ending promotions of unhealthy foods and replacing them with health warnings; and tackling the marketing of junk food on television.

People in many quarters are calling for a 9 pm watershed, because we know that a lot of children do not watch only CBeebies or wherever the children's TV programmes are; they are watching reality TV shows and programmes at 7 and 8 o'clock at night. A watershed of 9 o'clock is therefore proposed, so that 59% of food and drink adverts shown during family viewing time would be banned from children's TV. That shows how children are exposed to all those adverts banned on children's TV but not at times when the whole family is watching a programme.

On fast food outlets near schools, I know that a lot of places are looking at exclusion zones—the standard is about 400 metres, but a lot are considering 800 metres. One of the suggestions was to increase business rates for fast food outlets near schools, using the funding to support food education and extended school day projects.

Fifthly, “Stop the stigma” is about ensuring that children who experience food insecurity and have to have free school meals do not feel ashamed about that. One of the things that stuck in my mind when talking to some pupils was that their school had a free salad bar. The idea was that the children could spend their money on the unhealthy food or go to the free salad bar, but

there was a stigma attached—people were seen as only going to the salad bar because they were poor, not because they wanted healthy food. We need to look at that.

Talk about that ask included renaming free school meals as the school meal allowance, increasing the allowance to at least £4 per day, and allowing it to be carried over, as I said. Another recommendation was banning water being sold in schools. It is shocking that some school dining halls do not have water fountains. If children were thirsty, they had to spend what little they had—£2.30—on bottled water. The plastic alone means that such bottles should not be there, but the fact that a school cannot provide free tap water is pretty shocking. Also, poverty-proofing our schools would ensure that all children may take part in activities such as cooking, and those on free school meals should be kept anonymous.

I want to draw to a close soon, but I will first say a few things about what we are doing in my city with the Feeding Bristol pilot, which was set up a couple of years ago and stems from the Feeding Britain project that came out of the all-party group on hunger and food poverty and the work of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field). We had a breakfast club initiative, in phase 1 of which we provided free food to 15 schools in high need. That was led by the chief executive of FareShare, which, as the Minister knows, takes in surplus food to distribute it to people in need. In phase 2, which will start later this year, we will target a further 20 schools in high need, increasing the nutritional value of the food distributed and offering it for free to about 30 to 50 children per school. Also under the auspices of Feeding Bristol, for the Christmas just gone FareShare distributed 56 free hampers across four children's centres for those in most need.

We are also setting up FOOD—Food On Our Doorstep—clubs, based on a Manchester membership-type model, which is funded by Family Action. Two clubs will launch in July and the plan is for another two later this year. The clubs are a way of providing a top-up of groceries at very low cost—families pay about £3.50 a week per customer to get groceries worth about £15 to £20. The first two clubs will be based in two children's centres. We will then find another two sites. We have also funded two community engagement workers through the Big Lottery. They are based in community organisations and provide support to families in need, helping them to build independence into their food security.

Holiday hunger is the final thing to mention. As I said, we are rather disappointed that Bristol did not qualify for the funding this year; last year, we got £30,000 from the Department for Education, which we used to feed 2,200 children—a total of 15,000 meals—over the six-week summer holidays. The Minister's office was in touch with me, because the announcement was made just gone midnight this morning, but I would be interested to know the criteria, because we felt that we did a good job with the money last year. We are now trying to crowd-source the funding and going out to city institutions because we want not only to replicate that this year, but to roll it out into something bigger.

A couple of weeks ago we had our huge annual Feeding Bristol event, with well over 100 people—perhaps 150—from all the organisations involved. That was not just people working in food banks and the charity sector but those involved in local food-growing projects,

which we are keen on, or those who teach cooking skills or want to do communal cooking in cooking centres. The pilot is a brilliant initiative, and I know that we are not the only place trying to do such things.

The Mayor of Bristol, Marvin Rees, spoke out when expressing his disappointment at us not getting the funding again. He said:

“It is evidence of a defunct model of leadership where a city...has proven its commitment and ability to deliver, further plans are put in place but...they are dependent on London-based decision makers—who then took a judgment not to fund, which in turn poses a major challenge... Our efforts to end child hunger should not be undermined because we are thrust into a zero-sum competition with other cities and towns. What is more, it undermines the stated national objective.”

That is true. We did all we could to deliver the programme, and we are keen to roll it out, but this time I think in the south-west it was Plymouth that secured the funding, which is great, but it should be mainstreamed and not subject to the whim of bids.

The Minister came along to the launch, and he was praised for his willingness to engage. I know that he was keen to take part in the debate today. I hope that he has had a chance to reflect more on the findings and that he will come up with some firm commitments.

9.48 am

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on her speech and on bringing this important subject before the House of Commons. She is absolutely right to do so, because the Food Foundation, among others, has pointed out that public policy has in effect withdrawn from the food sector over the past 20 years or so. That is not right, because the area is important and we need to do better in many parts of it.

At the very start of life, as we know from the report, the UK has one of the lowest breastfeeding rates in the world. Mothers' milk, or formula milk, is the most important food that children get to start with. As a man, I feel particularly passionate about defending the rights of breastfeeding mothers to feed in public or at work—women should not be shut away. We are moving on, but we still have to challenge one or two people who do not stand up for mothers who want to breastfeed.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I am sure he was in the House, as I was, when the Equality Act 2010 was passed. The Act made it lawful to breastfeed wherever bottle feeding a child was allowed. Is he as disappointed as I am that the Act still has not been enforced properly?

Andrew Selous: Yes, I am. We need to go further. If any employers are not giving mothers breaks at work to breastfeed, they should change their practice. The hon. Lady is right to raise that issue.

As children's lives go on, the problem gets worse. When children start primary school, 10% are obese, but when they leave at the age of 11, 20% are obese. A quarter of all children starting primary school are overweight or obese, yet one third are when they leave.

[*Andrew Selous*]

Cancer Research UK and others have said that, based on present trends, half all children in the UK are set to be overweight or obese by 2020.

Sadly, obese children are five times more likely to remain obese as adults, and therefore more likely to have diabetes, cancer, heart or liver conditions, or perhaps mental health conditions associated with those issues. There are 3.1 million people with diabetes. That has gone up from 2.4 million in 2010. Every week in this country we amputate around 170 lower limbs due to diabetes. That is 9,000 a year. People are having their feet or lower legs cut off because their diabetes has got so bad. That should shame us; it is an appalling state of affairs, and the number has gone up from 7,200 amputations in 2010. The trajectory is getting worse.

Our food sector is not working in the way it should. We know from the work of the Food Foundation and others that unhealthy food is on average three times cheaper than healthy food. Let me put that the other way around: healthy food is three times more expensive than unhealthy food. That is simply not good enough. People in poverty and those with low incomes will buy what they can afford. If they are forced to buy unhealthy food, children set off on the wrong trajectory, which is why being obese and overweight is a huge social justice issue. For the first time in our nation's history, the poorest are the most overweight and obese. That should set red lights flashing across Whitehall that our food policy is not working.

In most constituencies, fast food outlets, many of which unfortunately do not sell the healthy food they should, average about a quarter of all places to buy food. The figure varies from only 7% in the Isles of Scilly to 39% in Blackburn with Darwen, where nearly four in 10 food outlets are fast food outlets, selling primarily unhealthy food.

The UK does badly internationally, too. I am grateful for the research from the Guy's and St Thomas' Charity in its report "Bite Size", which came out a couple of months ago. It compared London with capital cities around the world for childhood obesity rates. It is not a happy story. In Paris, 5% of children are obese; in Hong Kong, it is 7%; in Sydney, it is 10%; in Tokyo, it is 12%; in New York, it is 21%; and in London, it is 22%. We are worse than New York for childhood obesity, and more than four times worse than Paris, which is just the other side of the channel.

There is a particularly European dimension to the problem. I will not talk about Brexit, but about what is happening with food policy in Europe. I am grateful to the Food Foundation for its "Broken Plate" report, which came out a couple of months ago. In that, a lady called Kathleen Kerridge wrote:

"Across mainland Europe, cheap foods are healthy choices. It's sensible that a kilo of tomatoes should be cheaper than a kilo of sausages. In the UK, however, the opposite is true"—or it is often true. Why is that the case? She goes on to state:

"I would like to see the UK take note of the European model. I think with food education and more affordable fresh produce, we could turn the tide for the poorest households and see us all eating 'well'."

I have considerable issues with the food industry in this country. I commend the work of the Obesity Health Alliance in calling for the 9 pm watershed and for

restrictions on multi-buy promotions, both of which the Government are consulting on. That is excellent, but we need to get through the consultation and take action. As the Obesity Health Alliance says, these are serious and important issues.

Let me give praise where praise is due. One supermarket in Europe is doing the right thing—the Dutch retail chain Marqt, which operates 16 stores in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague and Haarlem in the Netherlands. It has become the first chain in the Netherlands to ban the marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Its chief executive Joost Leeftang said:

"Marqt helps consumers choose products that are produced with respect for people, animals and environment and this includes helping customers make healthier choices."

He went on to say:

"Tempting children to choose unhealthy products doesn't fit with how we want to help our customers."

Mr Leeftang is a private sector entrepreneur running a business, and he is appealing to people's better instincts—to parents to do the right thing for their children. Frankly, if he can do it, I want to lay down that challenge before the supermarkets and fast food outlets up and down this country. If it can happen in the Netherlands, it can happen here.

As a member of the Health Committee, I went to Amsterdam, where the deputy mayor, Eric van der Burg, a centre-right politician, has brought in a major, city-wide programme to deal with obesity. That meant having free water available in schools—the hon. Member for Bristol East is absolutely right about that. In fact, only water is allowed to be drunk in schools there. That meant educating the parents, helping low-income and immigrant communities to learn to cook properly and banning the advertising of unhealthy foods on the metro. It is a city-wide approach that is producing results, as is happening in Leeds—encouragingly, we learnt last week that the poorest children are starting to lose weight the fastest. There is hope that lessons from Amsterdam are coming over to the UK.

I hear what the hon. Lady says about people living in food poverty. We have to make sure that people have enough income to eat properly. We need what I would call prosperity with a purpose and inclusive growth—there is no point running a free market system that does not benefit the people working in it. That has to be part of what we are about; it is what I am about, and I know it is what the Minister is about in his role in Government.

There is more we can do. We could learn from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programme in the United States, which gives vouchers for farmer's markets in the USA. I have farmer's markets in towns in my constituency, which often provide lower cost, healthy food. We need more of that. Let us look around the world and take best practice. Let us not just leave this issue to the free market alone. Let us encourage the people who are doing the right thing, such as Mr Leeftang in the Netherlands, and encourage UK retailers to follow his excellent example.

9.59 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important and very timely debate, and for her excellent opening speech.

Two weeks ago, as we have heard, we launched the children's future food inquiry and it was widely welcomed. A huge number of people attended the launch, including a number of us here, and the Minister, who everyone was pleased to see. I co-chaired the inquiry with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East and for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) were members of the inquiry committee. The report is unique, because it is the first to include children and young people from low-income backgrounds—in fact, it is all about them and their voices.

The young food ambassadors were instrumental in the development of the report—so much so that we produced the children's #Right2Food charter, which contains the voices of all the young people who contributed. They shared their experiences of food insecurity and hunger with such bravery, and ensured that not only their voices but those of their friends and peers who had experienced food insecurity were heard. They were so articulate in telling us about their experiences at home and school. They told us things that shocked even the most hardened and clued-up MPs on the inquiry committee; I think a number of us shed a few tears at those sessions.

I cannot mention all the things we heard during the inquiry, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East has already highlighted a number of them, so I will focus on three things that stood out: free school meals; the availability of free water, which we have already heard about; and the affordability and availability of food at home.

Hon. Members will know that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on school food. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham, who helped me set up that group 10 years ago, is one of its vice-chairs. We have campaigned for more than a decade with Members across the House to ensure that children have access to a hot and healthy meal during the school day. I am pleased that that campaign has developed to include provision for breakfast and meals throughout the school holidays for the poorest children.

I am very pleased by the Minister's announcement overnight that the Government will provide £9.1 million this year for holiday activities and food, following last year's £2 million. I was also pleased to see that two of the successful bids—those from Gateshead Council and StreetGames in Newcastle—were from the north-east. It will be really interesting to follow those programmes and see the difference that I know they will make to some of the most disadvantaged children across the country.

However, I want to focus on the provision of free school meals. As we know, on average, free school meal pupils receive around £2.30 a day. That rate was introduced in 2014 and has not increased since, so pupils have to stretch their allowance further each year to get a meal. However, the young food ambassadors told us that, more often than not, the cheapest food on the menu is the unhealthiest food. As the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) said, we see the same in wider society with supermarkets and takeaways, for example.

One young ambassador told us that she would usually get a sausage roll, chips and beans, because that was all she could afford on her free school meal allowance that would actually keep her full. She was looking for fullness,

not healthiness. The Minister will know that that is not the best example of a nutritious meal for a young person who is growing up and preparing for an afternoon of lessons. It is fine once in a while, but we do not really want a child to be eating that day in, day out just because it keeps them full. Will the Minister therefore have cross-departmental discussions with his colleagues to ensure that, especially in schools, the cheapest food is not the unhealthiest food on the menu, so pupils on free school meals have the opportunity to eat the same healthy food as their peers, even if some healthy items have to be provided at a loss? The situation in schools must be different from the situation in the supermarkets.

We also heard that schools did not value lunch time as part of the day but saw it as an inconvenience to be rushed and got over with. Unfortunately, for thousands of children, the only meal they get each day is the one they eat at school. That is not right, but we know it is the case, so school meals should not be rushed or dismissed. However, the young ambassadors told us that they sometimes had their lunch time as late as 1pm. That is an excruciating time for someone who has gone to school hungry to wait—even we cannot always wait until 1pm—and makes it impossible for them to concentrate on lessons in the morning. It probably wastes the whole morning's learning.

Most shockingly, we also heard that those very same pupils then had only a half-hour lunch break, a lot of which was spent queuing for food. If they had not finished their meal by the time the break was over, they were made to throw the remnants of their food in the bin. Imagine that—imagine having to throw some of the only meal that is available to you that day in the bin because you do not have time to eat it. It is just gut-wrenching.

One young ambassador also told us that pupils could be forced to take their detentions during their lunch break, further limiting the time they have to eat. Schools should not turn lunch time into a chore, something for pupils to dread or a time to punish pupils. Lunch time should be an integral part of the day—a time for children to get nourishment, to wind down and to spend time socialising with their friends. Let me be frank: children simply cannot learn if they are hungry and thirsty.

That takes me to my next point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East eloquently raised—its absurdity has exercised a number of us. We must remember that children from low-income families who are on free school meals are not the kind of children who have fancy reusable water bottles that they can refill as and when. They may also be from chaotic homes and, as we heard, some of them are child carers who have many responsibilities before they get to school, so finding a bottle to fill will not be foremost in their mind. In fact, it was the consensus among the young ambassadors that, even if they did have a reusable water bottle, there were no facilities at school where they could fill it with fresh water. The Minister heard that for himself when he met the young ambassadors at the launch of the report. I know he was shocked by that and said it was against school standards, but that is the reality that those children face. Sadly, I am sure the situation is the same in other schools.

If a child manages to bring a water bottle to school, there is often nowhere to fill it, so they have to buy another bottle. As we heard, that can cost them up to 90p—a

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

huge proportion of their £2.30 allowance for a free school meal, especially when they are battling with hunger. We were also told that, similarly to food, unhealthy drinks options such as juice and milkshakes are available and—guess what?—they are often cheaper than water, at 50p or 60p.

Andrew Selous: In the Netherlands, where the healthy food programme is called Jump-In, they allow only water in schools, they get parents on side, and they are very successful.

Mrs Hodgson: There is indeed a lot we can learn from other countries. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham and I visited Sweden at the start of our parliamentary careers, and that is what drove us to campaign to improve things here. In Sweden, not only was all the food free and healthy, but there were not millions of choices, so it was affordable to provide. The children all ate it, and there was water and milk on tap, totally free.

Clearly, there is a disparity in the messaging to pupils. They are told they have to eat healthily but they feel that a healthy diet is totally unaffordable for them. That brings me to my final point, which is about the availability of affordable food at home. Some 4.1 million children in the UK are growing up in poverty. That is a fact. That means that one in three children lives in a household that struggles to afford to buy enough healthy food to meet the official nutritional guidelines. Those families would have to spend 42% of their disposable income after housing to be able to consume a healthy diet. It is outrageous that a healthy diet is so far out of reach for millions of families. One young ambassador, who was a child carer, told the inquiry that food was so scarce at home that she rationed her food so her mum and siblings had enough to eat. I hope the Minister agrees that that is not a position any child should be put in.

Finally, will the Minister commit to setting up an independent food watchdog to look at these issues, to cost policies and to prevent children from going hungry? It is one of the five asks of the children's #Right2Food charter contained in the report. I will not go into those asks, because my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East spoke about them in detail. As the report highlights, if we do not act now, we will lose an entire generation to food insecurity and hunger—and, in turn, obesity, because hunger and obesity are two sides of the same coin: malnutrition. I implore the Minister to act now to help future generations.

10.10 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing and opening the debate. She set the tone for a thoughtful discussion. I pay tribute to all of those who served on the inquiry, which has produced an excellent report with many worthy recommendations.

Food poverty and food provision are topical, and I want to bring a few reflections from my constituency to the debate. I want to touch on a number of issues relating to providing free school meals, tackling holiday hunger, providing breakfast clubs and promoting breastfeeding.

I was heartened to hear the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) promoting breastfeeding, in the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss), who does a huge amount of work on the issue, although she cannot be here due to Committee commitments. I want to help fly the flag for breastfeeding. When we are having a conversation about infant and child nutrition, we need to think about breastfeeding. It is important that it is on the agenda, but there was no mention of it in the obesity strategy published in 2016.

The report rightly points out that the first 1,000 days of a child's development, from conception to their second birthday, are critical. We know, because the science tells us, that breastfeeding is second to none in terms of protecting a baby's short-term and long-term health. Yet, as the hon. Gentleman said, our breastfeeding rates are stubbornly low, and many people are not breastfeeding up to two years, in line with World Health Organisation guidelines. However, I do not want to be despondent on that point, because we have some truly dedicated health professionals in my constituency, such as Christine Walker and Lesley Davidson, who are doing some outstanding work to promote breastfeeding and help mentor peer-support volunteers alongside colleagues in the Breastfeeding Network.

I absolutely agree with the report's point about the loose regulation and legislation concerning formula companies, which have been allowed to ride roughshod when it comes to advertising and promotion. In the previous Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central introduced an excellent Bill that sought to rein in some of these outlandish claims made by the formula industry. The Minister would do well to look at that.

Let me turn to diet and the provision of fruit and vegetables. On bank holiday Monday, I was enjoying a picnic in the park with my wife and kids and reflecting on aspects of my own childhood. One of my most vivid memories from primary school—admittedly, that was only in the 1990s—was of the first time I saw a real pineapple. I was the son of a single parent, living in a deprived community, and fruit and vegetables were seen as a luxury or too expensive. In many respects, they still are. The report references testimony saying:

"I'll choose something that I know they're gonna like because I can't afford to do something and for them not to eat it."

I remember that day in primary school when my teacher, very much off her own back, brought in some fresh fruit for my class to try. I recall being fascinated by these exotic fruits: kiwis and pineapples. For some reason, the pineapple blew my mind—because until then I genuinely thought it just came from tins. I was in primary 4 in Glasgow, and I had never seen a pineapple before.

I say that because I was recounting the story to my wife and son on Monday. We make a conscious effort to promote fruit and vegetables with my son, who, I am delighted to say, always chooses fruit over chocolate. In many respects, we are able to do that because we are a higher-income family, and I am conscious that many families see buying fruit and vegetables as an expense that they do not want.

Parents are able to have only so much influence when it comes to the provision of food—the report makes that point—so let me turn to the provision of meals in

the education environment, where we have made some progress but we have got further to go. Thankfully, free school meals have moved from the stigmatised dinner tickets being handed out at the front of the class to the less well-off kids and are moving towards universal provision. In my class, the vast majority of us were getting free school meal tickets, but it must be welcomed that we are moving away from that and to universal provision.

In Glasgow, the city council has committed to ensuring free school meals for all primary school pupils by the end of this council term, which demonstrates an ambition to provide warm, nutritious school meals to every child regardless of their background. Likewise, my own son, Isaac, attends a Glasgow City Council nursery, where, until recently, there was a small charge for lunches. However, those have been abolished, which is good news for family budgets and ensuring equality in the early years. That point is made in the report.

I am glad that our ambition is not restricted to school or nursery meals, because we have recognised that holiday hunger is a major issue, too. The roll-out of Glasgow's £2 million holiday hunger programme has been hugely successful in meeting the demand for food provision and in bringing together partners to run community activities during the school holidays. Last summer, my church, Parkhead Nazarene, ran an incredibly successful programme of activities called Parkhead summer connections, providing warm, nutritious meals for families in some of the worst SIMD—Scottish index of multiple deprivation—areas in the country.

I am conscious of time constraints, but I want to touch on one other issue, which relates to breakfast clubs and how they tie into the education system. I was recently delighted to welcome a group of children from Quarry Brae Primary School in the east end, who were in Westminster to receive an award from Kellogg's for the best breakfast club in Scotland. More than 40 children attend Quarry Brae's breakfast club every morning, which makes a massive impact in ensuring that our young people are at school with a full stomach and ready to learn. Likewise, at Oakwood Primary School in Easterhouse, the headteacher, Vanessa Thomson, absolutely gets this, too. Working with local partners, she has ensured that free toast is available before the school day starts to help ensure that kids, many of whom live in a high SIMD area, are getting some form of nutrition before the start of the school day.

There is a lot more I want to say, but I was keen to offer a view from Glasgow's east end, where we know we have so much more to do. I finish by quoting Aaron Ross, aged 20, from Easterhouse, whose words are in the report. He told the inquiry:

"People struggle to afford to pay rent and buy food for their families and themselves. Most people don't want to ask for help as they are too ashamed or embarrassed about the issue. I want to be a part of this project to bring awareness to the rising issue of food poverty, and to help by providing better support to those in need."

Aaron and many others have given of their time, opinions and experience, and it falls to us to ensure that the report's recommendations are acted on and that we deliver.

10.17 am

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Rosindell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing this important debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for all the work she does. I want to acknowledge at the outset that she is a real champion of this issue.

Here we are again in this Chamber, talking about school food. However, this time it is wonderful that we have the children's future food inquiry report. I thank Dame Emma Thompson and Lindsay Graham for the huge work they did on the inquiry, but I pay most tribute to the young people who talked to us and gave us the evidence. It was a hard listen for all of us—even for those of us who have worked on school food and children's hunger for many years. We heard about their life experiences and about how, in many respects, the school system made things worse in terms of school food, when it could have offered a wonderful, nutritious experience for those young people. What they said was powerful; we are lucky to have those ambassadors.

School food has been an issue for me all my life because my mother was a school cook. Interestingly, I think we understood more about the importance of nutrition for learning 60 or 70 years ago than we appear to now as a society, which is dreadful. The issue was brought home to me when my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West and I visited Sweden in 2006. We were newly elected MPs and keen to get this issue on the agenda, and we were staggered by the way those in Sweden thought about school food. Young people came along in the morning. They got breakfast and lunch; it was provided free to them all. Their teachers sat down with them so that they learned social skills as well as having a nutritious meal.

Obviously, we were a bit shocked and said, "Oh, this is amazing." They said, "How is it amazing? Children can't learn when they are hungry." Having a nutritious school meal in the middle of the day is just as important as having a desk, chair or anything else that we provide as part of the education system. We must take that on board—I hope the Minister is listening—because 13 years later we are still having to make the same arguments about the importance of a nutritious school meal, including breakfast and something later in the school day.

What is different at the moment is the context in which we are making this argument, because we know that hunger is rising in this country. Between 1 April 2018 and 31 March 2019, Durham County Council allocated almost 20,000 emergency food supplies from food banks, including almost 7,000 to children. That was just in Durham—it is a huge number. I raised the matter with the Prime Minister some weeks ago, because teachers in my constituency are reporting children coming to school who have had nothing to eat since they were at school the day before. Teachers are providing breakfast themselves, and the situation cannot continue. In the north-east, almost a quarter of families are living in poverty, which for a lot of them means poor housing conditions and poor health, including mental health. They might not live in an area where it is easy to access shops or affordable, good-quality food, so we must consider the whole picture.

[*Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods*]

Some things that came out of the children's future food inquiry are worth emphasising, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East did a good job of that. For example, school lunch may be the only proper meal that a child receives, but what children eat during the day affects their concentration and performance at school. Entitlement to free school meals varies hugely across the UK, and thousands of extremely vulnerable children are excluded from accessing them because of their immigration status. I hope the Minister will consider that point.

As others have said, the free school meal allocation, at around £2.30, is not enough to enable children to buy a hot lunch, particularly if they have to buy water as well. I am glad that issue has been well aired this morning, because it is a disgrace that children at school in this country have to spend up to £1 to buy water at lunchtime. Private water companies must take that on board. The money might add to their profits, but what it is doing to children is outrageous. We also found that free school meals still carry a stigma, often because of the way they are organised. We have the technology for that not to be the case, so why do schools still do it? Perhaps we should think about how to rename free school meals.

Meal times are not valued as part of the school day, and they should be. We heard story after story of young people who simply do not have enough time to purchase a proper school meal at lunchtime, or time to eat it, as that often competes with other things they need to do. Young people also want a say in what type of food is delivered at school—that was more about cultural preferences than them wanting pizza and chips all the time, and they recognised the importance of having a proper meal.

One reason we are still here making the argument again and again for universal free school meals is the naysayers, and we will have to take them on if we want to make progress—Amanda Platell's recent article in the *Daily Mail* is a good example. People say we have high levels of childhood obesity in this country, so we cannot have hungry children. As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West said, however, those are two sides of the same coin. A lot of children from poorer backgrounds are not able to access good-quality food, and we therefore have a huge obesity crisis.

The last time we debated this issue in Westminster Hall, I and others were told that it was an abrogation of parental responsibility, because it is the responsibility of parents to feed their children properly at school. Practically, it is quite difficult for parents to give children a hot meal during the day, and we should think about education more generally as a societal responsibility.

Mrs Hodgson: People might say, "They can send children in with a packed lunch," but as my hon. Friend knows, only 1% of packed lunches were found by a report on school food to be as healthy as the food provided within schools. It is almost impossible for parents to send in that healthy food.

Dr Blackman-Woods: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

There was a universal free school meals pilot for two years in County Durham, and it transformed behaviour in school. It was incredibly important for the children

to learn those social skills, and attainment levels across the school were improved in a short time. The evidence is there. I hope the Minister will look at it and think about providing universal free school meals. It is great that additional money is going to address holiday hunger, but none of that is coming to County Durham, which is the poorest county in the country. Will the Minister consider that issue?

What children have asked for in the charter is modest, and I hope not only that the Minister will consider implementing it, but that he will have higher ambitions in terms of properly serving the needs of our young people.

10.28 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing this important debate, and all members of the panel and other organisations on producing the report.

Far too many children across the country live in poverty, which we know can have a variety of extremely detrimental effects on their wellbeing, development and life chances. Nowhere is that clearer than with the issue of food poverty and food insecurity. Across Bradford, 21.8% of children live in poverty. In my constituency, 25% of children—more than 7,000—live in poverty. Exact figures for how many children experience food poverty and insecurity are harder to come by, but it is likely that a high proportion of those who live in poverty have experienced food insecurity and, ultimately, hunger.

I will turn to some of the ways that is damaging children in my constituency, as the report rightly makes clear the link between food insecurity and attendance, achievement and attainment at school. What children eat during the day affects their concentration and performance in school. Children who are hungry are significantly more likely to misbehave or lose concentration and attention during lessons.

Hunger during term time is further compounded by hunger in the holidays. The long summer holidays are thought to contribute to weeks' worth of learning loss for the most disadvantaged children, and many teachers report its effects when the school year begins again. It is clear that food insecurity and going hungry is holding our children back from achieving their full potential. In my constituency, which ranks at the very bottom of all English constituencies for school-age social mobility, this is having a devastating impact on life chances for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. If we are to address the urgent problem of poor social mobility in this country, highlighted recently by the Social Mobility Commission's annual report, we must ensure that as a bare minimum no child goes hungry.

One of the great strengths of the report, and what sets it apart from others, is that it prominently features the contribution of young people who have themselves experienced food poverty. Their testimony is both heartbreaking and powerful. I commend their dignity and I hope that their stories will be a wake-up call for all politicians to act now. I endorse the children's #Right2Food charter that was developed as part of the inquiry. All children, whatever their background, deserve nothing

less than a healthy and balanced diet. We must consider a range of policies that can further this goal, and I support the calls to expand free school meals and the Healthy Start voucher scheme.

I agree with the inquiry's conclusion that the Government must act with more urgency and focus on this issue, for instance by establishing a new watchdog and including young people in its leadership. Our ultimate ambition must be that no child experiences poverty of any type. That will require wholesale effort by the Government that reaches across all Government Departments. As a start, reinstating and properly funding Sure Start and investing in our early years programme is a must. While children continue to live in poverty, the very least we must do is ensure that they do not go hungry.

10.32 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): As we have heard, 2.5 million children in the UK are living in food insecurity. I was honoured, along with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), to co-chair this inquiry. I am also vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on hunger and food poverty.

The inquiry heard from 400 young people across the UK. We met 15 young ambassadors, who were absolutely amazing and so articulate in explaining their experiences. Listening to them was harrowing. In the session that I chaired I kept having to put my glasses on to hide the fact that I was crying. They talked in an unemotional and down-to-earth way, because sadly this is their daily experience.

It is clear that the allowance for school meals is far too small, ranging from just over £2 to £3. Just some toast for breakfast can cost from 40p to over £1. Many young people mentioned that a bottle of water can cost 90p. In a country that has clean water, that is ridiculous. No water should be sold. Water coolers should simply be provided, as already ordained in law, and children should be given something to drink from, whether clean cups or water bottles. That is absolutely critical. It is important to hear those young people describe the headaches they were getting from dehydration. We also heard about many catering services being outsourced. It was all about having a canteen that made a profit and not about one that was providing nutrition.

There is a cliff edge that means that even a tiny change in income can suddenly mean that children do not qualify for free school meals. Dev talked about coming to school feeling embarrassed because his packed lunch box had hardly anything in it. Working out who is eligible for free schools meals has become a lot harder since the introduction of universal credit. My local authority used to have an automatic system based on the benefits people received, but there are no ways of triggering that any more. We also heard about not having enough time to eat and food therefore being thrown away, while other children who were feeling hungry watched.

There is stigma. I lost my father a week before my third birthday, so I grew up on free school meals when there were different coloured tickets and those eligible stood in a different queue. People have mentioned that there are ways of avoiding that stigma, but, as the young people mentioned, everyone knows very quickly who is on free school meals; there is no hiding it. The

simple approach is to make free school meals universal. England and Scotland have that system up to the age of 7, but Wales and Northern Ireland do not. In fact, investing in universal free school meals would be the most effective way of contributing to closing the attainment gap. Children who are mentally stressed or malnourished cannot learn. As I said at the launch of the report, I defy anyone to solve algebra when their stomach is hurting them because of hunger.

Governments have direct control over what our young people eat in school and that is where they could make changes. Outside school, Government do not have direct control, although they do have a lot of powers and levers. They could fund local authorities to tackle holiday hunger. In my constituency, North Ayrshire Council provides 23 centres that are open throughout the summer, providing activities and warm meals; that is an important provision in tackling holiday hunger. The APPG undertook a report two years ago, which has stimulated discussion at least. As was said earlier, when those children come back to school they have lost out educationally over the holidays. They are not being stimulated either, as there is no access to activities, and they are filling themselves up with carbohydrates, which are cheap. They may actually have gained weight over the summer.

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) mentioned breastfeeding, which is the start of a young person in life, but the mother's nutrition is also important, as that life actually starts at conception. People forget that if a pregnant woman is carrying a female child, that child will have all her eggs from the start; a woman is carrying two generations at one time. Therefore, if that child is malnourished during pregnancy, that is hitting two generations. Then comes breastfeeding, which requires promotion and support, as well as a health visitor or someone to check that the mother is not having problems. In England, half of infant feeding lead jobs have been cut and there is no breastfeeding strategy. In Scotland, we started at a worse level—as is often the case—but in the last 17 years breastfeeding has risen by 20%. In England the figure is drifting down, and we need to turn that around.

We heard that healthy food is three times more expensive than unhealthy food. Some 46% of advertising is about rubbish food and only 2.5% about fruit and vegetables. It is critical that we have a 9pm watershed. We have debated that for the four years that I have been in Parliament, yet there has still been no action. We need to tackle that or we will face an epidemic of type 2 diabetes, which results in people losing feet or legs. Having worked in a vascular unit, I spent two years of my life being part of those awful operations. People get stuck in hospital or stuck in care, and the quality of their lives is awful. The management of diabetes already costs NHS services £10 billion. Why do we not invest more of that money in our children, by making them healthy early in life?

It is critical that we have an independent children's food watchdog. It must involve young people, be allowed to explore different innovative approaches across the four UK nations and produce reports that the Government must promise to listen to. If that does not happen, we will pay the price in trying to support those children when they are struggling when they are older. We need to invest in our children now, and we need to start by listening to their words in this report.

10.39 am

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for securing such a vital debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) for the amount of work she has put in, over a considerable number of years, to chairing the APPG. Special thanks also go to the 15 young food ambassadors, all the young people and stakeholders who have offered their insights to this valuable report, and of course Dame Emma Thompson for giving the matter such a strong media profile, as well as for her impassioned work on the subject.

As we have heard, the report is an excellent and engaging piece of work, and it is all the more important because it involved young people so closely. As a result, it is something that all parties should give serious attention to. We on the Labour Benches would very much welcome the inquiry report and the #Right2Food charter's being submitted as a contribution to our current review of social security, and I hope the Government and other parties are also giving the report's findings serious consideration, and action in some parts of devolved Government.

It has been clear for some time, and made even clearer today, that we are facing a child poverty and child hunger crisis in our country, right from birth. For babies and pre-school years, the report raises serious concerns over support for breastfeeding—highlighted by the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous)—policies to support babies in low-income households and food provision in early years and pre-school environments.

The report goes on to find that free school meal provision is inconsistent across the Westminster and devolved Governments, while expressing concern about the way the free school meal policy works, including concerns that the allowance is not sufficient to buy a meal, as hon. Members have pointed out, and the higher price of healthier food options. It also highlights issues related to advertising and access to cheap, fast food. For example, the report states that children from the poorest families are

“more exposed to fast food outlets and more affected by the relatively higher costs of healthy food”.

Children, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire rightly pointed out, are becoming more obese, comparing London with the likes of Paris. Of course, that has drastic consequences for our nation's health.

These findings should come as no surprise. Last month, the Trussell Trust published its annual statistics on food bank use, which show that in 2018-19 the trust distributed almost 1.6 million food parcels, of which 578,000 went to children—a fact highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who noted that 7,000 such parcels were distributed to local children in Durham. That is the highest level since the charity opened in 2013-14 and nearly a 75% increase in the past five years.

Furthermore, the Government's own figures for households below average income, released in March, tell a shocking story. Child poverty is at 4.1 million, half a million more than in 2010, and beneath that headline charities such as the Child Poverty Action Group and others have even more concerns. Despite Government

claims that work is the best route out of poverty, 70% of children in poverty now live in working households, up from 67% last year. Every time we hear a Government Minister talk about record levels of employment, they are also presiding over record levels of families working, only to continue in poverty.

The Child Poverty Action Group also finds that the face of child poverty is getting younger; the proportion of children living in poverty who are under the age of five has risen from 51% to 53%, representing over 2 million children. We know that these early years often define our children's outcomes and expectations for a lifetime, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) argued.

Indeed, the inquiry report tells us:

“Up until their second birthday children's brains and bodies are developing fast and laying down the foundation for the future. The food, energy and nutrients which children eat during this period determine how well they grow, how well they do at school and are also a good predictor of long-term health.”

Tragically, under the current Government, those years are increasingly being damaged by poverty and empty stomachs.

The picture is worsening for larger families too. The risk of poverty for children in families with three or more children has also gone up, from 32% in 2012 to 43% today. Will the Minister admit that his policies, such as the two-child limit, the benefit cap and universal credit, have helped to drive this scandal? If so, will he commit to doing something about it and reversing these unfair and callous policies?

Poverty and food poverty are, of course, about more than just numbers. Behind the statistics, as hon. Members across the Chamber have pointed out, are real children, real families and real experiences. The inquiry report gives us some chilling examples and experiences from the food ambassadors about their experiences of going hungry, or of living and working alongside children suffering from not having enough to eat.

We have heard many other stories from colleagues here today. Hon. Members have given us examples of families having to choose between paying for heating or for eating. My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West spoke about the need for water dispensers, with thousands of children going thirsty day after day in the school environment. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) spoke about children's experiences of being stigmatised by the way free school meals are currently administered. Those tales show us just how important it is to ensure that, in one of the richest countries in the world, all our children can have access to that most basic of rights: enough to eat so that they can live and learn without the pain of hunger.

Related to that point is the shocking observation in the report that children living in households who have migrated to the UK and been granted leave to remain with no recourse to public funds cannot claim free school meals. That is affecting thousands and thousands of the most vulnerable children—something the Government must address. Will the Minister commit to recording that data, which is not currently recorded, so that we can have a true picture of some of the starkest examples of hunger in this country?

Will the Minister also commit, as hon. Members across the House have advocated, to extending holiday provision throughout the UK and funding all local

authorities to do that? We certainly welcome the announcement of the increase from £2 million to £9 million, but let us go further.

I will finish by once again thanking all those who have contributed to the report and the several hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I await the Minister's answers with interest, while also recognising that we all have a responsibility to understand the true picture of child and food poverty in our country and to improve that picture for the future. We are certainly committed to doing so on the Labour benches, and I hope that the Government will respond as a matter of urgency to the five asks in the report.

10.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell.

I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) on securing this important debate. I know it is an issue close to her heart, as a member of the committee for this important inquiry. I also take this opportunity to thank the young people and everyone else who contributed to the report.

I thank two people who are not in the room, Lindsay Graham and, of course, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), for their work in this area. The right hon. Gentleman certainly left an impression on me from the moment I got this job as the Children and Families Minister, and much of the work on the holiday activities and food programme is testament to his passion and commitment to this area.

I attended the launch of the inquiry's report the other week—it has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members—and I was especially lucky to meet some of the young food ambassadors in person. They have been mentioned several times today, and I want to echo what has been said, extend to them my congratulations and state my commitment to continue to listen to them as they continue their work. I was struck by the bravery of those young people, how articulate they were and their commitment to work with one another to improve the lives of other children in their communities. I know that many of them, including Dev, whom the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned, are interested in pursuing a career in politics. All I can say is that if that is the calibre of politicians in the future, we are in safe hands.

The Government are committed to delivering a country that works for everyone, and all children should be able to access healthy and nutritious food at home and at school. I am determined to ensure that we target our support as effectively as possible towards the children who are most in need.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Nadhim Zahawi: I have very little time and I want to address a number of the issues that were raised and, obviously, give the hon. Member for Bristol East a couple of minutes to respond, so I apologise, but I will not give way now. If I can at the end of my speech, I will certainly take interventions.

Clearly, there is much more to do. That was highlighted in the report, which raised some serious and important issues that we need to address. At the launch event, I

promised to take the report away to consider it in detail and to formulate an official response. Although this speech does not constitute our formal response to the report, what I can say is that I have asked my team to work with the Food Foundation to look into setting up a working group to explore how we might provide greater oversight of children's food, involving the young food ambassadors and other relevant Departments. I am happy to meet representatives of the Food Foundation to discuss that in more detail before the end of this month—diaries permitting, of course. I will also write to schools to remind them of their responsibilities on school food, including the need to provide access at all times to free, fresh drinking water. That issue has been mentioned several times today. I will respond formally to the report by the start of the new school year. That will give us a chance to test the response with the young food ambassadors when they meet in the school holidays. My Department is committed to ensuring that all children can access healthy food, both at school and beyond, and has put in place significant resources to ensure that that happens.

The holiday activities and food programme is exploring how we can better support children and young people during school holidays. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Mike Amesbury) mentioned expanding it. This is the second year of our research, and we will continue to try to understand what works. Last year, we awarded £2 million, as he mentioned, to holiday club providers to deliver free healthy food and enriching activities to about 18,000 children across the country. We have more than quadrupled the funding for the summer of 2019, when, as people may have heard earlier today, we will work with 11 organisations in all the regions of England. I am pleased to be able to tell the House, if hon. Members have not already heard, that the organisations and areas that we will be working with this summer are StreetGames in Newcastle—that organisation was mentioned by the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—Gateshead Council; the Leeds Community Foundation; Transforming Lives for Good, in Bradford; Edsential in the Cheshire West and Chester area; the Happy Healthy Holidays consortium in Birmingham; Barnardo's in Leicestershire; Suffolk County Council; Family Action in Croydon; the Romsey School in Hampshire; and Plymouth City Council. Those organisations will co-ordinate and fund—

Dr Blackman-Woods: Will the Minister give way briefly?

Nadhim Zahawi: I will right at the end, I promise, if I can just get through this speech. There is a lot that I want to respond on, including why Bristol East, unlike Plymouth, did not get the funding—

Kerry McCarthy: And Durham.

Dr Blackman-Woods: Yes.

Nadhim Zahawi: And Durham. The organisations that I have listed will co-ordinate and fund provision across their area to ensure that those who need it can access it. They will work with providers to ensure that they meet our new set of minimum standards, including that the food they offer meets school food standards, and that children and young people attending the clubs—and their families where appropriate—are being taught

[*Nadhim Zahawi*]

about the importance of healthy food and given the skills, through cooking classes, to ensure that they can put those lessons into practice at home.

I have spoken before about how enormously proud I am of the breakfast club programme, which has been mentioned today. We are investing £26 million. A good breakfast sets children up for the day ahead, as colleagues have mentioned, and where children do not get that at home, we are committed to ensuring that schools are able to provide it. The breakfast club programme is setting up or improving more than 1,700 breakfast clubs in schools in the most disadvantaged areas across the country. I recently visited one such club in Battersea, and everyone involved was overwhelmingly positive about the impact that the club has had.

Free school meals have been mentioned. The Government are also committed to ensuring that the most disadvantaged children receive a healthy and nutritious lunch time meal at school. Last year, more than 1 million disadvantaged children were eligible for and claimed a free school meal. We have recently expanded free school meal provision to include further education colleges and implemented, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire mentioned, universal free school meals for all infant children in state-funded schools in England.

We estimate that under our revised criteria, introduced last April, for free school meals, more children will benefit from free meals by 2022, compared with the previous benefits system. The hon. Member for Weaver Vale talked about that. We have also introduced generous transitional protections, so that all children will keep their free meals during the change to the new criteria.

Another recommendation from the report was that any unspent free meal allowance should be carried over for pupils to use on subsequent days. Free school meals are intended as a benefit in kind, rather than a cash benefit; our primary interest is that schools meet their legal duties to provide nutritious free lunches to eligible children. However, schools absolutely have the freedom to do this if their local arrangements allow it, and I know that Carmel Education Trust, up in the north-east, is one body that has adopted this practice.

My Department's school food standards mean that the food that children and young people access at school is healthy and nutritious and foods high in fat, salt and sugar are restricted. We are going even further by updating the standards to reduce sugar content even more. Of course, I acknowledge that these issues are related more to child health and obesity. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew

Selous) spoke so eloquently about that and the relationship with diabetes and the scourge of that illness. But as we all know, obesity and poverty are related issues. Many colleagues have mentioned that they are two sides of the same coin. Indeed, many of the young people asked why unhealthy food is cheaper and more readily available than healthy alternatives. I was shocked to hear the young food ambassadors talking about not having access to free water at school, and I will include that in my letter when I write to schools.

My time is limited. I thank all colleagues who have spoken. The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West spoke about free school meals and the allowance. We will look at that in the spending review. The hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) eloquently told his pineapple story, as I will refer to it, and quoted a young man named Aaron. The hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) referred to her own mother's experience of being a school cook and talked about holiday activities, which I will hopefully write to her on. The hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) talked about behavioural challenges. I have been to that wonderful town to look at our opportunity area there.

I want to end there to allow the hon. Member for Bristol East to respond. The only other thing I will say is that I have lots of responses to colleagues' points and I will write to them if I have not responded fully in my remarks today.

10.59 am

Kerry McCarthy: In the very short time I have, I do not want to appear churlish, but as has been made clear, my brilliant hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) have been campaigning on this issue since we were all elected in 2005. I am sure that the young food ambassadors and the Food Foundation will seize the opportunity that the Minister has suggested, but I do not think we need pilots to find out what works on holiday hunger. I do not think we need working groups. I think we need to get on with tackling the problems that have been identified and particularly the underlying problems, which the Minister has not mentioned at all. I am talking about things such as the roll-out of universal credit, benefit sanctions and so on. I urge the Minister to look at those, too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the report of the Children's Future Food inquiry.

Military Aircraft Manufacturing

11 am

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of military aircraft manufacturing in the UK.

It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Rosindell. To avoid any doubt, if during the course of the debate I refer to the Eurofighter, I am referring to an aircraft and not to Euro-fighters such as yourself—a Euro-fighter in a very different context.

The aerospace sector in general is a key driver of the UK manufacturing economy. In 2017 the industry contributed £6.6 billion to the UK economy, amounting to about 4% of total manufacturing output. Across the length and breadth of our nation, 900 businesses were involved, employing in excess of 90,000 people. I want to focus on the defence and military section within that.

The aerospace sector has accounted for 87% of defence exports over the past 10 years. The UK combat air sector has an annual turnover of over £6 billion, supporting 18,000 jobs. In the supply chain on programmes such as Typhoon, more than 10,000 full-time equivalents have been employed over the past 10 years, with 40,000 people involved at the peak of the programme. There are over 1,000 companies nationwide, in defence, aerospace and associated industries.

My constituency of Fylde is home to the Warton and Samlesbury business units. In Warton, BAE Systems employs 6,200 staff, who focus on Typhoon, Hawk and the future air platforms currently being worked on by the Government. At the Samlesbury business unit, the F-35 programme is being generated. Between those two sites, over 10,000 people are employed. I am very proud that my part of Lancashire plays an integral part in the UK's defence manufacturing sector.

The purpose of this debate is not to criticise the Government's work, because the Government have been very committed. I commend the current Minister and his predecessors, as well as the Prime Minister, for the focus that has been given to military aircraft strategy. It is important that the Government recognise the importance of retaining sovereign defence capability. Any fool can go out and buy aircraft that are manufactured overseas, but it takes something quite remarkable to invest in this country's sovereign capability.

It is very important that we do not lose sight of the fact that we retain such a significant work share in the F-35 programme because of the capability that the United Kingdom was able to put on the table. That capability had been generated over decades from programmes as far back as Harrier, as well as the Typhoon programme. Without investing in sovereign capability in design, build and development, if we seek a place at the table on another country's defence aircraft platform, we might get the crumbs rather than the lion's share.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is making an interesting and excellent speech. The economic benefits are obvious to see, as are the benefits of having those capabilities for domestic defence. Does he agree that having those world-leading sovereign capabilities also allows us to influence strategic decision-making processes on an international basis?

Mark Menzies: My hon. Friend is very modest. He also represents a constituency with a substantial defence footprint, and he has dedicated much of his career in this place to fighting for the workforce and the interests of the companies he represents. His point is solid. Across the whole range of skills and technologies that building a modern, sophisticated aircraft platform gives us—whether in avionics, engine design, low radar signature and so on—it is critical that having that sovereign capability not only allows us to influence the manufacturing programmes that we may become part of, but is an incredible part of the UK's strategic relationship with our key allies. That is something we must never lose sight of.

The combat air strategy, which the Government outlined in Farnborough in 2018, sets out the ambition for a new combat aircraft, expected to come into force in the 2030s. Government and industry have pledged over £2 billion over the next decade to the future combat air systems technology initiative. Team Tempest has also been created. That is welcome, but it is not likely to remain sovereign, due to cost; the reality is that we will need international partners, as we have done with Typhoon and Tornado, and with programmes as far back as Jaguar. It is incredibly important that the United Kingdom plays a significant role in shaping Typhoon, so that we do not lose any of that ability, which we hold so dear.

When it comes to sovereign capability, we are reaching a point where our workforce, which holds the skills required in the sector, may run out of work, and redundancies will follow. That is why it is crucial that the Government continue their support for the Typhoon export programme. The work currently taking place at Warton is for our export partners, which, in the case of Typhoon in Warton, is Qatar. If the supply chain is allowed to grind to a halt due to lack of export orders, we will lose not only the people and skills, but the ability and cash needed to innovate and invest.

Therefore, it is important that those who lament or complain about the United Kingdom's defence export strategy do not lose sight of the tens of thousands of men and women—and apprentices—whose jobs depend on that carefully controlled export strategy. I urge the Government to work closely with our partners in Germany, to ensure that their decision to block export licences to some of our key export partners does not have a catastrophic impact on the UK's defence manufacturing system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Everyone here will be aware of the work of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, including the dinners that it hosts here, and those who sponsor those events. At those events we gather knowledge and we get a sense of the importance of those companies to all the regions of the United Kingdom. There is a labour skills base in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, which we need to utilise to its full capability. Does he agree that, when it comes to the advantages of military aircraft manufacture in the UK, every region has a part to play?

Mark Menzies: The hon. Gentleman makes a very valid point.

I will now focus on the national value framework aspect of the combat air strategy, which states that the UK must consider a number of items. For example, it is important to maintain military capabilities and our

[*Mark Menzies*]

ability to respond quickly and effectively to threats. We must maintain choice in our future combat air capability and acquisition. We must sustain investment in highly skilled jobs throughout the supply chain, the contribution to the UK's science, technology, engineering and maths skills base, the development of high-end technologies, and the influence on international and trade relationships.

Above all, we need to ensure that we protect the UK's operational, technological and economic advantage, and the ability, when required, to act independently, freely and at will. As part of any future strategy, we must also ensure that the needs and future requirements of the RAF are central and critical.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He is making a powerful speech and I agree with everything he has said thus far. Does he agree that to sustain the supply chain, which is an important focus of the national value proposition that he has just made and of his earlier remarks, it is important that the Government's combat air strategy is backed up by contracts? That will allow the primes involved in Team Tempest and the supply chain that will support them to start investing to ensure that we maintain the design and engineering skills at the highest level for such a strategy to have an effect.

Mark Menzies: It comes as no surprise that my right hon. Friend's intervention is full of facts and knowledge, because he speaks as a former Minister for Defence Procurement. He is right that the people involved in the early stage of the development of platforms such as Team Tempest need that assurance and they need contracts to come through. It is important that the money that the Government have already committed at Farnborough, which I understand is part of the overall £2 billion envelope, begins to feed through into live programmes and work, and not just at large organisations such as BAE Systems, but at many of the smaller organisations within the supply chain. An aircraft supply chain is not a light that can be switched on and off; we have to maintain the drumbeat and ensure that programmes have work coming through and that innovation has a purpose.

On Team Tempest, is it possible for the Minister to update us today on where we are at with regard to building partnerships with other partner nations? What does that international collaborative effort look like? Where does he think we can go in terms of not only building a platform that is flexible in meeting the needs of the RAF, but ensuring that the platform is highly exportable and can take on the likes of France and the United States, which have several aircraft platforms that will fulfil a number of key segments of the export market? If we do not have an exportable aircraft as part of our future programme, and we rely solely on RAF orders or orders placed by partner nations, the programme will not be able to sustain the UK manufacturing sector in future.

I thank the Minister for the work that he and his predecessors have done to drive innovation within the manufacturing sector, but I urge him to look at programmes such as Hawk. Although it is not as shiny or exciting as future programmes such as Tempest, it is the solid trainer aircraft that we have depended on for the past

30-plus years, and it is fair to say that it is the only military aircraft that the United Kingdom manufactures throughout.

I pay tribute to the trade unions representatives, particularly from Brough, who come down, speak to members and get their points across. I urge the Minister to continue to work with the trade union movement in the military aircraft sector to ensure that we have a united team building a platform for the future and ensuring the UK's manufacturing base. With that, I will conclude and give him time to respond.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Rosindell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) on securing the debate and on his work for many of his constituents. He often grabs me in the corridor to raise issues that are of concern to him and them. As he rightly said, his constituency has a proud tradition in military aviation. Over recent years, BAE Systems Military Air & Information at Warton has been the central assembly facility for the Eurofighter Typhoon. That was one of the first visits I made when I was appointed to this job, and the passion that goes through that company was clear, from the management to the workforce. We should be proud of what it has done.

The area has a strong heritage. Warton was originally the base of English Electric and the testing ground for the legendary Lightning fighter—the supersonic interceptor of the 1960s and 1970s, rather than today's world-beating F-35 Lightning II stealth jet. It is doubly appropriate, therefore, that the debate has highlighted the proud history of the UK in the field.

Let us make no mistake that the UK remains a global leader in military aerospace for three reasons. The first reason, which my hon. Friend touched on, is innovation. We have a long heritage of leading the world in aerospace thinking—in taking cutting-edge industrial, technical and scientific know-how from the drawing board to cutting-edge military capability. The first purpose-built air-to-air combat fighter was designed and built in Britain, as was the first vertical take-off and landing aircraft. That heritage remains undiminished.

The second reason is our history of successful international collaboration in producing some of the best military aircraft in the world, such as Jaguar, Tornado and Typhoon, with our partners on the continent, and now the F-35 with the United States, as my hon. Friend pointed out. The third reason is the strength of our domestic combat air sector, which has created skilled jobs and prosperity not just in his constituency, but across the nation.

It is worth mentioning the recent successes for the UK industry in the sector. Programmes such as the F-35 are creating considerable industrial benefit, with 15% of the value of more than 3,000 airframes being built by British industry. The Government are also delighted with the UK's recent success in securing another batch of F-35 avionics and aircraft component repair work, which will bring an additional £500 million of work to north Wales and secure hundreds of skilled jobs. Overall, the combat air sector has an annual turnover of more than £6 billion. It directly supports more than 18,000 skilled jobs across the UK and many more in the wider supply chain, which are equally important.

To maintain and strengthen the sector's competitive international position, the Government established the £2 billion future combat air system technology initiative following the "Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015". That initiative sustains investment in the sector to ensure that the UK remains at the forefront of developing the next generation of technological capability.

Last year, the Government further demonstrated their commitment to the sector by launching the combat air strategy at the Farnborough international airshow, as my hon. Friend said. The strategy defined a clear vision for the sector that preserves our long-standing national advantages in the field and our freedom of action in deciding how our combat air capability is delivered. All future combat air decisions will be based on a national value framework that takes full account of our armed forces' requirements, the contribution to the nation's industrial capacity and prosperity, and the significant benefits that military aviation provides to our international influence.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): As the Minister knows, the Defence Committee is quite worried that not enough is being done to protect the defence industrial base. In advance of his appearance before us on 21 May, when we will look into some of these subjects, can he tell us how much consideration is given to the knock-on benefits of investing in production in the UK rather than buying off the shelf, given that the money spent is then channelled back into the British economy?

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his intervention, and I say with some trepidation that I am looking forward to appearing before his Committee in a couple of weeks' time. He is absolutely right to raise that important issue. We are doing a tremendous amount of work across the Department, and a lot of it is of course the focus of the fantastic report by our right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) on the important prosperity that the defence industry can bring. We are also engaging a lot with small and medium-sized enterprises around the country to encourage more of them to take part in many of the competitions, and to ensure that they do more business with defence. Wherever we build new platforms, we are encouraging wider prosperity among those in the supply chain in the United Kingdom.

I know there has been some controversy about some of the platforms we are buying from overseas, but we are working with these industries to ensure that they work closely with the UK supply chain, so that we can increase the prosperity that comes about because of the platforms we are buying. For example, Boeing recently took a lot of SMEs over to the United States to talk through how they can bid for business from that company. Of course, Boeing has made investments in this country, but we want to see even more of that happening, and I will be happy to develop a bit more of that when I come before the Committee chaired by the Member for New Forest East (Dr. Lewis) my right hon. Friend.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for taking an intervention on that point. I apologise to him for having been delayed in a Select Committee, and I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I was very interested in the answer the Minister gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) vis-à-vis investing in the defence base

of this country, and, of course, I agree 100% with that. However, with regard to the combat air sector, I was encouraged by the Minister's comments about Team Tempest. Could he update the House as to whether there has been any further discussion as regards international partners in that programme going forward?

Stuart Andrew: I will come on to those points in a minute. A number of points were raised in the debate that I will happily respond to when I have finished these remarks.

As part of the wider strategy programme, my Department has now launched its next-generation combat air acquisition programme. This will develop the capabilities that the RAF will need to replace Typhoon when it goes out of service in 2040. The programme's two-year concept phase has now begun, following my approval of the strategic outline case.

Furthermore, new forums have now been established to explore the possibilities for collaboration with other military aerospace partners. Early discussions have gone well, and my Department will provide more detailed updates in the summer. However, I can assure my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) that we are having very detailed conversations with a number of our partners around the world because we recognise that, for this process to be effective and, importantly, affordable when we deliver it, and, probably even more crucially, because of the importance of interoperability, it is vital that we have partner nations on board. However, as I say, those discussions are still ongoing. I hope I will be able to update the House on them later this year.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the Minister acknowledge that, although the commitment the Government have shown towards the Tempest programme is to be welcomed, if the project is to come to fruition, that will require much more investment by the Government than they are presently committed to?

Stuart Andrew: We are in the early stages at the moment, and I will shortly talk about some of our engagement with industry, to respond to his point a bit further.

The other thing that is really important, and it is in parallel to this work, is that fact that my Department is actively identifying and monitoring the health of the sector's skill base, which my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde mentioned. When I visited Samlesbury, I was very impressed by the BAE Systems training centre next door. That centre is helping not only the sector but a lot of businesses around the Lancashire area, and it really is a model that we should see from other businesses in the defence sector. The aim of our work is to inform crucial decisions on future skills investment in a fast-moving international environment, where technological practice changes continually.

I will just come on to some of the points that were raised in the debate. The first was the issue of exports. My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde was absolutely right to say that this is an incredibly important part of the work that we do. Personally, I have tried to invest a significant amount of my time in support of some of the export campaigns. We are working with Finland at the moment to see whether we can be successful in their competition, which is worth in the region of €6 billion

[*Stuart Andrew*]

to €10 billion. Finland has launched a competition for the acquisition of 64 fighter aircraft to replace its ageing fleet. That competition is a closely fought one, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we will do everything we can.

As for Saudi Arabia, we continue to make progress on the Typhoon batch 2 negotiations. The latest offer is a very strong package, and it would provide enduring industrial capability in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which would also establish many of the industrial components needed to realise that country's vision of 2030.

My hon. Friend was right to mention the export issues and the licensing issues, and we are working closely with the German Government to ensure that those are resolved. Equally, we are working together with Airbus on the campaign to supply Canada with a replacement for its F-18—it is currently running a competition to find that replacement.

Other points were raised in the debate. There was the issue that my hon. Friend mentioned to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow and the prosperity agenda. We are working closely with four main businesses at the moment: BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce, Leonardo and MBDA. Recently, I was pleased to attend a Team Tempest industry day, which over 150 companies attended so that they could get the briefs they needed and the capabilities and skills that will be required to facilitate the next generation. The Tempest partners are now very actively engaged with about a hundred of those companies. So that engagement is happening and, as I have said, I hope we will be able to make more announcements in the coming weeks.

I have talked about the partner nations. The innovation side is obviously incredibly important. The innovation fund is helpful, and the whole aspect of this future combat air strategy will be incredibly important for that.

My hon. Friend also mentioned Hawk, which I know has been a challenging issue. I have visited Kuwait on two occasions now, trying to personally support the very active campaign that BAE Systems and the Government have pursued there. I pay tribute to the trade unions; they are very active in making their case. I also pay tribute to BAE Systems, which is trying to keep things going at Brough while we see whether we can make any announcements.

I hope I have demonstrated in this debate, which I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde on securing, that we are doing everything we can to maintain the necessary skills and knowledge, as well as to retain our ability to have the combat air sector that we really need. I assure the House that the Government will continue to work in full partnership with our world-leading military aviation sector, maintaining its position at the cutting edge of technological development, and supporting the jobs and prosperity that it brings right across the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the future of military aircraft manufacturing in the UK.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Commonwealth Personnel in the Armed Forces

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fair treatment for Commonwealth personnel in the armed forces.

I am pleased to have been granted this debate today, Mr Sharma, and to speak under your chairmanship. I thank right hon. and hon. Members who have joined us for today's debate.

We often speak in this place about the need to support veterans and their families after they have served our country. However, there is now clear evidence that the Commonwealth personnel serving in the armed forces are being left behind. It is a duty of this and any Government to support all those who serve in the armed forces, including those from Commonwealth nations who serve with distinction alongside their comrades from the UK and Ireland. Commonwealth citizens have long made significant contributions to the defence of the United Kingdom, including during the first and second world wars. They continue to play an important role in the UK armed forces, serving in operations worldwide.

The tradition of soldiers recruited from across the Commonwealth and other former colonies serving in the British armed forces is the legacy of a time when Britain had an extensive military role in garrisoning and policing the largest empire in the world. Indeed, the Brigade of Gurkhas has celebrated over two centuries of continuous loyal service to Britain, initially under the command of the East India Company from 1814, then within the British Indian Army from 1895, and continuing within the British Army after the 1947 decolonisation of India until the present day.

Commonwealth soldiers, like all members of the armed forces, are prepared to sacrifice their lives for the defence of our country. I believe that all armed forces personnel, regardless of their background or country of origin, should be treated equally and with gratitude. Much like ordinary civilians, Commonwealth soldiers are being unfairly treated by the Home Office, which is not doing enough to end the hostile environment it has created at immense cost to society. Given the ongoing recruitment crisis and the Government's recent decision to recruit more Commonwealth personnel, it is all the more urgent that the Government review any recruitment barriers. The Labour party recognises the immense debt that we owe to all personnel, veterans and their families, and the need to ensure that they have the very best support. Today, I call upon the Government to do the same.

According to the Royal British Legion, over 6,000 personnel from foreign and Commonwealth countries are currently serving in the UK armed forces, with more recruited each year to fill technical and specialist roles. In 2018 the Army employed approximately 4.5% of its personnel—or 5,290—from foreign and Commonwealth nations. Although the Army has been the main recipient of Commonwealth recruits, the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force also recruit from Commonwealth countries. The majority of those recruits come from countries in Africa, the Caribbean,

Nepal and Fiji in the Pacific; they are also generally concentrated in non-commissioned ranks and within infantry units. That is despite the Conservative Government cutting the size of the regular Army from a peak of 114,000 in 2010 to a target size of 82,000 by 2020, and privatising recruitment to a company called Capita in 2012. However, in July 2018 the Army was 5,600, or about 7%, short of the number of regulars needed, and it is highly unlikely to meet its target headcount for 2020.

The Army and Capita have not recruited the number of regulars and reserves needed to sustain the required headcount in any year since the contract began, even though that headcount has been heavily reduced. The total annual shortfall has ranged from 21% to 45% of the Army's annual requirements. To illustrate the contrast, in the two years before the contract with Capita began, the annual shortfall was just 4%. In late 2018 the Ministry of Defence announced its intention to increase further its reliance on Commonwealth personnel, as home recruitment continues to chronically underperform. It aims to recruit 1,350 personnel per annum, including expanding the Brigade of Gurkhas by more than 800 posts and extending the right for women to join, too.

However, the immigration status of the Gurkhas and other Commonwealth personnel has been a significant matter of contention over the past two decades, led most notably by the Gurkha Justice Campaign. Until 2004, Gurkhas were not allowed to settle in the United Kingdom. The Labour Government under Tony Blair changed the rules to allow Gurkhas who retired after 1997 to settle in the UK, because 1997 was the year in which the Gurkhas' brigade headquarters transferred from Hong Kong to Britain. In May 2009, following a campaign by Gurkha veterans, Gordon Brown's Labour Government announced that all Gurkha veterans who had served four years or more in the British Army before 1997 would also be allowed to settle in Britain.

It seems to me extraordinary that our country placed such barriers to citizenship in the way of those who served this nation so gallantly in the first place. In my opinion, this situation reveals a latent neo-colonial mentality in the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office when it comes to championing the equal right of those who have served us in uniform to become British citizens.

Commonwealth personnel are exempt from UK immigration controls throughout their service, but that exemption is removed immediately upon discharge. Former personnel who wish to stay in the United Kingdom indefinitely, whether with their family or alone, are required to apply for indefinite leave to remain. In alignment with civilian applicants for indefinite leave to remain, veterans are subject to several requirements, including four years' qualifying residency in the United Kingdom—which, of course, is obtainable via four years' service in the armed forces. However, veterans are also subject to a non-refundable fee of £2,389 per person. Fees for indefinite leave to remain have risen by 127% in the past five years, to £2,389 per person—since they were introduced in 2003, those fees have risen by 1,441%. The Royal British Legion has said that it provided £36,000 in grants over the past year alone to help pay for those visa fees, which is money that could have been spent on any number of better and more direct veteran support services. What an appalling diversion of time, effort and resource.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. As he rightly highlights, Commonwealth soldiers have long made significant contributions to the defence of our country, including during the first and second world wars, and they continue to do so to this day. However, they are now being charged exorbitant fees by the Government when making Home Office applications, which is frankly appalling given their immense sacrifices. Does he agree that it is high time the Government ended the hostile environment that they have created?

Mr Sweeney: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution, and for reiterating the frustration that many feel about the Government's wrong-headed position.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am slightly conscious of the manner in which the debate is already going. I simply interject about the use of the words "hostile environment", because I hope that there will be cross-party consensus on where we want to take this issue. I invite the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) to urge caution on such language. The fees for those from the Commonwealth who serve in our armed forces are the same fees that everybody must pay, no matter where they are from. Those people are not being targeted, and nor are those fees part of any form of hostile environment. I simply invite the hon. Gentleman to keep the debate as elevated as possible, rather than getting down into some political rut.

Mr Sweeney: I thank the Minister for his sentiments. The term "hostile environment" is born of persistent and comprehensive observation of the behaviour of the Home Office across a number of different fronts. It does not pertain particularly to service personnel; that is merely another permutation of how it harms quality of life, including that of our armed forces personnel. I am encouraged by the Minister's aspiration to reach consensus on this issue, which I share, but I also acknowledge that there is a significant problem within our immigration system. I believe that our armed forces personnel should be treated as exceptional cases. That is the thrust of my argument today, which I will elaborate on further as we go forward.

I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) about the costs associated with service leavers applying for indefinite leave to remain. A service leaver who wants their partner to join them with indefinite leave to remain faces a bill of £4,778 to continue to live in the UK, even before children and further dependants are taken into account. Furthermore, immigration rules state that a foreign worker must earn an income threshold of £18,600 to apply to bring their spouse to the UK. In addition to that £18,600 threshold, the minimum income requirement to bring over one child is £22,400, with an additional £2,400 for each child thereafter. To put that into context, a soldier's basic pay after training is just £18,600 a year; as a single person, they are right on the threshold.

It is difficult to understand just how vital the support of friends and family is to serving personnel who, during tours of duty in conflict zones, work antisocial hours in conditions that are often appalling. Impeding the opportunity for those who serve to have their families living with them, providing that close emotional support, seems to me particularly callous. Considering the general

concentration of Commonwealth troops in the lower ranks, and the fact that they require permission from their superiors and commanding officers to take up weekend work in order to earn sufficient money to achieve those income thresholds, doing so can be exceptionally difficult and put those troops under significant emotional hardship.

The Army Families Federation, which has also been investigating the issue, believes that up to 500 troops are affected. The AFF told *The Times* that it has been contacted by around a dozen soldiers separated from their children, and that Army chaplains and welfare officers have reported tearful troops in despair over their situation. There are also concerns that Commonwealth soldiers are not always aware of the issues prior to joining the UK armed forces, and it comes as a very unwelcome and distressing shock when they realise the limitations they face.

A recent Defence Committee report recognised that the vast majority of veterans leave the services with no ill effects. It is important to acknowledge that reality, but the report maintained that although the Government have made improvements in the care available to personnel leaving the armed forces, it was none the less the case that

"some serving personnel, veterans and their families who need mental health care are still being completely failed by the system."

That is not good enough. It might not be typical, but it is certainly not good enough.

For some Commonwealth veterans who struggle with mental health, there is also a serious threat of deportation in addition to any other concerns they might have. I have spoken several times of the struggles that many veterans experience with their mental health. It has often been discussed in debates—some familiar faces are here. I have personal experience of people who have suffered and been affected by those problems. As I have mentioned before, the Royal Regiment of Scotland lost four soldiers and ex-soldiers last year through a spate of suicides. That caused great concern and worry about what that meant for the wider generation of soldiers who have served on operations in recent years. Reflecting further, more than 70 veterans have taken their own lives in the past year, which is very troubling. The death toll has exceeded the number of battlefield fatalities in 11 of the 13 years that British forces were operational in Herrick in Afghanistan. That is a pretty devastating statistic.

Four in 10 service families who have requested access to and been referred for mental health care have had difficulty accessing that treatment. That is not good enough and we need to do more. Many of our veterans experience great frustration when it comes to mental health support. Having approached people to get that level of support, they do not get the level of rigour that they deserve, leading to the despair we have seen, culminating in spates of veteran suicides. No veteran deserves that—not those originating from the UK, and not those from the Commonwealth. It is heartbreaking that some individuals could have their mental health affected by the lingering threat of deportation and immigration concerns after retiring from the armed forces.

I was pleased to see that a cross-party group of more than 130 MPs, co-ordinated by my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), have written to the Home Secretary calling for the fees to be scrapped. I

would like to add my late support to that today. I did not have the opportunity to sign the letter itself, but I thoroughly endorse its sentiments. The letter is indicative of the scale of the problem and the groundswell of support from Members from all parties who want to see this issue gripped and properly addressed with the greatest sense of urgency.

I will therefore finish with some direct questions to the Minister. First, will he speak to the Home Secretary and the Home Office to secure a reply to the cross-party letter on the issue of visa fees, because Members are yet to receive a reply? Will the Government do the right thing and immediately scrap visa fees for armed forces veterans applying for indefinite leave to remain and, furthermore, grant them the unique right to apply for immediate British citizenship without limit of time? Finally, will the Government, in recognition of the huge debt we owe to our veterans, issue an apology to the veterans from the Commonwealth and their families who have been forced to pay these extortionate fees, despite their service to our country, and set up a mechanism to compensate those who have suffered financial detriment?

The Windrush scandal and ongoing examples of the Home Office's policies in this regard demonstrate that our asylum and immigration system is badly failing and appallingly lacking in compassion and efficiency. Anyone who represents constituencies with a large population of immigrants or people seeking asylum will be all too aware of how the Home Office treats them. The situation with service personnel is just the latest manifestation, harming the very people who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice by laying down their lives in defence of our country. The very least we can do in recognition of their service is to grant them and their families the right to full British citizenship at the end of their service and to bring true equality to all those who serve in our armed forces, regardless of their country of origin.

2.44 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I should declare an interest at the beginning of my speech, because, possibly like you, Mr Sharma, I am, to some extent, a child of the Commonwealth, having spent my early years in Kenya. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this debate for all of us in a crowded Commons diary. This is an important issue for those who most respect the role of the Commonwealth and of the UK in the Commonwealth, and the contribution the two make together to the world. In particular, through the peacekeeping efforts of our armed forces, our Commonwealth servicemen and women make a contribution to global peace. It is also worth referring to the fact that the hon. Gentleman is, I think, one of only three Labour party reservists on the Benches of the House of Commons. He has served in the Signals and the Royal Regiment of Scotland, so he knows of what he talks, and I think we would all recognise his contribution.

I want to focus on one aspect of the role of Commonwealth servicemen and women in our armed forces, which is the one that the hon. Gentleman referred to. It refers back to the cross-party letter that I organised with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon), who has a distinguished role in the NATO Parliament. I am delighted that the hon. Member for Glasgow North

East has decided to add his signature to that letter today, which takes the number of Members of Parliament who have signed to 134, remembering always that those on the Front Benches on both sides are unable to sign such letters. It is fair to say that the letter is representative of a large body of feeling in the House of Commons.

The key points on the visa fees for Commonwealth armed forces personnel have been alluded to by the hon. Gentleman, but I would like to add two or three things. First, I did not start on this issue—nor did the hon. Member for Bridgend—from a position that Commonwealth servicemen were being unfairly treated, and least of all that they were in a “hostile environment”. That was not really our starting point, if I might distinguish the tone of the letter we wrote from the opening speech in this debate.

In fact, our issue is more about the fact that they are treated exactly like everyone else, including Commonwealth policemen and women or others in different occupations in this nation. Our point was that, since those who join our armed forces do so in the knowledge that they may be required to risk life and limb for our country, they therefore hold a special place in the respect of the nation and of all of us who serve in the House of Commons representing our constituents. In a sense, they occupy a special place.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who would give their lives in defence of this nation. Does he agree that the position in this country sits uneasily with that in other countries, such as the United States, where service in the military, either during peacetime or on active service, entitles that individual, ordinarily speaking, to be naturalised as a US citizen for the payment of no money at all? That is a proper expression of the debt of gratitude that a nation owes to those who serve in its armed forces.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, as so often, in highlighting the issue. It boils down to a perception, at the least, of meanness on the part of our state. That does not reflect the respect that we hold for our Commonwealth servicemen and women, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East highlighted, and as my hon. Friend rightly reiterates. That is an issue for us, particularly at a time when we are in the chair of the Commonwealth. We are responsible for having created the Commonwealth, and play such an important role in it. It is important that we recognise the value of the contribution that Commonwealth personnel make, and the risks that they run, as highlighted by the recent armed forces presence in Afghanistan, for example.

It can, of course, be argued that we should not use longer term access to indefinite leave to remain in this country as, effectively, a recruiting incentive. That should not be the primary reason why Commonwealth servicemen and women join our armed forces, and I am very conscious of that. I do not believe that that is the case, but it is something the Home Secretary will have to balance. I know that the Minister is sympathetic to the cause of ensuring that fees are, at the very least, kept to minimum, if not, as I and the hon. Member for Bridgend hope, effectively abolished completely. He will no doubt wish to comment on that.

[Richard Graham]

Let me touch on one or two relevant issues, which the Home Secretary will have to consider. First, there is the issue of equality. If a special case is made for those serving in our armed forces—there is a perfectly good case for that on precisely the grounds already mentioned—the Department will have to be sure that that would not trigger a series of legal claims from those serving in other Departments where there are different risks, such as the police.

The campaign that we have triggered through the letter is also, importantly, a campaign of the Royal British Legion, which has a large membership and following in this country, and has been extremely helpful in providing me and others with relevant information, partly through freedom of information requests. One of the difficulties for the Royal British Legion, and for us, in bringing this issue alive through the media and social media is the shortage of case studies, because most of the people involved are serving servicemen and women who do not necessarily want the publicity that would go with that. That makes this a harder campaign than others with which I, and others Members present, have been involved.

Although the responses from Ministers in the Ministry of Defence are incredibly helpful, and I hope the Minister will be able to share his support and enthusiasm for this cause, it will ultimately be the Home Office's responsibility to make a decision. I suspect that the Home Secretary will have to consider other issues, including the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East on the income levels of those coming to live in this country. That will open all sorts of other issues more widely than just in the armed forces.

I do not think for a moment that the Home Secretary is delaying his response to the campaign that the hon. Member for Bridgend and I started. I spoke to him earlier today. He will respond formally, and will meet the hon. Member for Bridgend and me, and the Royal British Legion, shortly on this issue. He will do his best to find the best way through the various challenges, and I do not doubt his instinctive sympathy and support. However, as we know, it can sometimes be hard to find a precise way through what appears to be a relatively simple issue, owing to the legal issues involved.

I hope all Members present will continue to engage with local branches of the Royal British Legion to show support for its campaign. I have encouraged the Royal British Legion to do various things that will bring the campaign alive, such as sharing through social media photographs of as many Commonwealth servicemen and women as possible, in different units of our armed forces, so that our constituents have a wider understanding of how many people from the Commonwealth are serving our country to the best of their ability. Anyone who has not yet signed the letter to the Home Secretary is welcome to do so, even though it has already gone, to show their support for this campaign with the Royal British Legion, and to support the debate that the hon. Member for Glasgow North East has rightly brought to the House today.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), who has clearly put over his support for the campaign. I, too, thank the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) for presenting the case very well for all

Members who will speak in the debate. I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place. I echo the thoughts that he expressed earlier: we can reach consensus today, and move forward in a constructive and helpful way. I also declare an interest as a former part-time member of the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Territorial Army.

I am honoured to stand side by side with my brethren—I use that word very clearly—in every arm of the armed forces, from the Parachute Regiment, which is facing persecution, to the Gurkhas, who fought for years for recognition. One of those campaigns is concluded; the other is still to be concluded. It is my belief that every person who wears a uniform and honourably serves deserves the gratitude and support of a nation that sleeps safely in bed due to their sacrifice. It is very simple for me; I think it is very simple for us all.

I have had the chance to participate in the armed forces parliamentary scheme, along with other Members present. Through that scheme, we meet many serving Commonwealth members who qualify for the British Army because of their Commonwealth attachments and their years of service. I am encouraged by those I have met, and by their clear commitment. Part of what we are trying to do today is to support their families—we cannot ignore them.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Mental health and suicide were mentioned earlier. Does my hon. Friend agree that the welfare of our soldiers is vital, as well as that of their partners, children and families, who may go through the trauma of losing a loved one, or of a loved one sustaining life-changing injuries? I am sure that he agrees that it is important that families are looked after as well.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I wholeheartedly agree with that, as I think all Members in the Chamber would.

The background to this issue is clear. In November 2018, the five-year residency requirement for Commonwealth personnel wishing to enlist in the UK armed forces was removed in the hopes of increasing the number of Commonwealth recruits to 1,350 per year. Having met some of those recruits and serving members, I realise just how important it is to have Commonwealth soldiers in our British Army.

That seems simple enough, but for Commonwealth soldiers who wish to bring family to the UK a number of requirements must be met for those family members to enter and remain. That is the crux of this debate. The Library produced a helpful briefing, which summed up the requirement admirably, stating:

“In addition to a valid passport and visa, individuals must also meet the English language requirement and suitability criteria relating to certain criminal convictions, including previous breaches of the UK's immigration laws. Primarily, however, there is a Minimum Income Requirement which a Commonwealth soldier must meet before they can bring family to the UK”.

We know the minimum requirement, because we deal with constituents in our offices every day, but in the particular case of soldiers, gross annual income must be at least £18,600, with an additional £3,800 for the first child and an additional £2,400 for each additional child thereafter. For a partner with no children, it is £18,600. For one child in addition to the partner, it is £22,400. For two children in addition to the partner, it is £24,800.

For three children in addition to the partner, it is £27,200. There are no exemptions from the requirement, and the guidance states:

“If you cannot meet the requirement, then you are advised not to apply to bring your family over”.

If we have asked that person to come and serve in the British Army, is it not right that they should be able to bring their families? I think it is. This debate is clearly trying to arrive at that.

As a result of the requirement, many Commonwealth soldiers leave their families at home, and some are taking second jobs to meet the affordability criteria. I will mention one such soldier later.

I was pleased to hear that there has been a move to improve awareness of immigration issues in the chain of command, and I thank the Minister for that, but I stand on the armed forces covenant, which I have spoken about in the House many times, and the current scenario that separates families in service is, in my opinion, a clear breach of that covenant. It is unfair to separate people who serve in the British Army and their families, wherever they may be. To pay our Commonwealth soldiers a wage that does not allow them to qualify for immigration, or to expect to be able to bring their families with them, is unacceptable.

I want to tell hon. Members about one of my constituents. A little child from a Commonwealth nation, whose daddy serves the Queen and this country—and does so exceptionally well—cries because she has not seen her daddy in two years. Her daddy also works in a Chinese restaurant to get extra money to get his savings up to the level to allow him to qualify. On top of that, it costs £10,000 in fees to apply to get his family to join him, which is difficult enough to raise to start with, but the fact that he has to do that through a second job illustrates where we are. That is a wee girl crying for her daddy for two years. He cannot get his family here until he earns the money and saves £10,000 for fees.

There is something drastically wrong with a system that—rightly—allows asylum seekers an opportunity to safely reside here, but takes out of the hands of people who have put their lives on the line the ability to have their families with them here, in this nation. It is wrong. For the benefit of everyone, I emphasise again: it is wrong, and it cannot be accepted.

I do not want to hear that the Ministry of Defence is aware that it is wrong and is thinking about it; I need to hear that the MOD is working with the Home Office to change it. I think that the Minister will tell us that, and I am looking forward to his response.

I stand with the cross-party delegation and demand that the fee for applications is reduced or scrapped for Commonwealth entrants. I am very conscious of how it works. Fees for indefinite leave to remain have risen by 127% in five years, to £2,389 per person. Since they were introduced in 2003, the fees have risen by 1,441%. While it is beyond admirable that the Royal British Legion, of which I am a member, and other charities have stepped up to the mark, providing £36,000 in grants to help to pay for visa fees last year alone, it is not the role of the soldiers' charities to do that, although we are very pleased that we do. It is the House's role to lay out in legislation that the armed forces covenant applies if someone was born in Birmingham, Belfast or Barbuda, and they have a right to live here with their families.

At a time when we are watching our armed forces being tried before juries for following orders in operations—I find that abhorrent to watch—the message must be clear to those who consider signing up for Queen and country that we will not leave them high and dry. We will support them and their families better than we are supporting Soldier F and others for different reasons. We will do the right thing by them and will put that into legislation to ensure that successive Governments will also do the right thing.

If ever our armed forces needed clarity about the feelings of this House towards them, it is now. This debate gives us the opportunity to say that very clearly. Let us stop talking and begin acting, and do the right thing by our soldiers, whether they are born here or born elsewhere.

3.3 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): In the time-honoured words of this place, Mr Sharma, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I listened to the highly informed and thought-provoking speech of the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) with the greatest of interest, as I have to the other contributions. This is therefore a classic example of someone having to change his speech because others have said what he wanted to say before he got there.

I, too, am, if not a child, then a grandchild, of empire. I had a cousin who commanded the 10th Baluch Regiment in the second world war. In one of the Arakan offensives, he got cut off with his soldiers behind Japanese lines. Japanese propaganda reported that he had committed suicide—cut his throat, as they put it in the English language propaganda they dropped from aeroplanes. He did not; he fought his way out of the jungle and got his troops out. I knew him as an old man, and he told me of the incredible bravery of the Baluchis and about what fantastic soldiers they were. To his grave, he said that there was nothing better.

Although my own father came from the north of Scotland, he also found himself, through a series of events, in India, in 1941. He also spoke of the extraordinary professionalism and valour of Baluchi, Punjabi and Sikh—of all manner of parts of what was then the British Indian Army in the sub-continent. He was proud to have been a member of the 14th Army—the Forgotten Army—commanded by Slim in its latter days. He was in the second wave going through Imphal, and he told me about Imphal and Kohima and what it meant. Kohima is rightly described as the Stalingrad of Britain. We beat the Japanese, but it was done with the fantastic soldiers from the Indian sub-continent and other parts of the world. Although today is the anniversary of VE-day, and Commonwealth troops contributed to the downfall of Hitler and his brutal regime, it is when celebrating the anniversary of VJ-day in a few weeks' time that we should remember just what their contribution was, because it was absolutely massive.

On a lighter note, one of the abiding things that has stayed with me through my life is that, early on in India, my father decided that the European food in the mess was absolutely disgusting and that he was going to learn how to cook curry properly. He went through to the kitchens—it was highly disapproved of for a British officer to do that, but he did, because he was a bit

[*Jamie Stone*]

eccentric and different—and he learnt to cook curry. Through all of my life, I have eaten an enormous amount of curry cooked by my father. We used to joke in my family that he could probably have curried an old boot and made it quite edible.

I too have been, in my small way, a member of the reserve forces, so I know a little bit about them. It was quite a long time ago, but I was a private soldier in the 2nd Battalion of the 51st Highland Volunteers. When I was a member of another place—I do not mean next door; I mean somewhere in Edinburgh—I was very much involved in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. I served for a number of years on the executive committee. I saw first hand just what an important institution the Commonwealth is, as other Members have said. It is a civilising, peace-making, teaching influence throughout the world, and one of the greatest things that we and all Commonwealth countries contribute to the good of the world.

Much has been said today—better than I can say it—about the role of Commonwealth soldiers. Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I saw that with my own eyes when I went with the armed forces parliamentary scheme to Estonia to spend some days with other hon. and right hon. Members and the 1st Battalion of the Yorkshire Regiment. I met soldiers from Commonwealth countries—from west Africa and from across the Atlantic. I remember talking to one young man who was the gunner on a Warrior—the Minister and other Members will know what I am talking about. I said, “That’s a pretty cool job, isn’t it?” He said, “Yes, it is. This is a cool job to have.” I then made a fatal mistake. I said, “I expect when you are in your No. 2 uniform, you are very smart.” This is not very politically correct, but I said, “That may well help you when it comes to talking to the opposite sex.” He reprimanded me and said, “I don’t need my uniform to pull the girls!” I am sorry if that story has shocked people.

The point is that the Commonwealth troops that I and others saw in Estonia were really good soldiers. Yet, if we look at the stats, as the hon. Member for Glasgow North East said, it is clear that we are not getting those soldiers beyond non-commissioned rank. Only 2.46% of officers are from a minority ethnic background or Commonwealth countries. We are missing a trick here.

I close with one suggestion. We need to sort this out. We need to get the career progress for those soldiers, sailors and airmen right from the bottom to the top of the service. I have made this point again and again in the House: as and when we have a successful serving person, they should be encouraged when they get leave to go back to their school or their country, wherever that is in the Commonwealth, to say to pupils, “This is the career I am pursuing, and it is a good career. Why don’t you think about doing it as well?” We do not do that very much in the UK, and we are missing a trick.

The Government’s policy of going out to recruit Commonwealth servicemen and women is absolutely a good idea. It has a long history, as I and other Members have mentioned. We have a rich seam that we can mine, but if we are to do it properly, we have to get over the message that it is worth while—as other Members have said, “You will be remunerated properly and honoured in this country and in your own land. It is a great service.”

3.10 pm

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing this extremely important debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) on his campaign and on raising the issue with many of us in this place. It is an extremely important campaign, which we support.

Commonwealth citizens who risk their lives in our service are valued members of our society. The Army Families Federation observes:

“Commonwealth members of our Armed Forces make up a significant and vital part of the UK’s Defence capability and, as a nation, we ask them to make significant sacrifices to do so.”

Their families pay a high price, too, and many find themselves living across the world from their partner or loved one. Those of us who have experience of military life know that the family is a support for serving members of the armed forces. It is a no-brainer that we should do everything in our power to ensure that the families are able to be there as the support that serving personnel need. We should be celebrating the contribution of our Commonwealth service personnel who have come to this country to serve in our armed forces. Instead, we find the Government separating members of our armed forces from their families and, on top of that, hitting them with exorbitant visa fees.

We know there are serious issues in recruitment, as has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow North East. The Defence Committee noted that the Government’s 10-year partnership with Capita

“has been abysmal since it started”

and that Capita has

“failed to meet the Army’s recruitment targets every single year of the contract”.

The Army has embarked on further recruitment campaigns across the Commonwealth to meet the minimum troop numbers required to defend our nations. Commonwealth citizens who have stepped forward to fill the gaps and to serve in the country’s armed forces deserve to be rewarded, but it seems as though we punish them instead.

The Government must reconsider the income requirements for Commonwealth serving personnel. The minimum income requirement has been mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who talked about the requirement for an income of £18,600 for a spouse and the additional costs of £3,800 for the first child and £2,400 for additional children. If we look at the military pay scales and assume that Commonwealth members enter at the lowest rate, it could take up to six years before they earn the £24,800 required for a typical family to join them. The Government’s current advice to Commonwealth personnel earning below the thresholds is simply: “If you cannot meet the requirement, you are advised not to bring your family over.” We can surely do better than that.

The application fee for veterans to settle with their families has more than doubled in the past four years to £2,389 per person, so we are talking about nearly £10,000 for a typical family of four. Those figures are simply not attainable for people earning £24,800 per annum.

In addition to the Commonwealth personnel here, the families living in the Commonwealth are greatly affected. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness,

Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) recently campaigned for his constituent, Denis Omondi, a British citizen and a serving soldier in the British Army, who was denied a visa for his daughter in Kenya, for whom he had uncontested custody, to come and live with him. Thankfully, after my hon. Friend's campaign, the Home Office made a U-turn on its decision to keep them apart, but such cases are not unique. We need to deal with such issues and look at them in a more serious manner.

Richard Graham: One of the things that has surprised me most about the letter campaign—the hon. Lady kindly signed the letter—is the number of Fijian servicemen who have logged on to my Facebook page and expressed strong support for the campaign. Pockets of servicemen and women from different countries are much more focused on this issue than many of us in the House realise, so I support what she says.

Carol Monaghan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. We could also mention the Hong Kong service personnel caught up in this. They are not able to apply even for British citizenship, despite the service they have given to our nations' armed forces. There are many examples.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) talked about his personal experience of Commonwealth personnel. I want to add to his story and say that the person who taught me to cook curry properly was a Commonwealth submariner from India, who spent an afternoon showing me how to mix and crush and all sorts. Unfortunately, I do not have much time these days to make a proper curry, but I remember it well.

The Minister for Immigration said last month:

"it would be unfair if certain applicants or routes benefited from free applications or reduced fees"

at the expense of others. Such inflexibility does not reflect well on the Government. Veterans from the Commonwealth should not be prevented from settling in the UK, or forced into debt by ridiculous fees, which the Government should commit to abolishing. It is not up to them to get veterans into debt and not up to veterans' charities to help veterans pay the fees, which simply should not exist.

We know that the Home Office is in need of drastic reform. The Minister has mentioned that he does not like talk of the hostile environment, so I will not refer to it directly, but I will say that we have had immigration scandals that have highlighted the deficiencies in our system. Scrapping the income requirements for Commonwealth armed forces personnel is an essential place to start. As I said at the start, it is a no-brainer.

We have a debt of gratitude to the people who have chosen to serve. That, coupled with the positive contribution that Commonwealth veterans will make in our society, means we should ensure that indefinite leave to remain is granted without charge, for both personnel and their families. All of us here this afternoon are keen to hear how the Minister is collaborating with the Home Office to ensure that that takes place. I look forward to hearing his contribution and what positive steps are being taken to sort out this—I will not call it an injustice—serious issue for our Commonwealth personnel.

3.18 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon. Mr Sharma. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing the debate and on his detailed and compassionate opening contribution. I pay tribute to all Members who have spoken for their thoughtful and constructive contributions, and in some cases for sharing very personal stories about the issue. Those include the hon. Members for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

It is fully acknowledged that throughout the 20th century and through to the present, British armed forces have recruited from Commonwealth nations to support British intervention in major global conflicts, from world war one to the present day. Those personnel continue to provide important and significant support to our armed forces. As we have heard, statistics from the Royal British Legion show that more than 6,000 personnel from foreign and Commonwealth countries currently serve in the UK armed forces. That number is increasing year on year to fill a range of technical and specialist roles. In 2018 the British Army employed approximately 4.5%—5,290—of its personnel from foreign and Commonwealth nations. There are many Commonwealth recruits in the Army, as well as in the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force. Labour Members believe that all armed forces personnel, regardless of their background, should be treated equally, and it is therefore extremely disappointing that Commonwealth soldiers are being treated unfairly by the Government. I shall return to that point.

The Government have done nowhere near enough to tackle the ongoing recruitment crisis, and given their recent decision to recruit more Commonwealth personnel, they must urgently review the barriers to recruitment and retention. Commonwealth personnel are exempt from UK immigration controls throughout their service, but once they are discharged that exemption is removed. Former personnel who wish to stay in the UK indefinitely, whether with their family or alone, must apply for indefinite leave to remain. As the Minister rightly pointed out, in alignment with civilian applicants for indefinite leave to remain, veterans are subject to a number of requirements, including four years' qualifying residency in the UK, which is obtainable via four years' service in the armed forces, and a non-refundable fee of £2,389.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East and others have outlined, there are difficulties with the immigration rules because a foreign worker must earn £18,600 to apply to bring their spouse to the UK. The minimum income requirement to bring over one child is £22,400, with additional costs for each child thereafter. A soldier's basic pay after training starts at £18,600 a year, but in many circumstances that income is unachievable, as the majority of Commonwealth troops in our armed forces are in the lower ranks. As my hon. Friend outlined, the Army Families Federation believes that around 500 troops have been affected by those circumstances, and that Commonwealth soldiers are not routinely aware of such issues when they join the UK armed forces. The Government need to consider that issue sympathetically, to show our country's gratitude to those Commonwealth personnel who have served.

[Gerald Jones]

A recent Defence Committee report recognised that the vast majority of veterans leave the services with no ill effects. It also noted, however, that although the Government have made improvements to the care available to personnel leaving the armed forces,

“some serving personnel veterans and their families who need mental health care are still being completely failed by the system”.

One important welfare issue that particularly affects foreign and Commonwealth personnel is that of non-freezing cold injuries. Ministry of Defence guidance warns that

“African-Caribbeans may be at greater risk than Caucasians”

of non-freezing cold injuries, and states that commanders should have a heightened awareness of the higher risk. Despite that guidance, many Commonwealth soldiers continue to feel let down. The Government are fully aware that African-Caribbean soldiers are more susceptible to such injuries, but they do not always provide them with a better kit or remove those susceptible from exercise when they complain of cold symptoms, and neither do they nor undertake hand and foot inspections at the time or when weather conditions are bad. Injured soldiers are often discharged, and in many cases they struggle to retrain for jobs that they can manage with permanent cold sensitisation.

In 2015-16 the Government paid out £1.49 million to servicemen suffering from that condition under the armed forces compensation scheme, which was a 20% rise on the previous year. Since 2006, 1,235 armed forces personnel have received compensation from the Government for such injuries. Last year saw a 16.7% rise in the total number of service personnel awarded compensation by the Government, and over the past 10 years claims have risen by a staggering 1,650%—evidence of the scale of the problem and the need for something to be done.

Labours Members are also concerned about the disparity in war gratuity payments given to black soldiers of the East Africa Force, which was formed in 1940, and their white counterparts. There are reports that white soldiers were paid up to three times more than their black counterparts. The shadow Secretaries of State for Defence, for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and for International Development have written to the Government calling for an investigation into the issue, an apology for those affected and—most importantly—for the veterans to be paid what they are entitled to before it is too late. The issue has also been raised a number of times by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton). He received a reply from the Ministry of Defence that simply passed the buck to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which had previously passed it to the MOD. Disappointingly, no response has been received by those shadow Secretaries of State.

This issue rightly causes anger and concern, and there is also a sense of urgency, given the age and relatively small number of surviving veterans affected. All these years later, it is a disgrace to discover that the reward for that brave service was so callously calibrated according to the colour of those soldiers' skin. I hope that the Minister will provide clarity on the issue. It is important to work together on a cross-party basis and to do everything possible as a country to repair that shameful episode.

All Members will recognise the immense debt that we owe to all personnel, veterans and their families, and the need to ensure that they have the best possible support. The Government must do more to protect all soldiers, but they should pay particular attention to Commonwealth soldiers who suffer from the issues I have raised this afternoon. A number of important and legitimate concerns and questions have been raised today, and I hope that the Minister will provide clarity and assurances on those, and show that the Government are not passing the buck for historical grievances that affect Commonwealth soldiers. The small number of surviving veterans who were affected by racially based disparities in the payments given to them in the second world war deserve an apology at the very least, as well as a thorough investigation into and acknowledgement of their unfair treatment.

3.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a pleasure and honour to respond to this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on securing it. I also thank him for his service. In this country we do not pay tribute often enough to those who put on the uniform and serve their country—perhaps we are shy compared with the Americans—so I am grateful for that. The hon. Gentleman brings a level of expertise and understanding to this debate, which is very welcome.

As the Prime Minister did today during Prime Minister's questions, I wish to pay tribute to Guardsman Mathew Talbot, who was sadly killed on duty in the Liwonde national park in Malawi, where he had an important role in the counter-poaching efforts in which we are involved. His work was a reflection of the symbiotic relationship that we have with so many Commonwealth countries with which we work, not just on security aspects but on the other detailed challenges that we face, including poaching. This is a very sad moment, and our thoughts and prayers are very much with Mathew's friends and family. It is a reflection of the bond that we have with nations of the Commonwealth when dealing with modern-day problems.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East spoke of the history of the Commonwealth countries, and of the bonds that go back to before the East India Company and have matured into something very important that goes beyond trade; it is the strength of trust that we have. It is a relationship that we value very much, to the point that we invite them to work with us—to be in the trenches, on the factory floors and in the diplomatic corridors—and serve together for the greater good, and to stand up to ill across the world.

I look back on my own service. The first sergeant who I came across in the Royal Green Jackets, Sergeant Morrell, was a big, burly character from Fiji. He could do things with a Northern Ireland glove that kept discipline in line in our platoon. It would probably not be allowed nowadays, but it was nevertheless a fantastic introduction to the contribution that the Commonwealth made. Another person in my platoon was from St. Lucia. He was a wonderful character of the same size as Dwayne Johnson, also known as The Rock, who is a big, burly actor in all the movies at the moment. My colleague was his own deterrent: whenever he stood behind me when I had a disagreement, things were somehow resolved very quickly.

It is important that we begin this debate by paying tribute and giving thanks to our Commonwealth friends for what they bring to this country, which is all the more reason why we need to get this particular issue absolutely right. I will answer some of the general questions that were asked and then dive into the detailed matter, if I may.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East touched on the mental aspect, which is something that is quite important to me. I hope he acknowledges the advancement that we have made on stoicism and the difficulties we have in the armed forces environment of talking about mental health. Our new strategy is about recognising that it is all right to put one's hand up and say there might be something wrong with one's mind, as one does if there is something wrong physically; greater prevention in the resilience that we build up in preparing people for the battlefields and theatres of operations in which they might be involved; and better detection, so that we can treat people and get them back to the frontline without their fearing that putting their hand up might affect their career prospects. Although the hon. Gentleman raises this matter, I hope that we have made progress. More work needs to be done, and we look forward to sharing some of the work we have done with the arrival of Mental Health Awareness Week next week.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke of friends and family, which perhaps goes to the heart of this matter. Individuals from the Commonwealth come here with the anticipation that perhaps one day they might wish to bring their families. Questions then arise, because financial challenges are suddenly imposed. I know that one of the reasons people choose to depart the armed forces is the eventual pressures on the family unit, including children at school and spouses. We are working to ensure that the welfare support we provide to people in uniform extends to the wider family support unit, which is so critical.

Hon. Members touched on matters that are not the purview of the Ministry of Defence, which I think is recognised—for example, the Home Office has responded to Windrush. I hope he recognises that I cannot respond to such questions. I will do my best to answer some of them in the time we have. If I cannot, I commit to writing to hon. Members with the details, should that be helpful.

I do not understand why my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) is still on the Back Benches, because the knowledge that he brings to debates is phenomenal, which I hope is recognised. He spoke about his background in Kenya, and I know he also spent a bit of time in the far east—he is a real internationalist. Every time he adds value to these debates, people listen. He made the most important point: this is not just about our armed forces, but applies to anybody who wants to come and work in our NHS or for the police. The very same challenges exist in those arenas. We have to recognise that other Departments will be queuing up to say, "I'll have some of that too, please, if you don't mind." That is the wider context of this debate, so I was very pleased that he raised that point.

Alex Chalk: The Minister is giving a powerful response, as I would expect. He is right to say that there is a risk of a floodgates argument. Does he agree that people who put their lives on the line in the service of this country are in a special category, which ought to be reflected in the way their visa applications are dealt with?

Mr Ellwood: I do not want to kill my own argument, so of course I am going to say that my hon. Friend makes a powerful point. We need to recognise that people joining our police forces or fire services would claim something similar. We need to find a solution that is amenable to all, but which also recognises—this issue was raised earlier—the challenges for recruitment and retention. I will not deny those. At the moment, we are doing better at recruitment, but not so well at retention, which is partly to do with improving the actual contract that we have with people to ensure that we retain them for as long as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester also mentioned the campaign that the Royal British Legion has done, and it was a pleasure to meet Charles Byrne yesterday to discuss these and other issues. I am very grateful for the work the RBL is doing to highlight this issue.

Jamie Stone: Can I press the Minister on that point? In my own contribution—I did not put it quite as eloquently as I should have done—I said that if somebody at the bottom could see a career path that would take them up, it might improve the chances of retention.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I will come on to address such issues. He allows me to jump ahead and thank him for his contribution and the valuable point that he makes. People who arrive here tend to be singles—individuals on their own. They have signed up, but their circumstances might change. What happens then? It is a communication issue as well. We need to make sure that those who are embarking on this journey and signing up to join our armed forces are fully aware of what is happening. We have found out, particularly from the families' federations, that they arrive here unaware of the financial consequences, which is the first step we are trying to resolve.

My good friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), mentioned the role of the Gurkhas. They are not part of the Commonwealth, but we have a unique relationship that has developed over time. Through various campaigns, they have gained parity with our armed forces, which is very important indeed. He also mentioned that everybody who serves in Her Majesty's armed forces deserves the gratitude of the nation, and I could not agree more.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan) spoke of the importance of the families' federations. I meet with them on a regular basis and will be seeing them tomorrow. I think we are meeting some in the near future to talk about aspects of the charities' work. The three families' federations give some of the most important input I receive—a reality check on what life is like in our armed forces. It is critical that we keep that communication going.

Richard Graham: In terms of the nation at large understanding the scale of the Commonwealth contribution to our armed forces, would the Ministry of Defence consider creating a digital map of the some 4,700 Commonwealth servicemen and women, and the different armed forces or units they are in, to give an example of the scale of what I think is roughly 5% of the Army alone?

Mr Ellwood: That would certainly be an interesting reflection of the importance of the contribution they make. I think the current number stands at about 4,500. There are also 3,000 Gurkhas—as I indicated earlier, they are an incredibly formidable and extremely professional force, and I had the privilege to serve with many of them.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North West spoke of the Capita contract. We have debated this many times, and it is a concern of ours as well. I am genuinely concerned, because I fear that there is a gulf between our capability and the threats we face, which needs to be recognised if it is to be filled. We need to ensure that we retain and recruit, and that we procure the necessary equipment, in order to close the gap. Given that we have a spending review coming up, that is exactly what the new Defence Secretary is focusing on. I hope hon. Members will be supportive of an increased defence budget.

I spoke of our historic relationship from a military service perspective. At Sandhurst, Lympstone, Dartmouth or the staff college at Shrivenham, one can see myriad representatives from the full spectrum of Commonwealth countries. Those people are not just in our armed forces, but also train officers, for example, and work alongside their British comrades, which is exactly as it should be. British personnel also go to staff colleges in other countries around the world. At any one time, a number of British officers are at the staff college in India, for example. That is an important advancement of our relationship.

Another reflection of our gratitude is the number of Victoria Crosses awarded over the years. Some 280 Victoria Crosses have been awarded to people from 13 different Commonwealth countries, including William Hall from Canada in 1857, for his contribution in India, and more recently, Johnson Beharry, who was in Al-Amarah in Iraq in 2004. That shows that once they are in uniform and working alongside us, they meet the same standards, values, professionalism and bravery that we expect from our own troops.

The terms and conditions for Commonwealth soldiers, sailors and air personnel are exactly the same as for their British counterparts, as are their pay, accommodation and service eligibility criteria. They fulfil a wide range of roles, whether technical or from an infantry perspective, which is why it is so important, in this day and age, to recognise that and give thanks to our Commonwealth citizens.

Commonwealth citizens with five years of residency are eligible to join the armed forces—between 2013 and 2015, 650 joined. Last November, the Government announced plans to significantly expand the number of Commonwealth personnel to 1,350, which reflects the challenge of recruiting in the UK. That required the removal of the five-year UK residency criterion for Commonwealth participants.

Richard Graham: The Minister makes a good point about those numbers. I understand that every year, roughly 400 Commonwealth servicemen and women apply for indefinite leave to remain. If the cost for a family of four is roughly £10,000, the total cost would be around half a million pounds. Although that is a lot of money for any individual, it is a relatively small figure in the overall scheme of Government spending, so I hope that the Minister agrees that whatever judgment the Home Office reaches, it will not be because of financial pressure.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, with which I was going to conclude. We are not talking about huge sums of money to rectify the problem—it will not completely break the bank, but it will require answers. At the moment, the ball is in the court of the Home Office, which is looking at the issue, but he suggests exactly how we would like it to go.

The immigration status has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members. Non-UK personnel are granted an exemption from immigration control by the Home Office once they have joined, and can come and go from the UK without restriction for the purposes of their duty. The exemption is valid for the entirety of their regular service. Commonwealth personnel can apply to naturalise, using their time in the UK and while serving overseas towards the five-year UK residency criterion. That is not offered to other groups living and working in the UK, so it distinguishes us from police and NHS recruitment. Non-naturalised personnel can apply for indefinite leave to remain if they have completed a minimum of four years' service upon discharge. Applications can be made up to 10 weeks before discharge, so indefinite leave to remain can normally be granted quickly following the last day of service.

The minimum income requirement was also raised by a number of hon. Members. The Home Office introduced new family migration rules, including a minimum income threshold—now known as the minimum income requirement—that individuals need to meet to sponsor visas for non-EU dependants to enter the UK. The minimum income requirement is £18,600 for a spouse or civil partner. That rises to £22,400 for a spouse or civil partner plus a child, and further £2,400 is required for each individual child beyond that. The minimum income requirement is designed to ensure that sponsors can support their dependants financially, so that they do not become a burden on the UK taxpayer. The requirement has been tested and upheld by the Supreme Court.

The starting salary after training for regular soldiers is £18,850, which is above the minimum income requirement. Any individual soldier who comes here and passes their basic training is not affected by the minimum income requirement, because they earn the right amount of money. The problem is if they want to bring their other half or any children—that is the dilemma that we face. For lower-ranked soldiers, sailors and air personnel, it can take up to four years for an individual salary to meet the minimum income requirement to bring a child to the UK. I agree with hon. Members that that is too long and needs to be addressed.

The immigration issues that impact on our personnel and their families have been raised as a key priority under the armed forces covenant, which we should recognise. Progress is being monitored through meetings, such as those of the Covenant Reference Group and the Ministerial Covenant and Veterans Board. We have raised the matter at every necessary level and are in discussions with the Home Office to explore whether armed forces personnel can be exempted from minimum income requirements to allow non-UK and non-EU citizens to bring family members to the UK, and whether the costs of visas during service and applying for settlement after service can be waived.

I cannot make it clearer than that. That is what I want to achieve and what we need to do if we are to meet our moral obligation and sense of gratitude to

those who serve alongside us in peace and in war, to keep our country and their countries safe, and to keep our adversaries at bay. I will do my best to review what hon. Members have said and will write to them. I hope I have been clear about where the MOD and I sit on this issue. We will work with the Home Office to conclude the matter in a positive manner.

3.48 pm

Mr Sweeney: I congratulate all right hon. and hon. Members on the excellent, insightful and, in some cases, very moving contributions they have made about their own experiences. The key is recognition of the service of Commonwealth soldiers, Gurkhas and others, who serve this country with great gallantry and bravery. The notion that their service or welfare could be undermined by the restrictions and impositions of the Home Office must be addressed with the greatest urgency. It is important that this House has recognised those concerns, and I welcome the spirit of the Minister's approach to the debate as well as his sentiments.

The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) noted the potential knock-on effects on other Government Departments—it relates to the police and the national health service in particular—and how special exemptions for the armed forces might bleed over into challenges. I strongly echo his sentiment: the armed forces are a special case and, frankly, we as a nation should have the common sense to recognise the unique nature of their contribution and the gallant nature of their service, which is quite unique, compared even with the police. We ought to introduce special exemptions as a matter of urgency.

The Minister said that he is in discussions with the Home Office about the income thresholds. That is a welcome measure—to everyone—but a wider concern is the continuing cost of visas. It seems unacceptable to me that a veteran bringing, say, three dependants into the UK can be subject to a cost of £10,000. That seems thoroughly unreasonable. We would welcome the Minister considering the recommendation to amend the immigration and nationality fees regulations as a short-term measure to exclude recent members of the armed forces and their dependants from such costs. We are talking about some 500 people a year, which would not be a massive or onerous cost.

The Royal British Legion has stated that it spends thousands and thousands of pounds, from its own money, supporting veterans with those costs, and I am sure that many of those who donate to the RBL will be frustrated to learn that the money they donate goes back to the Home Office in fees—not a particularly useful way to spend their funds. To dispense with those fees altogether would be better and more efficient. I hope that is another aspect of the Minister's discussions with the Home Office of a more sensible approach.

I welcome the sentiments expressed today, and there has been great consensus in the Chamber about how we need to proceed. I look forward to following developments closely.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered fair treatment for Commonwealth personnel in the armed forces.

High Speed 2: Hollins Green, Culcheth and Croft

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

3.53 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect of High Speed Two on the villages of Hollins Green, Culcheth and Croft.

It is a great pleasure to be here under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to have been granted this debate on the impact of the proposed High Speed 2 line on villages in my constituency. For the record, although I live in the village of Culcheth, our home is not one of those affected by the line. Nevertheless, many of us have believed for some time that what we call “the spur”—the Hoo Green to Bamfurlong section of the line—simply does not stack up economically, or in any other terms, and that the decision to join the main line north of Warrington, rather than north of Crewe, is flawed.

I have previously questioned the costings for that part of the line. I do not propose to go through all that again, but suffice it to say that if HS2 is seriously arguing that this part of the line will cost only 28.6% of the costs elsewhere, when a viaduct has to be built over the Manchester ship canal and the M62 and the East Lancashire Road have to be crossed, it is highly unlikely to be correct. In fact, many of us have believed for some time that the real justification for the spur was to avoid the constituency of a certain former Chancellor of the Exchequer, of this parish. Now, with the decision to make Crewe a main transport hub and to abandon plans for any depot at Golborne, it makes even less sense than it did.

Even so, neither HS2 nor the Government have taken full account of the concerns of people who live in the villages. One bit of the line was tweaked following representations from the owner of the Taylor business park just outside Culcheth. That mitigated some of the impact on some houses in Culcheth but increased the problems in Croft. However, the decision allowed the business park to be sold for an undisclosed sum, reported by local newspapers to be more than £19 million—without any gain, I suspect, to the British taxpayer, since the last time I looked most of the shares in the business park were held by a company registered in Belize. We often ponder why notice was taken of one person, and not of the representations of the rest of the community.

That part of the line, however, has serious implications for all three villages. That is what I will concentrate on today. For example, Wigshaw Lane is proposed for permanent closure. It is the route that leads from Culcheth to Croft, going on towards the centre of Warrington. Traffic will therefore be forced on to the other route towards town, which is the A574, despite the fact that that road is already at a standstill at peak times. An accident on the motorway or the East Lancashire Road can gridlock traffic all around the village. It is simply not sustainable to force more traffic on to an already congested road which is used as a cut-through by HGVs.

Importantly, Wigshaw Lane is also the direct link between Culcheth and Croft, and closing it will have a serious impact on people's ability to access services in

[Helen Jones]

Culcheth village. For example, many people in Croft come into Culcheth to shop and to use the doctors' surgeries there. Culcheth High School is the nearest high school to Croft and is attended by many of the young people from that village. They will be forced on to a much more unsafe route to school, and the road closure will have a particularly adverse impact on elderly and disabled people who come to shop in Culcheth.

There will of course also be problems for people who want to move the other way, from Culcheth to Croft and towards town. For example, the hospital is in the centre of town, and young people who want to access post-16 educational provision, whether at Warrington and Vale Royal College or Priestley College, need to go into the town centre. How people will get to early appointments in Warrington, or young people to classes, when the road is congested and often at a standstill is something that no one appears to have considered properly.

In fact, young people will be disproportionately affected by the closure because they move between the villages of Croft and Culcheth for sport and recreation, as well as education. Local air cadets, for example, are based in Croft. People go there from Culcheth and all around the town. The cadets are well respected—one member of my staff learned to fly with them—but the direct route there will be closed. Similarly, for young people who want to come from Croft to Culcheth to access after-school activities and sports facilities, there will be no direct route.

If that were not enough, another proposal is that the area known as the Oaks—which is on the alternative route, the A574—will lose more than 20% of its area. Culcheth Athletic junior football club has 23 teams that play there. The idea put forward by HS2, that they can all move to Shaw Street recreation ground in Culcheth, or the Culcheth sports and social club, which we call the Daten, is nonsense: four out of six pitches and the parking facilities are to be lost. It is interesting that the Government want people to be more active and for young people to take part in more sport and in the cadet forces, yet they are set on making it more difficult for them to do so in the area.

Another part of the community that will suffer a serious impact is the Catholic population. St Lewis Primary School is in Croft, as is St Lewis parish church. When the direct route is closed, young children will no longer have an even moderately safe route to school; they will be forced on to the congested A574. Older people and others who want to go to mass will be seriously inconvenienced. That is direct discrimination against the Catholic community, which goes against HS2's declared policies.

If that were not enough, there is a proposal to put a construction depot on the A574, close to Newchurch Primary School and the residential houses that abut that road. That will increase not only traffic—yet again on a road that is already congested—but air and noise pollution for the primary school and the people who live in that area. Anyone who knows the villages would say that the proposal simply is not feasible.

As far as Hollins Green is concerned, there is a proposal to build a viaduct over the Manchester ship canal, despite the fact that on the nearby M6 the Thelwall viaduct often has speed restrictions because of

high winds. It would be interesting to know how HS2 thinks that is feasible. Previous plans for a motorway in the area were rejected by the then Secretary of State on grounds that remain relevant to HS2: namely, that it would have an unacceptable environmental impact, and would cause a loss of green belt and a harmful effect on village life. That viaduct and its associated embankment will tower over the area. It will cut through a historic parish and it will destroy a network of footpaths between Hollins Green and Glazebrook.

As well as the environmental impact, there will be an economic impact on the villages. It might help the Minister if I explain that Culcheth is the centre village for Croft and Glazebury and, in some sense, for Glazebrook too. Lots of people from outside those areas come to the village because they are attracted by its mix of local shops and nice restaurants and pubs. When Wigshaw Lane had to be closed a few years ago for bridge repairs, there was a serious impact on local businesses, which lost a lot of trade. Culcheth also has a thriving night-time economy—because of the restaurants and so on. People come to the village from quite far away. That trade will be reduced if one of the main routes out is closed.

The new route will go straight through the Partridge Lakes fishery—a thriving family business built up over many years, which has also planted thousands of trees. Other businesses are situated there, too. For instance, there is a store that sells prom dresses—I think that is a thing now, although when I was growing up we just went to the pub when we left school. People come from all around to get their dresses there. There is a yoga studio and there is the Black Sheep Wools craft centre. The key thing to remember if those businesses go to the wall is that they encourage people to go to Culcheth village and spend money in the shops and restaurants. It would be a double whammy.

In Hollins Green, the Black Sheep pub will have the route going straight through its car park. People go to that pub from outside the village, and it holds a thriving farmer's market that brings people into the village. We are constantly told that HS2 is beneficial to the economy. I do not think it is beneficial to the economy of these villages. Although I keep asking questions about the economic impact and the assessment that has been made of it, I do not get very satisfactory answers. The cost-benefit ratio of the line is estimated at between 0.5 and 0.8, but with the effect on those businesses, many of which will experience a serious loss of trade and some of which may go to the wall, that analysis changes. I hope the Minister will look at that very seriously.

There will be an impact on people's health. The loss of the footpaths in Hollins Green, the loss of access to the linear park, which is used by walkers and horse riders, and the loss of the fishery where people are welcome to walk around, look at the wildlife and have a coffee, will have a serious impact on people's access to green space. HS2 accepts that most anglers tend to be older men and a high proportion are disabled, although the fishery has done sterling work with young offenders to try to get them interested in the sport. We know that being out in the open air is beneficial not only to our physical health but to our mental health. Many of those benefits will be lost in those villages. We will pay the price in worse health, but in the end the country will pay the price in increased costs to the NHS.

It cannot be right that HS2 can come up with plans that anyone who knows anything about these villages thinks are unworkable. They take no account of the traffic situation, the economy of the villages and people's health. They are just not feasible. In addition, many of them ignore HS2's own stated equalities policies, because they have a disproportionate impact on young people, older and disabled people, and the Catholic community.

There is a way out of this situation. As the costs escalate, Ministers need to look at the cost of this part of the line. In fact, in previous debates I have undertaken, Ministers did agree that the costs needed to be looked at. The original cost of the spur was estimated at £800 million, whereas joining the main line north of Crewe was estimated at £750 million. The cost of the spur has risen to £1 billion. The original justification for not joining the main line north of Crewe was that a lot of work would need to be done to make Crewe station viable. Since the Higgins report, it has been decided that Crewe will be a main transport hub, so that work will have to be done anyway.

The other justification for the route was having a depot at Golborne, so that trains could turn around and come out of that depot. There is no longer going to be a depot there. I urge the Minister to look seriously at that. It has been said often that HS2 is of great benefit to big cities but not much benefit to towns. There is something in that. By looking again at the possibility of running trains out of Crewe to Chester, north Wales, Liverpool and up through Warrington, many towns could benefit much more, and the impact on villages could be avoided. If the Minister cannot do that, I strongly urge her to look at HS2's plans for building the line and the impact on those villages. I sincerely believe that they will be disastrous for village life and the whole thing needs to be considered again.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 4.23 pm. Before calling the Minister to speak, I congratulate the hon. Lady on giving a detailed and knowledgeable speech for just under 15 minutes without referring to any notes whatsoever. I call the Minister.

4.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) on securing this important debate on the effect of High Speed 2 on the villages of Hollins Green, Culcheth and Croft. She gave us a lovely picture of her constituency.

I sympathise with the concerns the hon. Lady has raised with me, my Department and previous Ministers, and with HS2 Ltd itself. I shall provide an overview of why the project is important and then move on to the questions she asked. If I fail to respond to them all, I hope she will allow me to correspond with her in writing to ensure that everything is down on paper. I do not doubt for a moment that she will continue to champion action on behalf of her constituency.

HS2 is a critical project for our country. It will be the backbone of our national rail network. It really will help to rebalance our economy, create opportunities for regeneration and lessen the north-south divide. The strategic case for HS2 is that it will increase capacity on our overcrowded rail network and improve journeys into and between the major towns and cities of the

midlands and the north. It will connect eight of our 10 biggest cities, and it will more than double the number of seats from Euston in peak hours, carrying more than 300,000 people every day.

I know the hon. Lady raised concerns on behalf of her constituents, but we are already starting to see the benefits of HS2. More than 7,000 people are working on the line and more than 2,000 businesses are working to deliver the new railway. Opportunities for jobs and apprenticeships are being created across the country; I am pleased to say that more than 250 new apprenticeships have been created so far. The project is critical. It will connect half of our country's population. Even though the hon. Lady's constituents may be asking, "What's in it for me?", they are among that half of the population that the project will impact by helping to rebalance the economy.

HS2 is an essential component in the delivery of the Government's and Transport for the North's plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail. For example, the current designs for NPR use HS2 infrastructure into Manchester and Leeds. If we did not build HS2 phase 2b, we would need to send NPR back to the drawing board. The two projects are complementary and will work in tandem to transform connectivity across the north, bringing towns and cities together. If the hon. Lady does not want to take my word for it, I have a recent article by Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, and Steve Rotherham, the Mayor of the Liverpool city region, in which they talk about the benefits that I hope she will—

Helen Jones *rose*—

Ms Ghani: Let me just go through the quote. I have many more—too many for this debate—but this one is important, because it mentions the benefits in the north. Andy Burnham and Steve Rotherham wrote:

"The economic output of Greater Manchester could double to around £132bn by 2050"

because of HS2,

"contributing at least 40,000 new jobs. Liverpool city region forecasts £15bn of economic growth and 24,000 new jobs."

You will be surprised to learn, Mr Hollobone, that we often read criticism of HS2. It tends to come from the press, which tends to be based down here. Importantly, in their article, those leaders of the north wrote:

"We don't need London commentators telling northern leaders what we need."

It is important to reflect what is wanted and needed beyond London and the south-east.

Helen Jones: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; she is very kind. However, I think she is making my point about HS2 benefiting big cities rather than towns. Warrington is in neither Greater Manchester nor Merseyside—it is in Cheshire—and it will not have a station on the line. As my constituents have argued, areas that are getting a station might be able to weigh the benefits against the costs, but for areas that are not getting a station and already have an hourly service to London, as we do, the situation is much more difficult.

Ms Ghani: The hon. Lady raises some important points. I note that she does not actually criticise HS2 but expresses a desire for a station. Unfortunately, if I provided a station to everyone who wanted one, the project would not be going anywhere very fast anytime soon. There are already 2,000 businesses and 7,000 people

[*Ms Ghani*]

involved in the project, and at its peak there will be 30,000 people building this railway, so I do not doubt for a moment that every part of the country will be touched in a positive way, whether it is by the economic opportunities or the jobs that HS2 provides.

Let me turn to the questions the hon. Lady raised. She made a robust argument about the Golborne link. The Government will continue to invest in upgrades to the conventional rail network, including the west coast main line, in addition to their proposals for the development and delivery of HS2. However, only HS2 will be sufficient to meet the long-term growth in demand that is forecast on the existing network. HS2 is the right intervention to address the capacity constraints on the west coast and east coast main lines. The Government have already considered alternative schemes to HS2, including upgrading the existing railway, but no other option can deliver the same scale of benefits as HS2 phase 2b.

The Golborne link is the most effective way to deliver the much-needed capacity on the west coast main line. It has two key purposes: it avoids a constrained section of the west coast main line, improving capacity and reliability on that line, and it delivers faster journey times for destinations north of the connection, such as Wigan, Preston, Lancaster, Cumbria and Scotland. The hon. Lady mentioned costs and benefits. Proposed alternatives to the Golborne link would reduce the benefits of HS2 without necessarily saving money. Early analysis shows that delivering the same benefits, such as the published journey times to the north and Scotland, without the Golborne link may add an extra £0.8 billion to the cost of HS2.

Let me move on to some further points the hon. Lady raised about HS2 and Warrington. HS2's arrival is becoming integral to local plans in Warrington and the surrounding area. Warrington stands to benefit from HS2 services, which will cut journey times between Warrington and London to just over an hour, supporting enhanced growth in and around the town. HS2 is already driving employment opportunities, with approximately 80 businesses in the north-west now working on the early stages of the project. Decisions about service patterns will be taken in the future, taking into account factors such as demand and local considerations. The HS2 indicative train service specification shows Warrington Bank Quay being served by one HS2 train per hour in phase 1, which it will continue to receive when phase 2b opens.

I turn now to some of the important local points that the hon. Lady raised. I must place on record the fact that she has campaigned on behalf of her constituents by writing to raise arguments with the Department, especially since I have been there, and no doubt with the previous Minister, too. The local issues she has raised are very important to the Government and HS2 Ltd. I was particularly struck by some of the cases she made, and I will raise them directly with HS2 Ltd. I will ensure that I get a detailed response to all the points she raised if I am able to; otherwise, I will invite her to have a conversation with me about anything that is outstanding.

We are mitigating particularly in the following areas. On Wigshaw Lane, we are acutely aware of the issues the proposed road alignment presents and are currently working on alternatives. HS2 Ltd is already engaged with Warrington Borough Council on the closure of

Wigshaw Lane. It is also looking to change the alignment of the viaduct in the Hollins Green area to move it further away from Hollinfare cemetery and the local community. The alignment of the viaduct would also be adjusted north and south of that point.

On the construction compounds near Hollins Green, the location and dimensions of some of the compounds shown in the working draft environmental consultation are being considered in the light of local feedback. That includes trying to reduce the size of compounds in the area. Developments to the design will help move compounds further away from residents in Hollins Green. The details in the draft code of construction practice, which formed part of the working draft environmental statement consultation, will help provide residents with reassurance about some areas of concern with construction compounds.

More broadly, we have already consulted on the working draft environmental statement for phase 2b. That consultation, through which we sought views from local stakeholders and residents along the route, closed at the end of last year. My officials and HS2 Ltd are analysing the responses and will continue to listen to the concerns of local people through HS2 Ltd's engagement teams and meetings with local councils. I will ensure that the hon. Lady has a link into the HS2 Ltd team so she has an individual to direct her concerns to, and ensure that community meetings take place at the appropriate time.

The hon. Lady raised an important point about the viaduct versus the tunnel. That issue has been raised by many local stakeholders. Boring under the canal would require a particularly large land take either side of the canal to support tunnelling to the depth required. That means that much more land would be required in the area by a tunnel than by the proposed viaduct. That would have an impact on land and property in the area. The soil conditions in the area would also make tunnel construction difficult; the area around the tunnel is peat, so the tunnel would have to be very deep and constantly drained.

The hon. Lady made an interesting point about the depot no longer being situated at Golborne. The decision to relocate the depot to just north of Crewe was made in response to consultation feedback—particularly from local stakeholders—about open spaces and public amenities. The route through this area is still the Secretary of State's preferred route and is not dependent on the depot being located at Golborne; that is a completely separate issue.

The hon. Lady raised an important point about the environment and the mental and physical health of her constituents. HS2 Ltd has a target to ensure that there is no net loss of biodiversity. Substantial funds are in place in the earlier phases to ensure that we are greening as we go along. HS2 launched a green corridor along phase 1 of the route, which includes 3,340 hectares of wildlife habitat, a 33% increase on existing habitat. HS2 is also committed to planting 7 million trees and shrubs along the line.

The hon. Lady mentioned pitches. HS2 Ltd is aware of the reduction in available pitches and is exploring options to re-provide those. I was moved by the points she raised, so I will keep a close eye on that and do my best to ensure that we get a positive outcome. Otherwise,

I am more than happy to meet her to ensure that her points are, at the very least, heard and responded to by HS2 Ltd.

As I said earlier, this project is crucial for our country, especially in smashing the north-south divide. I appreciate that that will not provide succour for the hon. Lady's constituents when she returns home this weekend. The Government are already spending more than £48 billion on our existing rail network, but that is not enough. We need to build extra capacity. HS2 is not just about passengers; it is about freight, taking cars off the road and encouraging people to use the railway instead of taking flights.

I am loth to read out another quote, because the hon. Lady will say, "It's not close to home for me," but let me reference Judith Blake, the leader of Leeds City Council, because it is appropriate.

Helen Jones: That's definitely not close.

Ms Ghani: It is not about being close; it is about the importance of the project for our whole country and for the north in particular. Judith Blake said HS2 is

"the opportunity to transform the prospects for the north—perhaps a once in 200-year opportunity."

Politicians are often criticised for not thinking long term, planning for infrastructure on a large enough scale or understanding what our country needs going forward. HS2 addresses that. It is a large project. I understand the hon. Lady's concerns, but HS2 Ltd is tasked to ensure that it mitigates its impact on the environment and communities.

I welcome the opportunity the debate has provided once again to reflect on how important HS2 is. We must remember that it has cross-party support: when the Bill for phase 2a went through Parliament, only 12 MPs opposed it. It was in all three main political parties' manifestos. It is right that we continue to focus on delivering it, and it is also right that HS2 Ltd works appropriately, with humility and sympathy, with the communities it will be building the line through.

Question put and agreed to.

4.22 pm

Sitting suspended.

West Papua: Human Rights

4.30 pm

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered human rights in West Papua.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am delighted to have been granted this extremely important debate about human rights in West Papua. As I understand it, this is the first ever debate in the House of Commons on this topic. I am pleased to welcome colleagues from across the House who have come to support the debate, and I am grateful to them.

There have been a couple of brief debates in the other place over the years, but this is the first time that we, as elected representatives, have debated West Papua, despite having held some 3,455 debates in the last 50 years on issues great and small, of national and local significance. That is illustrative of the lack of attention this issue has received, when it ought to have had attention both at home and from the international community. I hope that today, in our small way, we can start to shine a light on the West Papuan cause and to give a voice to the people of West Papua.

I referenced the last 50 years, and there is a significance to that, as 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the so-called Act of Free Choice. That Act is a defining moment in the West Papuan story and forms the context within which the current situation in West Papua must be viewed. I will set out some of that context and give a brief history of West Papua, before discussing the current situation. I will conclude with two key actions I suggest the UK Government consider taking to help improve the human rights situation in West Papua.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way before he starts on his historical exposé. I want to set the current situation in context, as he is coming on to describe it. Is he aware of two human rights situations? The first was illustrated in a video that went viral, which showed a West Papuan freedom fighter being tortured with a snake by the Indonesian army. Is he also aware that, as a result of Indonesian activities in Nduga, 30,000 refugees have been created in just that area?

Robert Courts: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am aware of both the fact and the incident; they illustrate, in microcosm, the importance of this debate and are vivid examples of what is happening this very day in West Papua.

West Papua is the western half of New Guinea, which is the second largest island on earth and one of many thousands of south Pacific islands that are collectively known as Melanesia. Papuan people have inhabited the West Papua region for over 40,000 years. It was slowly drawn into the Dutch sphere of influence, and by the end of the 19th century the Dutch had established permanent administrative centres in the region as part of the Dutch East Indies.

When Indonesian nationalists declared independence from the Dutch empire in 1945, they included West Papua in the list of territories that would form the newly born country. That declaration sparked a four-year-long war between the Indonesians and the Dutch, which ended in 1949, when Indonesia was granted international recognition as an independent state at The

[Robert Courts]

Hague roundtable conference. However, this only heightened the divisions that existed on the status of the West Papua region. Indonesia argued that the region should be included in its new independent state, but the Dutch refused to cede the territory. At this point, I ought to mention that the West Papua region is home to the largest gold mine and the second largest copper mine in the world.

No compromise was found in the years that followed Indonesian independence, leading to a further fraying of tensions between Indonesia and the Netherlands. That led to Indonesia building up its military capacity, largely from weapons acquired from the Soviet Union. In the conflict that ensued, the United States, although originally supportive of the Dutch cause, eventually changed its position to ensure that Indonesia would not be driven towards the Soviet Union, in the context of the cold war.

Talks between Indonesia and the Netherlands followed in 1962, with the UN acting as the official mediating power. This resulted in the signing of the New York agreement, according to which the administration of West Papua would be assigned to the United Nations for a minimum of seven months, before being passed to Indonesia. Crucially, article 18 of that agreement stipulated:

“Indonesia will make arrangements, with the assistance and participation of the United Nations Representative and his staff, to give the people of the territory the opportunity to exercise freedom of choice.”

It went on:

“Such arrangements will include...formulations of the questions in such a way as to permit the inhabitants to decide (a) whether they wish to remain with Indonesia; or (b) whether they wish to sever their ties with Indonesia.”

Article 18 also noted that the consultation had to ensure the

“eligibility of all adults, male and female, not foreign nationals to participate in the act of self-determination to be carried out in accordance with international practice.”

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I have long held an interest in West Papua, going back 15 or 16 years into my previous life. Is not the root issue self-determination, which is an international human right? Having an ethical foreign policy that protects that vital human right is important for any Government, including the British Government.

Robert Courts: Self-determination is a fundamental human right. That has been the case for many hundreds of years, as most famously enunciated at the beginning of the 20th century, after the first world war. It is a guiding principle in foreign policy for all countries, but particularly for the United Kingdom since that time. Self-determination is at the heart of the issue we are discussing, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point.

It is difficult to say that what happened in 1969—the so-called Act of Free Choice—was carried out in accordance with international practice or captured the true democratic will of the West Papuan people. Despite the New York agreement explicitly requiring Indonesia to

“guarantee fully the rights, including the rights of free speech, free movement and of assembly, of the inhabitants of the area”,

that guarantee was not fulfilled, because Papuan political parties were banned at the time of the Act of Free Choice.

A one person, one vote system, which is international practice, was not granted. Instead 1,025 representatives were selected by the Indonesian military to vote on behalf of the Papuan people. The representatives voted unanimously in favour of Papua becoming part of Indonesia. However, numerous reports from foreign observers and Papuans suggest that it was not a free consultation. It is claimed that those who were selected for the vote were blackmailed into voting against independence by means of threats of violence against their person and their families. Representatives were taken away from their families and communities for several weeks before the consultation.

Diplomatic cables from the US ambassador to Indonesia reported at the time that the Act of Free Choice in West Papua

“is unfolding like a Greek tragedy, the conclusion preordained.”

The ambassador went on to say that the Indonesians

“cannot and will not permit any resolution other than continued inclusion”

of West Papua

“in Indonesia. Dissident activity is likely to increase as the climax is reached but the Indonesian armed forces will be able to contain it and, if necessary, suppress it.”

The ambassador continued by saying that the Indonesian armed forces had “no intention of allowing” West Papuan choice

“other than incorporation into Indonesia. Separation is unthinkable.”

British diplomats in the region took similar views and drew similar conclusions at the time.

In a House of Lords debate in 2004, the then Foreign Office Minister, Baroness Symons, made this admission in responding to the then Bishop of Oxford:

“He is right to say that there were 1,000 handpicked representatives and that they were largely coerced into declaring for inclusion in Indonesia.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 13 December 2004; Vol. 667, c. 1084.]

I would be interested to hear in due course from the Minister whether that is still the position of the UK Government, although I see no reason for it to have changed at this stage.

After making that admission, Baroness Symons went on to say that these things had occurred many decades ago and that, rather than dwelling on the past, it was important to look to the future and improve matters in the here and now. While I have some sympathy with that sentiment, it does perhaps miss the key point—that in the eyes of many West Papuans, the fundamental questions about the legitimacy of the so-called Act of Free Choice undermine the very legitimacy of Indonesian rule in West Papua.

We are now in the 50th anniversary year of the Act of Free Choice, which is understandably seen as an act of great injustice by the people of West Papua, who refer to it ironically as the “Act of No Choice”. In the past 50 years, the West Papuan people have been subjected to serious human rights violations, which have only fuelled and heightened that sense of injustice. Those human rights violations include the repression of free

speech and peaceful assembly, impediments to a free press, arbitrary arrest, and even cases of torture and killings, as we have heard.

The human rights abuses in West Papua are in large part down to the fact that the region is de facto controlled by the Indonesian military. The University of Sydney has estimated that around 15,000 troops are currently deployed in the region. When human rights violations occur, there are inadequate systems of redress for Papuans, so violations often go unpunished. An Amnesty International report on West Papua noted that there is a lack of effort to investigate accusations of human rights violations and to try before civilian courts police officials accused of violations. Furthermore, it noted that allegations of human rights abuses committed by the military in West Papua often go unchecked or are dealt with before military tribunals with no transparency, leaving many victims of human rights violations awaiting justice.

We will all be aware of the case from earlier this year, which we heard about from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). Footage emerged of Indonesian police interrogating a young Papuan boy, who was on the floor and in handcuffs while officers wrapped a large snake around him. The child was alleged to have stolen a mobile phone. In the video, he is heard screaming in fear as officers laugh and push the snake's head towards his face. In responding to the incident, a UN panel of human rights experts stated that it

“reflects a widespread pattern of violence, alleged arbitrary arrests and detention as well as methods amounting to torture used by the Indonesian police and military in Papua”.

They went on to explain that those tactics are often used against indigenous Papuans and that the incident is “symptomatic” of the discrimination West Papuans face from the Indonesian authorities.

Papuans are regularly arrested for peacefully expressing their opinions on the political status of West Papua, including through peaceful demonstrations or attending meetings in which the matter is discussed. The simple act of raising the symbol of West Papuan independence, the Morning Star flag, carries a prison sentence of up to 15 years. Pro-independence political leaders have routinely faced persecution and even assassination at the hands of the Indonesian authorities.

At this point, I would like to introduce someone who, I am pleased to say, is in attendance today—Benny Wenda, leader of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, who came to see me recently, along with my constituent Richard Samuelson, who was the first person to bring the situation in West Papua to my attention, and his fiancée Elaine, who are also in attendance. I thank them.

I pay tribute to Richard for bringing this issue to my attention; without going off on too much of a tangent, it shows one of the greatest things about our parliamentary system. Many of us, when we raise issues in the House, do so because they are brought to our attention by constituents in our surgeries, and this is one such case. Richard and Benny made a powerful, moving case to me, and I am only too pleased to raise this issue before Parliament today.

I make that point during this debate as a reminder of the democratic rights and freedoms we enjoy in this country. Richard and Benny could come to see me and make their point freely, knowing they would not be

persecuted and that their representative could and would take up the matter on their behalf. Those are rights and freedoms that, sadly, are not enjoyed by too many people around the world.

Benny's story would bring a tear to the stoniest eye. Benny's father was, in fact, one of the representatives hand-picked in 1969 to vote in the Act of Free Choice. Benny says that he still remembers his father telling him how he had been threatened and told that he and his whole family would be killed if he voted for Papuan independence.

During our meeting, Benny told me the tragic story, which he says is permanently fixed in his memory, of when, at just three years old, he saw many of his fellow villagers, including most of his family, killed during an Indonesian military operation. Years later, Benny became the leader of the Papuan student independence movement. After being imprisoned, he was able to escape to Oxford, where he was duly granted political asylum by the United Kingdom.

When I met Benny, he expressed with great emotion the gratitude he felt to the United Kingdom, and he spoke with admiration of our values of freedom and the rule of law—principles he said he was determined to see his people in West Papua enjoy. Benny was the one who, earlier this year, presented a petition to the United Nations calling for an independence referendum in West Papua. The petition contained the signatures and thumbprints of some 1.8 million West Papuans, which represents approximately 70% of the entire population.

I turn now to the Minister. What can the UK Government do? I have explained the history and set out the present situation. The question is, what can we do to ensure that the human rights situation improves in West Papua and that the future is brighter for the Papuan people? I accept that the United Kingdom's power is limited, but I think there are two key areas where we could—and should—apply diplomatic pressure.

We should not downplay our influence. The United Kingdom is a close and important friend of Indonesia. A recent BBC poll found that over 65% of Indonesians take a positive view of the UK's influence, making Indonesia the country with the second most favourable perception of the United Kingdom in Asia. Therefore, we have a role to play in having these conversations with our Indonesian friends, difficult though they may be.

The first thing I ask the Minister to consider doing is to push for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua. That should not be controversial; indeed, in a February 2018 meeting with the then UN High Commissioner, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, Indonesian President Jokowi invited his office to visit West Papua. Sadly, some 15 months on, that visit has not taken place, and the former UN High Commissioner expressed concern about that in his update to the 38th session of the Human Rights Council.

The Foreign Office, and our representatives in the United Nations, should encourage their Indonesian counterparts to honour that invitation and permit the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua. The UN High Commissioner's assessment of human rights in West Papua will be critical to informing the world of the situation on the ground and bringing about positive change in the region. I ask the Minister today if he would please commit to raising the issue of this invitation with his Indonesian counterpart and encouraging them to honour it.

[Robert Courts]

The second area where I would suggest the United Kingdom could have a positive influence is in pushing for increased press freedom in West Papua and particularly for greater access for foreign journalists to the region. At present, foreign journalists are essentially banned from West Papua. The few who are granted access are closely monitored by the Indonesian military and by no means allowed to report freely. The BBC's Indonesia editor, Rebecca Henschke, was granted a special permit to report on a malnutrition crisis in the region last year but was expelled shortly after arriving after posting tweets that "hurt the feelings" of soldiers.

It is therefore unsurprising that Indonesia ranks 124th out of 180 countries in the 2019 World Press Freedom Index of the press freedom charity Reporters Without Borders. The charity concludes that President Jokowi did not keep his campaign promise to address media freedom in West Papua, with his presidency instead seeing drastic restrictions on access for foreign journalists and growing violence against local journalists who seek to report abuses by the Indonesian military.

A free press nurtures free societies. Now, more than ever, we must defend it. That was the message of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office last week as we marked World Press Freedom Day. Never has that been more true than in the case of West Papua. We simply must ensure that journalists are able to report freely in the region, shining a light on wrongdoings when they occur, and generally scrutinising the actions of the authorities in West Papua. Ensuring that that happens will go a long way towards helping to protect the human rights of the West Papuan people.

The UK is in an ideal position to take action on this issue. Last month, the UK Government announced that Amal Clooney had been made a special envoy on media freedom by the FCO and would head up a panel of legal experts looking to repeal anti-press freedom laws abroad and ensure that journalists across the world are free to report the truth. I therefore urge the Minister and the Foreign Secretary to ensure that this important panel, when it is established, investigates the situation in West Papua as a top priority. The panel, which is a wonderful initiative, can look at the restrictive laws that the Indonesian Government have put in place in West Papua, which have essentially created a media blackout in the region, and press the Indonesian Government to repeal them, enabling a free press, transparency and accountability in West Papua.

The simple fact is that the human rights situation in West Papua cannot improve until President Jokowi delivers on his promise to allow greater press freedom in the region, which has thus far failed to happen. The panel therefore represents a golden opportunity to hold the Indonesian Government to their promises, ensuring that their warm words turn into hard action. Ultimately, a free media can prevail in West Papua, and I therefore hope that the Minister will assure me that he will make strong representations to the Foreign Secretary and Amal Clooney that West Papua must be an area of focus for the Defend Media Freedom panel.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; he is extremely generous. Will he add to his wish list the suggestion that the British

Government use all their efforts and influence in Indonesia to secure access to West Papua for non-governmental organisations such as Amnesty International and the Red Cross? They have had difficulty visiting the area to see what is going on.

Robert Courts: That is a very sensible suggestion. I wonder whether the Minister will add that. Ultimately, I think the hon. Gentleman and I are looking for transparency, access and freedom, all of which are tied together.

John Howell: I wonder whether my hon. Friend will add to his list of things that could be done something that the University of Sydney has called for: a comprehensive investigation into the killing of Papuans by Indonesian forces. At the moment, we are left with the Asian Human Rights Commission, which produced a report in 2013 showing the savagery of Indonesian forces in dealing with this situation.

Robert Courts: I am grateful for that suggestion. I am keen that the Minister takes away two or three things that we may be able to achieve in the near future, and I am of course happy to add that request to the list. Ultimately, I think we are all making the same point, which is that an investigation carried out by an NGO or the press will achieve largely the same ends: transparency, clarity and an understanding of what is taking place in West Papua. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for adding that suggestion to the list.

In conclusion, I leave the Minister with two modest requests from myself—and two from hon. Members—which, if followed through and achieved, could be immensely significant. They ought not to be controversial, as they essentially ask the Indonesian Government to honour promises they have already made. The first request is that the Minister encourages his counterparts in the Indonesian Government to honour that February 2018 invitation to the Office of the UN Commissioner for Human Rights to visit West Papua, and the second is that he ensures that the new FCO panel for press freedom investigates the situation in West Papua as a top priority.

If we can ensure the free access of international media and independent human rights observers to West Papua, we will have taken an enormous step forward in protecting the human rights of the Papuan people, putting the region on the road towards a more free and prosperous future. I hope the Minister will be able to assure me and all others who have attended the debate—I note that the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), is here, and I welcome him—that he will take up these issues on behalf of the people of West Papua, whose cries for help have for far too long gone unanswered. The debate has helped give a voice to the voiceless. I hope the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will be able to help too.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I am obliged to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 5.8 pm. The guideline limits are five minutes for the Scottish National party spokesperson, five minutes for Her Majesty's Opposition's spokesperson and 10 minutes for the Minister. If the Minister will allow Robert Courts two minutes at the

end to sum up the debate, that would be fantastic. Until 5.8 pm is Back-Bench time. Two Members are seeking to contribute, so there will be a time limit of six minutes each.

4.56 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We think we know all about the great injustices of the world: people who have been killed, had their human rights transgressed, been illegally imprisoned and seen their calls for a right to self-determination unanswered. However, West Papua is the forgotten struggle. I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for giving us the opportunity to highlight the plight of West Papua, for his explanation of the history and an overview of the actions of successive Indonesian Governments against West Papua, and for the requests he made to the Minister, which I shall add to. I will not repeat any of those points, but I will say that, in the 50 years of Indonesian control, there is significant evidence of genocide.

Yale Law School, in a 2004 report for the Indonesia Human Rights Network, found

“in the available evidence a strong indication that the Indonesian government has committed genocide against the West Papuans”.

The Indonesian military have also carried out widespread acts of torture and sexual assault against the native Papuans—a point I made in a debate yesterday on women human rights defenders.

The people of West Papua have been campaigning since 1969, and many have had to flee and campaign from their new homes. A united campaign representing all those in the West Papuan diaspora and in West Papua, the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, was formed in 2014, bringing together all the campaigns. The Free West Papua campaign is based in the UK and supports the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, which I chair. As the hon. Member for Witney said, Benny Wenda, who lives in Oxford, is the chair of the Free West Papua campaign and the United Liberation Movement for West Papua. I put on the record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and her predecessor, Andrew Smith, for their years of support for Benny and the campaign.

The bringing together of the organisations has led to major steps forward recently, one of which was the Westminster declaration calling for an internationally supervised vote for independence, signed in 2016 by representatives of Governments of four Pacific states and parliamentarians from around the world; since then, other parliamentarians, including me, have signed up to the declaration. As the hon. Gentleman said, West Papuans, in secret and often in fear of discovery, collected a petition calling for the right to vote for independence, which was signed by 1.8 million people. That petition has now been presented to the UN. I thank the Minister for the meeting prior to that petition being presented, and look forward to future meetings regarding the petition.

However, my main comments regard incidents in Nduga province. I recently met members of the World Council of Churches on their return from West Papua, who gave me a report that highlighted that Indonesian security forces allegedly fired large-calibre machine guns and dropped grenades from helicopters in areas inhabited by indigenous local communities. While the Indonesian military continue to deny access to the province for

human rights organisations, journalists, human rights defenders and observers, a rescue team consisting of local government and civil society representatives was able to collect data in some of the affected areas.

According to recent reports, security forces killed at least nine indigenous Papuans, while at least five indigenous Papuans, including two minors, have been reported missing since the commencement of military operations. Witnesses have stated that many displaced villagers continue to hide in the jungle, where they live in small groups in improvised huts. The men leave the shelter during the night and walk long distances to collect sweet potatoes and taro. They do so under fear of murder. The harsh climate and food scarcity in the central Papuan highlands have particularly affected women and children. According to local human rights defenders, at least 13 have died because of starvation after fleeing villages.

I want to use this opportunity to highlight the fact that Indonesian armed forces have been accused of deploying chemical weapons—suspected to be white phosphorus, banned under international law—in West Papua, Indonesia’s easternmost territory. I am referring to international humanitarian law, because this is an issue of contention. Under the convention on the prohibition of the development, production, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons and on their destruction, which Indonesia has signed and ratified—in fact, it sits on the committee—states are banned from using and stockpiling chemical weapons.

ABC, which is the Australian equivalent of the BBC, reported in December claims that wounds may have been inflicted by white phosphorus. The report had photos of the canisters and wounds. I have more photos, from the World Council of Churches, which I can provide to the Minister. I wrote to the Minister regarding this situation, and he responded to me, but I feel that the Minister’s letter could have been written by the Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.

Before I wrote to the Minister, the Indonesian embassy wrote to me, saying:

“I deeply regret that such motion was based on groundless reporting, most notably by Australia’s *The Saturday Paper* throughout its January to February 2019 articles. No significant evidence has been subsequently produced despite the strong claims made by the authors.”

In the Minister’s letter to me, he said:

“We are aware of a media claim, first made in *The Saturday Paper* on 22 December 2018, about the possible use of white phosphorus”.

It was not just *The Saturday Paper*, which is a small paper in Australia; it was ABC and many other media outlets that reported the claims. I am sure that the Minister would not want people to think that the United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office was subservient to the Indonesian Government on these matters, so I once again urge the Minister to write to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons to ask it to investigate this issue as an international priority. I request that the Minister immediately send an official request to the OPCW, asking the organisation to verify the incident and investigate the suspected breach of Indonesia’s obligations under the chemical weapons convention. If no investigations are conducted, if no light is shone into the dark underbelly of the military occupation of West Papua by Indonesia, how will we know what is going on?

[Alex Sobel]

Before I have to finish, I want to make just one more point about the letter from the Minister. He says:

“The use of white phosphorus is not banned under international law”.

I ask him whether the UK Government are going to call for the banning of white phosphorous, because when it is used against civilians, it is a chemical weapon; it is exactly that type of weapon and should be banned under international law.

5.2 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to follow the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for securing the debate and for the very powerful contribution that he made in setting the scene for us and explaining his interest in the subject. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place. We recognise his commitment to his role, which he carries out very well. We often say this, but it is the truth: I very much look forward to hearing the Minister’s remarks.

I am very interested in human rights issues and always have been. That has been one of the big issues for me in my time in the House. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, but today I will speak about human rights issues; I want to put those on the record. Whether we are talking about discrimination or abuse and whether it is emotional, physical or financial, I am happy to take whatever opportunity comes my way to speak up for people—to be, as the hon. Member for Witney said, a voice for the voiceless, and to speak for those whom no one else is speaking for, at least in this place.

According to Amnesty International, the people of Papua are subject to severe human rights violations at the hands of Indonesian authorities. Amnesty’s 2002 report on Indonesia found that counter-insurgency operations by security forces in West Papua had resulted in gross human rights violations, including extrajudicial executions, enforced disappearances, torture and arbitrary detentions.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the elections as well. In Northern Ireland some time ago, in the early years of the troubles—1969 or thereabouts—people used the term “gerrymandering”, as in gerrymandering the democratic process. I am reminded very much of that, except that in this case, the result was very final. As terrible as it is to fix elections by intimidation and threats of violence, the reality for West Papuans is even worse. A paper prepared by Yale Law School in 2004 found evidence that strongly indicates that the Indonesian Government have committed genocide against the West Papuans and that, at the very least, the Indonesian Government have committed crimes against humanity against them.

Despite those crimes, authorities in West Papua operate with impunity. In March 2018, the mysterious death in police custody of Rico Ayomi, a 17-year-old student, from alleged alcohol poisoning underscored the police’s lack of accountability for deaths of Papuans. From 2010 to 2018, security forces were responsible for an estimated 95 deaths in 69 incidents, 39 of which were related to peaceful political activities such as demonstrations or raising the Papuan independence flag. No security

force personnel have been convicted in civilian courts for those deaths, and only a handful of cases have led to disciplinary measures or military trials. It is outrageous and unacceptable that none of those cases has been answered. Those who have committed crimes need to be brought to the courts for those crimes—for their brutality.

The brutality of the Indonesian Government in cracking down on separatists has created an environment in which anyone suspected of supporting Papuan independence can become subject to human rights violations by police and security forces, including unlawful killing, torture and beating. Thus the rights of West Papuans to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are heavily curtailed. In today’s debate, we are speaking for those people and ensuring that their voices are heard. Many people are imprisoned simply for having taken part in non-violent demonstrations or expressed their opinions. Here we are expressing our opinion, and we can do that freely. Why should they not be able express their opinion?

Similarly, international human rights organisations and journalists face severe restrictions on their ability to work freely and visit the area. Human Rights Watch reports that just last year, two foreign journalists were harassed for alleged illegal reporting. They were BBC correspondent Rebecca Henschke, arrested in February, and Polish freelancer Jakub Fabian Skrzypski, arrested in August.

The oppression of the media and freedom of expression ensures that the terrible oppression of West Papuans continues away from the international community’s awareness. I do not believe that we, as part of the international community, can sit back and do nothing. That is why this debate and those in other parts of the world are so important. It is vital that we take every opportunity that we have to publicly stand in solidarity with those who are suffering in West Papua and to say to the Indonesian Government, “The world is watching you. We will not simply forget.” The opportunity to speak for the people of West Papua has been given to us today. We look to the Minister for a response and we hope that the influence that we can exert on Indonesia can bring about change.

5.7 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) and congratulate him on initiating this debate. As he pointed out, it is the first one that this place has had on this subject ever. I appreciated the very powerful remarks that he made and I am glad that they are now on the record. I look forward to hearing a response to some of the points that he raised with the Minister, who I know takes this matter seriously as well.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has just said to us, it is important to have a voice, because we have to tell the Indonesian authorities that the world is watching; the world is paying attention. It is important to raise and highlight human rights violations and lack of self-determination wherever that occurs in the world. That is what makes this debate on West Papua so timely.

The SNP unequivocally condemns any human rights violations, regardless of where in the world they occur. We find the reports that have come out about human rights violations incredibly concerning. We have seen some reports about the use of chemical weapons as well. The hon. Member for Witney quoted a comment from the UN panel of experts:

“This case reflects a widespread pattern of violence, alleged arbitrary arrests and detention as well as methods amounting to torture used by the Indonesian police and military in Papua”.

That should be hugely concerning to all of us. The hon. Gentleman was right, as were other hon. Members, including the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on West Papua, the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel). He and his colleagues are doing good work in pushing for a full investigation of the situation.

The hon. Member for Witney was right that self-determination goes to the heart of this issue. The right of people to choose how they are governed is a fundamental pillar of the international rules-based order. We should all be significantly concerned that the decision to unify with Indonesia—the Act of Free Choice, as it was called, or the Act of No Choice, as others have referred to it—was made with one in 800 citizens having the vote. Even those one in 800 voters, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out and as Mr Wenda has testified, may not have had a free and fair vote. That is a very significant issue. What moves does the Minister have to raise that issue of self-determination, which is so important in this case? What discussions has he had with the Indonesian authorities and representatives of West Papua?

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I apologise for not being here for the whole debate. I had commitments in Committee and the main Chamber. I first met Benny Wenda several years ago when he visited the Scottish Parliament. He was hosted by our good friend Aileen Campbell, who is now a Minister in the Scottish Government. I had the pleasure of meeting him again this morning with his colleagues.

Self-determination is crucial. Regardless of an individual's views on whether a given community should be an independent state or country, the people who live there and self-identify as part of that nation or community should have the right to a free and fair choice. Understandably, the Scottish National party has always been very proud to support that.

Stephen Gethins: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I want to add that Mr Wenda is always very welcome in the Scottish Parliament. I also add my voice to the key actions raised, including pushing for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights to visit. That visit must take place. I know that the Minister will make that point in the strongest possible terms. The press must also have the freedom to visit. If there is nothing to hide, they should show that. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) made a good additional point about letting international NGOs, such as Amnesty International and others, be part of any delegation.

I want to leave time for the Minister to respond. I add my voice to the points that have already been made. I know that the Minister has heard those points loud and clear.

5.12 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) on raising an extremely important issue, which he did very well. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who is an extremely energetic champion for the people of West Papua.

Several hon. Members have talked about the history and I agree with their analysis. There has been some discussion of the human rights situation. It is extremely disappointing that the human rights situation in West Papua is still so bad, because the situation in other parts of Indonesia has improved significantly over the past 20 years. One would hope that the people of West Papua would have benefited from that as well.

I want to raise a couple of particular episodes. First, at the beginning of last December more than 500 Papuans were arrested after peaceful demonstrations to commemorate the birth of the West Papuan nation in 1961. Days later West Papua Liberation Army militants attacked and killed 20 construction workers in the Nduga region. Some 300 villagers had to flee to escape the subsequent military sweep following the attack.

The British Government have slightly more power than the hon. Member for Witney suggested, because the UK is currently the penholder in the UN Security Council for the protection of civilians in armed conflict. Innocent West Papuans are clearly not getting the protection they so badly need. They are being treated as legitimate targets by the Indonesian military. I would be grateful if the Minister would explain what his Department is doing about that.

Alex Sobel: In a letter to me the Minister described that incident as “proportionate”. Would my hon. Friend describe the actions of the Indonesian army as proportionate or disproportionate?

Helen Goodman: They are most clearly disproportionate.

I want to talk about the use of white phosphorus. I believe that white phosphorus was used inappropriately, because I had meetings with Octovianus Mote, the deputy chairman and former general secretary of the United Liberation Movement for West Papua, who had direct testimony from people in the area, and with Ian Martin, the former head of the UN mission, which conducted the self-determination referendum in East Timor.

We need to be really specific about this matter: white phosphorous is not banned under the chemical weapons convention, but its military use is circumscribed by protocol III of the UN convention on certain conventional weapons. However, it is prohibited in all circumstances to use it against civilians. It is also prohibited to make any military objective located within a concentration of civilians the object of attack by air-delivered incendiary weapons, which is what happened on this occasion. I entirely support those calls to send in experts from the UN and the OPCW, to look at what happened. I heard stories of old people being burned out of their homes.

Furthermore, I would like the Minister to suggest to the Indonesian military—it seems to be out of control in West Papua—that peacekeeping duties be assigned instead to the local police. As well as the UN-led investigation into white phosphorus, we need to see the release of political prisoners and the recognition of local political parties, to facilitate the development of a political and civil society in West Papua. I hope that the Government will review any sales of military equipment to Indonesia.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) for securing this

[*Mark Field*]

important debate. I am also grateful for the insights and contributions of the hon. Members for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and for the Front-Bench contributions. I will endeavour to answer all the questions, and I will respond in writing to those that I do not answer now.

This year marks the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the UK and Indonesia. I am very pleased to say that the relationship is flourishing. Indonesia is an important democratic partner in the G20 and, for the next two years, on the UN Security Council. In that context, we follow the situation in Papua very seriously. We welcome President Joko Widodo's commitment to a peaceful and prosperous Papua, but we recognise that the historical challenges are significant. Many of those challenges stem from the disputes over resources and governance, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, and from unresolved human rights grievances.

Although the UK Government wholeheartedly respect the territorial integrity of Indonesia, with the province of Papua and West Papua as integral parts, it is important, within that framework, that the authorities address the needs and aspirations of the Papuan people.

We are concerned by the sporadic outbreaks of violence in Papua, and by reports of alleged human rights violations by the security forces. We will continue to press the Indonesian authorities to strengthen their human rights protections and to address the legitimate concerns of the people, including by ensuring that they benefit from sustainable and equitable development, and of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) in relation to the building of a civic society that allows free political parties.

There are serious and long-standing concerns about the influence and actions of the Indonesian security forces in Papua. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office and I believe that it is regrettable that, despite improvements since the restoration of democracy in Indonesia in 1998, there remains persistent reporting of worrying human rights violations in Papua. Meanwhile, there has been no real accountability for the serious abuses of the past.

When I met the Indonesian ambassador to London in January, I raised those issues with him, not least because I had recently met with the all-party group, and in the light of the contemporary violence in Nduga, where armed groups had attacked construction workers, resulting in the deaths of 19 people. We urged the Indonesian authorities then to ensure that any security response is proportionate. As has been rightly and universally recognised, however, under successive democratically elected Governments there has been a noticeable improvement in the overall human rights situation across Indonesia and an end to the debilitating conflicts in East Timor, Aceh, Ambon and elsewhere.

During their recent phone call, the UK Prime Minister praised the President of Indonesia for the peaceful conduct of the presidential and legislative elections in April, which represented the single largest one-day democratic event anywhere in the world, with an 80% voter turnout and more than 800,000 polling stations operating across the archipelago. Although there were some localised delays to polling, including in Papua, there has been no evidence to suggest that it was anything other than a well-run and credible election. Nevertheless,

we will continue to raise our concerns about issues such as the freedom of expression and assembly and the rights of persons belonging to minorities.

In reference to media freedom in Papua, which was raised by several hon. Members, UK officials regularly raise the importance of media access to Papua with the Indonesian Government, and they will continue to do so. Our embassy in Jakarta is active in promoting press freedom across the entirety of Indonesia, where there is already a vibrant media environment. To mark World Press Freedom Day last week, the embassy arranged a full programme of activities to celebrate the work of Indonesia's journalists, media organisations and regulators in that regard.

Although President Jokowi has said that foreign journalists should be allowed to access Papua without pre-conditions, unfortunately we understand that Indonesian officials continue to place substantial practical obstacles in the way of that taking place. Transparency and media access are important to give us a fuller picture of the situation. We also encourage all Indonesian journalists to write openly and frankly about Papua to ensure that local perspectives are properly heard and are part of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney made a point about the panel to defend media freedoms, which has not yet had its first meeting, as I understand. It will be for its members to determine its work and to plan its initial areas of focus. It would not be appropriate for the UK Government to seek to dictate them, because in many ways that would undermine the important sense of its independence.

We regularly press for the release of political prisoners across Papua. Under President Jokowi, the number has fallen from 37 in 2014 to fewer than 10 today. Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have acknowledged that positive trend, but we continue to make the case that 10 political prisoners remains 10 too many. Moreover, we are concerned that three people were charged with treason in January after apparently taking part in a peaceful prayer event. We call, here and now, for all political prisoners to be released immediately, and for the Indonesian authorities to ensure that all detainees are given the right to a fair trial.

We will continue to request updates on the historical human rights cases in Papua that President Jokowi has committed to resolve. We will keep the pressure up in the aftermath of the elections. Initial investigations have been conducted by the National Commission on Human Rights, but they need to be properly dealt with by the Attorney General's office.

On phosphorus, I am happy to have further conversations with the hon. Members for Bishop Auckland and for Leeds North West about the issue, but our investigations have not substantiated the media claims that it was used in violation of the chemical weapons convention—as was rightly pointed out, it is prohibited in all cases against civilians. Therefore, we do not believe that there is a case for referral to the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, but I am more than happy to look at any additional written or other evidence that the hon. Gentleman has. Clearly, we would then be happy to take the matter up.

As has been pointed out, President Jokowi has visited Papua 10 times during his first term, which is far more than any previous Indonesian President. He has made a number of important democratic commitments, including

to establish a constructive political dialogue with Papuan groups. That process represents a credible opportunity to address long-held grievances, and in our discussions with the Indonesian Government we will urge them to deliver on those commitments. I very much hope that the recent sad but peaceful passing of Pastor Neles Tebay, the Papuan priest who has been at the forefront of attempts to create a peaceful dialogue on the future of Papua, might inspire progress to honour his legacy, led by the team that the President has appointed to foster a dialogue.

I agree that the Act of Free Choice was an utterly flawed process, but I have to say to my hon. Friend the Member for Witney, and to the Chamber, that there is no desire in the international community for reopening the question. The UK, along with other members of the UN, supports Indonesia's territorial integrity.

We will continue to support efforts by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights and her officials to arrange the visit to Papua, at the invitation of the Indonesian Government. Officials in our embassy in Jakarta have discussed the proposed visit with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and have encouraged Indonesia to agree dates as soon as possible. I also undertake to raise the proposed visit with my Indonesian counterparts. I hope to make a substantially long visit to Indonesia later in the year.

Facilitating a visit to Papua would help the Indonesian Government to demonstrate their commitment to the rights and freedoms of those residing there. It would also help to underline the seriousness with which they take their candidacy for a seat on the Human Rights Council. Being a member of the UN Security Council also provides us with an opportunity to speak fairly openly in New York on the issue.

It is clear that economic factors are a major source of grievance among the Papuan people, and a source of strain in their relationship with the central Government and local authorities. That is why we will continue to support Indonesia's regional governments to develop a green economy in which people can make a living without over-exploiting their natural resources, and in which there is greater regulatory oversight of the timber industry, which has been fundamentally linked to the social conflict.

I end by saying that the Government will continue to take a close interest in human rights in Papua. I am pleased that a number of MPs are passionate about

that. I enjoy their passion and it provides us with the opportunity to make a serious case to our Indonesian counterparts, which we will do. Above all, that expression of interest is in the interests of all the people of Papua and the rest of Indonesia.

5.28 pm

Robert Courts: I thank the Minister for his full and comprehensive response, and every hon. Member for taking part. Once again, I welcome Benny Wenda and my constituent Richard Samuelson to the Public Gallery. I thank them for having initiated the debate and I hope that they think it has advanced the cause of human rights in West Papua.

I am grateful to all hon. Members for their points. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) for what I will summarise as his robust response to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his point about access to justice; the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) for underlining my points about the visit of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and press freedom; and the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for making the point about political prisoners.

I assure the Minister that I have heard everything he has said and I am glad that the FCO regularly raises the issue of press freedom. I underline the point that the Act of Free Choice lies at the heart of the real repression and the feeling of ill-justice, which are central to the cause. In the 70th year of diplomatic relations, I hope that the Minister and the FCO will continue and redouble their efforts, having heard how strongly hon. Members feel. On the panel to defend media freedoms, I understand its independence; I do not ask that the UK Government dictate to it but merely make suggestions.

We have made great strides today. I am grateful to you for having listened to us in detail, Mr Hollobone. We have cast a searching gaze on the human rights situation in West Papua. We must ensure that we do not look away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered human rights in West Papua.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 May 2019

HOME DEPARTMENT

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Following a review of the existing funding arrangements, I have decided to make more funding available to local authorities supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).

The review involved gathering detailed information and feedback from across the local government sector, and I am grateful to all those who contributed to producing a robust evidence base. This included over 50 upper tier or unitary local authorities, NGOs, the Local Government Association (LGA), Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and regional Strategic Migration Partnerships (SMPs).

After considering the evidence, I have decided that the rates currently paid at £71, £91 and £95 should be uplifted to £114 per UASC per night. This will apply to care provided from 1 April 2019 onwards.

Home Office funding for local authorities supporting UASC provides a contribution to their costs. The decision to increase these rates reflects the incredibly valuable work local authorities undertake with vulnerable UASC, and the Home Office commitment to supporting this.

[HCWS1543]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

IBRD Loan to Jordan: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for International Development (Rory Stewart): I have today laid a departmental minute setting out DFID's intention to guarantee a portion of a forthcoming development policy loan from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD)-arm of the World Bank to Jordan.

This would create a contingent liability of the US dollar equivalent of £332 million (based on current interest and exchange rates), in respect of the World Bank Group. There remain strong incentives for Jordan to avoid entering into arrears as doing so would lead to the IBRD not agreeing any new lending, and not providing any lending agreed under existing loans.

In the event that a default did occur, and the guarantee is called, the UK would still provide compensation to the World Bank, in proportion to the UK's guaranteed share of the overall IBRD loan. If this liability is called, provision for any DFID payment would be sought through the normal procedure.

[HCWS1542]

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Today, the Government publish the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill, which seeks to establish the statutory bodies that will be responsible for the restoration and renewal works within the parliamentary estate, giving effect to the resolutions passed by Parliament earlier last year. In addition to Parliament having expressed its view in those resolutions, it will also be given an opportunity to vote on the proposed design, cost and timing of the substantive building works relating to the Palace of Westminster. In developing the Bill, the Government have worked closely with the House authorities.

The tragic fire at Notre Dame has served as a reminder of the risks to this historic and iconic building. The recent incidents in the Palace of Westminster, including falling masonry, have further highlighted the urgency of the works to restore and renew the Palace of Westminster.

The Restoration and Renewal Bill was published in draft in October 2018 and has been subject to pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Committee. Its report was published in March 2019 and we have carefully considered the responses of the Joint Committee. The Government welcomed the Committee's report and the considered, evidence-based approach the Chair and Members of the Committee have taken in scrutinising the Bill, and accepted many of its recommendations in full. The support of the Committee and its endorsement of the overarching aim of the Bill is integral in progressing this important and pressing work.

The Bill will establish the governance structure within which those bodies will operate. The bodies will have the capacity and capability to make strategic decisions on the restoration and renewal programme, so that the Palace of Westminster can be secured as the UK Parliament for future generations.

The Bill establishes a parliamentary works sponsor body which will have overall responsibility for the programme and act as a single client on behalf of both Houses. It will also form a Delivery Authority as a company limited by guarantee. The Delivery Authority will formulate proposals in relation to the restoration works, and ensure their operational delivery. The bodies will be independent and able to operate effectively in the commercial sphere, bringing the expertise and capability needed for a project of this scale. This two-tier approach was used to successfully deliver the London Olympics.

The Bill also establishes a parliamentary works estimates commission which will lay the Sponsor Body's estimates before Parliament, and play a role in reviewing the Sponsor Body's expenditure.

The Government's role is to ensure we deliver the best possible value for taxpayers' money, and the measures in the Bill reflect our determination to ensure Parliament keeps the total bill down, and the restoration runs to time and on budget. The Bill provides that the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority must have regard to value for money when exercising their functions throughout the Programme. The Treasury will be able to review and comment on the annual estimates for the funding of the

programme, and the National Audit Office will be able to undertake audits and value-for-money reviews. Furthermore, the estimates commission will have the power to review, comment on, and in certain circumstances reject those annual estimates.

It is important that the views of parliamentarians on the programme are taken into account. The Sponsor Body will have a majority of parliamentarians on its board, alongside external expertise. Parliamentarians

will be fully consulted on the strategic direction of the programme. The Sponsor Body will be required to return to Parliament for approval to make any significant changes to the approved proposals in respect of the Palace. Parliament will also be given an opportunity to vote on the annual expenditure of the Sponsor Body and the Delivery Authority through the estimates process.

[HCWS1544]

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 8 May 2019

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Climate Change

The following is an extract from oral questions to the Secretary of State for International Development on Wednesday 1 May 2019.

Dan Carden: I wonder whether the Minister will today commit to auditing and publishing UK aid spending on fossil fuels through the CDC, the prosperity fund and multilateral organisations?

Harriett Baldwin: I am pretty sure that a lot of that information is already in the public domain. I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman my understanding that the CDC has made no new investments in fossil fuels since 2012.

[Official Report, 1 May 2019, Vol. 659, c. 189.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for International Development:

An error has been identified in my response to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden).

The correct response should have been:

Harriett Baldwin: I am pretty sure that a lot of that information is already in the public domain. **I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that the CDC** has made no new investments **in coal** since 2012.

ORAL ANSWERS

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