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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 May 2019

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Withdrawal Agreement: Public Vote

1. **Mr Paul Sweeney** (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a public vote on the EU withdrawal agreement and political declaration. [910916]

5. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a public vote on the EU withdrawal agreement and political declaration. [910921]

16. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential merits of a public vote on the EU withdrawal agreement and political declaration. [910935]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I have regular discussions with my ministerial colleagues, but those discussions are always short because we agree that it would be a bad idea.

Mr Sweeney: Einstein is widely credited with saying that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing multiple times but expecting different results. If the Government intend to bring their withdrawal agreement back to Parliament in the form of a Bill, is it not the case that it is only likely to receive any sort of majority in this House on condition of an amendment in support of a public vote? Does the Secretary of State accept, in the words of his own Chancellor, that that is a “perfectly credible proposition”?

Stephen Barclay: As the hon. Gentleman should know, part of the reason we have been having discussions with his Front-Bench colleagues is to look at how the legislation might evolve to take on board the earlier votes by the House. One could make a similar accusation against the Labour party. If we look at its policy on a second referendum, we see people such as Len McCluskey saying that it

“risks tearing our society further apart, as the ignored majority believe their views have been scorned”,

while other Labour members say it is the way forward. There is no consistency among Labour Members, and that is part of their problem.

Vicky Foxcroft: When I met the Prime Minister in March, I put it to her that a public vote is the only way to get us out of the current deadlock. Does the Secretary of State agree?

Stephen Barclay: It is not only that I do not agree; the hon. Lady’s own Front-Bench colleagues do not agree. She says that a public vote is the only way, but that is not the current policy of her party. Her party’s policy is to say that if its deal were accepted, it would not put it to a public vote. [*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady asks what I think, but I answered that at the start of my response. I do not agree that a public vote is the way forward; the vote is for Members of this House, who cannot make a decision. The point is that I am not the only one who thinks that a public vote is not the way forward; the hon. Lady’s Front-Bench colleagues think so too, because it is not their current policy.

Jeff Smith: What about a vote on the Prime Minister’s deal? In a few weeks’ time, the Prime Minister will have asked MPs no fewer than four times whether we agree with her deal. Does the Secretary of State not think it would be fair to ask the public once whether they agree with the deal?

Stephen Barclay: Again, the hon. Gentleman will need to look at the Bill when it comes forward. What we voted for on previous occasions was a meaningful vote. We have been in discussions with Opposition parties and, as referenced in an earlier question, Members across the House, to take on board some of the concerns raised in those debates, and those will be reflected in the legislation brought to the House.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Secretary of State could point out that the Opposition’s wish will be granted when the European elections take place next Thursday. That will be a genuine vote on what people think in this country. We will need to look at the policies of the party that finishes up with the most votes. Does he agree that that will clearly show what the people want?

Stephen Barclay: I am sure my hon. Friend will agree with me that we have had a people’s vote. It was won in 2016 and that was reflected in the Labour party’s manifesto. Once again, we hear Labour Members saying one thing to the electorate when they face an election but doing another when they come to the House.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Merit implies virtue, and while there might be some expediency in it, there are certainly no virtues, are there?

Stephen Barclay: I do not think that any Member of this House thinks that my right hon. Friend is anything other than virtuous in all that he does. In our commitment to bring forward the withdrawal agreement Bill, we have listened to the concerns of Members across the House and have reflected that in the draft legislation that is being prepared. It will be for Members to reach a decision on that or one of the two other alternatives—either

we risk not leaving at all, which I think would be a huge betrayal of the 17.4 million people who voted to leave, or we leave with no deal, which would create issues for the Union and the economic disruption that would flow.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Many of my constituents tell me that they would not vote in a second referendum because they are angry and frustrated that Parliament has not delivered on the first one. Does the Secretary of State agree that a second referendum would continue the divisiveness and uncertainty, and would almost certainly not settle the issue, because the turnout would be smaller?

Stephen Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend on that. I would urge his constituents to vote, and to vote Conservative, in that election, but he is right to say that any such second referendum would be both divisive and not necessarily decisive. They have perhaps taken their lead from many Members of the House, who seem unwilling to confront the real choice that lies before them and vote, which is why they are seeking to have a second referendum.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government's position is that it is democratic to come back to the House of Commons for the fourth time to try to persuade us to change our minds. They are entitled to try, although it may be unwise. Can the Secretary of State explain to the House, therefore, why it is undemocratic to ask the British people, given what we now know, whether they wish to change their minds or not?

Stephen Barclay: Because we had a decision; we gave the British public that and we have not delivered on it. I would have much more time for the right hon. Gentleman's position if behind the language of a confirmatory vote he wanted to explore the different ways of leaving: if he was saying, "The public gave a clear instruction to leave, but we want to have a vote between leaving with the Prime Minister's deal or leaving with no deal." But his position is to revoke. He does not want to say that he supports revoking, so he wants to hide behind this veneer, façade and impression whereby this can be done through a second referendum. I urge him to have some candour and say he wants to revoke. Come out and say it. That seems to be the right hon. Gentleman's position and that is what he should say.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I want to revoke article 50 and so do the vast majority of my constituents. Does the Secretary of State not see the glaring failure of logic in giving this House four votes but not being prepared to give the population a second vote? That is why people who do want to remain in the EU will be voting for the Scottish National party in the forthcoming European elections in Scotland.

Stephen Barclay: Well now, what is always glaring from SNP Members is their desire to overturn democratic decisions. They did this on the referendum in 2014 and they want to do it on the referendum in 2016. They then want to say to this House that a further referendum is one they will abide by, but we know that if they get the wrong result, it will be three strikes and yet again they will say that they are still not out.

Support for Farmers

2. **Mark Menzies** (Fylde) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for farmers after the UK leaves the EU. [910917]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): I continue to have regular discussions with ministerial colleagues across government. As my hon. Friend will be aware, we have pledged to commit the same cash total in funds for farm support until the end of this Parliament.

Mark Menzies: Export sales of organic produce totalled £188 million in 2016, supporting countless British jobs, particularly in the agricultural sector. What assurances can the Secretary of State give me on the certification that protects that organic produce in respect of exports to the EU after we leave?

Stephen Barclay: I know my hon. Friend's constituency very well, as it is where I was born and grew up. He is absolutely right to highlight the importance of this issue in the farming sector. I am happy to give him the commitment that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is looking at this issue. My hon. Friend will be aware that this is part of a wider approach, where we can take a much more bespoke approach to our farming needs once we are out of the EU, rather than the catch-all, one-size-fits-all approach in which the common agricultural policy applies.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will know that food processing is very much related to farming, and it is our biggest manufacturing sector. Has he talked to that sector? Does he not realise that research by King's College London shows that every leave constituency of this country will be 20% worse off leaving the EU—on any terms?

Stephen Barclay: First, may I join the Prime Minister in recognising the hon. Gentleman's service? He said at Prime Minister's questions yesterday that he was a Eurosceptic when he came into the House; there is still time for him to return to his true beliefs.

As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, I represent one of the key farming constituencies in the country, in the fens. He will also be aware that the majority of farmers voted to leave because they see the opportunities—for example, in respect of things like the three-crop rule, which is restrictive for many in the farming community. Through the Agriculture Bill, we can have a much more bespoke approach. The key issue is to speak to those who actually farm. The overriding message from the National Farmers Union is to back the deal, and farmers themselves want the liberty of being outside the straitjacket of the EU. That is what this Government will deliver.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend reassure livestock farmers in Brecon and Radnorshire and throughout the country that immediate funding for them will be guaranteed in all circumstances?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend has championed the livestock sector extremely assiduously, and I know he has met my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss these issues. We have given a commitment to match funding, but we must ensure that we do so in a more bespoke way. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further so that we can give his constituents the support that they need.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister further outline the support for agrifood producers, with reference to the food labelling and stamps issue, which is still uncertain and has the potential to cause massive financial strain and supply issues?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight an under-discussed area of policy. Some Members want only to talk down the opportunities of Brexit, rather than to talk about what we can do with the freedoms that Brexit unlocks. One of those freedoms is in respect of food labelling, which is an area in which the United Kingdom can apply a more bespoke approach and in which there will be opportunities. Indeed, last week I was in Scotland with manufacturers and we discussed just such issues.

UK Economy

3. **Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab):** What recent assessment the Government have made of the effect on the UK economy of the UK leaving the EU. [910918]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): In November 2018, the Government published their economic analysis of leaving the European Union. In doing so, the Government delivered on their commitment to provide appropriate analysis to Parliament. The publication provides an assessment of how different exit scenarios may affect the sectors, nations and regions of the UK economy in the long run.

Ian Murray: If the rumours are true, the withdrawal agreement Bill will come back to the House shortly. There is no credible analysis, including from the Government, that shows that any form of Brexit will be beneficial to the UK economy, so will the Bill include a detailed economic and environmental impact assessment of its impact on every single sector, region and nation of this country?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman has been in the House long enough to know that I cannot possibly reveal details of the Bill ahead of its introduction. What I can say generally is that the UK economy is performing strongly—much more strongly than many of his doom-mongers and naysayers have suggested. Employment levels have broken all records, and there are 3.6 million more people in work than there were in 2010. Business investment in the UK stood at almost £47 billion in the first quarter of this year—that is an increase of 30% since we took office in 2010. Generally, the UK is the top destination for inward investment in Europe. Amid uncertainty, the economy is performing well.

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Financial services are a critical part of the UK's economy and one of our top exports. Will my hon. Friend confirm that the withdrawal agreement does not include a specific section on financial services and that access to the EU market after any transition would be a matter of separate negotiation? Will he update the House on his most recent discussions on the issue with his EU counterparts?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The withdrawal agreement is not the end state of the relationship between the UK and the EU; it is merely a mechanism to get to that end state. In a free trade agreement, which I hope we get, our financial services will absolutely be able to have more freedom. They have a brighter future outside the EU than within it.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The creative industries tell me that their economy is already suffering, with the concerns of musicians in particular, for example, not being addressed in any part of the Government's negotiations or deal. They will have to move kit and people around the European Union, and they are already losing out on bookings. What discussions is the Minister having with representatives of, for instance, the Musicians Union about this problem?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave just a minute ago. The withdrawal agreement itself does not describe the end state of our relationship between the UK and the EU. It is simply a means to the end. We are discussing all the time with representatives of the creative industries, and we hope that, once the agreement is passed, we can then go on to the second phase of the discussions.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The European Union is mired in low economic growth. Many of its countries have eye-watering levels of youth unemployment and its currency has to be constantly supported by quantitative easing. Can my hon. Friend understand why anybody would want to chain us to this rotten corpse?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I fully appreciate the force of my hon. Friend's argument. The idea that the EU simply represented the be-all and end-all of economic prosperity has been completely exploded by his remarks. If those record high levels of youth unemployment occurred in the constituencies of any Labour Member, they would be rightly outraged. We have great opportunities outside the EU, which is why I hope that we can pass the Bill and move forward in these discussions.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The car industry, British steel and the travel industry are all citing Brexit as a major cause of concern in their sectors. Does the Minister consider that to be project fear or project reality?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I urge the right hon. Gentleman to end the uncertainty and back the Bill so that we can move on with this debate and get to the next phase of the negotiations. That would provide the certainty that the industries that he cites are looking for.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): The Minister reminded us that the Government have done an economic analysis of a number of Brexit scenarios, but, very pointedly, they have not given us an analysis of the impact of the scenario that they are going to ask us to vote on in a few weeks' time. Every analysis they have done of every Brexit scenario has shown that the economic damage to Scotland caused by Brexit is always made even worse if we also lose our rights under free movement of people. How does the Minister justify imposing this additional economic damage on a country that rejected Brexit by 62% in 2016?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I fully appreciate the concern of the Members from the Scottish National party. They campaigned for two referendums. They got beaten in both of them and now they simply want to re-run them. The fact is that the United Kingdom voted to leave and this Government—and Ministers—are pledged to deliver on that referendum result.

Peter Grant: I want the result of the referendum to be respected. I want the 62% of sovereign citizens in my nation to have their declared will respected. Does the Minister not realise that, every time he or his colleagues say that Scotland has to put up with this because Scotland is part of the Union, they are driving another nail into the coffin of that Union? Does he not appreciate that his comments today will simply persuade more and more Scots that, next week, the way to protect Scotland's interests is by returning an increased number of SNP candidates to the European Parliament and by making sure that, in 2024, Scotland participates in those European elections as a full sovereign member of a partnership of equals?

Kwasi Kwarteng: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State was in Scotland last week, and the opinion there is very divided on this issue, as it is in the rest of the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman will appreciate, as a democrat, that the vote in 2016 was a national vote—a United Kingdom vote—and we are pledged to respect the majority result, which was to leave the European Union.

Customs Union

4. **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): What recent assessment the Government have made of the economic effect of the UK leaving the EU customs union. [910919]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Any assessment will depend on the counterfactuals that it is measured against, and those were considered in the economic analysis that was put out in November.

Gill Furniss: Many of my constituents in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough contact me regularly with their wide-ranging views on Brexit. Will the Secretary of State reassure them that they would be no worse off if we left without a customs union and without the elusive trade deal that the Secretary of State for International Trade has failed to deliver despite stating that it would be the easiest thing in human history to negotiate?

Stephen Barclay: There is nothing elusive about the text of the political declaration, which makes it clear that the Government can negotiate the benefits of a customs arrangement alongside an independent trade policy. The economic analysis shows that that is the best way forward of the options open to the Government.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): On Monday, the Secretary of State's two predecessors, 11 other former Cabinet Ministers and the Chair of the 1922 Committee wrote to the Prime Minister urging her "to reject a customs union solution with Labour".

Many Cabinet Ministers clearly agree with them. Does the Secretary of State?

Stephen Barclay: I have been clear throughout that we have an approach that I think is the best way forward. There are conflicting views in all the parties including, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, on his own Front Bench. We are discussing these issues with the Labour party to seek a way forward on behalf of the House that will allow us to deliver on the referendum result. If he is asking about my personal position, I have always been clear that we made a clear manifesto commitment with regards to the single market and customs union, and we are trying to look at how to deliver on the referendum result. As the shadow Secretary of State would say, those discussions are ongoing.

Paul Blomfield: I guess that might have come close to a suggestion that the Secretary of State does agree with those who are opposing the Prime Minister's position. But this is, after all, a Secretary of State who voted with those two predecessors against his own Government's proposal on extending article 50, even after he had recommended it to the House, so I think we deserve some clarity on these issues. The authors of Monday's letter also said of any agreement that is reached:

"No leader can bind his or her successor...so the deal would likely be...at best temporary...at worse illusory."

Does he agree with that?

Stephen Barclay: It is not a revelation to this House that I supported leaving in the referendum, that I still support leaving, that I have voted consistently on every occasion to leave, that I have voted against extending article 50 and that I have stood by the manifesto on which I was elected. The question for Labour Members is why they repeatedly—at every opportunity—refuse to stand by their manifesto commitment. Why will they not honour their promises to the electorate? Yes, I do support leaving. I support leaving with a deal, and I have made it clear that if we do not leave with a deal, of the two alternative options I would leave with no deal. My position has been consistent. Why hasn't theirs?

EU Settlement Scheme

6. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Home Secretary on the effectiveness of the EU settlement scheme for European economic area nationals. [910922]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): This is a hugely important scheme designed to help EEA and EU citizens

take up their rights and deliver on the Government's commitment that we want them to stay. I regularly meet colleagues in the Home Office to discuss the scheme, and it is important to note that the Home Office has received more than 650,000 applications so far, with thousands more being received every week. Applications are free and there is plenty of time to apply.

Daniel Zeichner: If the Government really wanted to make non-UK EU nationals feel welcome and wanted them to stay, they would make this an easy system. In fact, people have to have the right phone. If they do not have the right phone, they have to go to an ID scanning centre. But just look at where those centres have been placed; they are all around London, so the Secretary of State's constituents and my constituents have to travel all the way to Bedford, Peterborough or London. Why is there not at least an ID scanning centre in every county?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the accessibility of the scheme, and I agree that it should be accessible. There are going to be 200 assisted digital locations across the UK to support people to register, including one in the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Cambridge, which he should welcome.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is all well and good for the Minister to say that there are going to be these centres, but they are not here yet. My constituents are having to travel to Glasgow for ID scanning because there is not an opportunity to do that in Aberdeen, where there is only a small library centre. I am incredibly concerned—this issue has been highlighted to me—that women fleeing domestic violence are being told that that, because their application is a bit more difficult, they will have to go all the way to Glasgow, when they are already suffering from destitution as a result of domestic violence.

Mr Walker: I take on board the hon. Lady's point and I am happy to discuss it with colleagues at the Home Office. As well as the assisted digital locations and the scanning centres that she mentioned, it is also possible for people to apply via the Android app. My colleagues at the Home Office have also been in regular talks with Apple to ensure that applications can also be made through its devices. There is a whole range of ways in which people can apply. Face-to-face support at home is also available to help particularly vulnerable people complete their applications.

Sovereignty

8. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Ind): What assessment he has made of the potential level of sovereignty that the UK will have after leaving the EU. [910924]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I know that the hon. Gentleman has consistently championed leaving the EU on the grounds of sovereignty. The referendum was a call to reclaim the UK's sovereignty by ensuring that the decisions that affect us are made by those whom we elect. On borders, free movement will end, with Parliament deciding our domestic immigration policy in the national interest. On money, vast annual

payments to the EU will end, and the UK will leave the EU budget. On laws, EU law in the UK will end, as will the jurisdiction of the Court of Justice of the European Union. All this can be achieved by voting for the withdrawal agreement.

Kelvin Hopkins: People voted in the referendum for the United Kingdom to be independent, democratic and self-governing, but the BBC recently broadcast a comment by the Belgian Liberal politician, Guy Verhofstadt, about the UK becoming a "colony" of the EU. What are the Government going to do to avoid such a humiliation?

Mr Walker: I think the hon. Gentleman will recognise that some of these statements may be made to provoke rather than necessarily to inform. We have a very clear agreement, in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, on the UK coming out of and separating itself from the European Union. That is something that Members across this House, bearing in mind the manifestos on which they were elected, should get on and support.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The BBC documentary "Brexit: Behind Closed Doors" was a devastating exposé of the incompetence of the Government's Brexit negotiating strategy. It showed the contempt the EU has for the Prime Minister's stance and showed that the EU has run rings round us at every opportunity. With two exit dates having come and gone, despite over 100 assurances from the Prime Minister on the Floor of the House, is it not clear that the simplest, cheapest, cleanest and most honest way to deliver Brexit is to leave with no deal on 31 October?

Mr Walker: If my hon. Friend had voted as the Secretary of State and I have voted, we would have left the EU already.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): A YouGov poll published today indicates that a majority of people are not happy with the European Union and feel that it may break up in the next 20 years. There is also widespread concern about the political elite both at European and national levels. Does this not show that at some time in the near future, Europe is going to go through major reform, and is it not better for us to be there and be part of that reform? Should we not therefore now be considering, in the light of the fact that there is no majority here for no deal or for a second referendum, revoking article 50?

Mr Walker: I admire the hon. Gentleman's honesty in setting out that his position is clearly to revoke article 50. These are arguments that were made before the referendum. We had a negotiation with the European Union, and we put that approach to the people in the referendum and said that they should decide. I think we should listen to their decision and follow it through.

Political Declaration: Security

9. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Whether the Government have made a recent assessment of the adequacy of the security commitments provided for in the political declaration. [910925]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): In November 2018, the Government published an assessment of the future security partnership as set out in the political declaration. The political declaration itself recognises the shared threats faced by the UK and the European Union and provides a framework to safeguard our security. That framework, as the hon. Lady will know, covers law enforcement, judicial co-operation in criminal matters, foreign policy, and security and defence co-operation in areas where we hope to have mutual co-operation.

Diana Johnson: Protecting our national security from organised crime and terrorism is of course the first duty of any Government. My constituents want to know that we will still be able to participate in the European arrest warrant and share criminal record checks if or when we leave the EU, so what further progress has been made on what was put into the political declaration so many months ago?

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady will appreciate that those matters are for the second phase of the discussions between us and the EU. To get to that second stage, I sincerely recommend that she support the withdrawal agreement. That is the only mechanism by which we will get to phase 2 of the negotiations, where we can discuss some of these matters, which are critically important to her constituents and to the country.

NHS

10. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the effect on the NHS of the UK leaving the EU. [910929]

11. **Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the effect on the NHS of the UK leaving the EU. [910930]

12. **Emma Dent Coad** (Kensington) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the effect on the NHS of the UK leaving the EU. [910931]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): DExEU Ministers continue to hold regular discussions with Department of Health and Social Care Ministers.

Janet Daby: Nearly 500 people working for Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust are from the EU. The Royal College of Nursing tells us that 7,000 EU nurses have left the register since the referendum. With the number of trained nurses declining, what will the Government do to ensure that quality of healthcare in my constituency does not suffer if and when the UK leaves the EU?

Stephen Barclay: Throughout the period since the—

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The nurses are all going home!

Stephen Barclay: If the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) gives me a moment, I will answer with some specific numbers on recruitment. As a former Health Minister whose portfolio covered the workforce, I have always taken an interest in this area, so if he gives me a moment to get past the first two words, I will try my best to respond. It is not a widely known fact that, since the referendum, there are 700 more doctors from the EU27 countries working in the NHS and over 5,200 more EU27 nationals working in NHS trusts and clinical commissioning groups.

The hon. Lady is right that we need to do more on nurse recruitment. The Department is doing a huge number of things, including on the apprenticeship levy, looking at the skills mix and professional qualifications and investing up to £20.5 billion extra a year in the NHS, a lot of which is targeted at improvements to the workforce. She is right that we need to look at how to strengthen nurse recruitment, but it is misleading to keep presenting to the House the fiction that, since the referendum, there has been a fall in the number of EU staff working in the NHS, when 700 more doctors are working in it since then.

Liz McInnes: Some 64% of medical professionals think that the NHS will get worse after Brexit. They have not been fooled by a slogan on the side of a bus. Can the Secretary of State explain why the Government are struggling to convince those who work for the NHS that there will be a Brexit dividend?

Stephen Barclay: I suspect that this constant drumbeat of negativity around it does not help. The fact is that we have committed to a 10-year plan. The hon. Lady should listen to people like Simon Stevens, the former Labour adviser and the chief executive of NHS England. She should look at the 10-year NHS funding commitment that this Government have made, with up to an additional £20.5 billion a year. She should look at the areas of improvement to care and stop talking down our NHS. In terms of Brexit, there are things, if one looks at the October 2017 paper, to protect the NHS, but it is time to stop talking down the NHS and look at the funding commitment this Government have made.

Emma Dent Coad: I should declare an interest: I have several family members working in the NHS. As we have heard, there is huge concern about the lack of nurses—particularly specialist nurses—coming from the EU. The NHS used to have a recruitment programme in Portugal, where the training is excellent, particularly in intensive and post-operative care, and there is good care but not enough jobs. The NHS can no longer do that. In addition, medical research teams are in despair because they cannot exchange specialist researchers to further medical science. Can the Secretary of State reassure the medical profession that this is keeping him awake and that he has a response to it?

Stephen Barclay: It is quite remarkable that the hon. Lady makes no mention of the five new medical schools that this Government have committed to, of the record expansion in doctor training that this Government have committed to or of the lifting of tier 2 visas for not only doctors but nurses, so that we can recruit around the globe. The Opposition seem to think that recruitment into the NHS stops at Europe, but we recruit talent for

the NHS from around the globe, and we have lifted tier 2 visas to facilitate that. This constant drumbeat of negativity from the hon. Lady does not reflect the reality of this Government's commitment to our NHS.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I declare an interest: many members of my family work in the NHS. The NHS depends on tax and national insurance revenues. What is the Government's assessment of the impact of leaving the European Union on those tax and national insurance revenues?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is right to say that we need a strong economy to have a strong NHS. The option set out in the economic analysis that was published by the Treasury in November makes it clear that the Prime Minister's plan is the one that will deliver the strongest economy and enable us to make that record, 10-year commitment of up to £20.5 billion more a year to our NHS. That is a sign of the Conservative party's commitment to the NHS, and for the majority of years that the NHS has existed, it has been run by a Conservative Government.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) will take it in the right spirit if I say that it was most solicitous and courteous of her to notify us that her family members work in the national health service, but for the avoidance of doubt, it is not necessary to declare an interest simply because one visits a doctor from time to time.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I was going to say that both my parents were nurses, as was the shadow Secretary of State's mum, but I obviously do not need to. I remember being accused of negativity, as the Secretary of State has done repeatedly today, when we warned of the dangers of privatising the probation service, and look how that worked out. It is our job to challenge the Government. They might not like it, but that is one reason we are here. Public health is potentially at risk from Brexit. Chlorinated chicken is a public health risk.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): No it is not.

Jenny Chapman: The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs seems to think it is.

Michael Fabricant: Well it isn't.

Jenny Chapman: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman take that up with the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). How can we trust this Government to protect our public health or our NHS in any trade deal with the United States when they cannot agree within Cabinet? The Environment Secretary says that chlorinated chicken will be banned, but the Secretary of State for International Trade says it will not be. Who speaks for the Government on that issue?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady is right that it is her job to challenge the Government, and unfortunately for Government Members she usually does that more effectively than we would like her to. On this issue, however, I disagree with her. Labour policy is that it wants a say on EU trade policy, even though EU treaties do not allow

that. For many years, Conservative Members have been told by the Labour party that we cannot go into things such as the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership because that will be a threat to our NHS—that is what Labour Members have said repeatedly. Now they say that they want to pass control of our independent trade policy to the EU, but that that will not be a threat to the NHS. Once again, Labour Members say one thing when it suits them, and another thing today. There is no consistency in their trade policy.

Support for Towns

13. **Mary Robinson** (Cheadle) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support towns after the UK leaves the EU. [910932]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): The Department continues to work closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that towns and communities across England are supported post Brexit. In March, the Government announced a new £1.6 billion stronger towns fund for England, which will boost growth and give communities a stronger say in their future after Brexit.

Mary Robinson: Earlier this year, the Government announced that £55.6 million will be made available to local government to cover the additional expenditure resulting from Brexit, and it is important that councils such as Stockport are prepared from day one after we leave the EU, so that my constituents can have uninterrupted local services. How will my hon. Friend ensure that, as local authorities make their bids for the stronger towns fund, towns and villages such as Cheadle are able to feel the benefit?

Kwasi Kwarteng: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her tireless work representing and championing her constituents in the north-west. More than half the allocated stronger towns fund will go to towns across the north of England, and just over £281 million will be allocated to the north-west region. There will be further opportunity to deliver locally led projects, create new jobs and support the Government's commitment to building a more prosperous economy across the United Kingdom.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): One of the ways that the Government could start moving on regeneration, not just in England but across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, is to set out when the consultation on the shared prosperity fund will start. It was meant to start before December 2018, but Ministers from the Treasury, the Wales Office and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy do not know when it will be. Perhaps Ministers from the Department for Exiting the European Union can give us some answers for a change.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman will have observed that we have not yet reached a deal on the withdrawal agreement. The shared prosperity fund is the pot of money that will be allocated across the UK once we have left the EU. The withdrawal agreement still has to go through. We recognise the importance of reassuring

local areas at that point that the shared prosperity fund will be distributed, but it does not make any sense to do that ahead of the ratification of the deal.

Revoking Article 50: Voter Confidence

14. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What assessment the Government have made of the potential effect on voter confidence in (a) politicians and (b) democracy of revoking Article 50. [910933]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Revoking article 50 would cause irreparable damage to the relationship between voters and the Members of Parliament who represent them. It would reverse the outcome of the 2016 referendum, betraying not only the 17.4 million voters who voted to leave but everyone who voted, putting their faith in our democracy at risk. Revoking article 50 would break the trust the British people place in politicians, in voting and in democracy.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer. What steps is his Department taking to maintain the public's faith in the importance of their votes and confidence in this Government delivering what they said they would deliver, particularly as we head into European elections that the public did not want, vote for or support?

James Cleverly: Ultimately, there are only three ways that this situation can resolve itself: the UK leaves the EU with an agreement; the UK leaves without an agreement; or we revoke article 50 and do not leave. Leaving without a deal is undesirable, but not leaving is unacceptable. That is why the Government maintain the position that they want to leave the European Union with an agreement as quickly as possible, restoring people's faith in the democratic process and honouring the commitment we made in the 2016 referendum.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Next month, it will be three years since the referendum. Does the Minister regard the referendum choice as binding for all time? Does he not recognise that at some point it will be necessary to go back to the people and ask whether they still think leaving the EU is a good idea?

James Cleverly: The Government's position is that the referendum result is binding until it is delivered.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will not the biggest danger to confidence in democracy come when the promised sunlit uplands fail to materialise? Is not the only way out of this mess to go back to the people and ask them to exercise their democratic choice?

James Cleverly: The British people have already exercised their democratic choice. I do not subscribe to the negative predictions that the hon. Gentleman and others have made about a post-Brexit British future. More importantly, international businesses do not agree with him; inward investment into the UK is still flourishing. The employment market does not agree with his predictions either, because unemployment is still reducing and employment is still increasing. I am confident—the Government are

confident—that there is a bright future ahead for this country outside the European Union. That is what we are committed to delivering and that is what we are working towards.

Security

15. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the merits of continued co-operation with the EU on security after the UK leaves the EU; and if he will make a statement. [910934]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Last week, I was in Sibiu, where I made clear that we face common and evolving threats to European security. Those threats demand close co-operation and the UK has a leading role to play in that.

Michael Fabricant: My right hon. Friend will know that the Bundesnachrichtendienst has already made it absolutely clear that the United Kingdom is one of the biggest intelligence services in the world and a member of Five Eyes and that Europe is dependent on the United Kingdom for intelligence. We also wish to co-operate with them. Does that not make complete nonsense of what some Opposition Members say—that if we left the EU, without a deal or otherwise, the EU would not continue to co-operate with us for its own benefit?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that there is a shared interest between the UK and the European Union in close collaboration on security. He is right that the UK is the only European member of the Five Eyes intelligence network and that we are the only EU country that contributes both the NATO 2% and the overseas aid 0.7% commitments. It is in both sides' interests to work closely on our shared challenges, because many of those challenges lie beyond Europe.

No-deal Expenditure

17. **Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): How much Government Departments have spent on preparations for leaving the EU without a deal. [910937]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (James Cleverly): Additional EU exit funding allocated by Her Majesty's Treasury to Departments and devolved Administrations covers all scenarios. No-deal spending cannot readily be separated from deal spending, given the significant overlap in plans in many cases. Since 2016, the Treasury has allocated more than £2.4 billion of funding for all exit scenarios.¹

Mr McFadden: Despite talking up and legitimising a no-deal outcome for two years, the Prime Minister applied for two different extensions to the article 50 period to avoid that outcome, because she knows it would be damaging to the country. The Minister talks of £2.4 billion. Would that money not have been better spent on the fight against knife crime, on helping families struggling to cope with universal credit or on 100 other causes that would benefit our constituents, rather than on an argument that, by the Prime Minister's actions, she has shown she does not even believe in?

1. [Official Report, 20 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 6MC.]

James Cleverly: Her Majesty's Government have never had the policy to take no deal off the table; the House has committed the Government through votes to do so. The right hon. Gentleman talks about spending in other Departments. We have, for example, seen record spending in the national health service, making good on the Government's commitment. If he does not want to see any more money spent on no-deal preparations, it is incumbent on him to bring this to a conclusion, and the best way of doing so is by voting for the withdrawal agreement Bill when it is presented to the House, giving this country certainty and the ability to move forward in a post-Brexit world.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In an op-ed in *The Sun* on Saturday, the Brexit Secretary argued that

"it would be inexcusable for the Government to not use the coming months to continue to prepare"

for no deal. Indeed, based on his answers today, no doubt he would like to accelerate those preparations. However, as the public know, given that they get advance sight of pending public rows in their morning newspapers, the Chancellor of the Exchequer takes a different view. He recently issued an edict that no further Treasury money will be provided for no-deal planning ahead of the 31 October deadline. When it comes to no-deal planning, will the new Under-Secretary tell us who actually speaks for the Government?

James Cleverly: The Treasury has already allocated money for no-deal preparation. We continue to prepare for no deal, because at the moment there is still the possibility that on 31 October the United Kingdom will leave with no deal. Members of the House who are uncomfortable with that position can take a no-deal Brexit off the table by voting for a withdrawal agreement and leaving with a deal, which remains the Government's policy. If we were to do that, we could move on to the second stage of the negotiations and set about creating a strong working relationship with our European partners and other nations around the world.

Support for Fisheries

18. **David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What discussions he has had with Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on support for the fisheries sector after the UK leaves the EU. [910938]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We continue to work closely with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on supporting our fishing industry. The Government's vision for a sustainable and profitable fishing sector was set out in the fisheries White Paper in July 2018. As an independent coastal state, we will control access to UK waters and pursue a fairer share of fishing opportunities for the benefit of fishermen in Banff and Buchan and across the UK.

David Duguid: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. Will he confirm that, whatever form the withdrawal agreement takes, we will leave the common fisheries policy, as he just said, and take part in annual negotiations as an independent coastal state no later than December 2020?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is right. He continues to be a passionate and persistent champion of the fishing industry in his constituency. The best way to ensure our taking part in those negotiations by December 2020 is to vote for the withdrawal agreement, as he and I have done, to secure those rights, and not to try to trap us in the common fisheries policy as the SNP has done.

Legal Services

19. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that the UK's future relationship with the EU enables continued trade in legal services. [910939]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The UK is a world leader in the provision of legal services. English law has a reputation for excellence across the world. The political declaration outlined the EU and the UK's commitment to ambitious arrangements for services and investment that go well beyond World Trade Organisation terms and existing EU free trade agreements.

Bambos Charalambous: Legal services in the UK are a success story, with the sector making a significant contribution to the economy each year. The Law Society estimates it at about £25.7 billion, with £4.4 billion in net exports and 370,000 jobs. That relies in part on uniform market access across the EU and the European economic area. Will the Minister therefore work with representatives from the legal sector to ensure that it is maintained by the UK-EU future relationship?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman is a diligent member of the Justice Committee, and he is absolutely right about the importance of the UK legal services sector to exports and its contribution to the economy. We have listened to EU leaders, and we understand and respect the position that the four freedoms of the single market are indivisible and there can be no cherry-picking. Although we are not seeking single market membership, we are seeking ambitious arrangements for services and investment that build on recent EU FTAs. We are working closely with colleagues from the Ministry of Justice and engaging with industry stakeholders, including the Law Society, to achieve a deal that works for the UK legal services sector in terms of both market access and civil judicial co-operation.

Topical Questions

T1. [910941] **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Since our last questions session, over the past six weeks the Government and the Opposition have held constructive meetings. The Prime Minister met the Leader of the Opposition earlier this week, and discussions continue with the aim of reaching a compromise that could command a majority in the House. The Prime Minister has also said that the Government will introduce the withdrawal agreement Bill in the first week after the recess, which will allow more time for the talks to continue, but with a view to ratifying the withdrawal agreement before the summer recess.

Bambos Charalambous: Can the Secretary of State confirm that the withdrawal agreement Bill will include the Government's proposal for legislation to enshrine the backstop in UK law?

Stephen Barclay: Yes, because the withdrawal agreement will need to be ratified, and ratification includes the Northern Ireland protocol.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I wonder if the excellent Secretary of State has had an opportunity to watch "Brexit: Behind Closed Doors". The BBC has hidden it away on BBC Four, but it is quite a revealing programme. In it, the lead negotiator for our exit from the European Union, Olly Robbins—who I think is in Brussels this week—says that because he has done such a rotten deal he cannot come back to the United Kingdom and is applying for Belgian citizenship. Is that appropriate, Secretary of State?

Stephen Barclay: Without straying too much into my television viewing habits of recent weeks, I must confess to my hon. Friend that I am intending to watch that documentary. I have seen clips of it, including the one to which he has referred. As he will appreciate, given my current diary, I do not have a huge amount of television time, but I will be sure to make time to watch it in the coming days.

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): In February, the Secretary of State told the House:

"the withdrawal agreement Bill is a significant piece of legislation and we will need to get it through the House, but the key issue is getting the deal through, because once we have done that, we will have the basis for the necessary consensus in the House to approach that legislation."—[*Official Report*, 28 February 2019; Vol. 655, c. 505.]

That makes sense—deal first, implement second—so will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Government are going to hold a fourth meaningful vote before the withdrawal agreement Bill is introduced, or whether the House will be asked to do the opposite of what he advocated in February and implement a deal that has not been approved?

Stephen Barclay: I do not want to stray into territory that is rightly much more a matter for the Chair, but I think I am correct in saying, Mr Speaker, that you have been very clear in your directions regarding meaningful votes and whether they would be considered. As for the deal, we have talked about whether an agreement could be reached with the Opposition. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, those talks are ongoing, including the discussion between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition this week. We have made it clear, and the Prime Minister has made it clear, that we will bring the withdrawal agreement legislation to the House in the week after the recess, and the House will have an opportunity to vote at that point.

Keir Starmer: I should have thought it was patently obvious that if the Prime Minister's deal is put to the House for the fourth time—if that is allowed—it will fail, just as it has failed three times already.

Let me make it clear that Labour opposes the idea of passing the withdrawal agreement Bill without an agreed deal. That would put the cart before the horse, and

Labour will therefore vote against the Bill's Second Reading. How on earth does the Secretary of State think that a Bill to implement a deal that is not before the House can be passed in two weeks' time—or is this about keeping the Prime Minister in office for another week and giving her a lifeline for today's meeting of the 1922 Committee?

Stephen Barclay: The talks with the Opposition Front Bench team have been going on for over six weeks, and the House has now looked at the meaningful vote on three occasions and made its view clear. The question therefore arises, as came through in amendments from a number of Members of this House—such as the Snell-Nandy amendment—whether there are changes to the withdrawal agreement Bill that would enable it to command wider support. It is on that basis that not only have we had those discussions but indeed the right hon. and learned Gentleman has welcomed them. When the House sees that legislation, it will be for it to decide whether it commands a majority of the House. The right hon. and learned Gentleman's personal position might be that what is in that text is irrelevant, because he personally wants to have a second referendum, but that is not the basis on which the discussions have been held; that may be his personal position, but it is not, as I understand it, the official position of the Leader of the Opposition. It will be for the House to make a decision, and the Prime Minister has made it clear that there will be an opportunity for it to do that in the week after the recess.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The Secretary of State looks physically fit and is in good shape and I expect he goes to the gym a lot. If he decided to leave his gym and the gym said to him, "You've got to give us two years' notice; when you leave, you have to pay four years' worth of membership fees up front; and after you've left, we're still going to control your fitness programme," would he regard that as a good deal or a bad deal?

Stephen Barclay: I fear that we are straying slightly into territory that is not primarily relevant to the legislation we will be considering after the recess. My gym attendance is a bit like my television viewing: a little non-existent at present. The point is that we as a House know that we need to confront not just the issue of the legislation in the withdrawal agreement but the consequences that would flow from it. When I gave evidence to the Lords Select Committee yesterday, in the usual joyful comments to which my social media feeds are accustomed, people seemed surprised that if we do not leave the EU with a deal, the House will need to face a choice as to whether it then leaves without a deal or whether Members of this House, as they have done with no deal before, seek to prevent that and seek to revoke such an outcome. I do not think that that is a revelation, although it seemed to be greeted as one; I think it is simply a statement of fact and logic, and Members of the House need to confront that when they consider the withdrawal agreement Bill that comes before the House after the recess.

T2. [910943] **Alex Cunningham** (Stockton North) (Lab): It is three years since the EU referendum and the chemical industry on Teesside and beyond is still nervous about the future. That is having a major impact on jobs and investment. Time and again, I have raised this issue

with Ministers, and time and again they have failed to provide the assurances needed; what has the Brexit Secretary got to say now?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Kwasi Kwarteng): I am very pleased that the hon. Gentleman has raised that question. I have not visited his constituency exactly, but I have been to Teesport and seen many representatives of the chemicals industry, and the one thing they are very anxious to do is create some certainty: they want this phase of the Brexit process to be completed and feel we should back the deal and back the withdrawal agreement. They have, unlike many Opposition Members, accepted the result of the referendum and want to move forward with this process.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What preparations have the Government made to establish a UK investment bank to take over the responsibilities and functions of the European Investment Bank and indeed to do more for investment in the infrastructure and businesses of the UK?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): My hon. Friend raises an important point. As the Treasury has set out, there will be extra support for the British Business Bank to play a role in that regard. I would also point him towards the important role of the UK shared prosperity fund in replacing elements of structural funding.

T3. [910945] **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** The Secretary of State said earlier that a no-deal scenario would be harmful to the economy and threaten the integrity of the United Kingdom, but he then also said that he would support a no-deal scenario rather than remaining in the European Union. So is he saying that threatening the integrity of the Union of the United Kingdom is actually a price worth paying for a hard Tory Brexit?

Stephen Barclay: What I am saying is that there will be consequences to both options. Revoke would involve a betrayal of democracy, going back on the commitments that this House has given and having a divisive, but not decisive, second referendum that could end up with the same result as before. Businesses are experiencing uncertainty, including in Dundee, where I was on Thursday. It has the fastest growing chamber of commerce in the United Kingdom, and people there want to see a deal and to see this country move forward. That is the way forward, but if we do not support a deal, a no-deal would have consequences. However, the much more severe consequences would be those for our democracy and for our international reputation as a country if we were to undermine such a major democratic decision.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Is planning still continuing for a no-deal situation, and is the Treasury providing adequate resources for it?

Stephen Barclay: I can absolutely confirm to my hon. Friend that planning is continuing for no deal and that funding is allocated. It is important for the Government to use the time that we have between now and 31 October

to ensure that we are prepared, should that eventuality arise, but it is in our interests to secure a deal so that that becomes unnecessary.

T4. [910947] **Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op):** Nottingham has two world-class universities, and EU nationals on the academic staff and the student body make an extraordinary contribution to those schools. Can the Secretary of State give me a categorical assurance that, however Brexit is resolved, there will be no extra burdens impairing the contribution of EU nationals to those institutions?

Mr Robin Walker: EU nationals play a really important part in all our universities, and I regularly meet the university sector to discuss them. We will absolutely continue to welcome EU nationals to study at our universities after Brexit, but of course, part of the arrangements between us will depend on the future relationship, which will be determined in the next phase of the negotiations. I want to move on so that we can secure the best possible future relationship for our universities.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Secretary of State set out for the House why a customs union is the wrong policy choice for the future success of the UK economy?

Stephen Barclay: As we set out in our manifesto, it is in the interests of this country to have an independent trade policy. That is what the Prime Minister has negotiated, and that is the best way for us to deliver the global vision, which is why my hon. Friend and I supported Brexit in the first place.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I am sure that the whole Government Front Bench team will be aware of the bad news today from Thomas Cook, whose travel business looks unsustainable as a result of the Brexit process. There is no such thing as a good Brexit, and we can only imagine the economic disaster of a madcap no-deal Brexit. Before the European elections next week, will the Secretary of State confirm that he will respect the views of this House and take a no-deal Brexit off the table completely?

Stephen Barclay: Any news regarding an individual company is always concerning, in particular because our minds turn to the staff and their families who are dealing with the situation. This is an area in which the parties traditionally come together and work together to try to resolve the issue. However, we should not take these things out of context. Only this week, we had the lowest unemployment since 1974, and that is an indication of our economic strength. When bad news is always blamed on Brexit, as some Opposition Members seem to want to do, it is always worth remembering that we have not yet left.

T5. [910950] **Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op):** Will the Secretary of State assure me that he has read the major piece of research led by King's College London and Sheffield University, alongside universities across Europe, into the impact on communities of leaving the EU on any basis? Is he as dreadfully worried as I am that many of the hardest hit will be those towns and cities that voted to leave? On

the basis of these figures, many people are predicting a 20% cut in GDP, which would turn those areas into investment and employment wastelands.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that the people in those communities that voted to leave should not be trusted with their vote, but that is not what he says at a general election when those same communities return Labour MPs. He does not say, when those people look at the economic policy of the Leader of the Opposition, that they are too stupid to be trusted with a vote, yet when it comes to the biggest vote in our country's history, he seems to be saying that their vote should not be respected.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Earlier this month, the House unanimously declared a climate change emergency. Does the Minister agree that when it comes to tackling the catastrophe that is climate change—or, for that matter, challenging the overweening arrogance of the tech giants or protecting our citizens—we are stronger and have more influence as a consequence of international agreements, and that those agreements therefore enhance rather than diminish our sovereignty?

Mr Robin Walker: I agree with every word the hon. Lady just said. That is one of the reasons why we are seeking to secure the international agreement we have

already negotiated with the European Union to allow an orderly withdrawal—one that will allow us to work together effectively on those issues in the future. Indeed, our Prime Minister has been in European capitals this week working collaboratively with other European countries.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): The Minister knows that the Government's myopic obsession with ending freedom of movement is causing a recruitment crisis in the health and social care sector—indeed, the King's Fund said recently that it was becoming a national emergency. Why are his Government determined to drag that sector into that national emergency?

Stephen Barclay: The only myopic obsession is the Scottish National party's obsession with an independence referendum. The hon. Gentleman says it is the Government's obsession, but it is the Migration Advisory Council that said this is a UK-wide issue, which needs to be approached on a UK-wide basis. I remind the House of the answer I gave earlier: there are now 700 more doctors from EU27 countries working in the NHS than there were at the time of the referendum. The numbers are going up, yet the hon. Gentleman constantly talks our country down.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Offensive Weapons Act 2019

Mental Capacity (Amendment) Act 2019.

Investigation of Veterans

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) to ask his urgent question, I remind right hon. and hon. Members that, under the House's long-standing resolution on matters sub judice, they must not make reference to individual cases currently before the courts.

10.41 am

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if she will outline the Government's plans for dealing with legacy issues and the investigation of veterans who served in Northern Ireland during the troubles.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): I begin with an apology because, as everybody will no doubt have observed by now, I am not the Secretary of State for Defence—I don't have her hair. I wanted to explain why there has been some to-ing and fro-ing since the terms of the urgent question became clear in the last hour.

I am here because we have concluded, at least for the moment, that it would be better that I try to respond to my right hon. Friend's question about soldiers serving in Northern Ireland—obviously the Northern Ireland Office addresses that directly—particularly because the rules were different when soldiers were serving in Northern Ireland. They were there in support of the police and in support of civil powers, which forms a different legal basis than the one that applies if they are fighting abroad in other kinds of conflict. I shall endeavour to be as helpful as I can to my right hon. Friend; if he has any remaining questions he wants to address, I will be happy to follow through with him later, but let me at least try to respond to the burden of his urgent question as it was asked.

I strongly agree, as I suspect that all Members on both sides of the House will strongly agree, that my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that the current system—the current situation—in Northern Ireland is not working properly for people on all sides. It is clearly unsupportable and it is unfair in many ways. If a former soldier or a former police officer—perhaps now in their 70s—is concerned about being pursued through the courts for events that happened 30 or 40 years ago, that is a constant worry to them, their family and their friends. Equally, a family member of a victim of republican terrorists in a case where the perpetrators were never brought to justice has a feeling of great worry and concern, and has difficulty moving on. That concern affects people on all sides of the community in Northern Ireland, and my right hon. Friend is absolutely right that it has to be addressed.

It is for that reason that not just the Government but—I think I am right in saying—parties on both sides of the House and right the way across Northern Ireland believe that a new approach is vital if we are to put this right. That was why the original Stormont House agreement was announced some years ago, and it is why most recently we have been consulting on how to take this forward. We received more than 17,000 responses to the consultation, which shows the depth, breadth and intensity of concern about the current situation. We have now

[John Penrose]

pretty much finished going through those responses. Some trends are starting to emerge, and we will of course bring them to the House as soon as we decently and responsibly can.

One thing is clear to everybody: everyone agrees on the aim. The difficulty is that, 30 or 40 years after some of the events of the troubles, we need a process that, while having a judicial element, is broader than just judicial. It must allow all sides of the community in Northern Ireland to establish the truth, where it can be established, be fair to all sides and allow people—society as a whole—to draw a line and move on.

While comparisons cannot be exact, because the situation in Northern Ireland is unlike anything else on the planet, this has been done in other societies. One famous example, of course, is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Clearly, that would not work precisely in Northern Ireland, but it is essential that we find an equivalent process that aims at the same outcome of allowing people to feel that justice is being achieved with the truth established, wherever it can be, so that closure can be achieved for all sides on an equal basis wherever possible. That matters particularly for soldiers and police officers who served in Northern Ireland, but also for the families and grieving loved ones of victims.

I will endeavour to respond to my right hon. Friend's further questions—I am sure he has many—but I hope that helps to set the scene.

Mr Francois: I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for allowing this urgent question. There has been a great deal of media speculation over the last week about what the Ministry of Defence and the Northern Ireland Office want to do, yet no information has been given to the House. I sought this UQ to try to achieve some clarity—we will see how we get on, Sir.

The Secretary of State for Defence gave a very confident and front-footed speech at the Royal United Services Institute yesterday. I was in the audience and it was an excellent speech. She mentioned her intention to try to provide legal protection particularly for veterans who had served in the campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. We have seen articles in *The Times* and elsewhere to that effect, but thus far I am afraid we have had no specific details. If press reports are accurate, the MOD is aiming at something along the lines of a statute of limitations, taking force perhaps 10 years after a conflict has ended, after which no prosecution would be possible unless exceptional or compelling evidence were to come forward.

If that is the case, the Defence Secretary would be honouring the Conservative party's 2017 manifesto—that would make a nice change—which reads:

“We will protect our brave armed forces personnel from persistent legal claims, which distress those who risk their lives for us, cost the taxpayer millions and undermine the armed forces”.

That is plain as a pikestaff, and if she is to do it, well and good, but we would like more details.

I will explain one reason why this is so pressing, in terms of the persecution of Iraq veterans. The MOD set up the Iraq Historic Allegations Team, which spent years looking into these cases, but unfortunately it became a racket. Several law firms—particularly the

ironically named Public Interest Lawyers, led by an appalling man called Phil Shiner—trawled Iraq to encourage people to come forward and make false allegations. Basically, they made some of it up. That all came out in a court case when the trial collapsed after they admitted that they had fabricated evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer)—a fellow member of the Defence Committee—then conducted a Sub-Committee inquiry into IHAT, which proved so shocking that the then Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), shut the team down. I am sure that the whole House would agree that we must never do that again.

Turning to Northern Ireland, the Minister—I have a great deal of time for him, but perhaps slightly less time for his Department—rightly said that the NIO, under the Stormont House agreement, agreed with the parties in Northern Ireland to establish so-called legacy institutions to look into the past. The NIO's interpretation of that means that it will set up some form of commission that will go back 50 years to 1968-69 and re-examine every fatality since—some 3,500 cases. Any serviceman or member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, George Cross, who fired a fatal shot will therefore be reinvestigated. However, the alleged terrorists will not because, under the Good Friday agreement, Tony Blair gave them so-called letters of comfort, which mean that they are immune from prosecution. No alleged terrorist who was given one of those letters has been successfully prosecuted. The nearest we came was with the alleged Hyde Park bomber, but when he produced his letter of comfort in court, the judge abandoned the trial and declared an abuse of process. The entire process will be utterly one-sided, because service personnel and members of the RUC GC will be liable to prosecution, while those with letters of comfort get off scot-free.

After the appalling, tragic events in Londonderry, we all want the Northern Ireland Executive re-established—of course we do—but that cannot come at the price of some rancid, backstairs deal between the NIO and Sinn Féin-IRA that sells Corporal Johnny Atkins down the river. Up with that, I believe, this House will not put. We have a moral duty to defend those who defended us, and we abrogate that duty if, for reasons of political convenience, we allow the scapegoating of our veterans to pander to terrorists.

I want to ask the Minister six very specific questions—

Mr Speaker: Order. The challenge for the right hon. Gentleman is to do so before he reaches six minutes. He is brilliant, but he is no more addicted to brevity than I am.

Mr Francois: We are both addicts, Mr Speaker.

First, while I know that the Ministry of Defence is not the Minister's Department, will he give us some indication of when the MOD will provide the House with more details of its proposals? Secondly, when will the NIO publish the response to the consultation on legacy issues to which the Minister referred? Thirdly, will the Minister confirm that a Bill will be required to set up the legacy institutions—or, as I call them, IHAT mark II? Fourthly, what discussions have taken place between NIO Ministers and civil servants, and Sinn Féin-IRA, and is there any truth in the rumours that

they have demanded the continued investigation of British veterans as the price of re-entering the Executive? Fifthly, when will the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland come to the House to make an oral statement to update us so that Members can question her in detail about the NIO's proposals?

Sixthly, and lastly, what would the Minister say to former Royal Marine David Griffin, aged 78, whom I met on Monday? He is being reinvestigated for a shooting in 1972 for which he was investigated, and completely cleared, at the time? If he wants to discuss the matter with Mr Griffin in person, would he be kind enough to go down to the Royal Hospital Chelsea, because that is where he now lives?

John Penrose: I will endeavour to respond to those six points, but may I begin by saying that I am sure that my right hon. Friend speaks for everybody in this House—he certainly speaks for me—when he says that we will have no rancid political deals here? That is not acceptable. If we are going to ask people potentially to put their lives on the line by serving in Her Majesty's armed forces anywhere in the world, we need to make sure that we do the right thing by them when they have done the right thing by their country. As somebody who has served and who understands the importance of military discipline, my right hon. Friend will know that that is not unqualified, because there are rules within the armed forces. However, provided that people have adhered to those rules, we in this place, on both sides of the aisle, and more broadly across society, owe something in return, so there absolutely will be no rancid political deals on my watch, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be absolutely certain to make sure that that will not happen more broadly.

Before I come to my right hon. Friend's six questions, may I put him right on a couple of other things? On his point about whether or not the Secretary of State announced a statute of limitations or an intention to move towards one, he is right that the details have not yet been fully put out. I understand that there will be a consultation with more details attached to it. Some press reports are talking about a presumption of non-prosecution rather than a statute of limitations; we will have to wait and see.

My right hon. Friend's first question was about when the MOD will publish details. I am afraid that I cannot answer that as a Northern Ireland Office Minister. I imagine it will want to move forward fairly briskly, but to get a categorical answer, I am afraid he will have to raise that point either privately or at the next Defence questions.

Mr Francois: On Monday.

John Penrose: Exactly.

My right hon. Friend also made a point about the letters of comfort that were issued by a previous Government. I reassure him and other Members that legal reports have been issued on those letters since the cases that he mentioned saying that they are not an amnesty from prosecution. If a case can be made, letters of comfort will not in future be body armour against prosecution—[*Interruption.*] He is right to say that we will have to wait and see how that plays out when or if one of the cases comes to court, but that is the latest and strongest legal situation.

My right hon. Friend asked when we will publish the responses to the consultation. We have received 17,000 responses, and the answer is as soon as we decently can. We are very nearly there. It has taken a very long time to go through those responses. As I am sure that everybody will appreciate, they came from people with stories of tragedy to tell, so they needed to be gone through with a degree of respect and care, as I am sure that everyone would expect. It has taken some time to go through the process properly and to honour the reasons why people wrote in. We are very nearly there and we will bring them forward as soon as we decently can.

My right hon. Friend asked whether a Bill would be required to put new legacy arrangements in place as and when we come up with proposals. The answer is almost certainly yes, so the House will have an opportunity for full scrutiny according to the usual process—I suspect that that was why he asked the question. Everybody will have a chance to ask detailed questions about how this thing is being put together—

Mr Francois: And to vote on it.

John Penrose: To vote on it, and to confirm the important point, on which my right hon. Friend and I agree, that no rancid deals have been done.

My right hon. Friend asked whether Sinn Féin-IRA, as he characterised them, demanded a price in the talks. Not to my knowledge at all, but I think that goes back to his point about no rancid deals.

My right hon. Friend asked when the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland would make a statement on our plans. I think the answer to that is as soon as we have had a chance to discuss the issue in detail with different parties, both in Northern Ireland and here. I hope all Members will understand that while there is agreement on the direction and the outcome that everybody wants, the details matter hugely. He gave examples of real concerns about the initial set of Stormont agreement proposals for dealing with legacy. He could have given examples about other concerns. We have to deal with those and come up with proposals that work in detail and that have acceptance from all sides of the community in Northern Ireland. It is worth everybody's while to take a little bit of extra time now to get the details right to come up with a process that everyone can live with, and to do the detailed design work—the pre-legislative scrutiny, if you like—so that we get that essential work right. The answer, therefore, is as soon as we decently can, but given the sensitivities involved and the precision required to come up with a process that, after decades, will stand the test of time and of warring views within Northern Ireland society, I hope my right hon. Friend will understand that we need something that is robust and put together with enormous care.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Minister rightly began by talking about victims—those who were killed, those who were killed unlawfully—and the families of those victims, who all these years on still seek truth and to know what has happened to their loved ones. As a matter of record, which I know the Minister will confirm, the overwhelming majority of the killings that took place in Northern Ireland were committed by paramilitaries, republican or loyalist—

Mr Francois Terrorists.

Tony Lloyd: I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in using that word. Therefore, by definition, those were illegal and in need of investigation, where there can be no bar because of the passage of time. Every serving soldier swears an oath of allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, to

“observe and obey all orders of Her Majesty, Her heirs and successors and of the generals and officers set over me.”

It should be axiomatic that when a soldier has obeyed those Queen’s regulations and acted within the orders set out, that individual soldier should be protected from vexatious attacks—that is legitimate whether in foreign fields or in the context of Northern Ireland. But I have to say to the Minister, and I am not sure he wants to disagree with me on this, that it is very hard for me to recognise that when a soldier has broken that solemn oath of allegiance to the Queen—a solemn oath to uphold our laws—and wilfully broken it, leading to the death of individuals, that should be put beyond time for investigation. We have to be very clear in this House that investigating the most serious crimes, where death has taken place, we have to be resolute and absolute in saying there can be no statute of limitations. Crime is crime. Murder is murder, and we need to establish as a House, as a nation, that our principles uphold the rule of law and uphold not simply our international obligations, but our moral obligations.

In that context, can the Minister confirm specifically that the Police Service of Northern Ireland now—and any other investigatory body—will, by law, be enjoined to investigate those most serious crimes, whether committed by republican terrorists, loyalist terrorists or those in the police service or the Army who wilfully have broken our laws? That is the important distinction. The important distinction is between protection from vexatious claims for those who legitimately carried out the Queen’s orders—that is right and proper and we should establish that—and no protection for those who wilfully broke our laws.

John Penrose: I think the hon. Gentleman is making a central and uncontroversial point, but we need to be very careful in how we approach it. He has to be right that outright crimes such as murder must be pursued, and be pursued even-handedly. In defence of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), I should say that I do not think he is suggesting anything else.

As I was saying earlier, military discipline means that the duty we all owe to members of Her Majesty’s armed forces is not an unqualified one—there are limits to it for people who may have failed to follow the orders they were given or failed to act in the right way. But we need to be careful about being resolutely even-handed about it. One of the many difficulties that many people have about the situation currently in Northern Ireland is that it is extremely difficult to mount effective investigations into many of these deaths. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that the majority of the deaths that occurred originated from republican terrorists, and it is therefore difficult in many cases to find enough evidence to make those cases stand up in court. It is not necessarily a question of prosecuting authorities not trying to be even-handed; they have to be able to follow evidence that is available to them and see whether or not there is a decent case.

The fact remains that the Government are a great deal better at maintaining records 30 or 40 years later than perhaps the IRA was at all. It is therefore extremely difficult to pursue some cases, which is one of the major reasons—it may not be the only one—why, to many eyes, the ratio of prosecutions is as skewed as I think the hon. Gentleman was trying to suggest. That is the concern that people have, but I can reassure him, as I am sure everybody else present would, that it has to be everybody’s intention to pursue cases for which there is evidence on a completely even-handed basis. We obviously need to make sure that we deal with all the others, too, which is why we have to have a process that is broader than just a judicial one and that allows people to get to the truth, in so far as it ever can be reached at this late stage, to move on with their lives and to draw a line under a pretty terrible series of episodes in Northern Ireland’s past.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have an interest to declare, having served in Iraq. With respect to the consultation, what trend has emerged in the views of veterans of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and might we be surprised by it?

John Penrose: The simple answer to that is that the analysis is only just starting to emerge now, and I have not seen it broken down in the way that my right hon. Friend describes, so I am afraid I cannot give him a factual answer. Once the results are out, I am sure people will pore over them and we may then be able to come up with an answer. I apologise that I cannot come up with a solid factual answer for my right hon. Friend at the moment.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We acknowledge the challenges that come with military service. We do need to be sensitive to those challenges and to recognise the volatile circumstances that came with serving in Northern Ireland during the troubles, but nobody is above the law. The Good Friday agreement remains incredibly important today, and we have a duty to defer to the frameworks underneath it. When he was Prime Minister, David Cameron gave a formal apology for the events of Bloody Sunday. He said:

“What happened on Bloody Sunday was both unjustified and unjustifiable. It was wrong.”—[*Official Report*, 15 June 2010; Vol. 511, c. 739.]

I suggest that, having acknowledged that, it is reasonable that we determine whether—whether—anyone is culpable of criminality for the events of Bloody Sunday. Are the Government committed to ensuring that those who lost loved ones, on all sides of the conflict, have the means to pursue both justice and truth?

John Penrose: The straightforward answer to that last question is yes, and I do not think there is any disagreement, on either side of the House, about that central aim. The question, of course—I think this is inherent in what the hon. Lady asked—is about the details of how. Once we have had a chance to announce to the House the results of the consultation, we will need to start work on the detailed reactions to that consultation, to formulate a Bill that will be acceptable to deliver what we are talking about in a way that works for all sides of the community in Northern Ireland.

On the point about Bloody Sunday cases, the hon. Lady will of course be aware that the Director of Public Prosecutions recently announced, having reviewed all the various different cases, that all but one of them will not be taken forward. There is not enough evidence for any sort of reasonable prospect of a prosecution, so all but one of them have been withdrawn.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I completed seven tours in Northern Ireland, all with the infantry or associated units. I lost many men and I was involved in fatality shootings. I was investigated, along with others. The investigations were thorough, aggressive and bloody awful to go through. When the investigations were completed, we sometimes had to go to court to prove that we had acted in accordance with the yellow card. In 1978, I told two soldiers who were with me that because they had been to court and been proved innocent and had acted within the law, they would never, ever be asked to do such a thing again. How the hell can our Government allow such people possibly to be investigated again?

John Penrose: My hon. and gallant Friend speaks with huge authority given his personal background and experience in the armed forces. I think the whole House understands that the examples that he has just given are a specific and very good illustration of my earlier comments in response to the initial question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) about why the current situation is not working properly for anybody. We need to get to a point where, unless there is some brand new and credible piece of evidence that changes the situation, but in most cases that is not the case—

Bob Stewart: They asked them to come and give evidence.

John Penrose: Exactly so. Unless there is something that is brand new and that was not available at the time—in the vast majority of cases that is not the case—then at that point people should be entitled to consider that they do not have to face further pursuance through the court. Therefore, my point is that we must get this sorted and sorted soon, and we must come up with a process that works for all the different sides of the equation, as I laid out in my initial response. I guess what I am saying is that we are in violent agreement on this. My hon. and gallant Friend illustrates forcefully and accurately why the current situation is not acceptable and cannot be allowed to stand.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response so far. Will he explain the fundamental difference between soldiers following orders in uniform in Afghanistan and Iraq and soldiers following orders in uniform in Northern Ireland, other than a drive by militant republicans to rewrite history to make it seem as if their bloodlust against Captain Nairac and the three Scottish soldiers and all those other men and women slaughtered by evil people was in some way acceptable? We must have equal treatment for all who have served in Army uniform wherever it was, or is, in the world.

John Penrose: May I start by saying that I certainly agree with the underlying premise of the hon. Gentleman's point, which is that we need to make sure that we are

doing the right thing by our armed forces? The difficulty lies with the legal underpinnings. The legal difference between soldiers serving abroad versus soldiers serving in Northern Ireland in support of the police is important. It means that our route to arriving at the goal that he wants to get us to, and that I want to get us to, has to be a different one. Let me take a specific case in point: people who suggest that we should have some kind of a statute of limitations for forces that have been serving abroad need to realise that if we try to do that in the UK, that statute of limitations, according to human rights law, would have to apply to all sides of the conflict in Northern Ireland.

Mr Francois: They got letters of comfort. They are scot-free.

John Penrose: The Northern Ireland letters of comfort, as I have already said, do not stop prosecutions under the latest legal guidance. Therefore, we have to come up with something that gets us to the point that the hon. Gentleman is trying to illustrate, but it must have a different legal foundation to it. I wish it were simpler. I wish that it were not the case, but it is and we have to take the world as we find it. That should be an explanation about why it is hard, but not a satisfactory justification for not trying and not getting there, and not getting there soon.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I say to the Minister of State that I have every sympathy with his position at the Dispatch Box? I did exactly the same and had exactly the same advice, which was fundamentally wrong, when I was in the Northern Ireland Office as well as in the Ministry of Defence. Like many colleagues, I served in Northern Ireland. When I came back, I was given a general service medal. I was on operations. To us, peacekeeping there was no different to peacekeeping anywhere else in the world. That is what British Army soldiers do. To stand here and say that there is a legal difference between a soldier going on ops in Iraq, Cyprus or anywhere else in the world and a soldier going on ops in Northern Ireland is fundamentally wrong, and I challenged and challenged and challenged that advice. How on earth have we got into this position where we will not defend our own soldiers because of some technicality that we were not on ops? We were on ops and we were defending the public and our guys were killed. I will not have terrorists mentioned in the same breath as British soldiers.

John Penrose: I could not agree more. My right hon. Friend rightly points out that he has stood in my shoes on this issue. I am sure he is absolutely right that, to anybody serving in Her Majesty's armed forces—whether they served in peacekeeping operations or not, and whether they served in Northern Ireland or in other parts of the world—the practical effect will feel the same.

Sir Mike Penning: I was given a medal for it.

John Penrose: As my right hon. Friend rightly points out, he was given a medal for it. The only point on which I would pull him up is that, although the practical effect may feel the same, the legal underpinnings—again, I appreciate that he contested this—are different. Although

[John Penrose]

we may wish that were not so, it is so. Therefore, we have to come up with something that will withstand legal challenge. As my right hon. Friend for Rayleigh and Wickford rightly pointed out, there are people out there who will try to knock legal holes in any answer that we come up with unless it is legally robust. We have to acknowledge the legal difference and find an answer that works, even though we are trying to get to the same answer in each case. If we cannot do that, we may come up with something that sounds great when we announce it, but that will get legal holes knocked in it; and that would mean that we were not protecting our veterans in the way in which everybody here wants us to do.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I represent Darlington, which is the nearest large town to Catterick garrison, so there are many hundreds of veterans living in my constituency. None of them has ever asked or expected to be treated differently or as if they were above the law in any situation, but there is deep concern about this issue. There is also deep concern in the wider community that individual soldiers may be held responsible for failings that they alone do not own—that a lack of preparedness, or a lack of understanding or anticipation of the context in which they would be serving at the time, may have led to certain things happening that those individuals could be held responsible for. That is a real and deep worry. Will the Minister assure me that individual veterans in my constituency will not be held responsible for actions that they alone are not responsible for?

John Penrose: That is precisely why we need to come up with these proposals as fast as we can. It is clear from both sides of the House that the time for action is now—well, it was probably several years ago actually—and that this situation cannot be allowed to persist. The hon. Lady's example is only one of a spectrum of concerns, depending on which part of the community one talks to in Northern Ireland and who one talks to in the UK. However, that concern is absolutely valid and we cannot allow this situation to continue. We will come back to this as soon as it is decent to do so; and by “decent”, I mean when we have a chance of getting something that is practically going to work, rather than something that sounds good as a soundbite. We need to ensure that this thing works under legal challenge.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Is it not ironic that throughout the whole Brexit process we have been bending over backwards to treat Northern Ireland the same as the rest of the UK, and we are now about to treat Northern Ireland differently? I understand the sensitivities of the Good Friday agreement and the Stormont House agreement, but surely this can be sorted out with robust and strong leadership. I put it to the Minister that no other country in the world would treat their veterans in this way. He goes on about taking more time, and going through this and that. All this time, veterans—including in my constituency—are suffering.

John Penrose: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I certainly did not want to imply that we are countenancing being leisurely about this. This situation has been wrong for many years. The only reason for not announcing something tomorrow—or, indeed, today or yesterday—is

simply that we need to ensure that we have put all the answers from the consultation out and in front of the House, so people have a chance to work through the details and ask, “All right, what does this mean in practice then?” We need to move as fast as we can, but it has to be as fast as we can in a way that is consistent with forging a consensus in Northern Ireland. We have to ensure that whatever answer we come up with sticks, survives and works for both sides of the community, otherwise it will come unravelled in the fullness of time and we will have failed to protect our veterans from the kind of problems that we have all heard about and that I think everyone here agrees are absolutely unacceptable.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is quite right when he says that this question really ought to be answered by the Secretary of State for Defence, because it is her intervention that has left the Government with a policy that is totally lacking in any coherence.

Quite apart from the inconsistencies that others have highlighted, we are now, we understand from the Secretary of State for Defence, to disapply the European convention on human rights in this area. Is that Government policy that she speaks of, and if so, where does the Minister, as a Minister of State in the Northern Ireland Office, think that leaves the Good Friday agreement?

John Penrose: Let me first address the right hon. Gentleman's point about whether this is a matter for the Ministry of Defence or the Northern Ireland Office. He is of course right that the Ministry of Defence has a major, major stake in getting this right. As he would expect—as everybody would expect—the Secretary of State for Defence wants to make sure that this issue is dealt with as promptly as possible. The Ministry of Defence is not the only Department to have a stake, because clearly there are former police officers in Northern Ireland—members of the PSNI—who could also be vulnerable to such predatory legal attack, or whatever, and we need to make sure that they are properly dealt with too. He is right that the MOD is a vital part, but it is not all of it, and that is why the issue goes broader than just veterans of Her Majesty's armed forces.

On human rights, as I said earlier, all we have to go on at the moment are the press reports and the outlines of the Secretary of State for Defence's proposals. I did not see those as having—and I do not think she meant them to have—anything to do with contradicting human rights. It is clear that anything we come up with, if it is to be legally robust, has to be compliant with article 2 in human rights terms, because if we do not have a process that is compliant with article 2, we will have failed to protect our veterans, whether they are former members of the armed forces or former members of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. If we fail to protect them from proper legal challenge because we have designed a process that is not compliant with article 2, we will have failed in our duty and failed to deliver what everybody here, of all parties, wishes to achieve.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I understand that the Legacy Inquest Unit is powering through its work. May I urge the Minister to consider the timescale for inquests while considering what other bodies he is going

to set up? May I also urge him to make sure that veterans are properly supported throughout the inquest process? To most people, an inquest looks like a court and smells like a court, and it is very important that they are helped through the process.

John Penrose: My hon. Friend makes a very important point about people facing current cases, regardless of whether we wish to design an alternative process that may mean in future many of them will not have to undergo the process, which I think everybody here agrees would be sensible where possible and appropriate. For those who have to do so, however, we absolutely need to make sure that there is proper legal support. As I said, I would regard that as absolutely part of the duty that we owe to our former soldiers and other members of our armed forces.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister is speaking as though this issue has landed on him unexpectedly from a clear blue sky, but we are talking about events that happened 40 years ago, and much of it could have been predicted. Although of course we want malicious cases to be dismissed, will he confirm his exact policy on cases that may have some legitimacy but have already been tried and within which we would expect soldiers to be treated fairly?

John Penrose: I assure the hon. Gentleman that this issue has not landed on anybody's desk in the Northern Ireland Office out of a clear blue sky—it has been taking up a very large proportion of everybody's care and attention. It is probably fair to say that it was doing so under former Labour Governments as well as the current Government, and indeed the coalition Government. It is certainly not a new problem, and it has clearly defeated successive attempts to solve it. That is why we have to proceed as fast as possible, but with care.

With regard to people who have already faced cases, clearly we need to make sure that they are treated fairly within the law. Bearing in mind Mr Speaker's earlier strictures, I probably should not comment on individual cases, but I am sure that everybody here would stand up for the notion that yes, clearly, everyone should be treated fairly within the law.

James Heapey (Wells) (Con): I deployed to Afghanistan twice and to Iraq and to Northern Ireland, all in quite quick succession. I can tell the Minister that I received operational training and operational kit. I carried operational rules of engagement. I received operational pay, and I received an operational medal for all four of those tours. The distinction that a soldier is aware of the legal premise on which they are deployed is not true—it is not fair, and it stinks. Troops do not get to choose whether they deploy on an operational tour because of the legal underpinning that the Government have chosen, and it is unreasonable to assert that now. We must limit their liability immediately.

John Penrose: I completely agree. I was trying to make this point in response to a couple of earlier questions, but let me have another crack at it. For members of Her Majesty's armed forces serving on the ground, no matter where they are, if they are on similar kinds of operation, the practical effect and feel of those operations will be the same. My hon. Friend, who is my

parliamentary neighbour in Somerset, is absolutely right to make that point. It is not an acceptable justification for inaction for any Government to say, "The legal basis is different, and therefore we cannot solve this."

All I am saying is that the legal solution has to be different because the legal basis is different, even though soldiers may not care or worry about it. If we do not take that difference of legal basis into account, the answer we come up with will not work in protecting them. We want to protect them properly and successfully. If we do not, the first malicious prosecution that is mounted in a court and knocks a hole in it will show that our efforts have been in vain. My hon. Friend is right. This is an explanation of why it is different; it is not a justification for not acting, nor is it a justification for not succeeding in coming up with an identical outcome, even though it has to be based on different legal foundations.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Chester is a proud garrison city, and I am proud to represent ex-service and current service families, many of whom have raised their concerns with me. Their concerns are generally twofold. The first is that these seem to be arbitrary fishing investigations—and investigations are just as stressful as prosecutions. Secondly, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) talked about rancid deals. Of course there had to be a deal under the Good Friday agreement, but my constituents' concern is clear: that deal should be applied equally and fairly to all sides.

John Penrose: "Equally and fairly to all sides" have to be our watch-words for the outcome of publishing the results of the consultation and the process of coming up with a Bill that works. It has to be equal and fair to both sides, otherwise it will not endure, it will not work, and it will not protect our forces in the way that we all want.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): As the MP for Moray, I represent a large number of veterans, and I share their disgust at the way they have been treated by this Government. The Minister's answers have been full, but when speaking about future legislation and the results of the consultation, he has said "soon", "very quickly" and "shortly". He has given no specific timeframe. When can my constituents and people across the United Kingdom expect to hear from the Government specific dates for the plans, to ensure that we can hold the Government to account on their promises?

John Penrose: I wish I could give my hon. Friend a specific date. We are trying to get through this as fast as we can. I hope he will understand that, with 17,000 responses, each telling a story of personal tragedy, we needed to ensure we were honouring the sense in which those were provided. Having worked through that, we need to move at pace, and we will endeavour to do so. I cannot give him a precise date today, but I will undertake to take back to the Department the very clear message from today, which is that we need to get on with this and move as fast as we can, but we need to ensure we are proceeding in a way that will endure and come up with a robust answer that, as we just heard, is fair and equal for all sides.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Like all Members here, I have veterans in my constituency who are very angry at the way this issue has been handled and extremely concerned about issues being dredged up from 20, 30 or 40 years ago in what they consider to be an unfair manner. There has been a lot of press speculation in recent days and mixed messages from the Government, which has only increased the anxiety that many veterans feel. Does the Minister understand the concern caused, as well as the need for clarity and certainty that it will be dealt with as quickly as possible?

John Penrose: Yes, yes, and emphatically yes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): The borough of Kettering is blessed with many veterans who served in Northern Ireland, and they are outraged by this process. The previous Labour Government issued letters of comfort to known terrorists, and now a Conservative Government are effectively threatening prosecution of veterans, many of whom have already faced court cases. The Minister says he has received legal advice from the Northern Ireland Office. Will he reassure the House that he is challenging that advice, not simply accepting it? He said that Sinn Féin is not pressing for these cases to be examined—he said he had no knowledge of that. Can he confirm 100% that Sinn Féin is not pressing for these veterans to be prosecuted as a condition of setting up the new Northern Ireland Executive?

John Penrose: I am not in that part of those talks, so I would not be able to tell my hon. Friend that one way or another. I can say, however—this returns to my earlier answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford—that rancid deals should have no part in how we treat our veterans in any case.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The best way for wounds to heal is to stop picking at the scabs, and we must stop treating Northern Ireland as “other”. Our military, police or civilians will have far greater confidence only when rules apply globally, and I see no merit in perpetrating the “otherness” of Northern Ireland. Rules should apply to our military, police and civilians, whether in Basra or Belfast. The status of the unbalanced letters of comfort must be reviewed and clarified as they distort the arguments. The scales of justice must be able to balance, but those letters distort them beyond all chance of that happening.

John Penrose: I agree strongly that the scales of justice must be able to balance, and it is not just a question of balancing in one or two cases—they must balance for all cases, and be seen to balance by all sides. We are all here today because there is a widespread perception, on both sides of the community in Northern Ireland, that those scales are tilted for different reasons in different ways. My hon. Friend is right to make that point, and I remind him of my earlier answer on the letters of comfort. Those letters have now been reviewed, and the latest legal report states that they do not provide immunity from prosecution—

Mr Francois: But no one has ever been prosecuted!

John Penrose: They may not have ever been prosecuted, but the letters do not provide immunity from prosecution.

Mr Francois: What is the difference?

John Penrose: The difference is that, were a case to be brought tomorrow, those letters would not be a piece of legal body armour. It is important that we make that point, and I hope the message will go out loud and clear from the Chamber that anyone who thinks they can swan around scot-free as a result of that does not have the legal protection that some people may have thought they did.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman is hovering—

Mr Duncan Smith: I recognise that I arrived slightly late, but I wondered—

Mr Speaker: Well, I am in a generous mood, so in recognition of the right hon. Gentleman’s military background and former leadership of his party, I think the House should indulge him.

Mr Duncan Smith: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and I apologise that I came in when the Minister was already on his feet. I served in Northern Ireland and in what was then Rhodesia. I received a general service medal for one campaign, and a separate campaign medal for the other—as has been said, they were both operations. We were sent to Northern Ireland, and I lost friends, particularly Robert Nairac—I am sorry I was not here when he was mentioned. I do not know how I can honestly, and with a clean heart, say that my Government represent the best interests of ex-servicemen and women who have served their country. I simply state to the Minister this simple principle: when natural justice collides with the law, we change the law.

John Penrose: That has to be correct. That is why we are talking about bringing forward a Bill in this place to change the law to put this right. My right hon. Friend is also right to say—I think he is echoing the point made by my parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heapey)—that for serving soldiers who get campaign or operation medals, whatever it may be, it feels the same whether or not the legal underpinning of the operation is different. We therefore have to come up with an Act of Parliament that ensures that protections are the same, even if they are arrived at through a different legal route. Either way, it absolutely and essentially has to be robust in the event of legal challenge, otherwise we will have failed in our duty to look after our veterans, no matter where they have served.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think that is stretching the point. Points of order come later. Does the point of order relate to these—

Mr Sheerman: Am I right thinking, Mr Speaker, that you take points of order after statements?

Mr Speaker: Yes, but we have not had the statements yet. If the point of order appertained to these exchanges, then possibly—but no. Reference was made to the hon.

Gentleman's service earlier and I say for the benefit of those who are attending our proceedings in the House but are not Members that the confetti showered upon the hon. Gentleman on account of his long service was recognition of the fact that he was elected first to the House on 3 May 1979 and, 40 years and 13 days later, the hon. Gentleman is still here. He has been in the House without interruption for that 40-year period, upon which we all congratulate him.

Business of the House

11.36 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing 20 May will include:

MONDAY 20 MAY—Proceedings on the Non-Domestic Rating (Preparation for Digital Services) Bill, followed by a debate on a motion on medical cannabis under prescription. The subject of this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 21 MAY—Second Reading of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 22 MAY—Opposition day (un-allotted). There will be a debate on an opposition motion. Subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 23 MAY—Debate on a motion on the Yemen peace process, followed by matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 24 MAY—The House will not be sitting.

I can also inform colleagues that the withdrawal agreement Bill will have a Second Reading during the week beginning Monday 3 June 2019. The Bill will be introduced as soon as possible to give colleagues the chance to consider the provisions within it. I will make a further business statement next week in the usual way.

May I take this opportunity to wish my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) the very best as a new Minister in the Justice Department? He ably stood in for me in a number of Leader debates and I am sure he will be a great success in his new role.

This week is Mental Health Awareness Week, an opportunity to promote good mental health for us all. This year's theme is body image, which can have a real impact on mental health and wellbeing. I congratulate all those helping to raise awareness of these vitally important issues.

Finally, tomorrow is also International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, which is recognised in more than 130 countries. I encourage as many Members as possible to take part in the debate later today to promote equal rights across the world.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for the business. I am pleased that she said we will be debating the withdrawal agreement Bill, but I would just like some clarification. Will that be on 4 June, or 5 June as No. 10 has announced? Are we going to get business from No. 10 in future, or will it actually be announced here in the Chamber? Can the Leader confirm whether we will have the meaningful vote before the Bill? Will she also clarify what the Brexit Secretary said—I know she said the Bill will be introduced—to the Lords EU Committee yesterday? He said he accepted that MPs need to see the Bill before the vote on Second Reading, but that many of the issues raised by the Bill have

[Valerie Vaz]

already been debated. It would be helpful to know whether there will be something new in the Bill or whether everything in the agreement will be in the Bill.

There have been noises off from No. 10, which has said that the Bill will be published next week. If it is published before 23 May, will the Leader publish the advice on whether that would breach the purdah rules, and perhaps lay it in the Library? We do have an impartial civil service and do not want it compromised while an election is going on. It is important in the interests of democracy that we see the Bill as soon as possible but purdah rules must not be breached.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has said that the agreement could be done and dusted by the summer recess. I assume that that is confirmation that we will get a summer recess. Will the Leader say when that is likely to be?

This is so sad for Parliament. Since the beginning of the 20th century, the House has routinely sat for 150 days a year. This Session is now double that, and there is absolutely no end in sight. We are now straddling three calendar years. There have been no Divisions for a month apart from the one on the Opposition day earlier this week. On Monday, the House sat for just 3 hours and 34 minutes, and the Government, having refused to grant Opposition days for 150 days, have now given us five of them. We are grateful for that, because we can show people that there is an alternative.

Parliament is in paralysis, with the Government in their offices but not in power. Some of them are moving offices, and I also want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who served the Leader well as her deputy.

I turn now to something the Leader said last week. I will write to her formally, but I thought she was somewhat discourteous in saying last week that I did not read my emails. My question to her was, as it is today: will she ensure that Ministers are aware of the ministerial code, which says:

“Ministers intending to make an official visit within the United Kingdom must inform in advance, and in good time, the MPs whose constituencies are to be included within the itinerary.”?

Please will she ensure that all Ministers are aware of that code when they visit our constituencies?

Will the Government look again at the voter identification pilots: their key policy that is subverting democracy? In the local elections, 819 people were denied their vote, and the *Local Government Chronicle* identified that this included an 87-year-old woman in Pendle. The Leader of the House and I both know how hard we as women have struggled to get the vote. The number of people turned away in some areas could have influenced the election result. In Mid Sussex, 78 people were denied a vote, and in three cases a candidate won by fewer than 25 votes.

The Electoral Commission has said that if the Government pursue this policy and people are not able to provide identification, 7.5% of the electorate—3.5 million people—will be unable to vote. If people are asked to produce their passports or driving licences, 11 million citizens will be disenfranchised. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Fleetwood (Cat Smith) has

called for a debate. Can we have a debate in Government time on this dangerous, discriminatory and undemocratic policy?

At business questions last week, the Leader of the House said that the Government are

“determined to be world leading in our actions, not words, to tackle the global challenge of climate change.”—[*Official Report*, 9 May 2019; Vol. 659, c. 672.]

She gave us a few examples. It is actually a climate emergency. Will she explain why the Government announced last week that they will increase VAT on domestic solar installations from 5% to 20%? The Renewable Energy Association has said:

“This change risks setting back the UK decarbonisation of homes and businesses in the UK by a number of years.”

The Government are relentlessly supportive of fracking, despite the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy having found that only 12% of people support it. We want action, not words, to combat the climate emergency.

I join my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition and other hon. Members in mentioning that the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) have passed the 40-year mark. My hon. Friend is an assiduous attender of business questions. He is also a great supporter of John Clare, so he will be pleased that we have a new poet laureate in Simon Armitage, whom we wish well.

I also pay tribute to the late Brian Walden, who served here in the House and was an excellent interviewer on television. When I was applying for a job in TV, he was a practice interviewee for me. I did not get the job, which means he was a good interviewer and interviewee. We acknowledge his public service in all those fields.

I wanted to mention Philippa Helme, who is leaving next week, so that people would have a chance to say goodbye to her properly. She is the Principal Clerk of the Table Office, and she joined the House of Commons in 1983—as, incidentally, did our Chief Whip.

Philippa has been Clerk of the Welsh Affairs, Science and Technology and Defence Committees, where she formed excellent relationships with formidable Chairs from Renée Short to Michael Mates and James Arbuthnot. She was parliamentary adviser to the Cabinet Office between 2002 and 2005, and head of the Office of the Chief Executive between 2008 and 2010. She was deputy head of the Committee Office for four years before becoming Principal Clerk of the Table Office in 2014. Throughout her career, she has restlessly questioned received wisdom and settled convictions—I suppose she got on well with you, Mr Speaker—and has combined that with kindness to more junior staff. People have liked working for her and being given space by her to develop themselves. Her door is always open, and has always been open to me, and she has never failed to answer my questions. It was a delight to see her at the Clerks’ Table, and she got there on her own terms. It must have been incredibly difficult at the time to combine a career with family life, but she did that. It was not easy for women.

We all thank Philippa for her service to the House, and wish her clean sailing, fair winds and following seas. She will know what that means.

Mr Speaker: May I just say a big thank you to the shadow Leader of the House for that tribute to Philippa Helme? I first came to know Philippa in 1997 when I was appointed to the Welsh Affairs Committee, of which she was the extremely accomplished Clerk, and I have known her for the last 22 years. As the shadow Leader of the House said, she has served the House with great distinction, and I look forward very much to hosting the retirement reception for her in Speaker's House—next Thursday, if memory serves me correctly.

Andrea Leadsom: I echo the tribute paid by the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to Philippa Helme. She has been an assiduous Clerk for many years, and we wish her a very happy and energising retirement. I am sure that she will feel some elements of relief in escaping from this place—which reminds me that the hon. Lady is always after recess dates, which suggests that she, too, is desperate to get away from it.

The hon. Lady asked specifically about the meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement Bill. She will be aware that the Bill is not subject to a motion under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. There will be a Second Reading debate on a Bill that is yet to be introduced. Section 13 of the Act stipulates that a meaningful vote must be passed for ratification of the deal, and the Government will ensure that the conditions are met to enable ratification to take place. There will be no issues relating to purdah: that has been carefully checked, and there are no such implications. As I have said, the Bill will be introduced soon so that colleagues can consider it.

The hon. Lady asked when the Bill would be completed. We have made it very clear that we will be able to leave the European Union on the first day of the month following ratification of the treaty. We would like that to happen this summer, and we will work hard to ensure that it does, but, as ever, there are discussions in the usual channels about the programming of the Bill.

The hon. Lady referred to the length of the Session. It was set out at the beginning that this would be an extended Session because of the enormous change that would be involved in our leaving the European Union. However, we have achieved some superb legislation during this period. Our 44th Bill, the Offensive Weapons Bill, received Royal Assent today. The excellent energy cap has been introduced, and the Tenant Fees Act 2019, which will help people who have been harshly treated by their landlords, has been enacted. So there has been a lot that is good about this Session—and, very importantly, we have to leave the European Union. All colleagues can, of course, influence the end of the Session by voting for the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill.

The hon. Lady asked about the House rising early. I must say that I was rather astonished on Monday. First there were two very important statements, one on the Tessa Jowell brain cancer mission and the other on domestic abuse, and then there was the Second Reading of a Government Bill that had the potential to affect business rates and our high streets. There was huge scope for colleagues to talk about many issues relating to their constituencies yet only one Government Back Bencher made a full speech during Monday's debate, and there were no Scottish National party contributions at all—not even interventions—and no Labour Back

Bencher spoke. It is not for me, I gently say to the House, to determine who speaks in debates; I merely make the time available. So I do not accept in any sense that it is for the Government to determine when the House rises; that is a matter decided by the demand from colleagues to make contributions in debates.

The hon. Lady asked me to ensure that all ministerial visits are advised. All Ministers are well aware of the ministerial code. She again made reference to a visit she feels she was left out of; that was nothing to do with the Minister concerned, who in fact was the person who alerted the hon. Lady to the fact of that meeting going ahead.

The hon. Lady raised an important point about voter ID pilots. She will appreciate that there are huge risks at present with individuals not having to provide any form of ID whatsoever, and merely going up to polling booths and saying they are individual X or Y. There are many anecdotal cases where people have turned up at polling booths and been told they have already voted when they clearly have not. It is because of such problems that we have to ensure the integrity of our electoral system and give the public confidence that our elections are secure and fit for the 21st century.

The Electoral Commission's own evaluation shows that the 2018 voter ID pilots were a success and the overwhelming majority of people cast their vote without a problem. We need to continue to understand how voter ID will work on a wider scale and what works best for voters, so it is important that we continue piloting before any national roll-out takes place.

Finally, the hon. Lady asked about action not words with regard to climate change, so let me remind her that we have reduced emissions faster than any other G7 nation. We have reduced greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since 2010. In the last year we have generated record levels of solar and wind energy. We have planted over 15 million trees since 2010. We have opened the world's largest offshore wind farm and the world's first floating offshore wind farm in Scotland. That is action not words.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on revisiting the Mental Health Act 1983 so that in new legislation we have as an absolute priority supporting young people and children? It is truly shocking that one in 10 young people and children have a mental health issue that lasts throughout their lives, and we must treat them in a better way than we do at present.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an incredibly important matter and it is particularly right that he should do so during mental health awareness week. I am pleased to be able to tell him that we have championed investment in children's mental health services. Last year, there was an overall 17% increase in funding in real terms, to around £226 million, and spending by clinical commissioning groups has gone up by 33% since 2015-16 to £687 million, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right that more needs to be done, and that is why we have committed to transforming children's mental health services through the NHS long-term plan.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. It is a pity that we cannot go

[Pete Wishart]

back to the good old days where provisional business was also announced for the following sitting week, but I am pleased to see that the withdrawal agreement Bill is to be brought before the House, and I too very much look forward to seeing it.

May I also join in the tributes to Philippa Helme, and warmly congratulate the shadow Leader of the House on her warm and glowing tribute? Philippa Helme will be missed by all of us around the House.

May I also gently remind the Leader of the House that Monday's business was on an English ratings Bill that was exclusively devolved? If she is in the business of trying to curtail the voting and speaking rights of Scottish Members of Parliament it is a bit rich her complaining we were not speaking on something that has absolutely nothing to do with us.

In advance of the withdrawal agreement Bill could we possibly have a debate about masochism, Mr Speaker, because it seems to me that the very definition of May-ite Conservatism is to do the same thing over and over again expecting a different result? It is a bewildering condition that involves delusion, deafness and self-flagellation—which they have obviously found a taste for—eventually leading to schism, paralysis and then political death. The idea that the Prime Minister will somehow get it through this time is almost like abandoning all sense of reason as Members are all rushing to tell her that they are not prepared to support her on this withdrawal agreement Bill. Her only hope is to get her comrades in the Labour party to abstain on all this, but I think I heard the shadow Secretary of State for Brexit saying today that Labour will not abstain and I hope that will be the case.

Another week on, and the men in grey underpants are still camped outside No. 10, trying to get the recalcitrant occupant to leave. Ultimatum after ultimatum is delivered, to no effect, and timetables are discussed, to no impact. I believe that another one is being discussed this morning. May we have a debate on enforced evictions and maybe see what this House can do to support the Brexit One?

Lastly, in advance of next week's EU elections, could we perhaps have a debate on the productive and valuable relationship that we have with our European Union colleagues? In that debate, we on these Benches would make it abundantly clear that, in Scotland, we intend to stop this Government's crazy Brexit and let the Scottish people determine their own future—and the only way to achieve that is to vote SNP next Thursday.

Andrea Leadsom: I am getting a bit worried about the hon. Gentleman: masochism and underpants in the same intervention! Anyway, I gather that he is up incredibly early on Thursday mornings to write his witty interventions. If he had been up early on Monday morning, he could have usefully used his time at the Liaison Committee, where I was appearing. It was very poorly attended, and he could have been there to talk about the effectiveness of what goes on in this place and made a useful contribution to how Select Committees contribute to exiting the EU. He may not have had anything to say about business rates for Scotland, but he could have had something to say in the Adjournment debate of my lovely Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), on self-build housing. I am sure that his constituents in Scotland would be interested in the

prospect of many more homes for them. There is a lot that goes on in this place—it is not all about what goes on in this Chamber, as we all know—so that was extremely disappointing.

The hon. Gentleman is pleased that we are getting on with the European Union withdrawal agreement Bill, and so am I. It is something that I have been calling for for a long time. It is vital that we give the Bill a Second Reading and that we actually leave the European Union. He also said that it was important to let the Scottish people decide. Well, the Scottish people did decide, in 2014, that they wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom. He was not listening to them then, and it is absolutely extraordinary that he stands up and argues for the Scottish people now when at every opportunity he is denying them the chance to remain part of the United Kingdom, which is good for us all.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. No fewer than 34 right hon. and hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye and, as per usual, I am keen to attempt to accommodate them. However, I remind the House that there is a statement to follow and that I have to have regard to the importance of protecting the Backbench Business Committee business as well. As a consequence of all that, there is a premium upon brevity—first to be exemplified, I am sure, by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—there will be speed if not brevity.

C. S. Lewis said:

“If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end; if you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth only soft soap and wishful thinking”.

We have heard again this week, and in the urgent question yesterday, that the tech companies' claims about encryption and security are just so much soft soap. In this dystopian world of spyware, Big Brother is watching us all. So will the Leader of the House arrange a debate so that we can consider how we can clamp down, bear down and if necessary close down those tech companies that are either callous, careless or crass?

Mr Speaker: Ah! Wonderful alliteration!

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is, as ever, succinct and to the point. As he is well aware, the Government's White Paper on online harms will set out our plans to make this the best country in which to be as safe online as offline. We are encouraging companies to take forward a shared international approach to regulation and we are absolutely determined to resolve the issue of the ongoing harm being created through social media companies.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): May I echo everyone's comments about Philippa Helme? She has been of enormous assistance to me since I became Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, as have her wonderful staff who support the Committee.

In the week we come back, will there be any time for Backbench business? I know it will be busy, but I hope there will be time on the 6th as we already have a couple of debates lined up for that day if time is allocated.

One would be on the response to the Grenfell Tower fire; the debate would come one week before the second anniversary of the fire. We must remember that 72 people died, over 70 were injured and over 300 were made homeless, and I think we must mark that occasion. The other debate would be on mortgage prisoners—people caught by the collapse of mortgage companies in the credit crunch—and their subsequent exploitation by what have become known as successor vulture funds. Those people are chained until death because of the way the vulture funds are exploiting them.

Andrea Leadsom: As ever, the hon. Gentleman makes a strong case for Backbench time and I will always seek to accommodate it. I pay tribute again to the incredible bravery of the survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy—an utterly appalling event, unrivalled in modern times. I shall certainly seek to give time for that debate.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I and those of my constituents who commute into London and rely on public transport are fed up with the unacceptably poor service from both South Western Railway and London Underground. Not only is the service unreliable, but when disruption occurs it takes practically all day for the service to get back to an acceptable standard, so both morning and evening commutes are affected. May we have a debate on how the Secretary of State for Transport and the Mayor of London can work more effectively together to get the service back up to scratch?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the frustration of commuters who cannot get to work; it is incredibly frustrating and happens far too frequently on some train services. I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate, so that she can raise her particular concerns about commuters in her constituency.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): My constituent Bhavani Esapathi contacted me following the Home Office's rejection of a visa application. Bhavani has Crohn's disease and needs critical care that is unavailable in India. She has lived and worked in the UK for almost 10 years. While Bhavani was in a coma after major surgery, she received a notice from the Home Office telling her that she should leave the country. May we have an urgent debate on the Government's barbaric treatment of people?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a serious and worrying constituency case. I am sure that, were she to raise it directly with Home Office Ministers, they would respond. Obviously, they do take into account individual circumstances. I encourage her to raise the case directly.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): The Government rightly made funding available for the Law Commission to begin work on updating the UK's surrogacy laws. Very shortly, the Law Commission will publish its initial proposals. I and other members of the all-party group on surrogacy will of course seek a debate on the proposals, either in the main Chamber or in Westminster Hall, but will the Government proactively consider providing Government time for us to debate that really important change to surrogacy law?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an important subject. Surrogacy is a valuable way to provide would-be parents with the child they so long for. Of course, there

are complex issues around making that work for both the surrogate and the new parents. I encourage him in the first instance to seek an Adjournment debate, so he can discuss the subject directly with Ministers.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Back in 2010, the present Prime Minister told her party conference that she did not want the Tory party to be regarded as the nasty party. I do not know whether that miracle has happened, but could we have a debate on this Parliament not being a nasty Parliament? I have noticed some really personal attacks, usually on women MPs—of course, the Prime Minister is a woman. Can we have a debate on the standards we have in debate and how we respect each other during debates?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his 40 years in this place. How he can stand it I do not know. He obviously has lots of stamina. I also pay tribute to him for standing up for people treating each other with dignity and respect. He is absolutely right to do so. I encourage him to take part in the Westminster Hall debate on intimidation in public life on Tuesday 21 May. It is clear that whatever our political differences we must treat each other decently.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): In recent weeks and months, my constituency has tragically witnessed several suicides within the farming and rural community. Each case is tragic for the individual and devastating for the family and community left behind. My right hon. Friend has already mentioned that this is Mental Health Awareness Week—in fact, she has mentioned it twice—and that shows the commitment to this great cause. Can we have a debate on what can be done to tackle the causes of suicide in the farming community?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this worrying issue. Rates of depression and suicide are particularly high among farmers. The national suicide prevention strategy highlights the high risk of suicide among certain occupational groups, one of which is farmers. In October 2018, the Prime Minister announced our first suicide prevention Minister and recently she met the Farming Community Network to better understand the issues facing farmers. I am pleased to see my hon. Friend already has an Adjournment debate on this issue soon.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am wearing the mental health Scottish tartan in support of Mental Health Awareness Week.

I welcome next week's debate on medical cannabis. I have two constituents, John and Laura, whose beautiful daughter, Blathnaid, needs access to medical cannabis. After the Health Secretary told me at the Dispatch Box that he would look into their case, his correspondence department came back and said it was a matter for the Scottish Health Minister, which is not true—the licensing of medical cannabis is an issue for the UK Government. Can the Leader of the House confirm that, when Ministers come to the Dispatch Box and say they will look into something, they should do it?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. Ministers always seek to be very clear about what is a reserved and what is a devolved matter and to pay respect to that, as they utterly should do.

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

Occasionally, people have misunderstood or perhaps there is a different interpretation. I am certain that Ministers would always seek to correct the record if that were the case. He raises a specific point about his constituents and I am glad he will have the chance to raise it in the debate next week.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): Can we have a debate to recognise the thousands of volunteers across the country currently fundraising for Christian Aid Week? In Moray, we have many events and collections going on and, last year, local volunteers raised £18,000 to contribute to the £8 million raised across the country. So will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating all the volunteers on what they are doing for Christian Aid Week in Moray and across the country?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the fantastic volunteers up and down the country fundraising for Christian Aid Week, particularly in his constituency. Christian Aid was founded in the aftermath of the second world war, when it worked to support refugees and rebuild communities, and it is a great tribute to all those involved that their incredible work continues to this day.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Since the campaign by the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, I have had several constituents contact me about environmental safeguards and wildlife protection. When do the Government intend to introduce the next stage of their draft environmental Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady tempts me to tell her everything I know about the environmental Bill. It will be a superb and energising Bill demonstrating the Government's and, I think, the whole country's commitment to ensuring not only that we are the first generation to leave their environment in a better place than they found it, but that we are truly world leading in our approach to tackling some of the environmental issues ahead of us. Work is going on at pace to ensure that the Bill is ready for the second Session.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The Housing Minister is here, so within his earshot may I ask my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for a debate on local infrastructure and housing? We need more housing. My villages in West Sussex are having to accept large numbers of houses, but they feel that they have little control over the poorly designed process. Above all, the necessary infrastructure—the GP capacity, the local roads, the school places—does not follow. We must ensure that local infrastructure accompanies extra housing that we need.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an issue with which many colleagues across the House will have sympathy. We cannot build the homes that this country desperately needs without delivering the infrastructure, too. What I can tell him is that the £5.5 billion housing infrastructure fund is available to local authorities to unlock 650,000 new homes by helping to fund much needed infrastructure, and the Government recently awarded £16.5 million from that fund to West Sussex for three projects to help to provide the infrastructure that should enable the building of up to 1,300 homes.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Some years ago, Dianne Watkinson created the Crowlees Hoppa walking bus. Last Friday, I joined Dianne, other volunteers and the children to walk to their lovely school. The scheme reduces traffic congestion and promotes exercise, so will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Dianne and others and encourage other communities to follow suit?

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Lady in congratulating Dianne and all those who take part in the walking bus. As she says, it is a fantastic way for children to get exercise, to be community spirited, to see the world around them and, of course, it saves on environmental pollution. It is a profound good.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): May I gently remind the Leader of the House that, some time ago, she promised a debate on the work of the Council of Europe? Having looked at the latest list, however, it does not appear to be there. I wonder whether she would give the request urgent consideration because it is important that its work is made known, particularly to Ministers.

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend that we should have a debate about the Council of Europe. When we leave the European Union, it will become an even more important forum, enabling us to share in some of the activities and initiatives that are taking place around Europe in areas of common interest. I will take the request away and look again at when we can provide the time.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): May we have an urgent statement from the Cabinet Office on election funding? There is an outstanding investigation by the National Crime Agency into Arron Banks in respect of Leave.EU's overseas funding and his close ally, Nigel Farage, is now campaigning for the European elections. Will the Leader of the House support my call—I have written to the Cabinet Office today—for the voluntary disclosure of donors by all political parties prior to the European elections, so that we know who is paying for the current campaigns?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a specific question. He has probably tabled written questions on the matter to the Cabinet Office. He could also of course seek an Adjournment debate to raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): May I say how thrilled I am that we will have a debate on Monday on the prescribed use of cannabis in certain situations? It is sad that we have to have it, but I am pleased that it is happening.

I want to raise something with the Leader of the House that I have mentioned before, namely, the lack of accountability to the community for the decisions made by NHS trusts. She has said to me before, "You can get an Adjournment debate; you can go to Westminster Hall." I have done that. Can we have a debate on the Floor of the House about NHS trust accountability and about when their decisions ignore local communities? My local NHS trust is doing that, spending £350 million on an old Victorian hospital when we need a new, purpose-built one.

Andrea Leadsom: I genuinely wish that I could please my right hon. Friend by waving a magic wand and making his wishes come true. Unfortunately, as Leader of the House, all that I can suggest are ways of raising the matter in the House. I can certainly take away his request for a debate in Government time, but he will appreciate that he needs to keep raising the matter with the appropriate Ministers so that they can carefully consider his specific requests.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): A recent DWP assessment found a constituent fit for work. He is terminally ill and relies on regular dialysis, but the assessor stopped his benefits based on his adequate rapport and the fact that he was able to keep eye contact. The DWP's culture of disbelief is plunging many vulnerable constituents into poverty, so can we please have a debate on the impact that such assessments are having on disabled people and vulnerable constituents?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises a serious constituency issue. It does sound concerning that the assessment was potentially wrong. At the same time, she will appreciate that the Government spend £55 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions—up by more than £10 billion since 2010 and a record high. Under this Government, the number of disabled people in work increased by more than 950,000 between 2013 and 2018, so the Government's policy is to support those with disabilities both financially, so that they are able to lead normal lives, and by helping them to get into work to enable them to have a more fulfilling life. Nevertheless, she makes a serious point. If she wants to write to me after business questions, I can take it up directly with the Department.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on the ongoing scandal of the abuse of freeholds? Many people, particularly in the north-west of England, buy new-build properties thinking that they are getting a traditional freehold only to discover many complex terms and conditions that often cost them a great deal of money. The Government have made great progress in the past year, but we need to consider legislating to give people protection in law.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the situation is scandalous. The Government have been looking into it, and he may well be aware that we are considering what more can be done on both a voluntary and a legislative basis.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Grimsby Institute's level 3 enterprise and entrepreneurship group on its strong performance at the UK final of the Young Enterprise Start-up competition that was held in London yesterday? Our colleges play a critical role in delivering skills and qualifications, and they are at the forefront of the biggest reforms to technical education in a generation. When will we get a statement committing to increasing base rate funding for 16 to 19-year-olds by £1,000 so that colleges can meet the challenges that this place puts on them?

Andrea Leadsom: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating Grimsby Institute on its excellent performance. It is important to encourage young people to consider starting

their own businesses. She asks a specific question about a funding review, and I encourage her to seek a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate so that she can ask that question directly to Ministers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that the whole House would like to thank the Leader of the House for announcing that the withdrawal agreement Bill—a major constitutional piece of legislation—will be debated in the first week after the recess. I understand that the Bill has 37 clauses and is already drafted, so could it be published so that Members can decide how to debate it and vote on it?

More importantly, will the Leader of the House explain why the Bill has been scheduled for that first week after recess, when we have the important D-day celebrations? On the political side, we have the Peterborough by-election and—I have twiggled it—President Trump is also coming that week. Does the Leader of the House intend to invite President Trump to sit in the special Box in the Chamber reserved for important people so that he can see how British democracy works when discussing a major constitutional Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: May I say that the President of the United States will be very welcome in this place as far as I am concerned? My hon. Friend asks about the timing of the withdrawal agreement Bill. It is being brought forward in order for us to leave the European Union in line with the will of the 2016 referendum, and we need to get on with it. We certainly will publish the Bill in time for colleagues to be able to consider it.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Many people lost money due to the collapse of London Capital & Finance, including my constituent Mr Fulcher, who lost thousands of pounds. The media have raised hopes of compensation, but may we have a Government statement so that we can have certainty about what will be done for the victims?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue. I also have constituents who have lost money—it was scandalous—and I have heard from the Financial Conduct Authority about the steps that it is taking. We have Treasury questions on 21 May, when I encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise his specific question directly with Ministers.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): First, may I add my congratulations to Grimsby Institute, which also serves my constituency?

Many of my constituents work at British Steel in Scunthorpe and there is much local media coverage about the uncertainty of their future employment. May I urge the Leader of the House to ask the Business Secretary to update—and, I hope, reassure—the House early next week?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on the performance of Grimsby Institute? He is a strong voice for his constituents.

This is a very concerning time for all those who feel nervous about the future of British Steel. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Government are doing everything they can to ensure that all those concerned have a good future. I am sure the Business Secretary will make a statement when he is able to do so.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Ind): On Tuesday, the results of the great British transport competition, sponsored by the TaxPayers Alliance, were presented at Parliament by the hon. Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). The winning entries included 22 sensible railway schemes. I have to say that not all railway schemes are sensible, but the country is in desperate need of a sensible future for our railways. Will the Leader of the House make time for a full debate in the Chamber about those proposals and other railway investment to provide for our long-term transport needs?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman, who has been very closely involved—certainly for as long as I have been in Parliament—in looking at different rail projects. I absolutely admire his fortitude. He will be aware that the Government are investing the largest amount of money in our rail programme since the Victorian era. We are determined to improve the experience of passengers right across our rail network. I strongly suggest that he seek a Westminster Hall debate in the first instance because I have no doubt that those 22 rail projects will be of interest to many Members on both sides of the House.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Residents who live on a Bellway Homes-built estate in my constituency contacted me in April last year with concerns that the gas installation did not meet the safety regulations when the estate was built. We met Bellway on site in October, and it wrote to me the following week to say that the issue was with its lawyers and it would be back in touch. Despite my office and me chasing up Bellway many times, it has yet to respond. May we have an urgent debate on how we can hold house builders responsible to the people they sell houses to?

Andrea Leadsom: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising that specific point in the Chamber, and I am sure that those listening will respond to him extremely urgently indeed. The safety of his constituents is a very serious issue, and I know that all hon. Members would want a very fast response.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Next week, on 26 May, Campie Primary School in Musselburgh will be 100 years old. Education is, of course, devolved, but I think that colleagues across the House agree about the importance of our primary schools in creating a society that is built on the foundations of empathy, kindness, knowledge, hope and inspiration, so could we have a debate in Government time to celebrate the work that primary schools do for our and our children's future?

Andrea Leadsom: First, may I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Campie Primary School on its centenary? That is fantastic and wonderful news. What a great, long track record of raising children. I am sure, sadly, that not too many, if any, of its first pupils are still around to see it—it would be interesting to know if there are any.

The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point about primary schools' incredible contribution to the future of our society and all young people, who will be able to recall an amazing teacher who taught them one particular thing—often, it will be how to sit still and answer a question. I absolutely share his enthusiasm for the work of teachers and schools, and I will certainly look for Government time for a debate.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier this month saw the 25th anniversary of the genocide in Rwanda. Nottingham commemorated it with a walk to remember, organised by my constituent Amdani Juma. As well as the solemn remembrance of lives lost, we also marked the progress made in Rwanda since. May we have a debate in Government time on how those in conflict situations around the world today might be able to learn from the experience in Rwanda?

Andrea Leadsom: The conflict in Rwanda was truly terrible, with appalling consequences for so many people, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise its anniversary. I certainly support the idea of a debate to look at how those in conflict situations can recover. There are far too many current conflicts and we should always seek to learn how we can better improve people's lives so that they can survive and thrive again. I will certainly see what can be done.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be concerned to know that Marks & Spencer's main store in Hull closed its doors on 4 May, 88 years after it opened. There are vacant units in our local railway station in the centre of Hull, and local MPs are asking for consideration to be given to Marks & Spencer opening a Simply Food outlet there, as has happened in many other stations up and down the land.

May we please have a debate, however, about the management of our train stations and whether they fulfil the needs of passengers and provide the necessary facilities? In Hull, the toilets are very smelly and signage is covered by masking tape. The current system is not working for passengers.

Andrea Leadsom: I am tempted to say that the M&S closure will be a disaster for all the grey underpants that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has talked about. They will obviously have to go elsewhere. It is a great shame and, after 88 years, a local tragedy—I can well understand that.

The hon. Lady raises an important point about the quality of the services available in train stations. All too often the toilets are closed late at night, when passengers may well want to use them, so I absolutely share her concern. She will be aware of the significant investment the Government are making in improving our rail infrastructure network, including the actual services available to passengers, but I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise her particular local concerns.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): I hear that the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency, which runs driving test centres, may close a centre in Dunfermline in my constituency. That will cause great inconvenience to learner drivers and will come at a huge cost for driving schools and instructors. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on the strategic direction of the DVSA so that any proposed closures can be averted?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that organisation is designed to be independent; it looks at where demand is, and manages its infrastructure and the availability of its learning centres independently of the Government. Nevertheless, I fully appreciate that

a local closure is always disappointing. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his particular concerns directly with Ministers.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): My riparian constituents living on Clink Street and all along the Thames are very concerned about a new pier being constructed on the north side of the river, mostly to serve as a new 1,500-person party boat. Will the Government provide time to debate how to transform tick-box consultation exercises for planning purposes into more meaningful engagement to ensure that everyone affected by developments has the right to have their concerns both heard and addressed?

Andrea Leadsom: I can well understand the concerns of the hon. Gentleman's constituents who would be adversely affected by such a development. He will be aware that there are strict planning rules that enable all those affected to have their say. Nevertheless, if he has particular concerns about how that works, he might want to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss it directly.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): The housing crisis is hitting Battersea hard, and those most affected are the homeless families who have been placed by Wandsworth Council in temporary accommodation outside the borough. That means that they must make regular trips back to Battersea to carry out the school run twice a day, to attend GP appointments and for various other reasons, and yet the council expects those families to cover those additional costs. That is causing severe, deep financial hardship, so may we have a debate on the issue in Government time?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the problems those constituents who are being placed outside the borough are having. Obviously, the key point is that we do not want to see anybody homeless, so it is vital that people are enabled to have a roof over their head. The Government are putting billions more into affordable housing and allowing councils to borrow to build more homes, deliberately to try to address the problem of getting the right number of homes in the right places. The hon. Lady talks about a specific constituency issue, and I encourage her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise it directly with Ministers.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I have been applying for some time, without success, for a debate on transport issues in Cheshire as we urgently need to discuss some of the things that are occurring. If my constituents want to cross the River Mersey, they get ripped off whichever way they go. If they go to the Mersey Gateway, they have to pay an exorbitant fee, whereas use is free for residents of Halton. If they go through the Mersey tunnels, they find that fees have increased by 50% while people who live in Merseyside are getting a discount. This is a postcode lottery; it is completely unfair and we need to discuss it urgently.

Andrea Leadsom: I can quite imagine that the situation is infuriating the hon. Gentleman's constituents. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise it directly with Ministers.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement from a Treasury Minister about how the Financial Conduct Authority is dragging its feet over contingent charging by independent financial advisers? We need urgent action to protect pension scheme members and clamp down on these pension sharks.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have sought, through various measures, to clamp down on pension sharks so that it is much easier for those seeking a new pension provider to get the advice that they need. We have Treasury questions on Tuesday 21 May, when I encourage him to raise his issue directly.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Older People's Commissioner for Wales has written to me to raise her deep concern about the impact of the Government's changes to pension credit and housing benefit in respect of the eligibility of mixed-age couples, with the worry being that they will have to claim universal credit until both of them reach pension age. On her estimates, that could lead to some households being at least £600 a month worse off. May we therefore find time for a debate and to review the eligibility of mixed-age couples so that they are not left worse off because of Government changes?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an issue of which I am not personally aware. He will appreciate that the Government have sought to learn from every issue raised in this Chamber in order to improve universal credit, so that a new system that replaces something that used to trap people on benefits and leave some people facing an effective tax rate of 90% now works better for people, be they in work or pensioners. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate on this specific issue so that he can raise it directly with Ministers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Officials of the unrecognised Luhansk people's republic in eastern Ukraine have ordered Baptist Union churches to halt their public worship or risk punishment. Last year, LPR authorities drafted a law requiring all churches to re-register and then they rejected all the registration applications from Protestant communities. Therefore, officials now regard all Protestant churches as illegal and have cracked down on meetings of these groups. Will the Leader of the House agree to arrange a statement or debate on this issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight this worrying situation. He is a strong voice for the freedom of religious belief, and he will be aware that the Government strongly promote the right to religious freedom around the world. I encourage him to raise this issue directly with Foreign Office Ministers.

Probation Reform

12.33 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the Government's response to the "Strengthening Probation, Building Confidence" consultation. Earlier today, I laid this Government response for consideration by both Houses. The response sets out our proposals for the future of the probation service. Across England and Wales, the probation service has more than a quarter of a million people under its supervision at any one time. An effective service is key to protecting the public, punishing those who have broken the law and reducing reoffending. I pay tribute to the hard work and professionalism of staff in both our national probation service and in the community rehabilitation companies who deliver this vital work.

The Transforming Rehabilitation reforms from 2014 aimed to encourage innovation and more modern ways of working. We introduced a payment-by-results system, creating incentives for providers to achieve reductions in reoffending; and we extended statutory supervision and resettlement to all offenders released from prison, supporting an extra 40,000 offenders for the first time. Since those reforms, we have seen a reduction in reoffending and other positive developments. However, there are challenges in the system. The changes I am setting out today are designed to make the system work as effectively as possible and meet our aims of a probation system that commands the confidence of the courts and the public.

Last summer, we took action to stabilise current delivery, and as a result, there are now about 500 additional staff in place to focus on resettlement services for offenders. At the same time, we announced a consultation on our plans for the future; I am grateful to the individuals and organisations who engaged and provided valuable feedback. We have reflected carefully and considered how to most effectively use the innovation and expertise of both the private and public sector to continue to drive down reoffending. I am today setting out plans that will see responsibility for the management of all offenders transferred to the national probation service. These arrangements are different from those set out for England in the consultation last summer. However, I believe that bringing responsibility for the delivery of all offender management within the NPS will remove some of the complexities that have caused challenges in the current model of delivery and make it more likely that an offender will have continuity of supervision throughout their sentence, while strengthening processes for managing risk. Alongside those changes, we will develop a more clearly defined role for the private and voluntary sector in delivering core interventions to offenders and securing innovation in the provision of those services.

Each NPS region will continue to have a private or voluntary sector partner—an innovation partner—directly responsible for providing unpaid work and accredited programmes. The NPS will be expressly required to buy all interventions from the market, spending up to an estimated £280 million a year. Contracts will be designed flexibly, so that innovative approaches that show results can be quickly identified and spread across the wider system.

Those interventions, such as unpaid work, accredited programmes, and resettlement and rehabilitative services are central to delivering the sentences of the courts. Subject to market engagement, I look ahead to launching procurement for those services later in the year with competitions for unpaid work and accredited programmes.

We want to make sure that services are responsive to local needs, and for resettlement and rehabilitative services we will create a national dynamic framework. It will be accessible to all providers, including specialist smaller scale and voluntary sector providers with the expertise to support the most complex offenders back into society. That direct relationship will create a greater role for providers in delivering probation services and ensure that innovation can be identified and replicated across the system effectively. I am confident that this model, based on the arrangements we consulted on in Wales, offers the most sustainable approach for probation and is the best option to build on the positive changes made under transforming rehabilitation, strengthen the system and sentencers' confidence in it, and continue to break the cycle of reoffending. We have no intention of reverting to the former probation trust model.

Since the consultation we have established a director general post in Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, responsible for overseeing probation delivery, and we will appoint probation directors across each new probation region. Probation works best when local partners work together, and those directors will be accountable for the quality, delivery and commissioning of services in each area, alongside building stronger relationships with local partners to ensure real joint working, including through co-commissioning opportunities, where possible.

Alongside those organisational changes in the NPS, we will overhaul NPS capability in commissioning and innovation, and deploy cutting-edge technology. CRCs have taken some steps to demonstrate how digital tools can improve practice. We will transform the use of technology in probation, investing in a digital and data strategy that will replace all our core systems and better utilise data to inform professional judgment. We will complement that with a new targeted innovation fund. We will ring-fence an initial £20 million a year in a regional outcome fund to attract match funding from other Departments or commissioning bodies, including social finance providers and social impact bonds. The fund will be reserved for innovative, cross-cutting approaches and will enable us to test proof of concept services before scaling them up.

I want to go further than what was set out in the consultation: when parliamentary time allows, we will look to introduce legislation to implement a statutory professional regulatory framework that puts probation on a par with teaching or social work. It will set ethical and training standards for different roles, to recognise the skills and expertise of probation staff and to support their ongoing professional development and expertise in providing a critical public service.

The changes I have set out will mean that in future it will be easier to respond to the changing profiles of offenders and to drive improvements across the probation system. We will continue to leverage the innovation of the private and voluntary sector and to ensure that probation is working with partners across the criminal justice system to reduce reoffending. It is essential that we take the time to get the changes right. We have put in

place arrangements to allow us to extend CRC contracts to ensure that we have the necessary time to get the transition to the new system right. We intend to use the arrangements to end contracts in spring 2021. My officials will now engage with prospective providers and wider stakeholders and finalise our proposals ahead of seeking to launch procurement exercises later this year.

The changes I have outlined will help to deliver a stronger, more stable probation system that will reduce reoffending, support victims of crime and keep the public safe and that will merit the confidence of the courts and the public. I commend this statement to the House.

12.41 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Government have been forced to face reality and accept that their probation model is irredeemably broken; unfortunately, though, this U-turn comes only after they have put public safety at risk and squandered hundreds of millions of pounds trying to shore up failing private probation firms. The Opposition are clear that today's announcement is a necessary first step in cleaning up the probation mess, but the question is whether it goes far enough.

Have the Conservatives really learned the lesson about the limitations of the role of the private sector in delivering probation? The Tories did not want to make this U-turn and had been trying desperately to re-tender private probation contracts; in fact, the House may remember that that was the Secretary of State's big probation announcement last summer. Was it the flood of recent scathing reports from experts such as the chief inspector and the excellent work of the Public Accounts Committee and the Justice Committee that forced the Government's hand? Or was it the collapse of Working Links, one of the largest private probation providers in the country, and the severe financial difficulties faced by another, Interserve? This is an important matter, because I am concerned that if lessons have not been learned, the changes announced today could be a smokescreen to give failing outsourcing giants—the likes of G4S and Sodexo—a route back into probation.

Labour is clear that there is an important role for the voluntary sector and small social enterprises in a future justice system. Voluntary sector organisations have held much of the justice system together in the face of Government cuts. We have heard promises before from the Secretary of State's Government that the voluntary sector will play a major role, only for that to have been an excuse for big corporations to profit from probation, so what is the overall proportion of all probation budgets that the Secretary of State expects to be delivered by the private sector in future? A figure of £280 million has been suggested; what proportion of that will go to the voluntary sector? Each probation area will be allocated a private company or voluntary body; will private companies be able to act in more than one probation area—which would favour outsourcing giants—or will they be specific local social enterprises? Will any of the major companies that have failed in probation be able to access the contracts?

On oversight and accountability, does the Secretary of State have concerns that the 11 probation areas will remain too distant from local communities? How will they interact with local criminal justice boards and health and policing services?

Privatisation failed to reduce reoffending, with a 22% overall increase in the average number of offences per reoffender. Separate figures suggest that serious further offences such as murder and rape soared by 50%. What is the Secretary of State's target for reducing reoffending under the new model?

Labour has long called for the Conservatives to drop their dangerous obsession with running probation for profit, but we have also been outlining the alternative, with the well-respected Lord Ramsbotham overseeing Labour's review of what a publicly-owned probation service would look like under a Labour Government. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the vision outlined in Lord Ramsbotham's important report?

The new probation model will start from spring 2021. Given the likelihood of a change of Government before then, will the Secretary of State commit today to setting up a special committee to reach a broad consensus on probation reforms? That would rule out the need for a future Labour Government to make further changes.

As a result of chaotic privatisation, many experienced staff left. What action will the Secretary of State take to rehire experienced former probation staff?

In conclusion, the changes announced today should just be a start. The Government must demonstrate a commitment to the true function of probation, properly invest in it and ensure that it can once again be the award-winning public service that it was before the disastrous Conservative privatisation.

Mr Gauke: To be fair, by the hon. Gentleman's standards that was quite a warm welcome for this policy announcement. I thank him for that.

Let me pick up some of the points he made. He talked about the costs and about the squandering of vast sums of money; the House should be aware that we have spent considerably less with the community rehabilitation companies than was anticipated when the business plan for the transforming rehabilitation programme was put together. The issue is not the squandering of billions of pounds; it is about how we improve the service, and that is the intention behind my announcement.

On returning to the past, which was a sort of theme in the hon. Gentleman's comments, we do not want to do that. I do not think that simply to return to the days of 35 probation trusts is the right course of action. There are things that we can learn from what was done well with them, as well as what was not done so well, just as we can learn from what has happened over the past four years or so, post the transforming rehabilitation programme.

On the £280 million and how it will be spent, as I said there will be regional directors for each of the 11 regions, and they will make decisions based on commercial considerations in terms of the nature of the bids. I am keen to do more to ensure that the voluntary sector can get in and play an important role.

I want to encourage work at a devolved level. For example, I want to do everything that we can to ensure that police and crime commissioners can play an active role.

We are already recruiting staff. Probation has an absolutely key role to play in how we tackle crime and reduce reoffending, and I want to make sure that it is properly resourced.

[Mr Gauke]

Finally, there was a lot of criticism about the role of the private sector in probation. The hon. Gentleman highlighted Lord Ramsbotham's report, which was produced yesterday. I have looked at his report, and it says that when it comes to probation, the private sector has "a part to play". I am not sure that I quite picked up that tone from the hon. Gentleman. I do not know whether he had not read that bit, or if he had, whether he had forgotten it—that is also perfectly possible—but the fact is that even his own party's report recognises that the private sector has a part to play. I will of course happily meet the hon. Gentleman, and if he wants to bring along Lord Ramsbotham, that will make the occasion all the more convivial. I thank him for his comments.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is an important statement and I am keen to accommodate all would-be questioners on it, but I remind the House that there are two debates to follow, the protection of time for which is also a priority for the Chair. Therefore, notwithstanding the insatiable enthusiasm of colleagues for putting full inquiries on this matter, I appeal for brevity.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I will do my best, Mr Speaker.

I welcome this statement and I hope that anyone who cares about the criminal justice system will also welcome it. It is a good thing for Governments to reflect on experience and adjust policy and that is what the Secretary of State should be commended for doing. Does he agree that a critical part of the new arrangements must be to ensure sentencer confidence and that, therefore, not only must there be continuity of supervision, but an assurance to sentencers of the quality of supervision? Will he perhaps look at means by which the judiciary can be better involved in the follow-up to sentencing to ensure that that is the case?

Mr Gauke: That is a very interesting point and certainly something that I am keen to explore. The Chairman of the Justice Committee has hit the nail on the head: sentencer confidence is key. It is well known that there is support across the House for trying to move away from short custodial sentences that appear to be ineffective when it comes to rehabilitation. If we are to move away from that, we need to ensure that we have robust alternatives—robust community sentences—available, and we need to build the confidence for that and this plays a part in achieving exactly that.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I welcome the statement today. Dame Glenys Stacey's annual report was absolutely damning in relation to the state of our probation services as a result of failed privatisation. I am glad that the Secretary of State has conceded that this does not work and that payment by results does not work in probation. I have long called for a holistic probation service that centres on the needs of individuals. What support will the Secretary of State give to the national probation service to ensure that we move away from this tick-box exercise that exists at present and instead have a tailored support model that delivers meaningful and long-lasting results?

Mr Gauke: Clearly, there have been difficulties about the payment-by-results model in this context, and Dame Glenys Stacey has been very clear about that. She described herself as being delighted by the announcement today. I am delighted that she is delighted.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The attempt to bring in transforming rehabilitation failed partly because it failed to take into account and wait for the end of the pilots at Doncaster and Peterborough prisons. Does the Secretary of State agree that that has been part of the failure? Will he tell me what effect his reforms will have on those who want to introduce new services, such as a much better rehabilitation process through paid work?

Mr Gauke: With regard to previous experience, there is always a balance to be struck between trying to deliver something in good time and waiting to see all the evidence emerge. On where we are now, we should move to a different model. We will lead with Wales, and by the end of this year, we should have moved to a unified model. England will follow in 2021. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of work. He knows that that is a key issue for me in terms of rehabilitation. Both paid and unpaid work have important roles to play. I do want to encourage innovation; I want to make sure that, in such areas, we have innovation and a diversity of suppliers who can play a role in ensuring that we try new things, learn from experiences and get things improving.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This failed experiment was set to cost the taxpayer £467 million because of the early termination of contracts at the end of next year. It would be helpful to know what the total bill will be. My biggest concern as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee is that the Secretary of State has just laid out that there will be major local procurement processes over the next two years. It seems like a long time now, but that time will go very fast. How will he make sure that that procurement is done thoughtfully and sensitively and really reaches those small voluntary groups that were so cut out of the previous system?

Mr Gauke: First, let me make the point about costs. I come back to the point that I made earlier, which is that our expenditure with community rehabilitation companies has been considerably lower than had been forecast—£1.4 billion lower. That takes into account the £467 million to which the hon. Lady referred, which was there to ensure that we had operational stability. As we move on to the new system, she is right to say that 2021 will soon be upon us. We do need to focus very heavily on ensuring that procurement works well, that we make use of the voluntary sector and that there is proper competition so that those who can contribute to this process can do so properly, and we are very much focused on that.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to have done what he has done. There is no doubt that, in many cases, the CRC contract did not achieve the intended aims. I was glad to hear that he still envisages a significant role for the voluntary sector and even, in some cases, for the private sector. I hope that he can assure us that the basic principle of the organisation that is employed to engage in rehabilitation, which is what we so sorely lacked under the previous regime,

is fulfilled and that evidence is garnered of whether a particular voluntary or private operator is producing results and that, where they are, that model is replicated.

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. I am keen to ensure that we have the innovation that we need, and I have talked about the innovation fund. It is very important that we are led by the data and that where good practice is identified it is disseminated so that it can be taken up elsewhere in the system. That is why it is helpful to have a diversity of supply. Under the old probation trust system, there was a reluctance on the part of many probation trusts to make use of the voluntary and private sectors. We do not want to go back to such a system. None the less, a unified model for offender management is a sensible way forward.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Despite the Secretary of State's characteristically emollient and reasonable tone, the announcement he has made today covers up one of the most catastrophic pieces of public policy and waste of public money that we have seen in many a long year. It has let down communities that suffer from crime; it has let down victims of crime; and it has let down those people who commit crimes who have a right to try at least to change their ways. Will the Minister say something about the Secretary of State—one of his predecessors—who actually thought that this would work and talk to us about ministerial accountability, because there seems to be absolutely none of it left in this flailing Government?

Mr Gauke: I shall try to be emollient again. The fact is that the reoffending rate has fallen since Transforming Rehabilitation was brought in. There are areas of very good practice within the private sector. A number of parliamentary colleagues have highlighted good practice in their own areas. That tends to be more in the accredited programmes and in the unpaid work areas than in offender management. The fact that we have a larger private sector in this area enables us to move now to a system that is sustainable, that strikes the right balance and that ensures that we have diversity of supply and consistency in the offender management function.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Secretary of State. With a significant category D prison in my constituency, I have seen at first hand some of the positive work that social enterprises play as part of prisoner rehabilitation alongside the probation service. May I urge him to make sure that those with complex needs, particularly drug and alcohol addictions, are given the necessary support in any reform?

Mr Gauke: Yes. That is a very important point and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that issue. When it comes to bringing down reoffending, making sure that we address issues of mental health and substance abuse will be key. This is not just about probation, but probation has a vital role to play.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Across the country, voluntary sector organisations do a high volume of extremely impressive and successful work with ex-offenders, much of which was undermined by the part privatisation of the probation service. Now that services are going to be tendered under the core

interventions programme, can the Minister give me some assurances that he will prioritise voluntary sector organisations, as they provide the best results when it comes to issues such as housing and substance abuse, and that he will not award these contracts to private organisations that exist just to make a profit and deliver services that are not as good?

Mr Gauke: We will certainly want to prioritise organisations that deliver the best results; that is the key task. As the hon. Gentleman says, it is often the smaller voluntary services that are able to do that. At this point, it is not a question of providing specific targets as such. We want to ensure that the organisations that are best placed to deliver high-quality services—often from the voluntary sector—are in a strong position to be able to do that work.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am a member of the Criminal Bar Association.

This is a good example of policy based on ideology, as opposed to policy based on evidence and, frankly, good sound common sense. Probation officers need to be qualified, properly paid, trained and respected because of the important work they do. They advise judges in the sentencing process, in which they play a critical part. They also play a critical part in rehabilitation, and of course they keep people safe, including offenders. Will the Secretary of State please assure us that he will ensure that his Department is run not on ideological grounds, but on evidence-based grounds? To that end, will he also assure us that this new system, which I welcome, will not overly rely on digitisation alone, but will remember that we need people to deal with what is basically a people service?

Mr Gauke: I thank the right hon. Lady for welcoming the reforms. She asks whether I can guarantee that the Ministry of Justice will not be run along ideological lines but when I look across the Chamber, I am really not sure that I can provide that guarantee; it may be up to the electorate. The right hon. Lady made a crucial point about the value of probation officers. We should do everything we can to value their work. As I mentioned in my statement, we intend to bring forward a statutory professional regulatory framework, part of which is about ensuring that the status of probation officers is properly valued because they have a crucial role in reducing crime.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I welcome the news that the Government have finally recognised what I and many others have been telling them for too long—that their decision to part privatise the probation service has failed. We know from reports that this outsourcing error has wasted nearly half a billion pounds, but can the Secretary of State tell me what assessment he has made of the human cost of privatisation, including those badly injured or even killed by people under probation supervision, such as my constituent Jacqueline Wileman?

Mr Gauke: Every individual case such as the one mentioned by the hon. Lady is a tragedy. We want to do everything we can to ensure that such cases are kept to a minimum, but there will always be individual decisions made by probation officers in the NPS or CRCs, and such tragedies can indeed occur. My focus is on ensuring

[Mr Gauke]

that we have a sustainable system for the future, and what I have outlined to the House today provides exactly that.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I listened carefully to what the Minister said about the failed privatisation of the probation service and the waste of money, but I wondered if he could help me with something that I am intrigued about. Would he tell us what arrangements are being put in place to supervise the serial offender in the Cabinet who causes criminal damage in every Department that he is sent to? Is he being considered for early release?

Mr Gauke: I can see that the hon. Lady has been working hard on her question. In 2014, the probation system was by no means perfect. There was a need for more innovation, and to ensure that we dealt with some of the inefficiencies in the system. Five years on, there are elements of those reforms where we can see real benefits, but I accept that there are also elements that have not worked as intended. It is right that we look at reforming those elements and that we make changes where we need to, and that is precisely what I have done.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab) *rose*—

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Clive Efford.

Clive Efford: Good choice, Mr Speaker.

This situation is a disgrace: reoffending rates are up 22%; there has been a 47% increase in offenders who have been recalled to prison for breaching their licence; the service is rated inadequate in 80% of areas; and tens of thousands of offenders are being monitored by phone.

Dame Glenys Stacey calls the whole thing “irredeemably flawed”. When are we going to know the impact that the Secretary of State for Transport has had on crime levels, which all our constituents are concerned about? This increase in crime, which he must have caused through this flawed probation service, is something that only a mafia don could be proud of. When are we going to assess his impact on crime?

Mr Gauke: To be candid, one of the problems that we have faced with the current system is that the case load of low and medium-risk offenders has been significantly lower than was anticipated when the system was set up. As a consequence, the CRCs have not had the work that they expected. We have therefore been in something of a vicious circle; as there has been less work, the CRCs have been under financial strain and have invested less, and that is why in some cases the service has not been what we need it to be. That is the context of this situation.

Nick Smith: I have had terrible problems getting hold of local probation service data in Blaenau Gwent, so I hope the Secretary of State’s promise about improving digital management comes to something. I will certainly be watching out for that in the future. May I ask him whether a recreated or new probation model will be based on county boundaries, which would be much better than it being based on larger regions, as is the case at present? Probation services need to be closer to employers, local prisons and local police services.

Mr Gauke: We are working on the basis of 11 regions, and one of those regions—Wales—is a nation. I recognise that much could be done to ensure that the system is as localised as possible. I have been talking to police and crime commissioners to see if there is more that could be done that is relevant at their level. To the extent that we can devolve below those regions in an effective and efficient way, I would certainly be keen to do so.

Backbench Business

Definition of Islamophobia

1.8 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the definition of Islamophobia.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for agreeing to this debate and the Government for providing time for us to discuss this issue today.

On 15 March, a gunman walked into the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand and opened fire. During his killing spree there and at the Linwood Islamic Centre, 51 people were slaughtered in their place of worship for no reason other than that their killer had decided that their faith meant that they deserved to die.

Hatred against Muslims does not begin with the sound of gunfire breaking through the peaceful calm of a place of prayer. It begins with simple prejudice that can go unchecked and unchallenged in our schools, workplaces and communities. It is amplified on the pages of national newspapers. It is legitimised by political leaders who use Muslims as punchlines and bigotry as a vote winner. Just over 20 years ago, the Runnymede Trust published its seminal report, “Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All”. That it felt compelled to publish a follow-up 20 years later entitled “Islamophobia: Still a Challenge for Us All” reflects our collective failure to listen, learn and lead.

The all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, which I am proud to lead with the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), is determined to rise to this challenge. That is why we produced a ground-breaking report proposing a working definition of “Islamophobia” entitled “Islamophobia Defined”. We entered into this with an open mind about whether “Islamophobia” was the correct term. It was clear from the evidence we gathered, including powerful testimony from victims, that the word “Islamophobia” is widely used by Muslim communities, that it is considered to be useful and that what we are up against goes much wider than anti-Muslim hatred—it is structural, often unconscious bias. We argue:

“Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.”

It is true that Islam is a religion—a set of beliefs and ideas—and that Muslims are a set of believers from many races. But racism is a social construct. As Dr Omar Khan of the Runnymede Trust has said,

“Defining Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism properly locates the issue as one in which groups of people are ascribed negative cultural and racial attributes which can lead to a wide range of experiences, either as an unconscious bias, prejudice, direct or indirect discrimination, structural inequality or hate incidents.”

Of course, many Muslims do belong to an ethnic minority in the United Kingdom, and even those who do not—white converts, for example—experience a form of racism. As Tell MAMA, an organisation that does excellent work in recording hate crime against Muslims, told us,

“Any definition must consider how racialisation of Muslim identity means, for example, that white converts are verbally abused with racial epithets like ‘P*ki’.”

Alongside our definition, we produced a series of examples, inspired by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, to help people to understand how Islamophobia manifests itself. These are outlined clearly in our report. They include calling for, aiding, instigating or justifying the killing or harming of Muslims in the name of a racist or fascist ideology or an extremist view of religion; the tropes that Muslims suffer about entryism in politics, accusing Muslims of being more loyal to the alleged priorities of Muslims worldwide than to their own nations; and applying double standards not applied to any other group in society.

But perhaps the best examples are those we published of real acts of Islamophobia within our own country: the attempted murder of a Muslim woman and her 12-year-old daughter as “revenge” for the Parsons Green terror attack; the torture of a Muslim convert by two women in Guisborough while they shouted, “We don’t like Muslims over here,” and worse; the Muslim mother attacked for wearing a hijab on the way to collect her children from primary school in London; the so-called “punish a Muslim day” letters sent to Muslim institutions and prominent Muslim figures; the racists in Northern Ireland who left a pig’s head on the door of a mosque they had graffitied; charging motorists £1,000 more to insure their car if their name is Mohammed; conscious and unconscious bias against Muslims in the employment market, which was identified by the Social Mobility Commission; the Islamophobic abuse hurled at people who are not even Muslim because their abusers could not tell the difference between, for example, a Sikh wearing a turban and a Muslim man; and the men who tied bacon to the door handles of a mosque in Bristol.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for all his hard work and leadership on this issue and for securing this important debate. As we all know, hate crime against our Muslim community has been on the rise in Britain, and it needs to be tackled by the Government and authorities. I want to highlight the hate crime against those who are perceived to be Muslim. An infamous recent example was when a hate-filled individual felt the urge to try to remove the turban of one of my Sikh guests queuing up just outside our Parliament and to shout, “Muslim, go back home.” Does my hon. Friend agree that this needs to be further explored within the “Islamophobia” definition and that it shows how we are all intertwined and need to stand together?

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree. I thank my hon. Friend for the work he does in supporting the all-party parliamentary group. I assure him that that kind of attack and that kind of prejudice is very much covered by our definition. If we cannot recognise what is under our very noses on the doorsteps of our own Parliament, how can we give Muslims up and down the country, or those who are perceived to be Muslim, the confidence that we are taking this seriously?

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I, too, commend my hon. Friend for the leadership that he has shown on this issue. Hate crime against Muslims has risen by almost 100% since the Brexit referendum. In my constituency, which has the biggest Muslim population of any constituency in Britain, nearly 90% of my constituents have experienced Islamophobia or know someone who has. That includes bottles thrown at them,

[Liam Byrne]

alcohol thrown at them, and people screamed at for having the temerity to wear a hijab. Surely we need a better definition of Islamophobia if we are to prosecute Islamophobia and to clamp down on its enablers in the British media.

Wes Streeting: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. He is respected in this place for his deep knowledge of extremism issues, which is why we invited him to give evidence to our inquiry. The law already covers discrimination based on race and religion, but what we are dealing with is not just a challenge of changing laws; it is a challenge of changing hearts and minds, changing the everyday lived experiences of people in our community, and helping people to recognise and understand the challenge.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that, if we are to tackle Islamophobia and other hate crime, we must ensure that the social media companies take their responsibility seriously? Only this week, I reported to Facebook this comment by somebody following the report of a large Muslim gathering: “A pig’s head and a dozen packs of bacon should do it.” Facebook replied very quickly, saying that it did not contravene its community standards. If that does not contravene them, what does? I hope that Facebook is listening today and will reflect on this. Does my hon. Friend agree that the social media companies, and the written media, need to do much more?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I raised this with Facebook very recently during a visit to its headquarters in Silicon Valley with the all-party parliamentary group on the fourth industrial revolution. It must be taken seriously.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work on this issue and indeed to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who has championed it over a number of years. The Government are consulting on their online harms White Paper. In my opinion, it is not anywhere near robust enough on online hate or on the various levels of impact that social media has across society. He made a point about how we change hearts and minds. Does he agree that social media companies can play a part in that? Rather than allowing the jokes, the hatred and the assumptions about people’s race and religion to be posted, they could be far more robust not just in dealing with complaints but in their facility to take these images down. They often do not do that for days, as in the case of the Christchurch mosque killings; it took over a day to remove those images from YouTube because it was reviewing the content.

Wes Streeting: I strongly agree. I hope that that point will be taken up by Ministers as they think about this issue carefully in the course of their consultation.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): We also know that an excessive level of hatred and abuse is piled on to black and minority ethnic public figures on Facebook, including the Mayor of London, who receives a torrent of Islamophobic abuse on virtually all his pronouncements. I reinforce the point that the social media companies

have to be a critical part of this. We have to change the law, but all the partners have to play a part in making it work.

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that powerful point. The Mayor of London and my right hon. Friends the Members for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) and for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) are among the many people in public life who are targeted because of racism—racism, pure and simple. It has a gendered aspect and a religious aspect, and it has to be recognised and tackled. Social media companies tell us they have the tools in place, but they are clearly not using them, and that is partly because they do not understand the prejudice that is as plain as the nose on their face.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done on this issue. Does he agree that we need clarity? The definition is essential. We cannot have different degrees of racism; something is either racist or not. If we start to question the fine detail of a clear, concise definition of Islamophobia, we open the door for companies like the social media platforms to question what is and is not Islamophobic, and the Government need to be much clearer and firmer on this.

Wes Streeting: Precisely. Let me make some progress on that point.

We toured the length and breadth of the country, engaging in extensive consultation with Muslim communities, academics, lawyers, police officers, public services, civil society leaders and politicians. That is why our definition already has widespread backing from more than 750 British Muslim organisations—including the Muslim Council of Britain, the Muslim Women’s Network and British Muslims for Secular Democracy—and from the First Minister of Scotland, the Mayor of London, local authorities across the country and the chair of the Government’s own working group on anti-Muslim hatred.

It is particularly disappointing to hear a noisy chorus of vocal opposition from many of the usual suspects, who are making arguments in bad faith that accuse us of trying to use the term “Islamophobia” to shut down criticism of Islam and introduce blasphemy laws by the back door. In fact, our report makes it crystal clear that our definition does not preclude criticism of Islam or Islamic theology. I am not Muslim. I do not believe that the Holy Koran is the received word of God or that the Prophet Mohammed was the seal of the prophets who I recognise from my Bible, who Jews would recognise from their Torah or who many people would fail to recognise at all because they think religious books belong in the fiction section of the local library. God, if we believe in such a thing, does not need protection from criticism. Ideas must always be subjected to debate and challenge.

The motivations of some of our critics are particularly exposed when they accuse us of pushing a definition written for us by others, including Muslim Engagement and Development and Cage—two organisations that have pointedly refused to support our definition. I would have thought it obvious by now that the right hon. Member for Broxtowe and I do not take kindly to being told what to do by anyone, let alone organisations with which we have serious disagreements.

Let me turn to some of the other concerns that have been expressed in good faith and reply in kind. Our definition does not cover sectarianism, which extends from the abuse levelled at our Home Secretary on social media by other Muslims calling him a “coconut”, through to the treatment of the Ahmadiyya community, which whom we are proud to engage through the work of our APPG. We recognise that sectarianism is a serious problem that extends beyond one religion and is worthy of separate consideration and action, just as the persecution of so-called non-believers or ex-believers is something we must consider further and separately.

Our definition does not prevent security and law enforcement agencies from recognising and fighting the threat posed to this country and other democracies by those with a warped view of Islam who carry out acts of violence and terrorism. Our definition does not prevent academics from pointing out the religious motivation behind, say, the sieges on Constantinople or the caliphate’s imposition of discriminatory taxes on Jews and Christians, just as we would discuss the role of Christianity in the crusades. Our definition does not prevent critical discussion about the conflict that can arise between conservative religious teaching and more liberal attitudes to issues such as human sexuality, the role of women, food laws, abortion and assisted dying.

While our definition cannot prevent false-flag accusations of Islamophobia to shut down reasonable debate and discussion, it does not enable such accusations. In fact, it makes it easier to deal with such behaviour. Context is everything. Our definition provides a framework for helping organisations to assess, understand and tackle real hatred, prejudice and discrimination.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an outstanding contribution to this very important discussion in this country. He raises the difficulty of terrorism, and he could also raise the very difficult issue of sexual grooming. Does he deplore and condemn the way in which this most minority of sinners who exist in every single ethnic group on the planet is being extrapolated to condemn an entire community? That is precisely what we are trying to get to grips with, through this important definition, to challenge those who take a terrible act by a small group of people and extend it to an entire ethnic group.

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree; that is exactly what we are trying to achieve. The story that is not written or told is about the faith leaders in my community who do not just know the challenge posed by hate preachers; they have physically wrestled them out of their mosques. Those are the same people who, when an act of terrorism is carried out in the name of one of the world’s great faiths, not only deplore the attack but know that they will be on the receiving end of the backlash, even though they believe their faith and the teaching of their religious text to be about peace and harmony.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Wes Streeting: I will give way one final time, and then I must draw my remarks to a conclusion.

Mike Gapes: I only intervene because he mentioned our Redbridge community and I want to pay tribute to the Redbridge Faith Forum and all the inter-faith work

in Redbridge. The Muslims who are involved in that have done a fantastic job. Does he agree that inter-faith dialogue is the essence of dealing with these problems?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree. As shown by the discussion on “Newsnight” last night between myself and a respected imam from Leicester, we can reconcile our way through some of these challenges, difficulties and tensions with mutual respect, proper public discourse and dialogue. Those of us who are on the receiving end of prejudice of one kind or another know exactly what it feels like, and we have a particular responsibility to stand alongside others who experience prejudice. That is why I am proud to lead the APPG on British Muslims as a non-Muslim and the APPG on British Jews as a non-Jew. It is not just the responsibility of Muslims to tackle Islamophobia; it is a challenge for us all.

Let me conclude with some personal observations. I have watched, with some amazement and even greater despair, the Conservative party making exactly the same mistakes over Islamophobia as my party has with antisemitism—the same miserable, inexcusable pattern of dismissal, denial and delegitimisation of serious concerns raised by prominent Muslims about racism within their ranks. My friend Baroness Warsi has stood as a brave lone voice, challenging discrimination in her party. As we recoil in horror at the deafening silence of decent people in the Conservative party about racism within their ranks, I respectfully say to some quarters of my own party: that is the same silence you demand of me on antisemitism, and it is one you will never receive.

The Prime Minister could have followed the lead of the Scottish Conservative leader, Ruth Davidson, in backing this definition and left a powerful legacy to detoxify her party and improve the lives of Muslims across the country. Instead, with a remarkable lack of self-awareness and humility, the party that has so spectacularly failed British Muslims now intends to produce its own description. The party’s abject failure to understand and tackle Islamophobia within its own ranks means that it has neither the wisdom nor the credibility to do so.

Given that, just over a year ago, Ministers denied that there was a need for any definition at all, I suppose we might consider this latest development some sign of progress. But it is too slow; it is insufficient; and it will not be tolerated. British Muslims deserve better than this. As the Runnymede Trust said last year, Islamophobia remains, shamefully, a challenge for us all. It is one that we must now meet.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I will not impose a time limit, but if we work to 10-minute speeches, or thereabouts, everybody will get in.

1.29 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I will be brief, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for whom, as he knows, I have the highest regard; we have worked on many things over some time. I disagree with him today, however, and the nature of a relationship—indeed, I would like to say friendship—is that we can do so with integrity. I hope he will agree that my

[*Sir John Hayes*]

disagreement is based on good faith—those were the words that he used—rather than anything else, and it is informed by conversations that I have had with others, whom I shall quote in a moment.

It is, of course, axiomatic that prejudice and bigotry levelled at a particular group on the basis of their race, religion or origin is wholly unacceptable, and those who apologise or are apologists for that have no place in this House. The right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—he is another friend of mine, in the personal rather than the parliamentary sense—knows of my support for him when he, quite rightly, boldly and bravely, raised the issue of Windrush. The Government were undoubtedly in the wrong; he was in the right; and his star rose as a result. But he did not do it for that reason; he did it in the cause of justice, and once again I congratulate him on so doing.

Let me start with a quotation that will not be to the taste of all Members:

“Most Muslims in this country see the preoccupation with Islamophobia, which is increasingly peddled by guilt-ridden white liberals and self-appointed Muslim campaigners, as far from being in their interests, an initiative that is likely to separate, segregate and stigmatise them and their families.”

That quote comes from a Muslim scholar, Professor Mohammed Abdel-Haq, with whom I had breakfast this morning. He is an example of how a first-generation immigrant, a practising and devout Muslim and, like many Muslims, a proud British patriot—the hon. Member for Ilford North made that point emphatically in his opening remarks when speaking about his constituents—sees the risks associated with something that is, to speak candidly, undoubtedly well intentioned and well motivated.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I just want to get into my flow, which I am not quite in yet, and then I will happily give way to the hon. Lady.

Professor Abdel-Haq and others see the risks in separating out Muslims and doing more harm than good by, in the words of Trevor Phillips, “making life harder” for them. Defining Islamophobia as anti-Muslim racism, as stated by the APPG, will distort the argument rather than clarify it.

Dr Huq: My name is also Huq, so I felt I should take issue with the Haq quoted by the right hon. Gentleman—he is no relation of mine, and my name is spelt differently because when people came to this country the names were transliterated. May I give an example of not a scholar, but a Muslim in my constituency who does great community work? Aizad Hussain from Outreach Ealing will meet me this evening—I do not know whether other right hon. and hon. Members have been invited to an Iftar, since we are in the season of Ramadan—and he will present me with a petition signed by 400 people who are calling for greater protection for places of worship such as mosques. We have heard the stories about pigs’ heads—sadly, they are true; they are not just stories. People feel vulnerable, and the Government should be providing protection. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the existing fund is insufficient, even if he does not agree with the definition of Islamophobia?

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is right to say that the prejudices and hatred that I described in my opening remarks, and which were highlighted by the hon. Member for Ilford North, are undoubtedly cause for alarm and require action. There being no doubt about that, the argument is about whether this definition of Islamophobia is helpful or not. This debate is not about the intent or our shared commitment to dealing with hatred and prejudice, or about our determination to stand by the people the hon. Lady describes; it is about whether this initiative, APPG report and definition move things on or not. There are differing opinions about that, and they are not all spiteful, unhelpful or deliberately obstructive. Indeed, as the hon. Gentleman acknowledged in his speech, such opinions are exercised in good faith. People may, of course, have tangential views and not act in good faith—he drew attention to that as well—but not all criticism of this is based on bias. Indeed, some criticisms, such as that offered by Mohammed Abdel-Haq, are based on a fear of separation, segregation and stigmatisation.

Let me develop the argument a little further. The report essentially identifies Islamophobia as an exercise in racism, which presumes that the Muslim peoples of this country, or any country, are a race. Given that Islam is a religion, that proposition is of itself contentious, and has been described as such by some critics of the report. People who ascribe to that religion come from all kinds of places, are all kinds of colours and creeds, and adopt all kinds of different practices. Rather like Christians, some take a more fundamentalist view of their faith than others. To describe them as a race is, of itself, a bold, and some would argue contentious, view, yet that is what the report does by identifying Islamophobia as a matter of anti-racism.

My third point—for those who are counting, Mr Deputy Speaker—is that many existing laws deal with these things. When I was the Security Minister, I worked with Mark Rowley in the Home Office on counter-terrorism matters, so I know him well. The argument that he made on the BBC this morning is that existing legislative arrangements on incitement to hatred, discrimination and a panoply of other measures allow the police, if they so choose, to pursue people who behave in a way that is unacceptable and, much more seriously, illegal—there is a perfectly proper argument that the police do not do that enough. I do not make that argument, but others might. It is certainly right that the police should pursue those people, who should be questioned, charged and, where appropriate, prosecuted. However, the argument that we are starting from a blank sheet of paper belies the fact that all kinds of anti-discrimination and anti-racism laws exist that allow us to protect those who might be victims of such prejudice.

Mr Lammy: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that what the definition describes is a form of racism? It does not state racism per se, but rather forms of racism. Does he understand that the historical roots of racism began several hundred years ago, when at the time there was an understanding that the Christian, Aryan, European race was superior to others? For those with a different religious faith, there was a pecking order, which would have put my ancestors, who were African, at the bottom. That is where it comes from. It is a form of prejudice that comes from our history.

Sir John Hayes: That partly depends how far one wants to explore the right hon. Gentleman's historical point—I imagine his point is largely about the European empires that predominated in relatively modern history. If we were speaking about the ancient world, none of what he said would be true. If we were talking about the Persian or Ottoman empires, none of what he said would be true. If we talked about the Moorish domination of north Africa and southern Europe, none of what he said would be true.

So, if we are going to use history as a means of legitimising or explaining our arguments, it is important that we do so in as holistic a way as possible, though I do not dispute the fact that the right hon. Gentleman is both honourable and a gentleman—perhaps that is the best way of putting it—because I know he has a long-standing commitment to fighting racism in his constituency and elsewhere.

I know that others want to speak and there are many of them, so I am going to deal with my other points fairly briefly.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I did suggest about 10 minutes. We have now gone past the right hon. Gentleman's 10 minutes, so I am sure he is coming to the end of his great speech.

Sir John Hayes: I did want to give way to other Members.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is your choice, but obviously it is the choice from the Chair that we stick to around 10 minutes.

Sir John Hayes: In that case, let me draw my remarks to a conclusion with my final two points, which I will deal with very briefly.

We have to take it very seriously indeed when anti-terrorist police, notably Martin Hewitt, who has been mentioned already, describe the risks associated with this initiative in the way that he has. He describes them as “undermining counterterrorist policing powers and tactics.”

That very damning criticism should not be dismissed lightly.

We should also take it very seriously when human rights lawyers say that these proposals would lead to judicial reviews and legal confusion which, as the House knows, they have.

Finally, we should, I am afraid, question whether the effect of this debate will not be to fuel the extreme and far right, who I am profoundly concerned are gaining a foothold again in our country. I go back to the 1970s, when I was a member of the Anti-Nazi League and marched against the National Front in Lewisham, Ilford and elsewhere. The far right will see this as a justification for their intolerance and it may well be that what is well intentioned and propounded by decent and honourable people is turned against them. For all those reasons—I could talk about the Policy Exchange report, but I will not—I cannot support the hon. Member for Ilford North, much as I admire him.

1.42 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes),

with whom I worked during his time as Security Minister. I would like to start by condemning the acts in Christchurch, New Zealand and in Sri Lanka.

I have been on the receiving end of hate mail and actions from both the far right and from the Islamist community. I have taken my job seriously since 2001 and I continue to do so. I am proud to be a British Pakistani Muslim Member of Parliament. I was elected in 2001 for Birmingham, Perry Barr, as the first Muslim to be elected to this Parliament from England. My great-grandfather and his brothers and cousins served in the British merchant navy in the first world war. My grandfather and his brothers and cousins served in the British merchant navy in the second world war. My maternal great-grandfather served in the British Indian Army in the second world war. I am proud of my roots and my heritage. I will take no lessons from anybody who tells me that I am Islamophobic or that I am too much of a Muslim. I am what I am, and I continue to be proud of that heritage. I am proud to be a member of the Labour party, because of its ideals in fighting against antisemitism, Muslim hatred, race hatred and LGBT hatred. I believe in equality and justice for all. That is why I am a Member of Parliament for the Labour party.

My objection to the report on Islamophobia by the all-party group on British Muslims is principled, and I will outline it later in my contribution. It is because of my long-held belief and the work I have done since 2011 that I oppose the report, and I will go deeper into that. That does not deflect from criticism of any political party that does not take Muslim hatred seriously. All political parties are accountable for hatred by any individual, particularly Muslim hatred. Therefore, all parties and all their members—elected or not—should be held to account on that basis.

The foreword of the report is by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who is highly esteemed and highly respected, I think, on both sides of the House. However, I do take slight issue when he says that

“Islamophobia was playing a major role in undermining integration and community cohesion.”

I have been looking at the issue of integration since 2001. The big problem with integration has predominantly been, from the 1980s and before, the way the Government fund communities. They fund communities to stay in isolation. They have funded the Sikh community, the Hindu community, the Afro-Caribbean community and the Churches community, and everybody is always divided, competing against each other for the bit of funding they get for community recognition. Whatever the issues are, I think they lie with all the communities, but not all communities are subject to Islamophobia in relation to integration.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): If I may say so, I think the hon. Gentleman has entirely misunderstood the content of my foreword. My foreword was simply designed to make the point that my own experience—I will touch on that in a moment—is that Islamophobia in the widest sense and as understood by the public, which is an irrational hatred directed towards Muslims, is playing a major role in preventing integration, in my view. That is my point. I will amplify it later, but I just want to make that quite clear.

Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. and learned Gentleman for that clarification. His foreword is very brief and that is all I had to go on. There are other issues that perhaps we might discuss outside this place.

The key issue not covered by the report is inter-community relations, predominantly within the Muslim community, whether from Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Kenya or elsewhere in Africa.

Sir John Hayes: I wonder if the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to this point and is able to clarify the matter—or perhaps the Chair of the Select Committee could answer it instead. Initially, one of the four key points of the Home Office inquiry that deals with a similar matter was on intra-Muslim prejudice and conflict, but it was dropped. Does he know why it was dropped?

Mr Mahmood: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue, but that is above my pay grade and I have no particular knowledge about that.

The point I want to make is about inter-community discrimination. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) is aware of the constituent who murdered a person from the Ahmadi community. We should really reflect on that. [*Interruption.*] I ask the shadow Minister to listen. I am coming to that, so please carry on listening. When we discuss Islamophobia, we also have to consider inter-community Islamophobia. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) will understand, a huge amount of knife crime is predominantly between Muslim communities, whether Turkish, Pakistani or north African. The other key issue we have to look at is class discrimination. If we are to address the issue holistically and move forward, all these factors are important.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for giving their best endeavours and having the best intentions in working on the report. I take issue not with the great work they have done and their genuine interest—I commend them for the time they spent on the report—but the issues of Islamophobia are not defined in the report. We must look at that seriously, because it needs addressing properly. I will come to that in my conclusions.

The report says that the Prevent policy, followed for a long time by both Labour and Conservative Governments, is Islamophobic. I believe strongly that Prevent must be amended, but that does not mean that it should not be followed. There should be a better interaction through Prevent with mainstream communities, with its work not limited to small organisations. However, the work done in education has been quite good and positive.

People have made exaggerations. A so-called terrorist house was taken up by MEND, but that was a completely different issue. Social services, a school and the police worked together, understood the issue quickly and dealt with it. However, people wanted to expand on it and highlight it further in the media because that suited their cause.

Chapter 3 of the report looks at a particular case. One person said:

“I was stopped at Heathrow airport. The policeman said that they targeted me because of my attire. This has happened to me so many times. I cannot report it because the police do not see this as Islamophobic”.

That goes to the crux of the definition of Muslimness in the report, which is the key issue for us to address. Muslimness is not just about the attire someone wears. I have a very good friend who is a civil engineer and one of the most observant people of his religion I know. He does not walk around wearing a particular turban. He still works as an engineer, although a lot less than he used to because I think he wants to take it easier. He is a devout Muslim, but he cannot be identified through his attire. If the report is to go the way it seems to be, how can we protect those Muslims who dress normally in society but have in their heart those religious beliefs?

I know someone else in Birmingham who has her hair cropped and blonde. She wears western clothes—sometimes skirts and sometimes trousers. Recently she has come back from supporting a charity in Sindh to look after the poor, open their fasts and do those sorts of things. She does not qualify under the Muslimness description, yet she does more for the Muslim community—

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mahmood: No. I must make tracks as time is limited.

This person went out there, but some people would look at her and probably not think that she is a Muslim. People can hide these things.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I rise genuinely to try to assist my hon. Friend in putting forward his views. Surely he is not implying—I know he is not—that those who choose to dress or look a certain way are in any way abnormal.

Mr Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification. Of course I am not. I am saying that the definition of Muslimness as described in the report categorises people into those who dress a particular way and those who do not. By definition, the people who do not dress one way are excluded.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the dress code. The issue about Islamophobia is that we know that women who work in headscarves are repeatedly getting attacked and abused. That is where the Muslimness perception comes into it.

Mr Mahmood: I will quickly give way to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe, if she wishes, just to be fair.

Anna Soubry indicated dissent.

Mr Mahmood: That is fair enough.

Those are the issues. I am happy to an extent to see people getting frustrated, because our objective is to get a clear definition. That is what I was after, but that is not coming.

Chapter 4 of the report mentions Trojan horse, with which I am familiar. However, the way it is described in the report has no basis in the events on the ground. I was there. I confronted most of those people. I know how girls were made to sit at the back of the school because they were female, how they were all told to cover their heads and how they were supposed to move on. Two reports were done about that by Peter Clarke

and Ian Kershaw. This report ignores all that work. It is therefore absurd to say that this report does something positive.

The report talks about “Denying Muslim populations the right to self-determination” in Kashmir. The report also mentions Palestine, but I will concentrate on Kashmir because I am a Kashmiri. There is a considerable proportion of Pandits in Kashmir; it is not just a Muslim state. If such claims are to be made in a major report, please get the facts right. Kashmiris are not all Muslims; there are also Pandits, who have long-standing heritage. In fact, the region of Kashmir was created by a Pandit. People who produce these reports must be mindful of such things.

We need balance in this issue, with we as Muslims able to condemn both sides. When radical action, radicalisation and terrorism take place, we should condemn that, just as we should condemn attacks from the right. We should all do that. This is about the mainstream in the United Kingdom and supporting the mainstream of the community. We as Muslims, given our population and the roles we play in this place, the other place and across the country, should do that, and be proud of who we are. We are proud Muslims, and we should start to move away from a victim mentality and be positive about who we are.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I know the Chairman of Ways and Means reminded colleagues that there are two debates this afternoon and asked if people could confine themselves to 12 minutes. If we cannot do that, I will have to impose a time limit.

1.57 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to participate in the debate—well, I think it is—and it is certainly a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood). I found myself agreeing with a great deal of what he had to say, although I was struck by the fact that, I think, he had misunderstood something I had written as part of the foreword to the APPG report.

I was not involved in some of the initial stages of the APPG report, but its members came to me—I was a member in any event—and asked for my input, because they knew that I had participated in and indeed chaired the Citizens UK commission that produced “The Missing Muslims”, a document that looked at Muslim participation in the public life of our country. For that, we went around the country and took extensive evidence in a large number of locations. It was wide-ranging and dealt with problems in mosque management and discrimination against women. A great many difficult subjects were touched on in the course of that inquiry, but one thing that emerged with absolute, complete clarity was the fact that Islamophobia—and I shall return to that word in a moment—exists in this country in ways that are having a significant impact on the daily lives of British Muslims, and, indeed, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), those who may be mistaken for Muslims. Both his constituency and mine contain substantial Sikh communities.

Much of this behaviour falls well short of criminality. Indeed, I should make it clear that I do not believe that any useful purpose would be served by trying to criminalise it, because at that point one would embark on an endless cycle, which I think would have no benefit at all.

Some Members who were around more than 10 years ago will remember that I was rather active when the legislation on incitement to religious hatred was introduced, arguing strongly in the House that the way in which the then Government were seeking to word it risked placing a fetter on free speech because it was too broadly drafted and included such terms as “ridicule”. I considered that it was within the tenets of a free society to express ridicule for another person’s religious beliefs. As a Christian, I encounter people who express ridicule for my beliefs, and I just have to live with it.

That having been said, I live, and have the benefit of living, in what is, in a sense, part of what would be seen as a majority community in this country, and I do not think we should underestimate the adverse impact that what I call Islamophobia is having on our society. It is acting as a preventer of integration, and we in the House should be paying some attention to it, because as leaders in our communities—which is what we are seen to be—we ought to be showing a lead in trying to eradicate it as much as possible. That does not mean preventing people from expressing perfectly reasoned criticisms, or, indeed, sometimes unreasonable criticisms, of other people’s religious beliefs; but human society cannot thrive unless we treat other human beings with respect, and lack of respect can have a corrosive impact.

Yasmin Qureshi: I agree with what the right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying. He mentioned discrimination. It is right that religions can be criticised, but I am sure he will agree that when certain sections of the media tell blatant lies about Muslims, media discussion of Islam becomes worrisome.

Mr Grieve: I often read in newspapers things about Islam that I know from my own experience—I am a trustee of the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies—to be inaccurate. Of course, we must also acknowledge, as, indeed, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr did, that Islam is not a homogenous practice. It is extremely diverse, just as is Christianity or, for that matter, Judaism. There will be areas of practice and criticism within the faith itself. As we know from the events in the middle east and the hostility between Shi’a and Sunni, a deep division, or indeed hostility towards groups who are considered to be heretical, such as Ahmadiyyans, is a real issue.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): Both my right hon. and learned Friend and I have a strong relationship with our local Ahmadiyya communities. I think it is worth drawing attention to the role that they play in trying to combat Islamophobia, which, in my opinion, has absolutely no place in any political party or any element of our society in a modern Britain. I pay tribute to the many Members who support the work that is done day in, day out on the streets of our country.

Mr Grieve: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend.

My view has always been that Islamophobia—which I find quite easy to identify in my own mind—is a process whereby utterly law-abiding individuals who wish to live in peace with their neighbours and get on with their daily lives find themselves subjected to abuse with no rational basis whatsoever, and it is very prevalent. Part of that may be a result of the disturbed conditions in the middle east and the growth of terrorism. I do not think it possible to disconnect the one from the other: the connection is very clear. However, that does not reduce our duty to try to do something about it.

[Mr Grieve]

That brings me to the work of the all-party parliamentary group and the foreword that I wrote. Those who were present at the APPG meeting which I attended will remember that I issued a gentle critique of the definition that it had drafted, and we had a very interesting discussion, in particular about the word “racism”, which is common parlance in the House and indeed the country, but whose usage has changed significantly over recent decades. It started as an attempt to define a prejudice or discrimination on the basis of someone’s immutable colour characteristics, but it has evolved over time into meaning something rather broader—I think the penny has gradually dropped that our colour characteristics are not necessarily all that immutable—and has taken on a far more cultural and wider context. It can be defined as hostility to the “other” outside one’s own group.

It was for that reason that the APPG looked at the definition in trying to establish a working definition of Islamophobia that might be useful. As I have said, during the meeting I gently pointed out that I could see where the pitfalls were likely to be, but I wrote the foreword because it seemed to me that it was possible to go round and round in circles, and that seeking a redefinition could well be useful to public authorities and groups that were trying to tackle Islamophobia. I should emphasise that neither I nor—I think—any member of the APPG thought that a new legal definition was being enacted and that condign punishment would be visited on any individual who transgressed what someone else’s definition might be.

I have to say that I am rather depressed to see some of the reaction to this work. I am sorry to have to say it, because I have great respect for Policy Exchange, but a great deal of this report is total and unadulterated rubbish. It strays off into areas that are about a million miles removed from Islamophobia. I really do not know about Mr Hewitt and the police officer and his issues concerning counter-terrorism, but how it could possibly be argued that this definition could prevent the police from enforcing the law against terrorists in this country is beyond my comprehension. It is breathtaking.

The lesson that I derive from this is that, unfortunately, we are treading on eggshells. When attempts to crystallise a definition to enable better debate and understanding—which, in my view, were clearly well-meaning—are immediately transformed into a culture war in which it starts to be alleged that what is being attempted is the suppression of free speech, I become profoundly depressed. The exaggerations in the report seem to demonstrate a reverse fear that, somehow, the word “Islamophobia” is being used as a weapon on the law-abiding when people reasonably highlight anxiety over terrorism, or practices within some communities that are regarded as being bad, a view that I believe to be shared throughout the House. That is far removing us from what I think the issue is.

Let me issue a plea to the Secretary of State. He has a rather unenviable task in this respect, but I hope that he will not dismiss the APPG’s report out of hand, because it does not deserve to be dismissed. It is clearly based on good intentions and a wish to identify a way forward. If we stop flying off the handle and disappearing into the most extraordinary and bizarre places—I am sorry to have to say that I felt that that was happening a little bit

when I listened to my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes)—we may make some progress, and I hope that this debate will facilitate it. That, I think, was the purpose of the APPG’s report, which is why I wrote the foreword.

I cannot get away from the fact that there is a real problem here, and we need to tackle it. This is an area in which we need to show leadership.

2.9 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): As vice-chair of the all-party group on British Muslims, I thank my colleagues, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), for applying for this hugely important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Truth be told, when I look across the House today, I realise this debate is not just about the definition of Islamophobia; it is also about the ever-prevalent Islamophobia across our society and in the online world peddled by the far right, leading to attacks every day on British Muslims, and the acceptable norms of prejudice passed across the dinner table and, frankly, in enclaves of the Tory party that fuel Islamophobia or allow it to be ignored.

Those watching this debate will notice that, although every other Westminster political party has accepted the APPG definition of Islamophobia, one party has not: the Conservative party, which refuses to accept the definition. Indeed, every party in Scotland, including the Conservative party, has accepted and endorsed the definition. I pay tribute to Ruth Davidson for showing great leadership on that.

I originally prepared my speech for the debate that was postponed. Sadly, I can no longer deliver that speech because, just in the last 24 hours, I have witnessed the orchestrated nature of a machine that has come out in spectacular fashion in a continued attempt to shut down the voices and experiences of ordinary British Muslims. What I say today is neither a conspiracy nor some delusional hyperbole. I am referring to the fact that the chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council, Martin Hewitt, wrote to the Prime Minister suggesting that the APPG definition of Islamophobia creates some sort of security risk. Let me put this to bed once and for all: this is a non-legally binding working definition, which is why that assertion is simply plain stupid. It is as stupid as saying that, because we have a non-legally binding definition of antisemitism, we can no longer do foreign policy in the middle east.

I am a member of the National Police Chiefs’ Council national roundtable for race, religion and belief, which until this week was chaired by Chief Constable Jon Boutcher. He was not aware of Martin Hewitt’s letter or concerns. Furthermore, Chief Constable Ian Hopkins, the national lead on matters of policing and diversity from Greater Manchester police, did not know either, and nor did John Robins, my chief constable in West Yorkshire.

What is deeply worrying is not only that Martin Hewitt attributes concerns to his colleagues without actually speaking to them, but that the intervention suggests that the police have a disgraceful lack of understanding of hate crimes. They recognise the importance of having racism and antisemitism defined, but the intervention

suggests that the police are blind to the same need for Muslims, despite the fact that year on year the police have consistently produced figures that show an increase in hate crime against Muslims.

This is not just about a Government who are failing to listen to the British Muslim communities; this is about a Government who on the eve of this debate coincidentally and conveniently had a security leak from within their highest office, the office of the Prime Minister, with the serious concerns of the protection of British Muslims played out as a game on the front pages of a national newspaper. This is no longer about a political party that is institutionally Islamophobic; this is about a Government telling a section of those they govern they will not only silence their voices and ignore their legitimate fears, but define their experiences and actively shut down those trying to represent their views.

If it is down to the experiences of women to define feminism, the experiences of people of colour to define racism, the experiences of Jews to define antisemitism, and the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities to define homophobia, I say to the Secretary of State: how dare he tell British Muslims that our experiences cannot define Islamophobia. If that is not a pernicious form of racism, what is it?

For me this is much more than just rejecting the definition. It is disgraceful when the most senior Muslim woman in the Tory party, the former chair of the party, Baroness Warsi, continuously calls for an inquiry into Islamophobia, yet time and again that is completely ignored. It is despicable that the Conservative party ran a dog-whistle Islamophobic campaign against the London Mayor Sadiq Khan and still refuses to apologise. It is unacceptable that, when I called for a debate on Islamophobia in this Chamber, the Leader of the House responded with blatant othering by suggesting that this was an issue for the Foreign Office, thus saying that British Muslims are not citizens of this nation. Maybe she was taking lessons from her colleague, the Home Secretary; I do not know. It is scandalous and frankly an act of misconduct in every field of work for a male to demean women for the way they choose to dress, yet it is unapologetically acceptable for the former Foreign Secretary to describe women in burkas as “letter boxes” and “bank robbers”. It is hypocrisy of the highest order when the Conservative party’s internal complaints procedure when dealing with Islamophobes is to publicly suspend them and privately sneak them back in when it thinks nobody is watching.

While all the above could be explained as a party in denial, the leak suggests this is a party in government that is willing to orchestrate a campaign to reject the recognition of the very real and prevalent nature of Islamophobia. A line has been crossed, beyond the failure to act, to send a clear message to British Muslim communities that this Government are not serious about the safety and security of British Muslims. As a British Muslim woman, that message is clear to me today, as it will be to those up and down this country.

In March 2018, when the right hon. Member for Broxtowe said to the Government that it was high time for there to be a proper legal definition of Islamophobia, the response from the Minister was:

“We do not accept the need for a definitive definition”.—[*Official Report*, 12 March 2018; Vol. 637, c. 595.]

So a year ago, the Government said they did not need a definition and today they are saying they need a definition but just not the one accepted by British Muslims. They choose to reject the definition that is rooted in the experiences of British Muslims and thus is widely accepted by over 750 Muslim institutions and organisations.

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. I can say hand on heart that she is speaking with the passion and clarity that I hear in mosques and Muslim community centres in my constituency. I heard from the Conservative Benches the comment that clearly not all Muslims agree with this definition and that is true, but I would just, through her, ask the Secretary of State to reflect on the same claims that are made by members of my own party about Jewish Voice for Labour and by other fringe groups who consistently seek to undermine the real fight against antisemitism. I am not talking about Members of this House who disagree; I am talking about fringe siren voices. Do not mistake the views of a minority with the views of the majority.

Naz Shah: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and he is absolutely right. The truth is that the Conservative party refuses to accept the definition accepted by over 750 Muslim institutions and organisations from across the spectrum, spanning from the Muslim Council of Britain, the largest umbrella body for British Muslims, to prominent Muslim women groups such as the Muslim Women’s Network, to British Muslims for Secular Democracy, and that is in addition to 80 academics, some of whose life’s work has been on racism.

In the spirit of speaking about freedoms, let me turn the Secretary of State’s attention to article 3 of the universal declaration of human rights:

“everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of a person”.

So I ask him: when Mohammed Saleem was murdered in 2013 in an Islamophobic terrorist attack, where was his freedom? Where was his right to life? Where was the national response from the Government? Where were the advisers forming a definition of Islamophobia?

When Mushin Ahmed, an 81-year-old grandfather from Rotherham, was murdered in 2015 in an Islamophobic terrorist attack, where was the Government response to his murder? In fact, never mind the Government not forming any sort of strategy to tackle Islamophobia: after his right to life was denied—after the duty to protect a Muslim grandfather was failed—where was the Government statement? Where was the Cobra meeting? Why was there no taskforce? Why have this Government failed to act while Islamophobia has continued to rise and rise and rise? It then took the third far-right Islamophobic attack, the mowing down of Makram Ali outside Finsbury park in Ramadan 2017, for the Government to finally acknowledge that this was terrorism.

I make no apologies for my emotions today. It has only been two months since we saw the deadly attacks in Christchurch, where over 50 Muslims were murdered at their place of worship. I do not want to personalise this debate, but I think it is important to give examples to illustrate the problem. These are just a handful of comments directed towards me—the ones I could read without crying. Beyond that, Muslims receive such abuse every single day as they go about their lives: “String her up”; “I will do time for you”; “I hope you see your children dead in your arms”; and “You don’t deserve life... You are pure evil and your clock is ticking.”

[Naz Shah]

Lives have been lost, globally and in the UK, and only now has the Islamophobia debate got to this stage—and even then through a Backbench Business debate. If we do not act today, I ask which Muslim's life must go next before we simply recognise and understand Islamophobia. Never before have I shared this openly, but I do question, as many Muslims across this country do, which Muslim's life will be next and whether it will be mine.

So I ask the Secretary of State and the Government to rethink their decision. It is high time we accepted this definition and moved forward to actually tackle Islamophobia. For those of privilege, a definition—or no definition—is just semantics, but for British Muslims, it is about their safety, the security of their lives and the fear of their sisters' hijabs being pulled off on the streets. It is about their places of worship being attacked while they pray; it is about being denied a job because of their Muslim-sounding name and struggling to make ends meet; and it is about their right to be equal citizens because of the faith they belong to.

I have also discussed this matter at length with the Foreign Office Minister, Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon. As well as being the Prime Minister's special representative on freedom of religion and belief, he is one of the most senior members of the British Ahmadiyya community. He agrees with the term "Islamophobia" and believes that this definition protects the Ahmadiyya community. What better assurance could the Government want than that? I share this because, when speaking to various Ministers from the Home Office, one of the concerns raised has been the issue of the definition not dealing with sectarianism. I put it to the Minister that, if sectarianism is something that this Government want to address, we can convene a roundtable with the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, representatives of ultra-orthodox and liberal Jewry, the plethora of sects and castes within the British Hindu community and representatives of various Muslim sects and other religions to ensure that we consider the issue of sectarianism in its totality. Surely the Secretary of State is not suggesting that the Government are only interested in sectarianism within the Muslim community, because such an exceptionalist approach would be dangerous and divisive.

To conclude, the choice of which side of history the Government choose to stand on is a choice for them, but the fight for equal protection for British Muslims will go on. Those of us, Muslim or not, who believe in equality for all will stand shoulder to shoulder with them. The Conservative party has sadly always found itself on the wrong side of history. It did so with women's rights and with the rights of black people and of the LGBTQ+ community. Every time, it finds itself on the wrong side of history and, every time, it is my party that has to teach it what equality means. Once again today, as we see Islamophobia on the rise, we see the Conservative party failing even to acknowledge the term "Islamophobia" or give this latest form of racism a definition.

Over the past month, I have seen this Government—and those connected to them through a tangled web of think-tanks, newspapers and other ideological bedfellows—ramp up their opposition to British Muslims who are seeking a protection framework equal to those given to

our fellow citizens. This has not gone unnoticed in Parliament, in our constituencies, on the streets or in the homes where a young British Muslim community feels that, under this Government, it has been forced to frame and fight its own civil rights movement. The effect of this will eventually be felt in Parliament when the Conservatives, now no longer fit to govern, feel the consequences, through the ballot box, of failing to give everyone in this country equal value and worth. If I, as a Muslim woman MP representing the largest Muslim constituency in the country, do not feel safe, how do I tell those people that they will be safe?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. To accommodate everyone who wants to speak, I am now going to put in place a 10-minute time limit.

2.24 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing this debate, and I commend them and their colleagues in the all-party group on British Muslims for making history by putting together the first definition of Islamophobia. This definition is the culmination of almost two years of consultation and evidence gathering. It is a concrete definition that takes into account the views of organisations, politicians, faith leaders, eminent academics, victims of hate crime and communities up and down the country. I hope that the Secretary of State will have listened to the comments made by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), who has also urged the Government to adopt the definition.

To tackle Islamophobia, we need to address a number of different issues, one of which is the role of the media. In Australia, where the Christchurch killer was born, raised and possibly radicalised, there has been a lot of debate on the extent to which the media—particularly that owned by Rupert Murdoch—contributed to sowing the seeds of hate that were unleashed in Christchurch. A study published in Sydney tallied up the number of negative stories that five Australian newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch produced in 2017. It found that almost 3,000 such stories referred to Islam or Muslims, alongside the words "violence", "terrorism" or "radical". Authors of the study reported that

"once every second day in 2017 there was a front page that demonised and spoke negatively about Muslims".

Yes, it was on social media where the killer spread his ideology, but we need to recognise that white supremacy and other ideologies of hate predate the internet. So while we are right to pay attention to the sheer speed and global reach of the internet, we need to talk about how hateful ideologies come into being and what allows them to flourish.

The print and broadcast media are not without their share of responsibility. Recently, in an open letter to a newspaper, Neil Basu said:

"The reality is that every terrorist we have dealt with has sought inspiration from the propaganda of others, and when they can't find it on Facebook, YouTube, or Twitter they only have to turn on the TV, read the paper or go to one of a myriad of mainstream media websites struggling to compete with those platforms."

He cited the 2017 terror attack in Finsbury Park as an example of where a man was

“driven to an act of terror by far-right messaging he found mostly on mainstream media”.

It is time we accepted that a large proportion of the British press incites hatred against Muslims to millions of people every day. This is not about freedom of speech; it is plain, downright lying published in our media, day in, day out. For example, a *Daily Express* front page has proclaimed: “Muslims tell British: Go to hell”. The *Daily Star* printed the headline: “UK mosques fundraising for terror” then later apologised. Or let us consider the front page of *The Sun*, which declared that “1 in 5 Brit Muslims” had sympathy for jihadists, accompanied by a picture of “Jihadi John” wielding a knife. Months later, it acknowledged that its claims were misleading, but such retractions are always just two sentences occupying a tiny space at the back of the newspaper.

Such inaccuracies are not restricted to the tabloid press. *The Times*, for example, claimed Muslims were “silent on terror”. On another occasion, it issued a correction for a story headlined “Christian child forced into Muslim foster care”, which turned out to be a complete bag of lies. The *Daily Mail* then picked up on that story and showed a picture of a woman wearing a veil, suggesting that this was the lady who had adopted the child. That was a lie as well, because although the woman in question was a Muslim, she did not wear a veil. *The Spectator* published a piece claiming that “there is not nearly enough Islamophobia within the Conservative party”.

It is not just misleading stories that are the problem. We consistently see articles that conflate Islam with criminality: “Muslim sex grooming” or “Imam beaten to death in sex grooming town”, for example. The latter resulted in the chief constable of Greater Manchester police writing an open letter criticising the newspaper.

A study from Lancaster University highlighted that for every mention of “moderate” Muslims in the media, there are 21 references to “extremist” Muslims, and that Muslims are collectively homogenised and portrayed as a threat to the “British way of life”. A study conducted by the University of Alabama found that Muslim extremists received 357% more coverage than non-Muslim extremists; by contrast, far-right terrorists are rationalised, understood to be lone wolves, or excused because they are suffering from poor mental health, instead of recognising the hatred that actually drove their atrocious actions. We saw that in the *Daily Mirror*’s coverage of Christchurch, describing the killer as an “angelic boy” in an attempt to humanise him and focusing on Muslims as victims. I do not think we have seen such a description given to any terrorist who happens to be Muslim.

In opinion pieces, the problem is even more apparent. *The Sun*’s Trevor Kavanagh ended one column with the question:

“What will we do about the Muslim problem then?”

We all know what that means. In July 2016, Fatima Manji reported on the Nice terror attack for Channel 4. Kelvin MacKenzie attacked her in *The Sun*, asking why a woman in a headscarf was reporting on a terrorist incident. Musing on why Channel 4 chose Manji for the slot, MacKenzie asked,

“Was it done to stick one in the eye of the ordinary viewer who looks at the hijab as a sign of the slavery of Muslim women by a male-dominated and clearly violent religion?”

Those are just the tip of the iceberg of lies in the media about Islam.

That should lead us to ask why this is happening. The answer is simple: stories that play on public fears and feed prejudices are popular, especially in times when, according to polls, more than half of British people see Islam as a threat to western liberal democracy, and others may not see Muslims as threats but feel softer dislike and that Muslims and Islam are not compatible. The fact is that most people in this country have probably never met a Muslim person and know nothing about Islam, but their reading and understanding of Islam are derived from the media. That is why so many of them, when surveyed, express views that clearly show that they have been affected by what they read.

Research by Cambridge University showed that mainstream media reporting on the Muslim community was contributing to an atmosphere of rising hostility toward Muslims in Britain, corroborating the findings of an Islamophobia roundtable in Stockholm. Do the Minister and the Government accept that the media have played a role in the growth of Islamophobia and that that is no longer tenable?

This is not a matter of freedom of speech; it is about the choice of editors to tolerate, if not encourage, bigotry in our papers. We live in a country that rightly cherishes freedom of the press, and that must be respected, but freedom comes with responsibility, which must be upheld. To publish inaccurate stories helps the rise of the far right; the othering of Muslims has real-world consequences. The National Union of Journalists understands that and has demanded an inquiry into Islamophobia in the media. Done properly, that could have the impact that the Macpherson report had on the police and encourage a sea change in attitudes. Will the Minister commit today to set up a Government inquiry into Islamophobia in the media?

These are not just my concerns. Respectable academics and think-tanks are concerned about what is happening. Last year, in the Home Affairs Committee, the new owner of the *Daily Express* said:

“Each and every editor has a responsibility for every single word that’s published in a newspaper. Cumulatively, some of the headlines that have appeared in the past have created an Islamophobic sentiment which I find uncomfortable” —

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

2.34 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): First, I thank all those who have taken part in this important debate. In particular, I thank the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for securing it. We in this House have an absolute duty to eliminate all forms of hate crime and discrimination.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), and perhaps others, have referred to personal experiences. I believe it takes guts and great courage to refer to personal situations in this place. Tragically, in the current political climate, many politicians and public servants in the frontline are being subjected to some atrocious behaviour, and I salute the courage of those who speak out. I, like many others, constantly receive Islamophobic hate mail and other expressions of Islamophobia, but I refuse to recount those instances

[Imran Hussain]

here today. I refuse to give air time to those who want people like me to air their views—their views of hatred and division—in this place. I refuse to do that here today.

Of course we need a definition of Islamophobia—on that much, I think everyone can agree. There are a number of definitions, starting with the Runnymede definition; then there is the all-party group's definition, and I know that in my home town Bradford's Council for Mosques is working on a definition. All those are important, but it is the aim of them all that I want to focus on. The aim of the definition is to eradicate Islamophobia, and that is where I want to concentrate my remarks. We cannot eradicate Islamophobia if we do not understand Islamophobia. That is the point.

This debate takes place against a disgusting backdrop of rising Islamophobic hate crime. Over half of all religiously motivated hate crimes recorded in 2017-18—almost 3,000—were committed against Muslims. Although abusive behaviour forms the core of recorded Islamophobia, we cannot downplay the number and severity of the physical attacks, many of the offences being of an extremely serious nature. Even at mosques and other places of worship, where Muslims should feel safe, they face both physical and verbal abuse and violence, with the number of attacks on mosques doubling and Muslims being left scared and vulnerable.

We simply cannot ignore the stark evidence facing us that Islamophobia is dramatically on the rise. We certainly cannot do so at a time when we are witnessing the rapid resurgence of far-right, fascist, white supremacist groups now fixated on persecuting Muslims and promoting Islamophobia. Those groups are pushing bigoted, xenophobic views of Muslims and others, and they are not only feeding on, but driving, an environment where it is now seen as acceptable to abuse and attack Muslims. With growing traffic to far-right websites and social media personalities, a growing number of foiled far-right terror plots and a membership that is younger and more extreme than before, the far right is now a key threat. Let us make no mistake about that.

None of this is surprising given the rhetoric espoused by the media and public figures, as was alluded to earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), but it is an absolute disgrace when Members of this House and the other place join in this divisive rhetoric, reinforcing the false narrative that Muslims are dangerous, second-class citizens and creating an atmosphere in which Islamophobia not only flourishes unchallenged but is actively promoted. By doing so, they have normalised Islamophobia. There is now so little accountability, self-awareness, guilt or shame that Islamophobic comments are not just accepted but casually tossed around as though absolutely fine.

The normalisation of Islamophobia created by the media, public figures and even policies such as Prevent and others, under which Muslims are treated as policing and social policy problems, is extremely damaging. Islamophobia is not just a far-right extremism issue, and the extreme abuse and violent attacks on Muslims are not the only issues they face. The commonplace and trivialised views of Islamophobia send out the message

to Muslims that they are outsiders in this country and that they are excluded as society divides into two groups—us and them.

This belief of exclusion resonates further when it is applied on top of existing barriers that all ethnic minorities face: poorer educational and employment prospects, poorer life chances and poorer healthcare compared with their white counterparts of similar backgrounds. Ultimately, Islamophobia leaves all Muslims feeling isolated and insecure in their own homes, despite the lengths to which they go to include themselves, their deep sense of belonging in this country and their keen desire to belong and join in.

As a proud British Muslim myself, I want to be clear that Islam is a religion of peace, love and charity, and for many it is not just our religion but our identity, and one that we are deeply proud of. Nowhere is this more evident than when Muslims open up their customs and practices to wider society. Much in this debate has been negative, but I want to celebrate the achievements and work of Muslims, celebrate the fact that Muslims open the doors of mosques, invite all communities to join in their religious celebrations, throw themselves into community life and initiatives that benefit all and spread awareness and understanding of what their culture is all about.

It is fitting during this holy month of Ramadan to point out that Muslims in Britain this year alone will donate tens of millions of pounds to charity, which I celebrate and the Charity Commission praises. Yet, sadly, because of the normalisation of Islamophobia, instead of feeling like they are productive and included members of society, Muslims are made to feel marginalised and isolated. They are excluded from what should be the shared life experiences between those of all backgrounds that make our society and culture so much richer.

I will conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, as time does not permit me to speak for long—although I am grateful for the 10 minutes I was promised. We must commit ourselves to ending the marginalisation of Muslims in society and to enforcing a zero-tolerance approach. If the Government are to prove they are serious about tackling the shameful rise in Islamophobia and the isolation of Muslims, they must do more to tackle the dangerous rise of the far right and end the practice of giving a high-profile platform to extremists. They must reaffirm and ensure an absolute responsibility and obligation on those in public office and in the media not to promote, fuel and normalise Islamophobia and Islamophobic tropes. They must take every available action, including legislation and adopting a firm definition of religiously and racially motivated hate, to ensure the perpetrators of Islamophobic hate crimes are brought to justice.

I say to the Minister that a definition cannot be forced downwards by political leaders or organisations, but must come up from the grassroots Muslim community. The House has a duty to speak up for Muslims and all those who face abuse, prejudice and discrimination. It is time we demanded more.

2.44 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): At a primary school a few years back, I met a little girl who told me how scared she had been when she heard about a plane that had flown into the side of a mountain. She was not scared to fly—oh no; she was terrified that the pilot

would turn out to be Muslim. I do not want to live in a country where our children are worried about the faith of a person who does wicked things. By the age of eight, she had been so affected by Islamophobia and the racism in and around us all that she had taken on a collective guilt. She felt it keenly. She almost accepted that she personally would be responsible if that pilot shared her religion. What a world.

Despite her age, this little girl knew all about Islamophobia—whichever definition we choose—about racism and about the blaming of people for the real or imaginary sins of another who shares their ethnicity, nationality or religion. She knew that many people were ready to hate her, her family and friends, and could even harm them. She almost felt it would be justified. I do not want to live in a world where our children feel like that.

I remember the fear among my Muslim friends, neighbours and constituents after the 2001, 2005, 2007 and 2017 attacks. That fear is clearly justified. There was a shocking 40% increase in reported religiously motivated hate crimes. One in four Muslims worries about being physically attacked. Several of the most recent Islamophobic attacks have been on children and—appalling—have been perpetrated by children. In 2017, a group of six boys surrounded a 13-year-old Muslim boy, pushed him to the ground and kicked him again and again in the head. He could have been killed. Later that year, two boys, 10 and 13, were attacked in Manchester by a group led by a boy of 12 evidently filled with hate.

As we know, last year 15-year-old Jamal, a refugee from Syria, was subjected to violence and simulated torture within his own school. We have since learned that his sister has also been viciously attacked, her headscarf being pulled off. The family's lawyer has now revealed that, because of the trauma she has received in this country—not in Syria—at the hands of Islamophobes, she has attempted suicide. As we know, Jamal's alleged attacker was 16 and had, according to reports, consumed far-right propaganda on social media. We have allowed Islamophobia to take hold. We have to act to stop it.

The Westminster, Manchester and London Bridge attacks were followed by the clearly Islamophobic terror attack in Finsbury Park. As we know, the perpetrator of that attack was inspired by exactly the same kind of far-right propaganda and rhetoric that was associated with the terrorist murder in Christchurch in March and the terrorist murder of our Labour sisters and brothers in Norway in 2011.

Evil rhetoric has power not just because it causes violence, but because it creates fear and causes children to be afraid because of the faith they hold. We cannot tolerate it for a second. That fear has been on the rise again in my constituency after the heart-wrenching act of terror in Christchurch and the systematic vandalism of mosques in Birmingham. I am proud to say that our mosques in Newham are responding with unity. More than 40 mosque and community leaders attended a meeting last month to recommit to work together to keep our neighbourhoods safe from hate. It was a powerful first step, and I thank Councillors Mas Patel, Hanif Abdulmuhit and Salim Patel for organising it and I thank all the attendees.

I am also really grateful to the Community Security Trust, to Dave Rich and to others who have offered their time, experience and solidarity to the Muslim

community in Newham to help with their community safety efforts. My mosque groups have readily accepted that help because, sadly, the CST gained its expertise because Jewish communities have also been so consistently under threat for so long. Its knowledge has been won from pain.

The same poisonous rhetoric that has long targeted our Jewish communities is being used to incite hatred and violence by Islamophobes, racists and fascists, and the rhetoric is sometimes directed at both Jewish and Muslim communities simultaneously by the same people. These hatemongers talk about replacement. They spread lies to present white people in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand as being under threat. While the Nazi lie was that Jewish people were conspiring to control and replace white people directly, many fascists today weave antisemitism and Islamophobia together. Today's alt-right say that so-called liberal elites, with Jewish people such as philanthropist George Soros always front and centre, support migrants and multiculturalism because we are trying to replace white people and Christian traditions with people, beliefs and practices that are both foreign and threatening.

The rhetoric about the so-called great replacement is as horrific as it is false. Chillingly, it echoes some of the propaganda that the Nazis used to prepare for the utter horror of the holocaust. Here and now, it is inciting acts of Islamophobic and antisemitic terror. Such racist lies were referred to by the terrorists who attacked synagogues in Pittsburgh last year and in California just last month. If the terrorists' manifesto is anything to go by, they were equally as influential in inspiring the murder of those 51 innocent worshippers in Christchurch this March. The perpetrator was totally focused on spreading those lies and, to our shame, social media platforms let him do so effectively with the livestream of the atrocity. I struggle to imagine just how terrifying it would have been to be at the Al Noor mosque in Christchurch—the shock, the confusion, the fear, the terror. I know that children in my constituency imagine it for themselves when they are at their mosque. It is beyond words.

That is what the idea of a great replacement has led to over and over again in recent years. The conspiracy theories are obviously false, but we need to take them seriously because they are spreading. The rhetoric is aiding the fascists, whom we have fought and defeated over again, with their mission of terror, division and murder. We have to see the exponents of those ideas for what they are—the polite, young, well-dressed, articulate, nicely spoken ones as well as the skinheads—and we must do everything we can from this House to stop this poison from spreading.

It has never been more important to put solidarity against racist and religious hatred first and foremost. To do that, we must understand what forms it takes and how they are connected and interconnected. I welcome the progress that has been made with establishing a definition for Islamophobia, because we need one. I would probably prefer the simpler one by the Runnymede Trust, but that is frankly irrelevant. We need a working definition, and we should be clear that Islamophobia is anti-Muslim racism. However, what I want most of all is action. We need to propose concrete steps today to protect Muslim communities, build solidarity and halt the spread of racist hate, and I hope that we will hear that when the Minister responds.

2.54 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Change UK): It is a great honour to follow the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I agree with everything that she, every other Opposition speaker and the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) have said.

I hope that the Secretary of State has listened to all the speeches made in support of the definition and that he will take away from them the following. The fact is that if the Conservative party is to understand why proportionately more people from black and ethnic minority communities voted for Trump in America than voted Conservative in 2017, it has to examine the reaction to this report and read in *Hansard* the speech of the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who I am sorry is no longer in his place. On his basis, the report has been dismissed for no other reason than that the chairs of the APPG are white liberals. Well, I am proud to be called a white, small “I” liberal, and I am even more proud to have helped form this report. I played a very small part in it. The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) played a considerable part in bringing it all together, and I am sure he will agree that the report was driven by Baroness Warsi, a member and former chair of the Conservative party. Those are interesting and valid points.

I speak as a former barrister. As a barrister, I was taught to look at the evidence. I am not a Muslim and, as it happens, there are very few Muslims in my constituency. The hon. Member for Ilford North is not a Muslim either. He has told us about his own faith, and I have no faith. The fact is that we have absolutely no stake in any of this. We are not from that community, but we are open-hearted and open-minded, and I hope that others will think that that has contributed to what we have done.

We listened. This report, which I am so proud of—it is one of the things I am most proud of in my nine years in this place—is based on the evidence of British Muslims. Unfortunately, too many of them live every day with prejudice, intolerance and Islamophobia. That is their lives. It is what defines them and that cannot be right—it is wrong. We have to stop talking about it and start acting and we begin that action to eradicate Islamophobia, which is rising in our society, by defining it. That is the right thing to do, even though on a previous occasion, as the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) reminded us, the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), said that the Government’s view was that we did not need a definition. I am pleased that the Government now accept that we need a definition. I say to the Secretary of State that it is here, in this report.

We went into this with absolutely no fixed views whatsoever—none at all. Month after month, we took evidence from individual Muslims and community groups that represent real British Muslims with real-life experiences. We also broadened the process out to politicians. For example, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) was one of our best witnesses. He is not a Muslim but he talked about his experiences as a Member of Parliament. The issue has been close to his heart for many years. We also spoke to academics.

We gathered the evidence and then we sat down and tried to work out a definition. I was in the Conservative party at the time and wrote in an email, “Islamophobia

is racism”. It is racist—that is its root. That is what it is about. I think there was a universal sense of shock among the group that I had come to that conclusion. Obviously, the hon. Member for Ilford North came to the same conclusion. When we look at the evidence and understand where academic thought has got to, we see that of course Islamophobia is rooted in racism and it is racism.

We then had a discussion, which the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield began to discuss. It was one of the best debates in a group that I have ever attended. I am so sorry he is not in his place, but he would agree that he was cynical about saying that this was rooted in racism—and rightly so because many people would be. But he sat and listened and we had this rigorous, brilliant debate with young Muslim academics, older Muslim academics, other academics and many others who have studied this, and he was convinced. I gently say to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings that it is extraordinary for him to criticise this report, which I doubt he has read, based on a breakfast and then another report, which the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah) and others have so rightly utterly demolished. Read this report and understand why we have come to these conclusions.

If I wanted to know about racism, I would be more likely to listen to the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy); given that he is a black British man, I think he might know a little more about racism than the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings. If I want to know about race and what racism is, I am again going to turn to the right hon. Member for Tottenham because he clearly knows a darn sight more about it, not because of the colour of his skin, but because he has actually done some research and has listened to the academics and many others. He understands, among other things, the root of the word “racism”, as the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield does. It is a fascinating lesson in history to understand how “racism” emerged as a word, what it meant and how it has developed, not just over decades, but over centuries.

Naz Shah *rose*—

Anna Soubry: I will give way in a moment. The hon. Member for Ilford North rightly explained that the definition of racism—or the definition of race—is no longer about biology; it is about a social concept. It can be defined by that antagonism, but it is also now, in the modern world, about groups that share the same culture, the same history, the same language—it can even include social classes. It has moved on in its definition and it clearly embraces Muslims. I will quickly give way now, if I am allowed, Madam Deputy Speaker. [*Interruption.*] It seems the hon. Lady has changed her mind on intervening; no problem with that. So it is right, when we define Islamophobia in the way that we do, to say that it is a form of racism and it is rooted in racism.

The other point I wish to make is about phobia and why we describe Islamophobia in that way. Phobia is an irrational dislike and has many forms. It can be a dislike. It can also encompass fear and hatred. I mention one of the things our definition absolutely does and understands. Many others make the mistake of thinking that this growing problem in our society—this bigotry and prejudice that ranges from the everyday insults and

offensive language aimed at individual Muslims right through to terrorist murders—is anti-Muslim hatred. The computer that churns out a higher insurance premium for somebody simply because they have Mohammed in their name does not hate Muslims. Indeed, the person who put the information in to churn out that nonsense probably does not hate Muslims either. So we must not fall into the trap of saying that it is anti-Muslim hatred.

This is a cracking report. It is based on evidence from the people who know and understand this. It has been accepted by dozens of their communities and by every political party, apart from the Conservative party. If it is good enough for Ruth Davidson, it is good enough for our Prime Minister.

3.4 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): The debate has been excellent, and it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), who explained the work of the all-party group. My good friend the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) led the debate quite superbly.

I am proud to represent a diverse parliamentary constituency. As the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) said, the Muslim faith is one of peace, love and charity, and that is my experience of the Muslim community in Glasgow South West. We have the Scottish Police Muslim Association, alongside the Glasgow South West food bank, which provides a community kitchen once a month to help the most vulnerable in our society by providing them with a hot meal. We have many charitable organisations, including the Crookston Community Group, and many of them are led by those of the Muslim faith, who are doing great work throughout the community.

The all-party group's report "Islamophobia Defined" proposes the following working definition:

"Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness."

I did not quite understand some of the criticisms of the report or the definition, which has come about as a result of a six-month inquiry. As we have heard, that inquiry took evidence from academics, lawyers, victims groups and British Muslim organisations, and included input from Member of the Scottish Parliament Anas Sarwar, who is chair of the Scottish Parliament's cross-party group on tackling Islamophobia, along with the Scottish Ahlul Bayt Society, one of the office-bearers of which is my good friend Shabir Beg.

All that input has gone into looking at a definition, and as we have heard that definition has been endorsed by the Muslim Council of Britain, British Muslims for Secular Democracy, the Muslim Women's Network and the Edinburgh central mosque in Scotland. The Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru have adopted the definition, as has the Scottish National party Westminster group. We are now going to feed that into our internal party structures so that the definition can be adopted at our next conference. It seems to me that a lot of serious work, thought, input and discussion has gone into the definition.

Several comments were made about hate crimes. The Scottish Government's publication "Religiously aggravated offending in Scotland" has figures on the proportion of charges for offences that relate to Islamophobia. In 2010-11, there were 15 charges that were defined as

Islamophobia, and that number rose to 115 in 2017-18. The number of charges in relation to other offences peaked in 2015-16, when there were 134 charges, of which 57 were recorded during one incident involving a march in Glasgow. It should be noted that the police in Scotland do not record the religion of the victims of religiously aggravated offences, so the data has been derived by analysing police reports and is based on the details of the incident and what the accused said and did. As such, the figures presented on the targeted religion should not necessarily be regarded as definitive.

We are deeply concerned about the growing levels of Islamophobia and other forms of intolerance seen recently not just in the UK, but around the world. Islamophobia is a real, lived experience, as confirmed by a 2018 ComRes poll that found that 58% of people thought that Islamophobia was a real problem in today's society. A poll of 1,000 Muslims conducted by ComRes for BBC Radio 4's "Today" programme in 2015 found that 46% of Muslims felt that prejudice against Islam makes it very difficult to be a Muslim in this country. Others have mentioned the despicable terrorist attack in Christchurch in New Zealand, which is a grave reminder of what Islamophobia can become if it is left unchallenged.

We need to provide a vision of a nation free from fear, prejudice and discrimination, and we should all continue to work for that. As I outlined, I am proud to represent a constituency that, like many others throughout Scotland and the UK, has a vibrant and dynamic Muslim community who play a valuable role in our society and strengthen our interfaith relationships.

The SNP Westminster Group considered the definition very carefully and decided to adopt it. The all-party definition was arrived at following a careful and robust process and wide consultation with the Muslim community. That is important and it is why we should give this definition our support today.

On Islamophobic comments by politicians, I listened very carefully to the hon. Member for Bradford West and agreed with what she said. She reminded us that we all have a duty and a responsibility to be careful about what we say and to make sure that what we are saying is not intolerant or incendiary. Of course, the former Foreign Secretary's remarks about Muslim women were cited in the APPG report. Those remarks were utterly inexcusable and should be called out for what they were. We should not stand by and expect dog-whistle Islamophobia. I have to say that the Conservative party really must stand firm against such grotesquely offensive and intentional comments, or risk normalising toxic and bigoted rhetoric. At a time when political discourse is alienating many, we all must consider the language that we use and reject intolerance.

It has been a pleasure to speak in the debate and to support the all-party group's definition of Islamophobia.

3.11pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I wholeheartedly congratulate the all-party group on British Muslims, my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) on securing the debate. I also thank the 19 hon. Members who have spoken for their meaningful contributions.

[Afzal Khan]

The all-party group has worked tirelessly on creating this definition and done a brilliant job. The definition has widespread support across the community and the confidence of more than 750 organisations. It has been adopted by the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru, the SNP, the Scottish Conservatives, and the Mayors of London and Greater Manchester, as well as by the National Union of Students and councils across the country. I want to applaud the aforementioned for taking this positive step. Defining and naming a problem is the first step to rooting it out.

As we enter the second week of Ramadan, I am humbled by the charitable deeds of the Muslim community across the country. This is a time for charity, reflection and community—values from which we can all greatly benefit. British Muslim charities raise, on average, £100 million during the month of Ramadan alone. It is therefore with great sadness that I must talk today about the growing problem of Islamophobia, which is apparent not only in the UK, but across Europe.

This Government have shown through their refusal to accept the definition proposed by the all-party group that they are in pure denial over Islamophobia. To add insult to injury, they cannot even bring themselves to use the term “Islamophobia”. How can the Government possibly deal with a problem that they cannot even name?

Cross-party calls for an inquiry into Islamophobia in the Conservative party, as well as calls from the Muslim community and key organisations such as the Muslim Council of Britain, British Muslims for Secular Democracy and even the Conservative Muslim Forum, continue to fall on politically deaf ears. What concerns me is that the Conservative party has an institutional problem. Recently, it suspended close to 50 members over alleged Islamophobia. Why is it that the Conservative party attracts such individuals? If the problem is not institutional, what is the explanation?

I have written to the Conservative chairman three times about this issue, and I have also asked the Prime Minister on three occasions to adopt the definition and to undertake an independent inquiry into the Conservative party. Each time her answer has fallen disappointingly short. Those members who engage in Islamophobia are not reprimanded. Even worse, they are simply let back into the party. Jeff Potts, a councillor in Solihull, had shared a post on Twitter saying:

“Deport and repatriate all Muslims from the UK or watch terrorists kill innocent people for generations to come.”

But just two days ago, his suspension was quietly lifted. That sends a very loud and clear message that Islamophobia is acceptable. Sadly, responses from the Facebook supporters’ group of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) to my statement about the Conservatives having a problem with Islamophobia include:

“There’s not enough Islamophobia”,

“I’m a proud Islamophobic”,

and

“Islam deserves all the hate it gets. Its earned it”.

There is a lack of transparency surrounding the way in which the Conservative party deals with Islamophobia. With its constant foot-dragging on the issue, we demand

to know more about this process and how it works. How many complaints has the party received and how many members have been suspended?

The Roger Scruton story goes to the heart of the Conservatives’ problem with Islamophobia. The Labour party and key figures from the Conservative party expressed serious concerns over Roger Scruton. Despite his record of hateful and Islamophobic remarks, the Secretary of State defended him as a champion of free speech. Last month, the Government were finally forced to sack him, after he again made Islamophobic, antisemitic and homophobic comments. But why did the Secretary of State defend him? Why has Roger Scruton not been stripped of his knighthood? If the Secretary of State claims he carried out due diligence, why did these vile comments not ring alarm bells? Will the Secretary of State now apologise for having defended this Islamophobe and for keeping him in post for so long? The whole episode lays bare the profound lack of concern of the Conservative party and the Prime Minister about Islamophobia. The Muslim community in our country deserve an explanation and an apology.

Critics of the APPG’s definition have argued that it should not say that Islamophobia is rooted in racism. However, all the evidence proves otherwise. Home Office data reveals that referrals to Prevent for extreme right-wing ideology increased by 36% last year over the previous year. The ugly face of right-wing racism reared its head in the horrific Christchurch attacks—a sobering reminder of the dangers of Islamophobia.

Here in the UK, we have seen the chilling results of Islamophobia, too: Mohammed Saleem was stabbed by an extreme right-wing racist who wanted to spark a race war in Britain; and Makram Ali died after Darren Osborne ran a van into a crowd of Muslims leaving late night prayers during Ramadan. Such examples frighteningly illustrate that Islamophobia can kill. If those acts of violence are not racism targeted at expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness, what are they? How can anyone claim that those attacks were not racist and that they did not target Muslims? However, they are not isolated occurrences. The recent Home Office hate crime statistics were also very telling. The data showed that 52% of religious hate crimes recorded by the police were against Muslims. With the European elections fast approaching, the rise of the extreme right wing has been deeply concerning, and the number of Islamophobic incidents indicates that action must be taken. The Government have failed to address and recognise this issue. Remaining silent only emboldens the nation’s Islamophobes.

Critics have argued that the APPG’s report undermines the Government’s counter-terrorism efforts. I find that claim utterly disappointing. Indeed, the claim itself serves to fuel suspicion and hostility towards Muslims. Through a leaked letter to the Prime Minister, it has been revealed that the chair of the National Police Chiefs’ Council has expressed concerns over the APPG’s definition. The APPG’s definition aims to tackle Islamophobia, which ranges from hate crimes to discriminatory outcomes in employment, and access to goods and services. The allegation that that definition will prevent police forces and authorities from doing their daily work is extremely dangerous and has real consequences. It looks at the Muslim community only through the lens of security. I strongly urge the Prime Minister to publish the letter.

The Muslim population have genuine concerns over their safety and security following recent events. During this holy month of Ramadan, funding for security at places of worship will be vital and I welcome the steps taken by the Home Secretary.

Let us remind ourselves that the reason the APPG created this definition was the Government's sheer reluctance to adopt a formal definition of Islamophobia in the first place. Whether we look at the evidence from the Ruby McGregor-Smith review or the review by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy), we are confronted with the fact that Islamophobia has damaging consequences for the life chances and equalities enjoyed by our British Muslim communities. The APPG's inquiry was set up to do something about the nature and scale of Islamophobia and its impact on British Muslim communities—and doing something is what we, as the Labour party, are committed to.

I sincerely hope that this debate does not warrant a predictable and rehearsed response from the Government. The Government do not need to reinvent the wheel. This definition already has cross-party support and the confidence of hundreds of organisations. The Prime Minister claimed with such conviction that she condemns any form of discrimination and Islamophobia. I urge the Government to translate that conviction into action by adopting the definition.

3.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The holy month of Ramadan marks one of the most sacred times for Muslims across the country and across the world. So let me start by wishing Members of this House, and others observing this period, Ramadan kareem. I know that in the coming days many Members across the House will be attending iftars—events that bring people and communities together, and celebrate the values that we share and the diverse country that we are. As a country, we are stronger because of the contribution that British Muslims make at every level and in so many different ways. That is why it is right that we should celebrate and be proud of this rich diversity and of how British Muslims make this country—our country—so special and a place that we all rightly call home.

So it is with regret, but also resolve, that I must turn to this debate focused on a subject that is the polar opposite of that shared drive for inclusion and understanding—confronting Islamophobia. Some of the examples that have been provided here today have been utterly shocking. At the heart of this debate is the intent to stand against those who would cause hatred or intimidation towards, or make threats against, our Muslim brothers and sisters, and the false narratives that underpin or give succour to this.

Hon. Members have commented on social media, the press and other issues. It is right that we reflect on some of the powerful contributions that have been made.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

James Brokenshire: I hope my hon. Friend will understand if I say that he has not been part of the debate and I am slightly tight on time.

I welcome the chance to respond to this debate. There have been a number of powerful and important contributions. As several Members acknowledged, the shadow of what happened in New Zealand just two months ago is inescapable—people murdered while at prayer and so many lives devastated and tragically cut short. It was a senseless and shocking assault on New Zealand's values of freedom, openness, democracy and decency—values that we all share. It was an act that I would describe as the epitome of evil. That is why it was right that as we grieved for those affected in mosques, synagogues, churches and other places of worship up and down the country, we reaffirmed our unity against all forms of hatred. We stood together with that sense of purpose against extremism and the false narratives that so often underpin it. We came together in love and solidarity, underlining not only our condemnation, in the strongest possible terms, of this attack, but the fact that all communities stand shoulder to shoulder with our Muslim brothers and sisters, because we know that an attack on one group is an attack on us all. To persecute anybody because of their race and religion goes against everything I believe we stand for as a country and underlines the need to tackle this hatred head on and the need to do more.

That is why the Government have taken steps to ensure that, for the first time, police forces are required to disaggregate religious hate crime data, to allow us to better identify anti-Muslim hatred. As a number of Members have underlined, that data has sadly revealed that Muslims are a commonly targeted religious group, accounting for over half of religiously motivated hate crime, and that the number of all religiously motivated hate crimes has gone up by 40% from 2016-17 to 2017-18. It is utterly unacceptable and deeply troubling for our Muslim neighbours, colleagues and friends to be living in fear, as so many Members have described.

No one should feel unsafe while practising their religion. No one should feel unsafe living in their community. That is why we doubled the places of worship fund to £1.6 million, to physically protect mosques and other places of worship and reassure communities, and are making it easier for people to apply for the funding from July 2019. In addition, we have announced a new £5 million fund to provide security training for places of worship and a consultation on what more can be done to protect faith communities. There is nothing more important than keeping people safe and ensuring that they feel safe.

As well as doing more to protect vulnerable communities, we must get a firmer grip on the nature of the bigotry they face, which I believe means creating a formal definition of Islamophobia to strengthen that. I am grateful for the input of Members across the House and their work on this important issue and hope that today's debate acts as a further step of progress. I note in particular the incredibly valuable work undertaken by the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims to develop a definition of Islamophobia. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for leading that work. I hope, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said in his foreword, that the APPG's report

“can give all of us food both for thought and positive action.”

[James Brokenshire]

The APPG's work makes an important and—I underline—serious contribution to how best to tackle bigotry, division and the pernicious narratives within our communities.

The issue of the definition was discussed at a roundtable on Islamophobia that I chaired on 5 March with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, where members of our anti-Muslim hatred working group and expert stakeholders such as the Runnymede Trust and the Commission for Countering Extremism shared their views. It is vital that we get this right and that any definition reflects the experiences of those who have experienced hatred because they are Muslim; that we are satisfied that it will have the positive effect it sets out to achieve—a point made by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood)—and do no harm; and that it commands broad support within communities and wider society.

The APPG definition, with the best of intent, does not yet meet those criteria, and further work and consideration are needed; I frame it in those terms. The proposal defines Islamophobia as “a type of racism”. I am in no doubt that racism forms a part of the bigotry that we need to confront, but combining race and religion within the definition causes legal and practical issues. As a starting point, it is not in line with the Equality Act 2010, which defines race as comprising colour, nationality and national or ethnic origins, none of which would necessarily encompass a Muslim or Islamic practice. There are potential consequences for freedom of speech. I recognise, as stated in the report, that that was not the intention behind the recommendation. There is also the issue of how we address sectarian hatred. I will reflect on how we can best respond to that, so that we are moving this issue forward.

It is clear that we must interrogate this complex issue further as matter of urgency. The Home Affairs Committee is undertaking a review into the issue, but the Government need to do more. That is why we will appoint two advisers. We will ensure that that reflects the need for community representation and drives the process forward, building on the important work already undertaken by

the anti-Muslim hatred working group, and other bodies, which will remain central to our efforts to engage with Muslim communities. Our priority is to arrive swiftly at a collective position that strengthens our resolve when tackling anti-Muslim hatred and challenging the false narratives that underpin it, and we must reflect on and respond to the strength of feeling that we have heard in the House this afternoon.

I know there is more work to do, and we must do everything in our power to stand up for our diverse, tolerant and vibrant society. In so doing, we must stand up for our Muslim friends, and for all communities that face hatred and bigotry. In the immortal and incredibly powerful words of Jo Cox, there is so much more that unites us than divides us, and I hope that Members across the House will go forward in that spirit to make Islamophobia, and all forms of hate, a thing of the past.

3.31 pm

Wes Streeting: This has been a wide-ranging and largely thoughtful debate, but the critical thing that people will now look to us for is action. We will engage seriously with the Secretary of State, as he has engaged seriously with our arguments. Clearly, there are points of disagreement that we need to work through, not just as legislators but with communities up and down the country. I say gently, however, that as he goes about that work, he must do so with a degree of self-awareness about the Government's position and the way that they are perceived among Muslim communities. I say with some reflection and humility from the Labour Benches, that I genuinely believe that the Government have no more credibility to define Islamophobia than the Labour party had to redefine antisemitism—that is how bad the politics of this place have sunk in the eyes of so many people up and down the country. I believe that we can and must make progress, and today's debate has helped us start to do that with, as the Secretary of State said, some urgency.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the definition of Islamophobia.

International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia

3.32 pm

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the International day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate at such an appropriate time, given that the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia is tomorrow, and was also marked by the House last year.

In previous debates, including last year, I spoke about how LGBT+ rights are now a tale of two worlds. A year on, it is worth recapping where the world has gone forward, and also where it has gone backwards. Seventy countries still criminalise homosexuality, or at least sexual acts between men, and 45 of those also criminalise sexual acts between women. Only 42 states actively protect against hate crimes based on sexual orientation, and 11 countries still carry the death penalty as a maximum punishment for LGBT conduct. Only three countries in the world—Brazil, Ecuador and Malta—have nationwide bans on conversion therapy, and we have seen alarming reverses of LGBT rights in countries such as Armenia, Brunei, Chechnya, Tanzania and Turkey. I will come on to those issues shortly. First, however, I think it is worth acknowledging that in other countries things have been moving in the right direction.

In September last year in India, section 377 of the penal code, which prohibited same-sex intimacy as against the order of nature—doubtless a legacy of the UK's laws—was struck down by the Supreme Court of India after a case was brought by a coalition of civil society groups. Homosexuality is now effectively decriminalised in this major country, although it is also true that there are no legal protections against discrimination. This is a momentous decision, because the Indian penal code was used as a template in other former colonies. There is a huge role for the UK to play in supporting legal cases against those colonial laws for which we have an historic responsibility elsewhere in the Commonwealth.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): I am exceedingly grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this truly important debate. He mentions the Commonwealth. We are currently chairing the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting was held here last year. It will be held in Kigali in Rwanda in 18 months' time. I know it was on the agenda last time, but does he agree with me that it is extremely important that the Foreign Office—I know the Minister cares deeply about this issue—keeps challenging Commonwealth countries on the discrimination of LGBT communities in their own countries? We must preach and change our own laws of course, but it is right that we use our soft power to influence Commonwealth countries around the world.

Nick Herbert: I agree with every word the hon. Gentleman says. The UK can play an important role in that respect. The Prime Minister said the right things at CHOGM last year, but we must follow through with funding. The Minister will no doubt tell us about that and he supports action in this area. We must continue to encourage the Government to pursue this issue.

In Angola, a new penal code was adopted in January this year to replace the Portuguese legacy colonial penal code. It removed a “vices against nature” law that criminalised same-sex activity. New legislation adopts broad new legal protections, banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and employment and offering services to LGBT people.

In March this year, the Kenyan Court of Appeal ruled that an LGBT non-governmental organisation could be registered, on the grounds that registration was constitutional and that forbidding its registration was unconstitutional because it contravened the freedom of association or assembly. That is a very important advance in a Commonwealth country. Similarly, a court ruling on decriminalisation is anticipated in Botswana next month.

In Trinidad and Tobago, the High Court ruled last month that the criminalisation of “buggery” was unconstitutional, as it contravened the law protecting human rights to privacy and expression. That could provide an important precedent for other Caribbean countries which share similar colonial laws.

In February this year, the Taiwanese Government introduced draft legislation to promote equal marriage. That followed the ruling by the constitutional court in 2017 that same-sex couples have a constitutional right to marry. It gave that Government two years to introduce legislation. A referendum rejected amending the civil code, but significantly the Government have gone ahead and introduced a new law anyway. It will be the first Asian country to legalise same-sex marriage.

Chile, Portugal, Luxembourg, Pakistan and Uruguay have all made it easier for trans people to change their legal gender. Across the piece, these are encouraging advances but they make the reverses elsewhere seem even more stark.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this very important debate. As we celebrate the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia and show proudly that we stand in solidarity with the LGBTQ+ community, does he agree with me that it is horrifying and deplorable that hate crime against the community here in the UK has been on the rise? Between 2016 and 2018, police-recorded hate crime based on sexual orientation and gender equality increased by 27% and 32% respectively.

Nick Herbert: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the rise in hate crime in this country. While the UK does so much to promote LGBT+ rights abroad, we must remember that there is work still to do in our own country. I will come to that.

I want to talk about the reverses in LGBT+ rights seen elsewhere in the world, some of which are really serious. In Tanzania in November last year, LGBT activists were forced into hiding in Dar es Salaam after officials announced a taskforce to identify and punish gay people. In the same month, there were police arrests at a same-sex ceremony in Zanzibar. The national Government in Tanzania has refused to intervene in worrying provincial crackdowns, following a ban on NGOs that had been distributing contraception and outreach to control the spread of HIV/AIDS.

[Nick Herbert]

There have been other crackdowns on private events, meetings and roundtables convened to ensure HIV advocacy. That development, seen in Tanzania, in other African countries and in Asian countries, is worrying because it interferes with the important global public health agenda to tackle HIV/AIDS. If some of our most discriminated-against and marginalised groups are oppressed in that way, we will make it harder to ensure that they have access to treatment. The concern is not just about human rights, important though that is. It is also about effective global healthcare programmes. That gives us a second and important reason to be concerned about the discriminatory policies and practices in these countries.

Notoriously, earlier this year Brunei announced that it would apply sharia law, which would impose the death sentence for homosexual conduct between men. There was an outcry, with action by civil society and business boycotts. It was discussed in this House, and I know the Government took action at a diplomatic level to persuade the Sultan of Brunei that enforcement of this sharia law was completely inappropriate for a modern country. It is therefore good that the Sultan announced that the death penalty moratorium will be extended for these offences, but it is important to say that that is not good enough. The status quo ante is restored for that specific offence, but that still leaves in place sharia law for other offences. Frankly, we should not welcome that as an advance when all that happened was, following an international outcry, the leadership in Brunei, buckling under pressure, were required to reverse a terrible announcement.

While that sharia law remains in place, despite what the Government have said about signing up to conventions on torture, it remains a huge concern that we see, in this country and others, increasing pressure on LGBT+ people with religion used as a pretext. We must stand up for the universality of human rights and say it is wrong to have such offences, which should not be on any kind of statute book. They certainly should not be enforced.

In Armenia, incredibly, Members of Parliament called for a trans activist to be burned alive after she addressed their Parliament's human rights committee last month. In Turkey, Istanbul pride was cancelled and last week in Ankara 75 LGBT+ activists were arrested and are currently awaiting release.

In the debate last year, Members raised the brutal treatment of gay men in Chechnya. We expressed concern about the fact that the Russian Government had not done enough to crack down on that terrible treatment of gay people. There was meant to be an independent inquiry and there was meant to be a report, but nothing effective has happened.

Worse still, since our debate there has been a further crackdown. There have been reports that at least 40 people in Chechnya, presumed to be LGBT+, were detained in concentration camps and tortured, and that there were at least two deaths. Human Rights Watch has reported that it interviewed four men who were detained for between three and 20 days between December 2018 and February this year at the Grozny Internal Affairs Department compound. Police officials there kicked them with booted feet, beat them with sticks and polypropylene pipes, and tortured three of the four with

electric shocks. One man was raped with a stick. There have even been murders of gay men by the authorities in Chechnya.

What have the Russian Government done to condemn that and to assure the global community that such activities will not be permitted in future in the state for which they have responsibility? Russia is a member of the Council of Europe and a signatory to the European convention on human rights. It is absolutely intolerable that it should permit such brutal treatment of any section of the community—any minority—in a state for which it has responsibility. The message must go from this House to the Russian Government, loud and clear, that we will not accept these egregious breaches of human rights, that we and the global community will hold the Russian Government to account, and that we will not stop raising this issue until they do something about it.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue. Excellent organisations such as Stonewall have highlighted what has been going on in Chechnya—just as he has done—for three years. Does he agree that, while it is good that our Government are condemning it, they must continue to put pressure on the Russian authorities in calling for an immediate end to these atrocities, and also join in the demand for an independent investigation?

Nick Herbert: Yes, I do agree. There needs to be an independent investigation of these terrible atrocities.

I will end my speech shortly because I know that many other Members on both sides of the House wish to speak.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nick Herbert: I will make a fraction more progress, if my hon. Friend will allow me.

Let me raise two further key issues. The first relates to how we respond. I shall leave it to the Minister to set out the many ways in which the Government have used their resources of soft power and, indeed, funding to ensure that groups around the world can promote LGBT+ rights. We must commend them for that, but we must ensure that the funding is sustained. Few countries in the world are in a stronger position than the United Kingdom, because of our own record on human rights, because of what we have achieved in our own country, and because of the soft power that we are able to exercise globally and in organisations such as the Commonwealth, to promote LGBT+ rights on the world stage. I congratulate the Government on taking many initiatives in this respect, but those initiatives must be sustained.

The Government will shortly assume the co-chairmanship of the Equal Rights Coalition, a nascent intergovernmental organisation to promote LGBT+ rights, along with the Argentine Government. I urge the Minister and his ministerial colleagues in other Departments—including the Defence Secretary, who is responsible for equalities, the Foreign Secretary, and the new Secretary of State for International Development—to note the importance of that chairmanship and of the conference that we will hold next year and to ensure that sufficient resources are committed to what will be a very important period. It is an opportunity for the UK to lead in this area, but that initiative requires greater co-ordination, greater organisation and dedicated resources.

Mark Menzies: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his work in leading today's debate and for shining a spotlight on many other occasions on corners of the world where LGBT people have been facing genuine hardship. May we, and in particular the Minister, use this opportunity to urge on countries that have been quite progressive on this but where we have seen some slippage—I reflect particularly on Cuba, where organisations such as Cenesex, which was led by Mariela Castro, drove LGBT rights but where only last weekend the LGBT march in Havana was outlawed and disrupted and people face arrest, and on Paraguay and Brazil, where we are hearing similar mood music, with LGBT rights slipping back? It is important that we support our friends to do the right thing.

Nick Herbert: I agree.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is talking about this country showing leadership. Last year, the World Health Organisation removed the classification of gender dysphoria as a mental illness, which was an important step forward and no doubt happened in part thanks to pressure from the UK. But the application process for gender recognition certificates in this country is still largely based on the conception that gender dysphoria is an illness. I have written to the Minister for Women and Equalities, who I believe also happens at present to be Foreign Secretary—

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Defence Secretary.

Sandy Martin: Defence Secretary. I apologise; I lose track of who is who—as I am sure Ministers do as well. Will we see movement on this to ensure that we really are doing the right thing here, as well as following WHO rules?

Nick Herbert: Through the hon. Gentleman's intervention he has made his point to the Government and I am sure the Government will reply. But the broader point is right: to lead on the world stage, we must ensure that our domestic agenda is fully complete. There are still outstanding issues in relation to trans equality, to ensuring education is genuinely LGBT-inclusive and to asylum for LGBT+ people. There are intersex issues where a response to a consultation is awaited. Most obviously there is still Northern Ireland's failure to introduce equal marriage despite strong public support for that in Northern Ireland. All those things need completing as well.

None of this is for Governments alone, although the UK Government's role is vital: it is also for business, civil society and NGOs to play their part. I congratulate all the NGOs that are engaged in promoting LGBT rights both in the UK and globally on their work. The all-party group on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, which I have the honour to chair, will continue to work with them.

We have a common objective. It was very well expressed by the Prime Minister in her foreword to the "LGBT Action Plan" that the UK Government published last year. She said she wanted to make the UK

"a country where no one feels the need to hide who they are or who they love".

That should be our ambition for the world as well.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope we can manage without a formal time limit. If everybody takes around six minutes in the general spirit of promoting equality, everybody will have a chance to speak.

3.54 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) on securing this debate, ahead of tomorrow's International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia. I join him and others who will celebrate the gains that LGBTQI people in the UK have made since the decriminalisation of homosexuality over 50 years ago. It is a mark of how far we have come that this debate is taking place and that both major parties finally recognise the inherent justice of treating LGBTQI people as equals, at least in law if not quite yet in reality.

I am especially proud to have been a part of the Labour movement that recognised at its Bournemouth conference in 1986 that LGBT people needed particular protection after the oppression visited upon them by the odious section 28. That disgraceful and overtly discriminatory measure was put on the statute book by the Thatcher Government, egged on by the red-top tabloids in full cry. It effectively singled out LGBT people as a threat in our schools, treated them as though they were alien and delegitimised their very existence in law by referring to their relationships as "pretend". It caused untold misery and suffering.

As the first openly out lesbian Minister in any UK Government, I was very proud indeed to have been part of a Labour Government who largely achieved equality in law for LGBT people during their 13 years in office. Indeed, the civil partnership legislation normalised LGBT relationships by granting legal protections equating to marriage. These were landmark social reforms, but their achievement was not inevitable. Positive change was not accomplished easily. Each reform was hard fought and resisted by the very forces that had given birth to section 28 in the first place.

Eliminating discrimination against LGBT people in UK law required heavy political lifting. It was undertaken out of conviction and it carried considerable political risk at the time, even if it seems in retrospect that it was all straightforward. I got fed up of seeing the Labour Government I was part of characterised in the tabloids as being obsessed with LGBT rights or seeing us being lampooned as being run by a "gay mafia". Section 28 was not repealed easily, as those of us who were there will attest. It took three years to get it through the House of Lords, and the Conservatives fought tooth and nail to keep it. Equalising the age of consent was not achieved easily. We had to invoke the Parliament Act to get it on to the statute book after three attempts because the Lords simply would not vote for it. They also outdid themselves in the debates by comparing gay sex to bestiality.

Now we have a welcome agreement across political parties that LGBTQI people should not face legal discrimination, and I speak in this debate as just one LGBT MP in what has been called the "gayest Parliament in the world". Who would have thought it? As we celebrate that progress, though, we have to remember that the forces of reaction have not been vanquished

[Ms Angela Eagle]

completely here and certainly not in the rest of the world, as the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said. IDAHO day calls on us to contemplate the work we still need to do to ensure that our LGBTQI sisters and brothers across the globe are able to achieve their own liberation from discrimination and bigotry.

That moment is a long way off, however, when we realise that 70 countries still criminalise same-sex relationships and that this involves the potential application of the death penalty in 11 of them. Stonewall's international work shows that one quarter of the world's population still believe that being LGBTQI should be a crime. LGBTQI people are losing their lives as a result of the bigotry and violence directed against them; it is estimated that there is a killing every two days.

So while we have seen the forces of progress advance in recent years, there is still much work to be done. We cannot and must not be complacent about what has been achieved, because we are in an era of backlash, and that should remind us that things can go backwards and that rights, once achieved, can be taken away. In 2019, the warning lights are flashing. The 2019 Rainbow Europe list shows that LGBTQI rights are even going backwards in Europe for the first time in 10 years. As the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs said, Turkey is failing to uphold fundamental civil rights, and Bulgaria has repealed a law allowing trans people to change their names and gender. Poland has made it harder for lesbians to access reproductive rights. Everywhere, the rise of the far right is threatening work to counter bigotry and discrimination against LGBTQI people and in some cases it is reversing gains already made.

The far right use the politics of hatred and resentment to foster blame against identified groups of people whom they can scapegoat for all society's ills. They are organised globally and they often adopt similar tactics, wherever they appear. Call them right-wing populists, call them the alt-right; they are hostile to difference and they wish liberation movements, whether for LGBT people or women, to be crushed. They want us back in the closet and back in the kitchen. They also direct their ire at the black and ethnic minority communities, religious minorities and foreign nationals. I believe that there is a connection between all forms of prejudice and bigotry, and we are undoubtedly living in an era when discrimination is accelerating in its most reprehensible forms. It must be exposed and opposed.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The hon. Lady is delivering a fantastic speech. Does she agree that social media, although a force for good, is also a key change that is unleashing horrific views around the world and helping to take us backward, when actually we should be using social media to help us to move forward and make the argument?

Ms Eagle: I could not agree more. I will refer to social media briefly later, but I think we need to contemplate far more when considering how to tackle the threat.

In the aftermath of the EU referendum in the UK, there was a spike in all sorts of hate crime. In the three months after the vote to leave, such crimes against LGBTQI people rose by a massive 147%. There is a sense that that type of bigotry has somehow now been normalised,

and the LGBTQI community is suffering because of it. So are others—women, religious minorities, black and ethnic minorities, the disabled. We now have candidates standing in the EU elections across Europe who openly advocate removing civil rights from sections of the population or scapegoating immigrants; others are unapologetic about issuing on social media rape threats against serving politicians. Much of the anger and hostility is being spread by social media, as the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) pointed out.

We have much to do to counter those disturbing trends if we are to be able to celebrate our progress on future IDAHO days. We must not fail in that crucial task.

4.2 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle). She is, of course, entitled to her perambulation back through history to a time when the records of our respective parties were perhaps not in the same place, but even then and throughout that period, there were champions in the Conservative party who had been working for change for many decades.

I grew up in a period of British history when it was hard to be gay, and I know the weight carried every day—that it was wrong to feel this way; that it was the secret part of me that no one could ever know. I understand exactly what it is like knowing that social and professional death would follow if the fact were ever discovered. But at least I do not have to live with the possibility of actual death, unlike 600 million of our fellow citizens on the planet who live in jurisdictions where they could be sentenced to death for their sexuality. Freedom from that fear is the most important event of my life.

I am a social liberal. For me, freedom starts with the right of individuals to be who they want to be—to be how we want to be, to love who we want to love, to form the relationships we want to form and to create a family and home to share that love with others. I will no longer be party to a society where that is not possible.

Here in the United Kingdom, many of us now enjoy unprecedented freedom. There were 7,019 marriages between same-sex couples in 2016. In 2018, one in eight adoptions in the UK were by couples in a same-sex relationship, a civil partnership or a same-sex marriage. Furthermore, as the hon. Lady said, there are now, I believe, 45 Members who publicly identify as LGBT.

That said, there are many whose plight is only just beginning to be recognised, and here I will deal with the trans community. In July 2018, the Government Equalities Office published the national LGBT community survey. Of the 108,100 valid responses to the survey, 40% of people said they had experienced a negative incident in the previous 12 months involving someone they did not live with that was due to their being of the LGBT community or being thought to be a part of it.

For transgender people, however, their likelihood of experiencing threats of physical or sexual harassment or violence is double that for the rest of the LGBT community. We are just waking up to the fact that transgender people continue to face some of the worst discrimination in our society. Almost half of trans people in the UK have attempted suicide. Given that there are 200,000 transgender people in the UK, this

means that an avoidable death is a threatening reality for many in our community—for our very friends and family.

Out of these 200,000 trans people in the UK, only 4,910 have been issued with a gender recognition certificate since the Gender Recognition Act 2004 came into force. The GRA enables trans men and women to update their legal gender by applying for that certificate, which allows them to change their gender and, if they wish, their name. It is required by trans people if they are to be recognised, legally and officially, as male or female. The Act was groundbreaking at the time but is now out of date. The process of obtaining a gender recognition certificate is intrusive, bureaucratic and medicalised. It also fails to make provision for non-binary people.

In 2017, the Government announced a welcome reform of the Act to streamline and de-medicalise the process, and after much delay the results are being analysed. I look forward to an update from the Minister on when these results will be published, along with plans for next steps. It would be a welcome conclusion to this debate. I can only hope it will help everyone to understand that being transgender, or indeed lesbian, gay, bisexual or intersexual, is not a lifestyle choice but usually an agonising realisation that no one would choose to go through. Accepting this crucial clarification is perhaps the biggest step towards ending aggression towards the LGBTI community.

That begins with education. My own choice had been to hide and to disguise myself. It was not until I got here that I understood enough about myself and everything else that I eventually found the courage to be open and to be myself. Education—the knowledge that it is not a matter of choice about who you innately are—is the cause that has to be won. The latest furore against the values of the Equality Act 2010 at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham was a stark reminder to us all of not only how far we have to go, but how easily we will backtrack on progress if we are not careful.

We have strong protections in Britain. The Equality Act is clear that people can be of different race, religion, disability and sexual orientation. This is non-negotiable. Homophobia exists, in part, because of a lack of education, and inclusive religious and sexual education is a cornerstone of ensuring that our children grow up to be some of the most well-rounded, inclusive, understanding and tolerant people in the world. We must remember and protect that.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech. Is there not some irony—I use the word carefully—here? The weekend gone, I went to the East Lothian Pride Saltire festival. It was a gathering of the LGBTI community, along with friends, families and communities of East Lothian. Since I had the honour of becoming an MP, I have not attended a more welcoming, open, friendly, inclusive gathering of people. The irony is that the prejudice is all one-sided.

Crispin Blunt: Obviously, I agree with the hon. Gentleman.

It must be a central characteristic of global Britain, with our people, culture and history, that if we as a nation do not understand difference at home, we undermine what is special about the United Kingdom abroad. People who dislike the idea of people with different

sexual orientations may have children or grandchildren who do not conform to their social norms. In fact, statistically, of course they will. There are children who have two fathers, and there are children who have two mothers. There are children who are gay. Those are facts.

All children need education on what Britain is like and what Britain stands for, which is tolerance and inclusivity. Pretending that such people do not exist only serves to misinform and continue the bullying of these children. Education is a prime opportunity for the Government to step up and champion LGBT rights. It is a duty. Backing teachers who teach and promote equality should not be a hard ask. Indeed, if a group of people demanded that their children should not learn about physics, history or British values because they believed that that was wrong, we would not be having this discussion.

I will close by showing that there is light at the end of this tunnel. The decision in India was the most momentous for the most enormous number of people, but it has been accompanied by change in places such as Angola and Trinidad and Tobago, where laws criminalising same-sex acts have been repealed. I commend the work of the Commonwealth Equality Network. When people stand up together to challenge exclusion, they can achieve great things. As part of Britain's place in the Commonwealth, we need to continue to support LGBT people globally and ensure that the British values of inclusivity, tolerance and respect reverberate around the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I made a plea for equality, but it did not work, so we will now have a formal time limit of five minutes.

4.11 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): We rightly acknowledge—especially those of us who are a little older—just how much freer and fairer our society has become for LGBTIQ people in a short time. We usually do not stop to think that if equality has come so far and so fast, it could be eroded just as quickly. We cannot stop building solidarity around gender, sexuality, race, religion, disability and class. This is about not just policies, but exchanging stories and coming to understand each other better. Our mission is to resist those who spread lies, fear and division, and to keep on with positive conversations about who we are, how we are different and how we are the same.

I will concentrate on just three issues on which the Government's response must be stronger. First, I want to know when we are going to get moving on reform of the Gender Recognition Act 2004. No matter how difficult the debate, we have to find the courage to help some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. Secondly, I want to know why PrEP is not being rolled out to absolutely everyone who needs it without delay, because it raises the genuine hope that we can end HIV transmission entirely. That is incredibly exciting, so why are we not acting faster? Thirdly, I want to know why our Government are not treating President Bolsonaro of Brazil as the active threat to LGBTIQ people that he clearly is, and I need to speak strongly on that issue.

[Lyn Brown]

Bolsonaro has used homophobic slurs as weapons against his political opponents, straight and LGBTIQI alike, over and again. He has repeated the incredibly damaging lie that LGBT parents are child abusers. He has repeated the lie that young people are recruited into being LGBT by activists who are simply in pursuit of sex. Just last month, he presented gay tourists, including British citizens, as a threat to Brazilian families. He has already acted to remove the responsibility to protect the rights of LGBT Brazilians from the Ministry of Women, Family and Human Rights in a country where more than 100 trans people, and many more queer folk, are murdered every single year.

Most despicably, Bolsonaro is a man who has encouraged parents to beat their children if they do not conform, who has explicitly endorsed violence against gay couples on the streets, and who has said repeatedly that he would prefer his sons to die rather than be gay—he would prefer them to be run over by a truck. This is a man who took a smiling selfie with his neighbour, the police officer charged with murdering the heroic bisexual councillor Marielle Franco last year. She was murdered for her human rights activism, and Bolsonaro alone refused to condemn her murder.

I want to finish by mentioning one specific case among many hundreds. In 2014, after Bolsonaro had made his comments about beating children who are not acting in line with their parents' gender expectations, an eight-year-old boy was murdered by his father near Rio. He was beaten because he liked having long hair, because he liked to dance, because he tried on his sister's clothes and because he liked helping to wash the dishes. Because he did not fit, his father beat him until he was dead. I can only conclude that Bolsonaro would have approved. He appears to me to be a vicious misogynist, transphobe and homophobe, and a clear danger to LGBTIQI Brazilians and visitors alike. I think him reprehensible.

I want to hear the Government tell the truth about Bolsonaro and tell me what action they are going to take to oppose this evil. That is the very least we can do for that murdered child and so many other LGBTIQI people who are living in absolute fear in Brazil today.

4.16 pm

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): I wanted to speak in this debate to add my voice to those who are rightly celebrating sexual orientation and gender identity diversity on Friday 17 May all over the world. I also wanted personally to support my excellent parliamentary neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), who has done so much work, in this House and around the world, to raise awareness of and campaign on the issue.

I am proud that the UK is a leader in the field of LGBTIQI equality, but much more progress is needed to ensure that we all live in an open and tolerant society. We are making good progress in this place, as we have the highest number of LGBT MPs elected to a Parliament. The Conservative party is also making great progress. I remember knocking on doors a few years ago when many people were concerned about gay marriage, but when I asked a recent open meeting of Conservative members in my constituency how many of them were concerned about gay marriage, only two people put

their hands up, and even they did so very reluctantly. Attitudes are changing. They take a long time to change, but when they change they change very quickly. What we have heard today is evidence of that.

One of the most worrying statistics I have heard recently comes from Stonewall, which says that more than one third of LGBT+ staff do not feel confident enough to come out in their place of work. The figure for trans staff members is higher, at 51%. Given that many more people feel safe to come out at university or even at school, it is a concern that people feel that they have to go back into the closet at work. This should be a wake-up call to everybody who has responsibility for managing a place of work.

We need people to bring their best and most confident self to work. The fact that so many LGBT+ staff members do not feel comfortable being out at work means that companies and we as a country are losing out. How so? We know from academic studies that diverse organisations are more successful than those that are not. They make better decisions because they get a wider range of inputs. They are more in touch with their stakeholders, customers and employees. In short, discrimination costs us dearly, not just because of the harm it does to the individual concerned, but because it prevents people from being at their very best by simply being themselves.

Discrimination is harmful not only to the individual concerned, but to society as a whole. Discrimination has unpleasant companions, namely bullying and self-harm. Bullying is not only distressing and isolating; it can also affect education and damage mental health. It is welcome that we are now investing £3 million to help primary and secondary schools across the country to eradicate this type of bullying. According to the Trevor Project, each episode of LGBTQI victimisation, whether physical or verbal harassment, increases the likelihood of self-harming behaviour by two and a half times on average. LGBTQI youth are almost five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. That is just not okay.

I was really pleased with the creation of a LGBT support group in Chichester, which started in February. I spoke to the group in preparing for this debate after being told about it by one of my own party members, Christopher Baldock. The support group was set up by Melissa Hamilton, a local trans woman. Growing up as trans she was met with a wall of apathy, and she found there were no adult services to support her. She told me that a common response was, "Why don't you just head to Brighton?" I am delighted that she stayed in Chichester and set this group up.

Justine Greening: I would love to network her with the Wandsworth LGBT Forum, which, similarly, has been well-established for many years, has brilliant people involved in it and does fantastic work in our local community. I am sure they could help my hon. Friend's LGBT community to get further, faster with the support they can provide locally.

Gillian Keegan: That is brilliant and I will definitely take my right hon. Friend up on that offer, and I am sure Melissa will be delighted.

Another story I heard was from two girls who had gone to Brighton to celebrate Pride. They went back home on the train, still wearing their rainbow colours,

which we have all got on today. While they were walking home, a car full of young men hurled homophobic abuse at them as they drove past. The car then turned around for another drive-by insult. This incident was, understandably, distressing, but we are so much better than this and we need to call it out wherever we see it.

The group is already up and running, and I am sure it will go much faster now thanks to the help and support from my right hon. Friend. It allows the LGBT community in Chichester to come together for the first time, to share their stories and experiences and to support one another. Without this support, it is so easy to feel isolated and unable to be yourself. I will join the group at one of its future get-togethers and look forward to meeting everyone in person.

Of course, this Friday is also a day when we draw attention to the issue of LGBTQI rights internationally. Our country is a leader in the world, much respected for our influence and the example we set. I am proud that it was a Conservative Prime Minister who put same-sex marriage on the statute book, but, as many colleagues have said, there is much to be done in the wider Commonwealth countries. I was particularly disappointed to see what was happening in Bermuda, which still seems to have a problem with LGBT rights. I mention Bermuda as my husband is the grandson of a Gosling, a very well-known Bermudian family, famous for Gosling's Rum. One would think that a wealthy and important British overseas territory would take a more enlightened and tolerant approach, and I call on it to do so.

In conclusion, I want to thank my colleagues who have enabled us to have this important debate today. We are making progress in Chichester and across the country. I am looking forward to working across the House, as a straight ally, to ensure we continue to be an open, tolerant society that stands firmly against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia, both now and in the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We have to reduce the time limit to four minutes. I am sorry, but that is just how it is.

4.22 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I rise to talk about the hope and promise of change, how far we have come and how far we still have to go. At a time of rising, rampaging populism across Europe and across other democracies around the world, and throughout the tyrannies of the world, it is important to remember that there is so much that we have none the less achieved and that the country we live in today is so much better than the one I was born into. That is largely because in this place openly gay politicians such as myself stand on the shoulders of giants—the giants who forced through legislative change in this place, not just by walking through the Division Lobby, but by marching through the streets demanding change. I am talking about those great social movements that have managed to change not just the laws of the land, but the hearts and minds of the people living in it.

One of the reasons the LGBT community was so disturbed by the protests at school gates around the country accusing gay people of proselytising to children, wanting to convert them and sexualising them is that the horror of section 28 rings so heavily in the our

memories. For young people who have gone through school without having to endure section 28, it has come as a shock—that realisation that the rights we have won and that have been fought for can be rolled back. For the older generations who founded organisations such as Stonewall to undo the damage of section 28, it was a reminder that there are battles that we thought were won but that can easily return. For those of us who stand somewhere in the middle, we recognise the heavy burden of responsibility we bear not only to defend the rights we already have, but to extend the freedoms even further.

I took hope from what Imam Ibrahim Mogra said last night on “Newsnight”. There is no doubt that he is a devout believer in his own faith, and I suspect he has traditional views on human sexuality, but on “Newsnight” he said this about homosexuality:

“It’s something you don’t choose into or opt out of.”

He also said that

“if there is a child who comes to school with two mummies or two daddies it’s only right that his”—

or her—

“classmates know about this. That would reduce bullying and discrimination.”

What a great message of hope, respect and inclusion.

The journey that the Conservative party has been on has already been referred to. I pay tribute to Conservatives who fought from within to change their party’s position on LGBT equality, meaning that I could march through the Division Lobby to support, for example, measures to extend compulsory sex and relationships education. I pay tribute to those people who are still fighting battles—for example, Alison Bennington in the Democratic Unionist party. She is the first openly gay DUP candidate. Whatever we think of the DUP’s politics, we certainly need more Alison Benningtons and fewer of the likes of Jim Wells.

I say to all of us in this House that there is still unfinished business. It is an absurdity that Northern Ireland is the only place on the island of Ireland and within the British Isles where marriage equality is not enjoyed by everybody. I am appalled that the trans debate has been conducted in an atmosphere of such vicious intolerance, with abuse and threats of violence traded from one side to the other. That is not the way to approach what must be a sensitive and thoughtful debate and consequent action. We have already heard expressed so eloquently the powerful role that this country has to play in undoing the damage in countries around the world where LGBT people are persecuted, often as a result of the House’s colonial legacy.

Finally, as I consider tying the knot, I hope that one day, like my dear friends Ann Limb and Maggie Cook, who married this weekend in a Quaker ceremony, my own church might bless my marriage, even if it does not take place in a church.

4.26 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), the hon. Members for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle) on securing this much-needed debate to mark the International Day against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

This year, 2019, marks the 30th anniversary of the founding of Stonewall. Its founders had been active in the fight against section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988. I welcome the new legislation that the House passed just a few weeks ago to extend relationship and sex education to include LGBTI issues. The backlash that we saw against LGBTI-inclusive education has faint but highly worrying echoes of the repressive section 28 from the 1980s. It is truly shameful that two in five LGBTI pupils between the ages of 11 and 19 are never taught anything about LGBTI issues in school. That does not create a healthy atmosphere in which LGBTI pupils feel they can talk to an adult about being LGBTI in school, and we know that being able to do so dramatically increases the mental wellbeing of LGBTI students.

The changes to RSE have taken too long to happen, and we cannot wait another 33 years for urgent reforms to be made. To start with, urgent reforms to the Gender Recognition Act 2004 need to be made sooner, rather than later. To put it in simple terms, transgender women are women. A reformed Gender Recognition Act needs to be committed to de-medicalising the process. The Government have consistently made it clear that being trans is not a mental illness, and the Act needs to be reformed to truly recognise that. Currently, transgender individuals must provide medical evidence from a mental health professional, with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria, before their gender is recognised. The Government themselves predict that just 12% of trans people in the UK have a gender recognition certificate. There are too many barriers in place that stop trans people from getting gender recognition certificates, which has meant that although new legislation has been introduced to improve the lives of trans people, the majority of trans people have not benefited from that legislation.

It is important that the House recognises that this is Mental Health Awareness Week. It is important that we acknowledge that in this debate because of the vast amount of research that suggests that LGBTI youth are more likely to struggle with their mental health. Today's LGBTI youth generally come out at younger ages, and public support for LGBTI issues has dramatically increased in recent years, but we must ask ourselves why LGBTI youth continue to have significantly higher rates of depression, self-harm and suicidal ideation than their cisgender/heterosexual counterparts.

I am proud to represent a party that has done so much for LGBTI rights in the UK, including through the repeal of section 28, the introduction of civil partnerships and the reduction of the age of consent for men in same-sex relationships to 16. In one of my first surgeries after I was elected as a Member of Parliament, a constituent came to see me about his status as a European citizen. It truly upset me that this constituent, who was in a same-sex relationship, told me that part of his anxieties about his immigration status were to do with him not feeling safe if he had to return home.

I am deeply concerned about the treatment of LGBTI people internationally. Very recently, we have seen the introduction of the death penalty in Brunei for men who choose to sleep with other men. Both nationally and internationally, we have to do better. Together we can create a world where men are not afraid to love one another, where women are not afraid to love one another

and where trans people can live safely. But to do that, cisgender and heterosexual people need to stand alongside our LGBTI citizens and not speak over them on this massively important issue. I know that, together, we can overcome homophobia, transphobia and biphobia.

4.30 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I want to start by saying that I am very proud that Scotland is one of the world's leading LGBTI+ rights countries in the world, and I am proud that I and the Scottish Government were elected on a manifesto commitment to reform the Gender Recognition Act 2004 in particular.

I know that I am not alone in feeling that ignorance is rearing its ugly head again, but it is our job to make sure that we bring people with us. The reality is that most folk do not know a lot about trans people; they do not know a lot about trans issues; and they do not know a lot about the laws that we are seeking to reform. I want to use today as an opportunity to take a little heat out of such discussions and explain and answer some of the concerns that people have about the Gender Recognition Act and trans rights more broadly.

First, the Act provides a process for trans people to obtain a gender recognition certificate, which is basically the equivalent of a new birth certificate, but it reflects who that person is. To take part in this process, a person must pay a £140 fee; they must be over 18; they must not be married and if they are married spousal consent has to be given; they must have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria through medical and psychiatric reports; they must prove that they have lived fully for two years in their gender; and then they must present this dossier of evidence to a gender recognition panel, which we know from gathering evidence is a really redundant system and which asks a lot of totally inappropriate and irrelevant questions.

Let me talk about the problems with the GRA as it stands. First, not all folk can afford the £140 fee. That cost can be covered in instances of low income, but medical and psychiatric reports, which can cost an absolute bomb for a lot of people, are not covered. Then there is the idea that someone needs spousal consent if they are married. That is a medieval kind of rule. For someone to prove that they have lived for two years in a certain gender is as redundant as it is hypocritical. Action for Trans Health warned that this requirement can force trans people to conform to outdated norms of gender and behaviour. It also risks outing these individuals, because if they are challenged at some point in those two years, they do not have a gender recognition certificate and could therefore find themselves in a dangerous situation, so it is a totally unjustified ask.

Finally, the requirement of a diagnosis of gender dysphoria is absolutely ridiculous. The World Health Organisation removed trans gender from the international classification of diseases. Another look at this shows that it removed homosexuality only in 1992. Gender dysphoria is defined as distress or discomfort caused by a mismatch between gender identity and the identity assigned at birth. It is important to say that not every trans person experiences gender dysphoria. A comparable hypothetical situation would be if I had to go to a doctor and get a clinical diagnosis of anxiety or depression before someone believes that I am gay. Of course, a lot

of gay people experience anxiety and depression in relation to their sexuality, but that is because of the way that the world treats us at the minute; it is not a medical consequence of being gay. The same is true of a trans gender person experiencing gender dysphoria.

The great thing about the Gender Recognition Act when it first came out in 2004 was that it recognised that not all trans people are physically or mentally prepared for surgery for a whole range of nuanced and different reasons. The everyday bigotry and ignorance experienced by trans people creates a vicious cycle of harassment and exclusion. I for one understand why many trans people are too emotionally exhausted to entertain this process to even get a GRC.

Under the reforms that have been put forward in Scotland—this place is looking at similar reforms—an individual would appear in person before a justice of the peace to make a statutory declaration confirming the truth of their application and their intention to live in their acquired gender for the remainder of their lives. The penalty for obtaining this by fraud would be two years in jail. This would bring us into line with international best practice, as we already see in Argentina, Malta, Norway, Denmark, Belgium and the Republic of Ireland. No evidence from any of those countries suggests that the system is abused in any way.

The Scottish Government’s consultation ended in March 2018. There were 15,000 responses, all of which were overwhelmingly in support of the reforms. Close the Gap, Equate Scotland, Rape Crisis Scotland, Scottish Women’s Aid, Women 50:50 and Zero Tolerance support all these reforms and released a joint statement saying:

“We do not regard trans equality and women’s equality to contradict or be in competition with each other”.

To be clear, there are absolutely no suggestions that we should change the exclusion clause in the Equality Act 2010, and it is the Equality Act that deals with single-sex services, where a lot of the recent concerns that have been surfacing seem to lie. If anyone wants to look this up for research purposes, page 7 of the Equality Act states that exclusion clauses can be used where

“a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim” can be shown.

It is important to follow that by saying that Rape Crisis and Women’s Aid already provide trans-inclusive services on the basis of self-ID, and have done so for well over a decade. They appreciate that trans women are running from the same abuse, the same toxic masculinity, and the same sexual and physical violence as other women they serve. We hear concerns such as, “What if an abusive male partner turns up to a refuge centre and starts self-identifying as a woman?” Well, the reality is that they would be treated in exactly the same way as an abusive lesbian partner turning up to a refuge. These questions already have answers. People have a right to express legitimate concerns and questions, but what I am saying just now is that either we are witnessing an open attack on rights that are already established and long have been, or we are seeing a worrying level of ignorance.

The only people responsible for abuse are abusers. We understand that men perpetrate more abuse against women, and we have to understand this trend if we want to challenge it, but that does not legitimise framing discussions on trans rights from the viewpoint that

trans women are a threat. It is the same tactic used by the far right. For example, the far right portrays sexual crimes by Muslim men as endemic, yet ignores the fact that most rapists and paedophiles are actually white men. We hear arguments that we cannot have a compassionate social security system because benefit scroungers will just cheat and abuse the system, when the truth is that that does not actually happen a lot. The bigger problem is people not claiming what they are entitled to. Fake stories or individual cases are used to smear entire communities, against wider evidence. The same thing regularly happens to the trans community, and it is happening just now.

For me, being a feminist means dismantling the patriarchy. That patriarchy has hurt every different identity in society in different ways—whether in all the battles that feminists have been fighting on women’s behalf for generations, or in men not feeling able to talk about their mental health or to seek help because they cannot be seen as weak or vulnerable. Even within the LGB community, we see the harm that this patriarchy does. We see guys who feel the need to be effeminate because they are gay, or women who feel the need to become butch because they are lesbian. All these insecurities are instilled in people, and they play out in different ways.

We live in a highly gendered and patriarchal world. Many people fail to grasp that it is also an incredibly heterosexual and binary world, and this goes hand in hand with the patriarchy. It is quite telling that there seems to be little concern—certainly little vocal concern—for trans men and the situations that they might find themselves in. Being an LGBT ally is more than supporting our existence and rights in theory; rather, it is demonstrating and taking personal responsibility to educate ourselves to understand the everyday barriers and prejudices that we face. We have to find out why the general welfare of trans people is so awful, given that they make up less than 1% of the population. People are right to express legitimate questions and concerns, but if they dig deep enough, I think they will find that the answers are indeed there.

4.39 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): It is an absolute pleasure to take part in this debate and to follow the passionate speech by the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) in support of the trans community. I sincerely thank the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing the debate. His very rounded speech ensured that the debate started in a way that updated us on the progress that has been made, and still needs to be made, globally. He also highlighted the legacy of the UK’s laws and our historical responsibility towards our former colonies. In fact, after he had finished speaking, I thought, “I haven’t really got much to say.”

It is with great pride that I take part in this debate. The theme for this year is justice and protection for all, and we really have to embrace that in its entirety. I always say that equality means equality. This month, on 24 May, we will be celebrating Stonewall’s 30 years of campaigning for LGBT+ people. Stonewall was formed a year and a day after the introduction of section 28—the legislation that prevented the so-called promotion of homosexuality in schools. It was formed by, among others, Lord Michael Cashman from the other place, Lisa Power and Sir Ian McKellen.

[Dawn Butler]

As we have heard, a lot has changed in the past 30 years, but there is still a lot of progress that needs to be made. We often talk about everybody bringing their true, authentic selves to work, yet there are still lots of people in this country and beyond who feel that they cannot do so. One equality does not trump another. You do not have to be gay to fight for gay rights: you just have to believe in equality. That might not come naturally to some—in fact, it may be hard, because they have to confront friends, family members, and even leaders of other countries. However, if that is what it takes to make people feel included, valued and worthy, then surely it is worth it.

The worrying rhetoric surrounding trans rights mirrors the dark early days of section 28 and has led to a spike in hate crimes against LGBT+ people. Members all around the House have said how important it is that we talk about and celebrate the LGBT+ community and the people who have led the way—like my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who was, as she said, the first openly out gay Minister in a UK Government. We can be pretty sure that she was not the only gay Minister, but she was the first to be openly out. The struggle of those pioneers led to hard-won battles that now seem to be being rolled back.

Why is this important? The annual statistics from the Home Office show that between 2016-17 and 2017-18, police-recorded hate crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity increased by 27% and 32% respectively. Let me read out a couple of quotes. Ava, 56, from London said:

“Someone described their intention to slit my throat and kill me. They went on to say no court would convict them for killing ‘the queer bait’.”

Abebi, 35, from Scotland said:

“I was physically assaulted by two women as I attempted to use the bathroom in a bar. They began pushing me and shouted that I was in the wrong bathroom and pointed out that this was the ladies’ bathroom. I told them that I knew which bathroom it was and I was in the right place, but they persisted. Since then I avoid public toilets wherever possible.”

Can we imagine living our lives avoiding public toilets or walking down certain roads, in case we are attacked just because we are LGBT+?

The consultation on the Gender Recognition Act 2004 has closed, but the Government have yet to publish the findings or respond. Many Members mentioned that. Today is a good day for the Minister to tell us more about the consultation, so that we can stop asking this question time and again.

The UK could be better allies. We have dropped from first to fourth to eighth in the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association rating. We need to support teachers in delivering the curriculum. The protests are growing around the country. We need to stop them in their tracks and ensure that teachers are properly supported, so that we can teach this in an informed and calm way. As the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) said, LGBT+ people are people, and children should be taught that we are different but equal.

According to 1 Corinthians, faith, hope and love are three things that people should abide by, “but the greatest of these is love.”

Martin Luther King said:

“It may be true that the law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that’s pretty important.”

This country should not support any other country where the LGBT+ community face death because of who they love. We should stand up and oppose that at every opportunity. Anybody who tries to turn love into hate cannot be supported. In our role as chair of the Commonwealth, the UK has an ideal opportunity to lead by example, to be a proper ally and to take a bold step and stand in solidarity with the LGBT+ community. The Government should put pressure on Commonwealth and non-Commonwealth nations to effectively repeal legislation that discriminates against LGBT+ people. The Government could also legislate for equal marriage in Northern Ireland and bring it in line with the rest of the UK. Almost 80% of people in Northern Ireland agree with that.

I would like to thank some people who have always informed me as the shadow Minister for Women and Equalities: LGBT Labour, Amnesty, Mermaids UK, Pride, Black Pride, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the Kaleidoscope Trust.

At the end of the day, hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Just imagine a world where there is more love than hate. As legislators, and with the UK as chair of the Commonwealth, we are in a strong position to help make that a reality.

4.47 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) for securing this debate and I pay tribute to his work on the APPG on global LGBT rights. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate. It is important for the world to hear the British Parliament speak out against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia and in support of this year’s theme, “Justice and protection for all”.

It is important not to forget that, behind the labels that trip off the tongue so easily, we are talking about real people and those who are often subject to discrimination, abuse and, sadly, in so many countries across the world, much worse. I am very proud, so many years on from the event, to be speaking here as the first openly gay Conservative MP and the shadow Minister who helped to steer through the Civil Partnership Bill for the Conservative party.

This country has a very proud record of promoting equality for those who define themselves as LGBT. Indeed, we are recognised as one of the top 10 most progressive countries in Europe for such rights. We have one of the strongest legislative frameworks in the world to prevent and tackle discrimination, including on the grounds of sexual orientation and gender reassignment.

We have heard powerful and moving speeches today but, as always, we recognise that there is more to do. In July last year, we launched the LGBT action plan, which set out 75 commitments and is supported by a £4.5 million fund to improve the lives of LGBT people in healthcare, education, the workplace and elsewhere. In the health sector, our £1 million LGBT health grant fund will back innovative proposals to tackle LGBT-related health inequality. Our new national LGBT health adviser, Dr Michael Brady, is working to improve LGBT people’s experiences throughout the healthcare sector.

We are also exploring options, including through existing legislation, to deliver on our commitment to end the abhorrent and prehistoric conversion therapy practices that some people disgustingly advocate. Such practices have no place in 21st-century Britain. Someone's sexual orientation or gender identity is not something to be cured; it is something we should all celebrate.

In schools and universities, we are supporting LGBT work by students and teachers to improve tolerance and diversity in leadership, and we have made a further £1 million available to expand and extend an existing project to fight homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools—a phenomenon we should all condemn and that is totally unacceptable. In the workplace, we have launched a new £600,000 scheme to help to develop skills and capacity in the LGBT sector and we are working with the police to improve the response to LGBT hate crime incidents.

Ms Angela Eagle: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that there is a real problem of homophobic bullying in the workplace and that often those best placed to deal with it are the trade unions? Will he say something about how his Government could assist trade unions in fighting the kind of discrimination that LGBT people face in the workplace every day?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is the duty of all people, be they managers or colleagues in the workplace, to stand up for anyone who may be discriminated against, and if a collective organisation of any sort in a company can assist an individual, I would wish it to be supported. We have nothing against trade unions doing things on that agenda in the workplace—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady gestures, but we would support any trade union endeavours to help to win the battle against discrimination and to protect individuals from bullying and inappropriate behaviour. I am proud that the UK Government are taking action in all those areas, as that shows our recognition of the extent to which the lives of LGBT people can still be improved, in order for them to be accorded the same dignity, respect and rights as all other citizens.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) referred to the Gender Recognition Act 2004, as did the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), who made an excellent, powerful and very personal speech. Last year, we held a public consultation on the reform of that Act, which allows transgender people legally to change their gender. We are analysing more than 100,000 responses and we will publish the outcome later this year. A lot of those responses were extraordinarily personal and contained individual stories and experiences which, if we are to take the consultation seriously, we must understand and properly digest. It would be wrong to say, “We’ve had the consultation and here is what we will do,” because we must use that body of work powerfully to inform the provisions that we need to convert into public policy. That will be followed by a call for evidence on non-binary gender identity that will inform policy in that field in due course.

More broadly, and crucially for the delivery of our action plan, we have created an LGBT advisory panel, with experts from the LGBT sector, academia and the legal world, to ensure that we can engage with the latest research and hear from people working directly with

those affected by these issues. As in so many areas of policy, change cannot be affected by Government alone. These partnerships with civil society are absolutely vital.

Wes Streeting: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am going to run out of time, so if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me I want to move on to the international dimension, which is more my field as a Foreign Office Minister and which I do not want to neglect in my response to the House.

In terms of our international approach, hon. Members will be aware that promoting and defending human rights is an integral part of our foreign policy. That includes speaking up for gender equality and LGBT rights and seeking an end to discrimination wherever it occurs, as I did this year following yet more disturbing reports of persecution in Chechnya. We are clear that every country must fulfil its international human rights obligations. LGBT rights are not special or additional rights. They are not optional rights. They are human rights. They are the very same rights and fundamental freedoms that are enshrined in the UN charter and the universal declaration of human rights and that should be enjoyed by everyone. We are talking about the rights of families, friends, colleagues and neighbours. These are rights for all ages, all races and all faiths. We must be resolute in our campaigning and stand firm by our values. We cannot stand by and allow atrocities to happen.

In such cases, it is often our quiet diplomacy that reaps the most rewards. Where that does not work, we have no qualms about making our case in public. When Brunei implemented the Sharia penal code, we addressed our concerns in both public and private, particularly about the potential impact on LGBT people. Consequently, we warmly welcome the assurances provided by His Majesty the Sultan on 5 May. I hope that those who have been leading bans and boycotts of Brunei-owed equities fairly acknowledge those improvements and changes. We will continue to encourage Brunei to take further steps to protect LGBT people from all forms of discrimination.

We welcome the fact that India and Trinidad and Tobago decriminalised same-sex relations last year, but as we heard earlier today, it still remains a criminal offence in 70 countries, half of which are members of the Commonwealth. That statistic alone is a matter of great concern and regret. That is why it was vital to address the issue at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting last year. I am delighted to report that it was the most progressive ever on LGBT rights.

I am going to skip over some things that I would like to say, as I am running out of time, but I want to refer quickly to the Equal Rights Coalition, which was mentioned earlier. I am delighted to announce that next month we will take on the co-chairmanship of the Equal Rights Coalition. It is a group of 40 countries that work together and share expertise to advance equality. It aims to co-ordinate international efforts to tackle violence and discrimination against LGBT people. It is a great pleasure that our partner will be Argentina. We have already worked closely and successfully with Argentina on a number of important issues and I look forward to this being another area of close collaboration. I hope that together we can re-energise the coalition.

[*Sir Alan Duncan*]

I am confident that I speak for the whole House when I say that everyone, no matter where they live, should have the right to be who they are and to love whoever they love without judgment or fear. I hope this debate today will have made sure that the voice of this Parliament can be heard widely and that we can keep pressure on those whose ways need to be amended for the better.

4.58 pm

Nick Herbert: I thank my right hon. Friend for his response and for saying that the Government's intention is to re-energise the Equal Rights Coalition. This is a really important moment for the UK Government to show continuing leadership in this area.

I thank all my right hon. and hon. Friends and Opposition Members for their contributions. I think we show the House of Commons at its best when we are able to debate these issues on an entirely bipartisan, cross-party basis, and demonstrate that our concern to promote equality is universal in this House of Commons and that we are not divided on the issue. In many speeches, we have recognised that there is still work to do.

A couple of issues raised related to the influence of religion on LGBT+ people. Next week, the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights will announce and call for evidence on a major new inquiry on the relationship between religion and LGBT rights. I think that we have to start to look at that relationship as an important driver of some of the concerns expressed today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I deeply regret that the commentators who criticise what goes on in this House and constantly find fault with the way in which Members of Parliament conduct themselves and their debates are not here to pay attention to this excellent debate, which has been thoughtful, gentle and constructive on all sides of the House. I only wish that people would sometimes pay attention to what is best about the way in which we conduct matters here in the House of Commons.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the International day against homophobia, biphobia and transphobia.

Flooding: Oxford West and Abingdon

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

5.1 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I am grateful to the House for allowing me to raise an extraordinarily important issue to my constituents: flooding in Oxford West and Abingdon. I am deeply grateful to the Minister for agreeing to meet me, following recent correspondence. We had been in touch via our offices, and then the opportunity for this debate arose. As she is aware, such opportunities are rare, so I thought this would be a great opportunity to talk in public. I am very grateful for her offer to meet more privately.

In 2007, several hundred households in Abingdon, and several local businesses, were flooded by the River Ock. Thousands of local residents were affected. I need not tell the Minister, who will have heard from other Members from across the country, just how traumatic the experience of being flooded is. We hear stories of people asking, similarly to how they would in the case of a fire, "What is the last thing I need to bring with me? What is important? How do I make sure we are safe? What will I come back to?" Some families were cast out of their homes for nearly a year, which caused enormous stress not just to them, but to their children and the wider community. At the time, there were vows by the community and in local petitions to do everything possible to help and to give the community the certainty it needed.

It is sometimes forgotten that there is always an economic cost to flooding. When the area floods, I have sat for hours on roads in Oxford, waiting to get through traffic and thinking about what else I could be doing at that time. The cost to the country is in the billions.

To turn to the Abingdon case, the Environment Agency, working with Vale of White Horse District Council, Oxfordshire County Council and the Thames regional flood and coastal committee, announced plans for an Abingdon flood alleviation scheme. After much patience and campaigning, residents were so relieved. Abingdon is in desperate need of such a scheme—this was not the first time it had flooded—especially for the River Ock, which was the main source of the disastrous flooding in 2007 that, as I described, residents will never forget. Imagine their disappointment when it was revealed that the scheme was to be abandoned.

The Environment Agency initially estimated that the scheme would cost £5 million, but when it realised more recently that the true cost was closer to double that, it decided that the value for money case had not been made, and the scheme was scrapped. Twelve years on from the 2007 flood, residents have not forgotten it. Their shock and frustration were palpable, especially given that the announcement to scrap the scheme was made in a seemingly innocuous Environment Agency newsletter in January. There was no public announcement, and, while I had received that same newsletter by email, it did not forcefully highlight or reflect the way in which this would have affected the community.

Of course I did what any Back-Bench MP would do: I called a public meeting. Let me say at this point how grateful I am to the Environment Agency and to the representatives of the local councils who came to explain

why this had happened. Questions were whirling. How could the costs have been so badly underestimated? Why would the Government not help, knowing what had happened in Abingdon, which I understand to have been a more than “once in 100 years” occurrence? People came to the meeting in droves—in fact, it was standing room only—and they were cynical, because they had been promised a scheme 12 years earlier.

One of the things that I found most striking about that meeting, apart from the cynicism—we talk about a loss of trust in Parliament, but it is not just about Brexit; decisions like this contribute to that loss of trust as well—was the fact that the community were desperate to do anything to secure what they wanted, and also felt that there was an inequity. The Abingdon scheme had been scrapped, but as the Minister will know very well, a massive scheme—the Oxford flood alleviation scheme—is under way. I represent both areas, so I am not implying any sort of competition. However, one of the residents did ask why £150 million—up from the initial estimate of £100 million—was available for the Oxford flood alleviation scheme but there was nothing for a much smaller scheme in Abingdon, saying “Why are they so much better than us?” That broke my heart, because I do not see my communities in that way.

The Environment Agency’s representatives said that they had secured funding contributions from others, including the local enterprise partnership, for the Oxford scheme. Why is it so difficult for a much smaller scheme to gain that type of funding? Is there something in the funding mechanisms that would enable communities to benefit from the schemes that they need? As I said earlier, the Minister and I have corresponded about this, and she said that the remainder of the funding for the Abingdon scheme should be raised locally by scheme partners and others. However, the EA representatives said at the meeting that they had a part to play. May I ask the Minister—this is a genuine question—what part the EA and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs play in trying to secure local funding?

Furthermore—I think that this is important with regard to communication with the local communities—if, as we now find, the decision to scrap the scheme was made in November 2018, why did it take until January for any kind of announcement to be made? I have spoken to a number of local councillors who were equally blindsided by the decision. When it comes to flooding, as with almost anything else, communities do not always want the moon on a stick; they just want to be involved. They want to be part of a decision and to understand why it was made. A public meeting after the fact should not have been necessary for people to obtain the information that they needed.

I ask the Minister this: how can we better engage communities in such decisions? There was no consultation; it looked as if the decision was being made behind closed doors. What is fascinating to me—and lovely—is the fact that, at the meeting, one of the residents raised the option of crowdfunding £6 million for a flood alleviation scheme for the community. That just goes to show the extraordinary good will that exists in areas like Abingdon to try to solve such extremely traumatic issues. However, I think it unlikely that a community—especially one that, while very old, is small—would be able to raise £6 million. So what more can the Government do? What representations is DEFRA making during

this period of, hopefully, upcoming spending reviews for schemes that might seem small but, boy, to the communities affected they are not?

I have met Environment Agency representatives many times and, Madam Deputy Speaker, you would be proud because these projects are led by a group of extraordinary women. They are engineers and project managers. They tell me it is a lack of central Government funding that is stopping them delivering these schemes; it is not lack of nous or anything else. Indeed, the natural flood management project manager has been doing great work to find local, natural processes to reduce flood risk, but the money for that will apparently run out in a year’s time. Such smaller schemes mitigate flood risk at a local level.

I am sure the Minister will point out that some schemes have happened in Abingdon. The point I want to make is that that has not assuaged the fears of the whole community. Had she seen what happened there in 2007, she would know that it was akin to what happened in other parts of the country—it was absolutely devastating.

If we cannot afford that process, let alone the full alleviation scheme, I am concerned that the disasters of previous years are destined to repeat themselves. That is to do with the geography of the Thames valley, which is the largest unprotected floodplain in the whole United Kingdom—I was shocked to discover that. Everywhere else has something, but the Thames valley, which includes all of us here, does not. This discussion is therefore urgent. It is not simply a case of, “I want to do what’s best for my community,” although of course I do as an MP, because there is a bigger issue: what will we do in the face of climate change for the Thames valley, which is itself completely unprotected?

Added to that, the number of homes in Oxfordshire that the Government want to build has doubled, and there are scheduled to be 1 million new homes across the Thames valley between now and 2050 according to the National Infrastructure Commission. The Environment Agency has been clear: that cannot be done without finally finding some sort of solution to protect the Thames valley.

What conversations is DEFRA having with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on its big plans for infrastructure and for roads? We have the Oxford-to-Cambridge expressway. All this is happening in an unprotected area. In private conversations, the Environment Agency has said categorically that there is no way that it can allow—it is a statutory consultee for all planning applications—all those homes to be built without the situation being sorted out. I am sure that that will come as no surprise to the Minister

I now want to move on to the Oxford flood alleviation scheme, which, as I said, will cost £150 million. While the scheme is clearly in a better state than the Abingdon, one, it faces delays. A small number of smallholders are challenging the process, as is absolutely their right. I want a little clarification from the Minister about how that will affect the timeline and what the process will be from now on.

While Abingdon faced its own floods because of the Ock, we also have the Cherwell, the Thames and other issues in Oxford itself, which is of course a much larger conurbation. I have already spoken about the economic

[Layla Moran]

costs of this scheme not being concluded. My understanding now is that it will not be finished until at least 2024, which is a significant delay.

There are also specific local issues. I understand that the construction at Redbridge would result in enormous amounts of traffic. I also want to mention South Hinksey, which I often do not talk about. It is a small village just off the A34, which is going to be the main route for construction traffic for the Oxford flood alleviation scheme. This was all proceeding without the parish council's knowledge, so how will we ensure that tiny communities that are badly affected by such issues are taken into account?

I want to talk briefly about climate change. The head of the Environment Agency, Emma Howard Boyd, gave a stark warning on flooding when the agency published its 50-year flood risk plan earlier this month. The UK needs to tackle our climate emergency head on; otherwise, our communities will face devastating consequences. I find myself puzzled, however. Surely more needs to be done to mitigate the environmental impact of the construction phase of these works. Constituents have raised their concern that the works on the Oxford flood alleviation scheme themselves are not green. This is not just about pollution; it is also about new planting, particularly of ash trees. Can the Minister assure us that the carbon footprint of the mitigation is also being factored into the equation?

The story of flood mitigation in Oxford West and Abingdon continues. We are all aware that we will never be able to fully protect against flooding, but there is much that we can do to mitigate risk. I firmly believe that part of the answer lies in actively involving residents and helping cash-strapped, resource-stretched local councils to find the funding and solutions that they need. These flood alleviation schemes will be vital, and they are long overdue, but they need help. Today, I call on the Government to please provide the funding necessary to get the Abingdon flood alleviation scheme off the ground and to ensure that the Oxford flood alleviation scheme is arrived at as swiftly and responsibly as possible. In the longer term, we need action to protect the whole Thames valley and to tackle climate change nationally and internationally. I appreciate that those will be no small feats, but I hope that they lie at the heart of the Minister's Department and in her heart, too. I very much look forward to hearing what she has to say.

5.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) on securing this important debate, in which she has put forward the case for her constituents with great passion. Flood and coastal risk management is a high priority for the Government, and as the MP for Suffolk Coastal, I know very well the impacts that flooding can have on lives and livelihoods. I am aware of the challenges faced by the town of Abingdon and the recent flooding that it has experienced, notably in 2007 when more than 400 homes were flooded by the River Ock, and when water levels exceeded those of the 1947 flood, which was previously the most significant such event in Abingdon.

The Environment Agency has been working in partnership with Vale of White Horse District Council, Oxfordshire County Council and the Thames regional flood and coastal committee to try to find ways to reduce flooding in Abingdon. The hon. Lady rightly said that a flood wall was built in 2017 to better protect some properties at St Helen's Mill from the River Ock. A further 106 properties can also benefit from the deployment of temporary barriers, and that plan is ready to be deployed, as and when.

The Environment Agency had identified a potential flood risk management scheme in Abingdon, but, as the hon. Lady pointed out, the cost estimate suddenly doubled. It is my understanding that the initial costings came from a desk-based study and that further detailed design and modelling were needed to develop the case further. The original cost of about £5.2 million was the starting point, but the agency then undertook additional modelling and ground investigations, which allowed it to produce the more detailed outline designs for the flood storage area. The cost increasing to £10 million is due not to one specific issue, but rather to a number of activities. For example, the reservoir needs to be compliant with the Reservoirs Act 1975 due to its size, resulting in the need for additional safety measures such as safe access routes for operational staff and maintenance vehicles. After appraisal, the cost has been estimated at about £10 million, as I have said.

Significant effort has been put into appraising this option and understanding the complexities of managing flood risk in the area. The Environment Agency considered whether it would be possible to create a larger flood storage area, but this would have had detrimental impacts on properties upstream. It also reviewed other areas for flood storage opportunities. However, the proposed site is deemed to be the only technically feasible location. This is where we come to the crux of the problem. Unfortunately, it was found that this proposal had a negative cost-benefit ratio and so was not eligible for any support at all from the £2.6 billion of central Government funding that has been made available over six years. The decision was also due in part to the presence of culverted watercourses in the town, which restrict the standard of protection that can be achieved. I regret that, as a result, the option will not be progressed with Government funding, although I am sure the Environment Agency would share its work and its design if a locally funded scheme wanted to proceed.

The Environment Agency also considered a number of local options for the Swift Ditch and River Stert, both of which also contribute to flood risk in Abingdon. At an early stage, however, it established that none of the options would deliver sufficient benefit or reduction in flood risk to deliver value for money. Again, the decision was taken not to progress further.

The hon. Lady spoke about communications. Residents and stakeholders were informed at the end of December through the newsletter she mentioned following the steering group decision. I understand that groups were invited to attend a meeting with the Environment Agency to discuss the matter—for example, the project team met with the Ock Valley Flood Group.

The Environment Agency's current routine of river maintenance, combined with the impact of existing structures upstream from Abingdon, provides a one in 25 standard of protection in any given year. Despite the

project not progressing at this time, the land area for flood storage is protected in the current Vale of White Horse local plan up to 2031. The project might be reconsidered in the light of future changes, but I do not want to get the hon. Lady's hopes up. Significant changes in terms of reductions in costs or reassessment of benefits would be required to shift the benefit-cost ratio from negative to positive.

From the late 1990s, central Government took on being the main source of funding for flood defences. The Government would fund an entire project or not at all. The funding formula takes a number of factors into account, but the main focus is protecting homes. We changed that in the years of the coalition Government by creating the partnership funding policy. That was introduced by my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), with a little help from me. We invited my right hon. Friend to Suffolk and took him on a journey—basically, we trapped him in a van, and on the way down we explained all the challenges we faced in making use of opportunities to take the work forward, and that led to the establishment of the partnership funding policy. It changed the dynamic so that projects with a positive benefit-cost ratio could benefit from Government funding, but set out clearly to local councils and communities what levels of partnership funding they would need to find for the project to progress.

Partnership funding can be secured from a range of sources, including local beneficiaries, partners and growth funds. Early indications suggest that up to 25% more schemes will go ahead in the coming years than if project costs were fully met by the Government. To give another example, in a Budget a few years ago we announced that companies could get tax relief if they invested in flood defences through approved projects.

The Government set aside £2.6 billion of investment between 2015 and 2021, to better protect the country from flooding. That in itself was significant, because for the first time there was a long-term budget. Instead of a hand-to-mouth existence, with the budget being announced yearly, better planning was possible, as was more sustainable development of projects. That record investment has attracted more than £700 million of additional partnership investment, funding over 1,000 flood defence schemes, which will better protect 300,000 homes by 2021 and is projected to save the economy more than £30 billion in avoided damages. Between 2015 and 2020 we will also spend over £1 billion on the maintenance of flood defence assets.

There is a lot of demand on the floods budget and it is not possible to deliver every proposal that would reduce flood risk. It is my duty as the responsible Minister to take a national perspective on flood risk management, guided by the funding formula. We have been able to release some further funding, particularly for projects in deprived communities, to unlock those projects, and £40 million was allocated to various communities last year.

The future spending review is a matter for negotiation with the Treasury, as will be consideration of a new funding formula that may take into account slightly different factors. At the moment, it is focused on homes, but we are considering extending it to take account of the number of properties and other elements, such as sparsity. Oxford is, of course, well known for its floodplains. Christ Church meadow is probably one of the most

famous, but there are many others around the city in particular. Elsewhere on the River Thames some communities and councils are considering raising a levy to bring in protection, but by and large since 2009 the planning guidance to local government has been clear that there should not be building on floodplains. There is the potential for people to do it, but only by designing properties differently—for example, some schemes have the garage on the ground and then the main residence on stilts. We will see what happens with the future spending review, but I will be pressing that case.

The Oxford flood alleviation scheme, which the hon. Lady mentioned, will cost about £150 million and will be one of the biggest flood schemes in the country. It is expected to reduce significantly the flood risk to homes, businesses, services and major transport routes, and while mainly funded by flood defence grant in aid, the project has secured £66.5 million in partnership funding, including from the local enterprise partnership and the county council. The scheme is designed to reduce the risk from floods of a size not seen in Oxford since 1947. Eight months ago, Vale of White Horse District Council commissioned an additional review of the downstream impact modelling, and it confirmed that the scheme would not increase flood risk to properties further downstream.

The hon. Lady mentioned that the Oxford scheme in its current form will present a severe level of disruption to residents during its four-year construction period. I am surprised that she does not seem to accept that such a large project, which will bring many benefits to the city, will bring some disruption. The EA is in discussion with Highways England and the highways authority about the traffic impact on the A34. I understand it is also working closely with South Hinksey Parish Council and the community to listen to and address the concerns raised in their planning application objection. It has arranged a community meeting with the parish council in the summer and has already reassured the community that the temporary footpaths will be of the same standard as those currently in place—in other words, suitable for all users, including cyclists and wheelchair users.

On the suggested environmental impacts, I believe that the project is showing our commitment to improving the natural environment with development. Our tree-planting proposals will result in more woodland within the scheme area. In the long term, this means the area will benefit from an environmental gain of more than 2,000 additional trees. We have designed the scheme to be as natural as possible in appearance and to blend into the surrounding fields. It will work with the natural floodplain and fit in with the existing environment. It will create more than 20 hectares of new wetland habitat, and the second stage part of the channel will be seeded and grazed by cattle to create floodplain grazing marsh. We recognise the importance of Hinksey meadow, a valuable natural habitat that includes many rare species, and we intend to minimise the impact on the existing meadow and create a new meadow of about 18 hectares. Creating larger areas of floodplain meadow will enhance the long-term resilience of those plant communities.

On the compulsory purchase order, the normal procedure is being followed. Following objections, in line with the planning process, a public inquiry will be held. I cannot give the hon. Lady the dates she seeks, because we need to take it through the normal process, but I do not

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

anticipate that the CPO inquiry will unduly delay the scheme. The EA has been working closely with landowners in the scheme area for several years. We are waiting to confirm a date for the inquiry, but I will write to the hon. Lady once we know it. The EA will continue to negotiate with affected landowners, leaseholders, tenants and occupiers as necessary. However, if some objections from affected parties remain unresolved, the public inquiry will go ahead, and an independently appointed inspector will consider the available evidence.

The hon. Lady referred to climate change, and resilience is one of the key features that we are trying to build into the thinking in the EA's strategy. It matters that we anticipate the future, but we should not worry communities unduly. For example, some people have expressed concerns that communities will just be moved away from the coast. We need to work carefully, and I am sure that hon. Lady will welcome the consultation, which is under

way, and the call for the evidence that the Government will issue before the summer recess, which will help to inform the national policy statement that will be published before the end of the year.

In closing, I recognise that this is not the answer the hon. Lady was hoping for and understand that she will want to keep campaigning. If she would still like a meeting, I would be happy to arrange one. Abingdon is a lovely town—it is larger than my Suffolk constituency's biggest town—and I know that she will continue to put residents' interests first, but we must be realistic with the communities we represent, recognising that protecting people's homes is an ongoing challenge, even with the £2.6 billion that we are spending on the programme over this six-year period.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 May 2019

[SIR DAVID AMESS *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks

1.30 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. This year, National Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week fall at the same time—this week. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing debate time to explore the connection between these two issues.

Increasingly, evidence is showing that mental health challenges are exacerbated when we experience relationship difficulties. There is a link between emotional health and wellbeing and mental health and wellbeing. As our most important and closest relationships are within our families, it is not surprising that when they are broken or dysfunctional, there is an increased likelihood of our mental health being affected. Evidence from a variety of sources, which I shall turn to shortly, increasingly demonstrates that.

However, the point of this debate is not just to draw the findings together, but to ask what the Government can do to address the matter through public policy decisions. We are suggesting not that the Government should tell people how to run their lives, but that a little bit of support—often it does not take much if it is provided early enough, whether that means early enough in life or early enough when relationship challenges occur—would help people to build stronger and more enduring relationships and, in turn, help to address the distressingly high level of mental health challenges in our country today, particularly among young people, reaping potentially lifelong benefits for them and benefits for wider society. That, of course, is a key thrust of “A Manifesto to Strengthen Families”, which was launched a year and a half ago here in the House of Commons and which has the support of more than 60 Conservative MPs as well as colleagues from other parties. Some are here today, and I thank them for attending.

At this point, I want to thank the Government, because they increasingly recognise the importance of addressing these issues. They are, for example, addressing poorly functioning relationships through the troubled families programme. The Department for Work and Pensions publication from a couple of years ago entitled “Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families” resulted in £39 million of funding for the reducing parental conflict programme, which focuses specifically on the couple relationship and on conflict that falls below the domestic violence and abuse threshold, but which means that parents need help to communicate and relate to

each other. There is increasing recognition of the need to improve inter-parental relationships, as a primary influence on children’s long-term mental health and future life chances. I therefore welcome what is being done. Of course, it is geographically limited and, in terms of funding, will not reach all those who need the help and need it now.

It is also encouraging that the Government have committed some £90 million to addressing mental health problems in young people—probably, my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards tells me, with a particular view to providing mental health nurses in schools. However, the impact of that investment, as I have said to the Minister, will never be as it could be if those professionals worked not only with the children involved, but with their families. So often, the relationship issues within the home mean that families are the source of the mental health challenges that children bring into school. Unless the whole family are worked with, helping the child in school and then sending them back to the source of the challenges will never resolve the problem.

I want to divert for a few moments and commend a charity called Visyon, which it has been my privilege to be patron of for many years. A mental health charity based in my constituency of Congleton, it supports children and young people from the age of four when they have mental health challenges and it provides help right across Cheshire East and into north Staffordshire.

I am grateful to the chief executive for providing me with some pointers for today’s debate, which I shall summarise. The document states:

“The Government’s Green Paper, Transforming Children and Young People’s Mental Health Provision, recognises the important role that the voluntary and charities sector will play in the formation and delivery of support to schools and colleges. With an ever increasing demand for specialist NHS mental health services for children and young people, it will be vital that schools are able to identify the most appropriate interventions or services to prevent the escalation into costly specialist provision, where possible.”

I shall refer to one area of intervention where the charity works as a priority, which is with parents, but first I shall give a few statistics from Visyon. It says that three in four mental illnesses start in childhood, 75% of young people with a mental health problem are not receiving treatment, and the average wait for effective treatment is 10 years. It also says that UK funding for mental illness research equates to just £8 per person, compared with £178 for cancer and £110 for dementia.

The document that I have from the charity states:

“Visyon’s approach is to look at mental health holistically and provide interventions that involve and impact on all aspects of the...young person’s life...When a young person is struggling with their mental health it has a huge impact on the whole family. Parents are often desperate to support their children but...end up feeling lost, isolated and under skilled...At Visyon we approach our mission to improve a child’s mental health in a holistic way...parents can be a child’s biggest resource.”

Visyon runs a “Parent Empower Hour” programme and states that in a recent evaluation of it,

“parents were asked how family dynamics had changed since taking part in the group. Comments included ‘Our house is so much calmer. I feel less angry and overwhelmed’ and ‘I have found even ground now. I feel more in control and I know this is what my daughter needs’.

There is a conscious focus in Parent Empower Hour to encourage parents to look after their own wellbeing. This serves two purposes—it is important to model to children the importance of self-care and

[Fiona Bruce]

it recognises the emotional toil of caring for children who are struggling with their mental health. One parent commented ‘I have learned to look after myself more and not feel guilty about it. This makes it easier to cope when difficult situations arise.’”

It is encouraging that the Government recently launched their new relationships and sex education in schools curriculum, which requires an emphasis on building healthy relationships. The regulations recently passed by both Houses require that pupils learn about the nature of marriage and civil partnerships and their importance for family life and the bringing up of children; safety and forming and maintaining relationships; the characteristics of healthy relationships; and how relationships can affect physical and mental health and wellbeing.

I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education has made the points for me in his foreword to the documentation that launched this. In his foreword to the guidance, he says:

“In primary schools, we want the subjects to put in place the key building blocks of healthy, respectful relationships, focusing on family and friendships, in all contexts, including online. This will sit alongside the essential understanding of how to be healthy. At secondary, teaching will build on the knowledge acquired at primary and develop further pupils’ understanding of health ...Teaching about mental wellbeing is central to these subjects, especially as a priority for parents is their children’s happiness.”

I welcome all that the Government are doing, because that work is crucial, but much more needs to be done. We need to recognise that, just as fractured family relationships can affect the emotional wellbeing and, in turn, the mental health of us all, the impact on the mental health of children growing up and experiencing poor or broken family relationships from an early age can be lifelong.

How can Government help people in the earliest stages of life? I will review a number of recent studies on this issue, not all of which come from organisations that have what might be called a vested interest in the subject. Relate—the relationship people—cites the Early Intervention Foundation’s statement that the inter-parental relationship is a “primary influence” on children’s life chances. In particular, frequent and intense unresolved inter-parental conflict is highlighted as a key factor affecting children’s long-term health and wellbeing.

A 2017 Office for National Statistics survey, no less, showed that children aged between two and 16 who are living in families that struggle to function well are more likely to have mental health challenges than are children from healthy, functioning families.

Interestingly, just today *The Times* has published details of the latest 2019 ONS survey, under the headline:

“The key to happiness? Eat, drink—and be married”.

The article says that according to research published by the ONS just yesterday on relationships, married people gave the highest score when asked to rate their life satisfaction out of 10, as compared with those who are not married. Researchers looking at data from 2017-18 found that marital status has overtaken economic activity—for example, whether someone is in work—as the most important factor contributing to happiness after good health. That is good news in National Marriage Week, and from an unlikely source.

I will turn to other sources. The National Childbirth Trust says that new mothers may experience multiple mental health problems during pregnancy or after giving birth, including post-natal depression, as we know, as well as anxiety, eating disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, with suicide the leading cause of direct maternal death after the first year following pregnancy. However, the NCT says that there is no requirement in the six-week maternal check, which mainly focuses on the baby, to include a check on the emotional health or wellbeing of the mother. NCT research shows that nearly half of new mothers’ mental health problems are not picked up by a health professional.

Also, as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children says in “All Babies Count: The Dad project”, the role of fathers in supporting mothers can have a significant influence on improving the mental health outcomes of mothers after they give birth. Such early support is critical because parental mental health is a key factor in understanding the mental health of children.

Research by the Marriage Foundation found that family breakdown also has a major impact on teenagers’ mental health. Although its statistics showed that one in five 14-year-olds with a mental health problem live in an intact married family, just under double that number—two in five of teenagers with mental health problems—were the children of parents who live apart and had never married.

The Marriage Foundation also recently conducted an evaluation of factors affecting teen mental health, using data from the millennium cohort study of young people who are now aged about 14 or a little older, who were born around the millennium. The Marriage Foundation report suggests that family breakdown is the biggest factor behind the UK’s child mental health crisis. Its analysis of almost 11,000 families found that having parents who split up was the strongest influence on girls’ mental health in their teenage years, with strong links to emotional problems. It was also the joint strongest factor, alongside relationship happiness, in teenage boys’ mental health, with strong links to behavioural problems.

ChildLine’s latest annual review cites family relationships as the second leading reason why children contacted the service to talk. The Samaritans says that divorce increases the risk of suicide, because the individual becomes disconnected from their domestic relationships and social norms, and that those who divorce may experience a deep sense of “emotional hurt”.

The Mental Health Foundation kindly provided me with a briefing for this debate, entitled, “Relationships in the 21st century: the forgotten foundation of mental health and wellbeing”. The Mental Health Foundation says that people who are more socially connected to family, friends or community have fewer mental health problems than people who are less well connected. It also states that, as I have said, conflict within the family environment impacts negatively on the mental health of children within the family, and the negative effects can be felt across the whole of life’s course.

The Mental Health Foundation’s briefing says:

“The family relationship environment in pregnancy, infancy and childhood is of fundamental importance to future mental health. This is only now starting to be fully appreciated as the neuroscience of brain development is becoming known and being seen to support understanding gained through observational studies of human beings and their mental health.”

In this respect, I commend the Leader of the House, because she has set up a working party of Ministers to look at helping families with children in their very earliest years—the first 1,001 days of life. This subject needs to be focused on more closely by Government, so I am very pleased that my right hon. Friend has done that and I look forward to reading her report, which will come out soon, about what Government can do to support those early days, although of course there is a lot more that needs to be done in later childhood, and indeed in adulthood.

The Relationships Alliance concludes that relationships are a vital public health concern, stating:

“Evidence shows that the quality of our couple and family relationships is linked directly to specific areas of public health concern. Such areas include cardiovascular disease, child poverty, alcohol/substance misuse, depression and mental health, obesity/child obesity, children’s mental health/cognitive development, and infant attachment.”

Of course, the first attachment that we make with others is with our parents; that relationship is one of the most important in all our lives. Positive and secure attachment is important for positive emotional and social development, with children being able to adjust better to adversity and change; to use a favoured word now, they are more “resilient”. By contrast, insecure and disordered attachment relationships in early childhood are associated with depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal tendencies and post-traumatic stress disorder, among other mental health problems.

Living with parents who divorce before their child is 18 has now been assessed as an adverse childhood experience, or ACE, for that child. Having one or more ACE increases the risk of a child experiencing depression, poor academic achievement, time in prison or sexual violence, among other negative outcomes. As the Mental Health Foundation says, toxic relationships and negative experiences can have a serious impact on a young person’s mental health.

We should bear it in mind that our children are growing up in a country that has one of the highest levels of family breakdown in the world; indeed, the UK now has the highest divorce rate in Europe, such that nearly half of all our teenagers do not live with both their parents. This is a massive issue, as we also know from those who work in schools, colleges and universities, where supporting young people with mental health challenges is now a major concern.

Why am I referring to all this during National Marriage Week? Because it is not just the quality of the parents’ relationship that matters; it is also being increasingly recognised that the stability of the parents’ relationship matters, if that relationship endures through a child’s childhood. That is important not only for the children, but for the adults within that relationship. As the Centre for Social Justice says:

“Family environment is crucial to children’s outcomes. It is the instability and disruption caused by family breakdown, coupled with poor parenting, that is so damaging to their outcomes.”

Therefore, one of the factors that promotes wellbeing is stability in family relationships, and all the evidence shows—we cannot avoid it—that marriage, as opposed to cohabitation, is much more likely to endure and to promote stability. Just one married couple in 11 splits up before a child’s fifth birthday, compared with one unmarried couple in three.

The CSJ produced a substantial new report just last month, entitled “Why Family Matters—A comprehensive analysis of the consequences of family breakdown”. Before I give Members the statistics, and people reject the comments made in that report as the mere opinions of those who have an interest in promoting such arguments, I will clarify the methodology that has been used. These statistics have been calculated using a sophisticated methodology known as logistic regression. I know; I had never heard of it before, either. That means that the influence of other demographic attributes such as gender, age, socioeconomic grade and ethnicity, as well as experience of social issues, are controlled for. The result is that the statistics arrived at are a true reflection, in this case, of the impact that family breakdown has on the life of a young person.

Here are some of the statistics that the report has produced: those who experience family breakdown when aged 18 or younger are over twice as likely to experience homelessness; twice as likely to be in trouble with the police or spend time in prison; almost twice as likely to experience educational under-achievement, not being with the other parent of their children, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy or mental health issues; and more likely to experience debt and living on benefits. Surely those statistics alone should persuade us that Government should be doing much more to address family breakdown. The cost of not doing so is too great, not just in financial terms—although that cost is huge, far more than the £51 billion often quoted for tackling these issues, which are the consequences of family breakdown—but, tragically, in terms of the lost life potential of the millions involved.

The CSJ states that one adult in 10 who experiences mental health issues says that family breakdown was a contributing factor. Put simply, the CSJ says:

“Marriage leads to the better mental health of children. Children of married parents are more likely to achieve at school, less likely to use drink and drugs and less likely to get involved in offending behaviour.”

Marriage reduces the risk of violence and abuse, and the CSJ states that marriage is more enduring and stable than just living together:

“Marriage is directly linked to better mental and physical health amongst adults, the same benefits are not found amongst co-habiting couples. It is specifically a marriage effect.”

This is very much a social justice issue. Better-off people get this; they get married in far greater numbers than poorer people. Poorer people do not marry as much, and therefore are the ones who sadly experience the consequences of breakdown that I have described. That is not social justice, and it is a key reason that we need to address this issue.

Those tragic, heartrending consequences for millions of young people surely cry out for Government to prioritise supporting all of us to build healthy, close personal relationships, just as no one now blinks when Government recommend that we should eat healthier so that our physical wellbeing is maintained and improved. The steps that we can learn for improving our close personal relationships are not that complicated—I will mention a few shortly—but the benefits we can all glean are unquantifiable. If we can strengthen our emotional wellbeing, we can help to protect our mental health. Not just children in school who are learning through relationships and sex education, but all of us who are learning about relationships capability, would benefit.

[Fiona Bruce]

The term “relationships capability” has been given to me, and very well promoted, by the organisation Soulmates Academy. About two weeks ago, its founders came to speak at a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for strengthening couple relationships and reducing inter-parental conflict. That organisation says that we have ignored investing in relationships at our peril. It provides courses and helpful advice on relationships capability to individuals and groups, as well as corporate organisations, which increasingly understand the beneficial effect of relationships capacity on productivity. As Soulmates Academy says, building a stronger relationship need not be complicated; its relationship tips can be summarised as follows:

“BE CURIOUS, not critical...BE CAREFUL, not crushing...ASK, don't assume...CONNECT, before you correct”.

I recommend its website for more information.

The Mental Health Foundation also provides tips for building and maintaining stronger relationships, which again can be summarised. It says that there are five things we can do: make more time to connect with our family; try to be present with them, not always on our phone; actively listen in a non-judgmental way; concentrate on the needs others are expressing; and express our own feelings honestly. It says:

“As a society and as individuals, we must urgently prioritise investing in building and maintaining good relationships and tackling the barriers to forming them. Failing to do so is equivalent to turning a blind eye to the impact of smoking and obesity on our health and wellbeing.”

People are with us. In a recent YouGov poll carried out for Relate, the relationships charity, no fewer than 99% of people agreed that strong and healthy couple relationships are important to a person's physical and mental wellbeing—I am sure that any colleague in the House would love a poll that was 99% in their favour. That is why Government need to invest much more in helping all of us to develop our relationship capability. Supporting organisations such as Soulmates Academy to do so would be a good start during National Marriage Week. As that organisation says:

“If we agree that our committed, long-term personal relationships & marriages are actually what anchor us in life and allow us to go on to achieve our potential, what are we doing to invest in them and build skills to develop them?”

We need a national strategic approach to strengthening families. We have a dedicated Minister for loneliness; why not one for relationships? A coherent strategy across Departments, led by a dedicated Minister at Cabinet level, would be very helpful in ensuring that relationships and families were supported at all stages and ages in life, not just when they run into trouble.

Such a Cabinet Minister could promote all the other policies in the manifesto to strengthen families, including the development of family hubs in local communities where that kind of relationship help could be made available. I am pleased to say that those hubs are springing up in different areas across the country, and the launch of the family hubs network to connect the growing number of hubs in local authorities will happen in Parliament's Jubilee Room on 5 June. I hope the Minister, all colleagues and all those who have come to listen to today's debate will attend.

1.58 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I will say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for having set the scene. She is always a strong supporter of marriage, and I wholeheartedly support the issues that she brings before this House, whether here in the Westminster Hall Chamber or in the main Chamber. Furthermore, without speaking for the hon. Lady, whenever I bring issues to either Chamber, she is always there to add her support. I thank her for that. She has been very much at the forefront of ensuring that National Marriage Week and the issues of family life and family values are heard about in this House whenever the occasion arises. It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate.

Marriage is a wonderful thing but, like all things of worth, it is not easy. In all honesty—I speak as someone who, on 6 June, will have been married for 32 years—I have a very long-suffering wife. The truth of the matter is that she has suffered long and hard, but she is still there, and that is one of the good things about married life. If my dad had lived another two weeks—he has been dead for four years—he and my mum would have been married for 61 years. They were a long time together, and that is not counting the time they were going together way back in the early '50s. I have no idea how and why my wife Sandra has stuck me for so long, but I thank God every day that she has.

A strong marriage requires two people who choose to love each other even when there are times they do not particularly like each other. That is the fact of it. If Sandra was here, she would say, “Amen to that.” She would wholeheartedly know what I mean when I say that, because we have some exchanges of opinion now and again. I think it is good to have those release valves. It does not mean we have fallen out; it means we can have differences of opinion. My wife is not politically motivated at all; she only became interested in politics when she married me. The fact of the matter is that whenever I bring up issues to do with politics, truthfully she is perhaps not that interested, but she supports me well and she has an opinion on political matters. She is quick to tell me about those things.

Marriage is tough, and my heart goes out to those who are unable to make things work despite the hard work put in. The reality is that relationships break down. That is a fact, even with the best relationships. No one gets married to get divorced; people get married to spend the rest of their lives together. That is how it happens, but sometimes things happen along the way. As elected representatives—we are all here speaking in this debate as elected representatives—we are probably confronted every day in our advice centres with people who have had marital breakdowns. If they are churchgoers, I genuinely usually say, “Have you spoken to your minister?” If not, I say, “Have you had a chance to talk things through with someone in Relate to see whether it is possible to pull things together?” Sometimes that works. I am not a Relate councillor with great skills, but I try to point people in the direction where some things can be brought together. That sometimes works, but it does not always work. Sometimes when they come to me as the MP, or when they did in my past life as a Member of the Legislative Assembly, things have broken irretrievably. Those are difficult times.

I read an incredibly interesting report by the Marriage Foundation, which had some noteworthy analysis and statistical presentations. Analysis carried out on the

millennium cohort study data on 10,929 mothers with 14-year-old children reveals that mental health problems are especially prevalent among children whose parents split up. We have just finished the main inquiry on education in the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Some of the figures on education in Northern Ireland are truly scary and worrying. We have the highest levels of anxiety and depression among children of primary school and secondary school age for the whole United Kingdom. That is very worrying. This debate is so important—the hon. Member for Congleton has referred to it—because it shows the importance of having a normal home life. I say that honestly, because having that does in some way help things.

It is incredibly difficult for a child to watch a break-up, and all too often they are in the middle. It happens so often. I thank every parent who makes the determination that, regardless of the relationship status, they will not allow their child to be a pawn or used as a weapon. A story came to my memory when I was sitting here. There was a sad, sad story last weekend in one of the papers. A mother and father were breaking up and they had two children from that relationship. The really sad thing was that neither the mother nor the father wanted custody of the children. I said to myself, “How sad is that?” Neither the mother nor the father felt that the children could be with them and they wanted the other one to have them. I do not know what the outcome of that will be. Sir David, you and I have talks about many things. You are chairing this sitting, so you are independent, but I know that you and I very much agree on the importance of married life and what it does for a relationship and the children that come out of it.

I have three sons from my relationship with Sandra. Two of them are married. The big fella, Jamie, has been married 11 years, and the second married just last year, and out of that comes the grandchildren. We could never get a wee girl—it was always wee boys—but Sandra always wanted a wee girl. She now has two wee granddaughters, Katie and Mia, and just before Christmas a third grandchild was born to my second son, who was married just last year—the product of that is a wee boy called Austin. How much do we as grandparents enjoy the grandchildren, ever mindful that at 7 o’clock at night we can give them back? That is a big, big thing. We get all the enjoyment, smiles and laughter, but when they get tantrum-y and want to go or argue, we can phone up to say, “They’re ready for going home.” That is always something to remember, but I say it because of the enjoyment they give to us as parents.

The findings show that the influence of family behaviour on teenage mental health extends far beyond parental conflict. Family breakdown is the single biggest factor for girls and equal top influence for boys, along with parental relationship happiness. Whether parents are married and happy, and stay together and remain close to their child, all make a unique contribution. I believe that parents have a strong responsibility; they need to be reminded that children watch and note their every word, action and deed. Therefore, the role of the parent is critical in setting an example for children in how the family gets on together.

The positive effect of marriage on mental health is clear and there for all to see. It is particularly interesting that the Marriage Foundation study showed that the effect of marriage extends well beyond stability and

selection effects. For boys, whether their parents were married when they were born remains one of the two biggest influences on their subsequent overall mental health, even after taking into account their mother’s age, education, ethnicity and relationship happiness when the child was born, and whether the parents stay together. We cannot ignore—and nor can parents—the influence that parents have on their children.

The 2016 report by the Marriage Foundation found evidence that marriage boosts self-esteem for boys and girls. It is good that that happens. The report relied on the data of 3,822 children from the British household panel survey. It revealed that teenage boys living with continuously married parents have the highest self-esteem, while teenage girls living with continuously cohabiting parents have the lowest. The data outlines that the mother’s education has a smaller effect on self-esteem, while the child’s age and the mother’s income have no effect at all. Some of those stats are particularly illuminating because they give an idea of how what happens in the family home can affect children. Although those differences are all relatively small, they are highly significant and provide robust evidence that the wellbeing of teenagers and their future life chances are influenced by whether or not their parents are married. I am not making it up—the stats come from organisations, and they cannot be ignored.

Teens of either sex who live with continuously married parents have higher self-esteem and acceptance than those who live with continuously cohabiting parents or other family types. In outlining all this, I must be very clear: I do not believe that if a family is not united by marriage, a bad outcome is predetermined—it is not; far from it—but I am referring to the findings and how the information was collated. Data shows that children from married families show a higher level of wellbeing and mental health. That should be noted and highlighted.

The institution of marriage, to which I happily subscribe, has stood the test of time, and its benefits to society are clear. I believe that the House must acknowledge that, which is why I am so happy to support my friend, the hon. Member for Congleton, and I thank her for allowing us to highlight that wonderful institution once more. I am someone who is convinced of the benefits of marriage, and in June, my 32 years of marriage will be an example of just that.

2.9 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my hon. Friends—they are my friends—the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on two excellent speeches. It is very good to see the Minister, who I know takes this area seriously. She has responded to other debates of this nature in Westminster Hall, and is a deep and serious thinker on these issues. We are lucky to have her responding to today’s debate.

The debate quite properly has marriage in its title, because it is National Marriage Week, and mental health, but every single Member in the Chamber, myself included, is here for every type of family. We are here for every one of our constituents, whether they are married, single, cohabiting, widowed or divorced—whatever their state. It is important to put that on the record, because occasionally such debates, and this issue, can end up in an unnecessary culture war. That is not necessary.

[*Andrew Selous*]

We have moved on. As MPs, we are for absolutely everyone. However, it is also right that at least once a year we come to the important issue of marriage.

On the cross-party consensus, I was really encouraged, as the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, that I, as a Conservative, could sit down recently with a Labour Front Bencher and a Liberal Democrat MP. The three of us, from different parties and traditions, were united in wanting to do more to promote couple stability, because we understand the links with inequality and poverty. I think all three of us would describe ourselves as true social justice warriors, as the hon. Member for Strangford mentioned. It is really important to put that on the record.

In 2016, 47% of all children in single-parent families were living in poverty. Frighteningly, the Resolution Foundation recently predicted that children in single-parent families will make up two thirds of all children living in poverty. Like every Member in the Chamber, I came into this House to eradicate poverty. That is the heart of what our politics are about. If children grow up in poverty, they do not have the life chances that we all want for them. They cannot make the most of their God-given gifts in terms of their education, career and contribution to their community.

I will focus on why this issue matters to Members in every party—the Scottish National party, the Democratic Unionist party, the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Conservatives. I want us all to be united on this. We need to get behind the family/relationship aspect of poverty if we are serious about engaging with social justice issues and tackling poverty.

Given the fairly terrifying figures—currently, 47% of children in single-parent families are in poverty, which is predicted by the Resolution Foundation to rise to two thirds—we know that we want to try to keep mum and dad together in order to keep children out of poverty. Why, however, does marriage matter, and why have a debate on it? Is it not just another structure among many?

It matters for this reason: sadly, unmarried couples are six times more likely to break up before their child's fifth birthday. If we are all on the same page in wanting to tackle poverty and reach a serious, evidence-based recognition of the fact that family breakdown, and the increasing numbers of children in single-parent families, is a major contributor to child poverty, we need to look at the type of relationships that will give our children the best chance of not growing up in poverty.

At this point, there is always a bit of challenge in the argument. “Okay, those are the facts,” people say, “but is that correlation or causation?” In other words, do a particular type of people decide to marry, which is why fewer of them are in poverty? I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton that we should dig into the data and compare like for like—people living in the same circumstances. I am absolutely assured by the researchers I have spoken to over the years that marriage still has a protective effect against child poverty in low-income communities, which many single-parent families live alongside.

That, in essence, is why marriage matters. If people accept my argument as I have laid it out so far, we need to be concerned about a number of facts. First, the

marriage rate itself is in free fall; the figures show that it is really declining. As I said, I am genuinely delighted that today's Minister will respond, because I know that she cares about this issue. I suspect that she was asked to reply to the debate because of the mental health part of the title. Had the debate been just on marriage, I wonder which Minister the Government would have put forward. I hope that it would have been her; perhaps it would have been someone else.

We might have had the new Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), as family policy is currently centred in that Department. However, if we are a Government and a Parliament that is four-square behind bearing down on child poverty, this issue needs to be at the heart of Government policy, not tucked away in one or two Departments. To my mind, it should be in the Cabinet Office, and there should be regular accountability through the Cabinet Office of all Government Departments on what they are doing in this area.

Statistics from the Office for National Statistics show that the marriage rate is in free fall. However, it is even worse than that because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton said, marriage rates among the better-off are holding up quite well. A company director or university lecturer is 48% more likely to be married than a building worker or office cleaner, and that gap is growing. In 2000, the gap was only 22%. Basically, marriage is almost completely disappearing from low-income communities. We have to call a spade a spade and recognise that fact.

I am really pleased that there are Labour Front Benchers who understand that fact and are concerned about it, because if we are to bear down on child poverty, we have to use every tool in the kitbag. Certainly, the Government, the welfare system, schools, youth clubs, community groups, the voluntary sector, the health service and all manner of different central Government and local government institutions have a role. However, we cannot ignore what is happening in our families up and down the country if we are really serious about this issue. The Marriage Foundation tells us, in a similar statistic put another way, that 87% of mothers from high-income groups get married, as opposed to only 24% from the lowest-income groups. We have to do something about that.

I am grateful to Tavistock Relationships for the briefing that it gave me for the debate. Its representatives sent me some research from Paul Amato, who they say is generally recognised as one of

“the world's leading researcher on marital quality, divorce, and other family related issues”.

His research has shown that common mental health problems are much

“more prevalent in people who are experiencing relationship distress than those who are happier in their relationships”.

He warned against viewing marriage and cohabitation as interchangeable, stating that

“we should consider the fact that cohabitations are less stable than marriages”,

as I pointed out a moment ago.

Tavistock Relationships has a particular ask of the Department of Health and Social Care, because it believes that the huge overlap between relationship distress and depression is being largely ignored by the NHS. It points out that within the excellent IAPT—

improving access to psychological therapies—programme, only 49% of the relevant NHS services provide couples therapy for depression. It is calling for that figure to be increased to at least 90%, although it would be best if couples therapy were universally available. I ask the Minister to take that point back to her Department.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton and the hon. Member for Strangford, I pay tribute to the many organisations up and down the country that are working hard to strengthen relationship quality and provide relationship support and education. They should be much more prominent in our national life and much better known in Whitehall and Westminster.

In no particular order, let me mention the four organisations that make up the Relationships Alliance: Relate, which is perhaps the best known and the largest, Tavistock Relationships, which I have already mentioned, Marriage Care and OnePlusOne. They are fantastic organisations and are at the front and centre of dealing with these issues and providing support day in, day out. In my view, they need to play a more prominent role in our national life in the fight against child poverty, because they are absolutely part of the solution.

I would like to mention the work of Nicky and Sila Lee, who run the marriage preparation course and the marriage course. I will also namecheck Jonathan and Andrea Taylor-Cummings of Soulmates Academy, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton mentioned. I commend them for their recent TED talk on this important subject and for their excellent work, particularly with employers. Many employers are beginning to realise that there is not a watertight seal between what happens at home and at work. Relationship distress and emotional distress at home have an unquestionable impact on performance and productivity at work.

We need the private sector to get a bit more engaged in the issue, because it is not just about the Government. Everyone always asks the Government to do everything, and while the Government have a role, employers and those in the private sector need to get with the programme and realise that they have a role to play too, alongside the community and the voluntary sector.

I will make a silly analogy that some colleagues will have heard before. I would guess that most of us in this Chamber own a car. It is the law that every year we have to give that car an MOT. We spend time and money taking it to the garage and having someone check under the bonnet so that the car is serviceable to go back on the road for another safe year's motoring, which is the object of the exercise—and quite right, too. Should not our relationships and marriages have the same treatment? Are they not just as important?

I use the phrase “marriage MOT” or “relationship MOT”. Some people may have done a little preparation before getting married, but will that last a lifetime? In my own marriage, I have got into bad habits and have had to be corrected by my wife or by good friends. I have gone on marriage MOTs from time to time with my wife and with other couples, and have found them helpful. We should try to make that more normal and mainstream. It is not just about therapy, but about something that all of us need: a little advice and assistance to get out of bad habits and maintain good ones. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for mentioning some of the practical things that are involved.

Research shows that the No. 1 reason why children present at child and adolescent mental health services is family relationship issues at home. The hon. Member for Strangford spoke about the huge growth—the epidemic—in children's mental health issues, which can extend until they are university students. Recent studies have shown that a quarter of all young women at university and in their early 20s experience some form of mental health issue. Very often, family relationships are at the core of those issues.

I will conclude with a quotation from an excellent article by Ed West that appeared in *The Spectator* in December 2017. *The Spectator* is not a magazine that I read very regularly, but I commend the article to anyone who is interested. I will read out his final paragraph, because I found it so striking. On the subject of marriage, he writes:

“How much does the government care? The answer is not very much. About a decade ago, David Cameron said he'd be the most pro-marriage leader the Tories have had in his lifetime, but his enthusiasm cooled quickly.”

Actually, I think that the last Prime Minister did some good things in the area. I would have liked him to do more, but I think that that criticism is a little harsh. The article continues:

“Jeremy Corbyn is unlikely to be talking about family values, which is a shame because a true social justice warrior would be obsessed with this issue. Marriage is becoming a luxury item, a trend that is likely to cause ever-increasing inequality down the generations. Any government that is genuinely concerned about helping those at the bottom should think about what it could do to make marriage for the many, not the few”—

a phrase that perhaps the Labour party could think about. I think that those are powerful words on which to conclude my speech.

2.26 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): In some respects, it is nice to have a slightly relaxed atmosphere in Westminster Hall, because that gives us the opportunity to consider issues in detail. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate. It is a happy coincidence of the calendar that Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week have fallen on the same dates, because that allows us to consider how marriage and mental health relate to each other. We should also note the general importance of awareness weeks and the work of the organisations that support them, because they give us an opportunity to raise issues in the House and press the Government on their commitments.

I congratulate the Marriage Foundation on promoting Marriage Week, which I believe has been marked for the past 22 years—not quite as long as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has been married, but not far off. I also congratulate the Mental Health Foundation, which has worked on mental health issues for more than 70 years. I am actually wearing a tie with the mental health tartan, which was developed by Support in Mind Scotland as a colourful way to promote mental health awareness and understanding.

As we have heard, Marriage Week is all about the ingredients of positive and healthy relationships, which are at the heart of a successful and vibrant society. Families and relationships bring meaning and purpose to people's lives, and they come in all shapes and sizes, as the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire

[Patrick Grady]

(Andrew Selous) said. Governments have a responsibility to support them by providing good-quality public services and fair work practices to ensure that people can live healthy and fruitful lives. When people feel supported by such services and by a positive sense of community, relationships can flourish. That is an ambition of all Governments, no matter what their political character may be or in which part of the United Kingdom they may operate.

It is right to stress that not all marriages are happy or end as happily as they began. It is important to have services and support in place to help those partnerships to move forward as positively as possible. In Scotland, a lot of support is provided to national family support organisations, such as Relationships Scotland and The Spark. As the hon. Gentleman also said, that importance is particularly true in making sure that the support is there for children, whether that is mental health support or mediation.

As the hon. Member for Strangford said, people present at our surgeries and we, as Members of Parliament, have an individual responsibility to signpost people to the right organisations and to be aware of the range of support services available nationally and in our communities.

Marriages come in all shapes and sizes, and Scotland was of course the first country in the United Kingdom to consult on same-sex marriage and subsequently to legalise it, through the Marriage and Civil Partnerships (Scotland) Act 2014. That has been a cause of great celebration, including among close friends of mine.

Not every marriage, however, is made through free choice. That is why we must also recognise the importance of having robust legislation in place to protect against the appalling practice of forced marriage and to ensure that marriage is not a misery or a trap. The Scottish Government introduced forced marriage protection orders to protect people from being forced to marry, or who were already in a forced marriage. In September 2014, that protection was extended to protect those at risk and to make forcing someone into a marriage a criminal offence in Scotland.

By coincidence, there was a particularly high-profile exponent of marriage in the news last week. The First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, gave an interview to her local station, Sunny Govan Radio. She was asked what had surprised her in recent years, and she said her marriage had surprised her:

“I had always been a bit of a feminist and never really considered marriage as an option. When Peter and I decided to get married, it was immediate how much more strong and stable I felt knowing that I had him at my back. His support and the support of my mum and dad give me the resilience and strength to keep going every day and doing my best.”

I hope those are words of encouragement to everyone who is considering marriage. Nobody is an island. None of us politicians is an island. We all have colleagues who have experienced difficulties and intimidation. When you are the one person in a room standing up speaking, that is difficult for any one of us. For most of us, it is the knowledge of the strong relationships in the background, whether marriage or other forms of partnership, or friends and family, that provides that support network that we rely on.

That point links to the importance of Mental Health Awareness Week. The First Minister went on to speak about some of the challenges and stresses that come with life in the public eye, particularly her experience of imposter syndrome. When asked if she ever feels like an imposter, she said:

“Like many women in senior positions, yes I absolutely do. However, I think it gives women a bit of humility too and reminds you that you have to work hard for what you need to achieve. It keeps you grounded. Do I deserve this? Could I do better? It makes you more accountable for your own work.”

That level of self-awareness and her willingness to speak out should be an encouragement for everyone in public life and beyond. It is important to use such opportunities to raise awareness of the issues.

The main focus for Mental Health Awareness Week this year is body image—a subject that has become topical in the last few days with the issues that led to the cancellation of “The Jeremy Kyle Show” and questions about “Love Island” and other reality TV programmes. Sometimes, frankly, this job can feel like a bit of a reality TV programme, though it is less likely to be slated for immediate cancellation. Using the opportunity of awareness weeks to turn the debate on social media around and to try to detoxify online culture is hugely important. We must support people who champion body positivity online and make sure that people who are struggling with those kinds of issue, especially young people, interact with social media content in a healthy way and avoid falling into mental spirals.

The Scottish Government have made several announcements to try to support that this week. They are setting up an advisory group on healthy body image, which will include members from youth, third sector and equalities groups, to identify steps that can improve support for young people and advice for relevant professionals. That will build on a package of measures to improve young people’s mental health, including £90,000 in funding to provide advice on the healthy use of social media and screen time, and a review of evidence on the effects of screen use on sleep and its implications for mental health.

We will continue to drive that forward and, again, I hope there will be lessons that the Governments can learn from each other. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire spoke about how such issues can be championed in Government. The Scottish Government have a dedicated ministerial post for mental health. The occupant, Clare Haughey, was herself a mental health nurse and brings significant personal experience to the post. The desire to see mental health issues mainstreamed across the NHS and other support organisations runs right across the national strategy.

Like other hon. Members, I see fantastic examples in my own constituency. The members at Flourish House, part of the global Clubhouse Network, presented me with this tie the last time I met them. They wanted to engage with me on different aspects of how Government and public policy affect people with mental health issues, particularly on questions around welfare reform, but also other aspects of social care and the health services. Flourish House does a fantastic job in reducing social isolation and providing different kinds of activity and engagement for its members. Similarly, the Coach House Trust provides a particular focus on employability and skills. It has been doing so for more than 20 years

and has an annual open day that is a highlight of the summer calendar. We are always spoilt for choice with the arts and crafts available for sale that have been produced by their members over the years.

I also pay tribute to a group called Differabled, which was founded by parents in my constituency to provide support for other parents and carers of children and young adults with a range of additional support and mental health needs. I met them during the 2017 election campaign and it was an incredibly powerful experience. The way that organisation has developed is incredibly impressive, and I continue to support it.

The Glasgow Riding for the Disabled Association helps to promote the mental health benefits of physical activity and physical exercise in different ways. It was the beneficiary of the Christmas card competition that I ran in my constituency last year. Last year and the year before, the winners of the competition came from two of the schools that provide support to children with additional needs and mental health issues. East Park in Maryhill has been supporting young people since 1874, and Alexander Houston was a worthy winner of last year's competition. Abercorn Secondary School, which is supported by the local authority, provides a fantastic supportive environment, and Jack Slavin's Christmas castle featured on my card in 2017. Kelbourne Park Primary School, in North Kelvinside in my constituency, supports younger age groups in a wonderfully nurturing environment. I use this opportunity to offer them my full support.

There has been a fair degree of consensus in this debate, particularly on the importance of stability in relationships for good mental health, and the benefits that that has for wider society in promoting social justice and tackling poverty, and the many different things that, in our different capacities, we all came into politics to try to achieve. There is a challenge to the Governments in the United Kingdom and the devolved nations to ensure that adequate funding is in place for the different services and that the appropriate legislative frameworks are in place to support families and the various organisations that work with them.

I hope the Chamber will indulge me, because on 1 June, during the recess, I will be attending a wedding of two very good friends of mine, Emma and Adam. I have known Adam Sutherland since we were very young. Of course, people are a bit older when they get married these days, so their chances of being married for quite as long as the parents of the hon. Member for Strangford probably depend on a variety of factors, but the strength of their relationship will be a solid foundation for many long years of happiness, and I hope the Chamber will join me in wishing them all the best.

2.40 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the chair, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate, and I thank hon. Members who have contributed to mark this unusual mix of Mental Health Awareness and National Marriage weeks.

Many points have been made on the value of marriage and family life, including in the excellent opening speech by the hon. Member for Congleton and by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I think I beat

him by two years in how long I have been married. Happy anniversary for each of our relationships. The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) focused on family relationship issues and poverty, and the role of family breakdown.

In line with my brief, I want to bring this debate back to mental health, because it is Mental Health Awareness week and we could explore some issues there, too. I feel that, no matter how strong a family are, there will be times when they need support from outside—when they need the services that the state can provide to help them to cope. If those services are not there when they need them, it can cause immense strain for everyone involved. This is every bit as true for mental health as it is for physical health services.

We do not expect families to cope with a broken leg or a cardiac problem on their own, so we should not expect them to cope with depression or an eating disorder without professional support. I want to question whether we really are doing all we can for families where one child is living with a mental health condition and they need help. Whatever our best intentions, the fact is that we are not yet doing the best we can for children and families.

According to the British Medical Association, spending on mental health care equates to only 11% of our UK NHS budget, despite accounting for 23% of the burden of disease in the UK. As we know, there is increasing demand for mental health care, with patient numbers increasing across a range of conditions. It might be time to look at that number and decide whether it should be greater, particularly for children and young people. We know that one in eight five to 19-year-olds has at least one mental disorder, but that only 6% of the mental health budget is spent on services for children and young people. I believe it is time we questioned that, because such a gap has serious consequences for children and young people with mental health conditions.

Some 400,000 children and young people who have a mental health condition do not get to see a professional at all. Instead, they have to cope with informal support. More than one in four of the children and young people referred to specialist child and adolescent mental health services in 2016-17 did not have their referral accepted. As the Children's Society analysis showed us last year—it is a very disturbing statistic—a quarter of 14-year-old girls and nearly one in 10 boys had self-harmed in a year.

I commend Sky News and their reporter Paul Kelso for a great piece of investigative work that sheds light on the experiences of children and young people in private mental health units, many of which take young people hundreds of miles from their homes and families. The report of this work was shown yesterday. One such young person is Natasha, who is now rebuilding her life after a lost decade spent in such units. Natasha has anorexia and escalating self-harm, and she hit crisis point when she was only 12. She then spent 10 years in private mental health units dotted around the country. She says she reached her lowest point in a mental health unit in a privately run hospital in Maidenhead. In that unit, she experienced brutal restraint, which she describes as follows:

“They would pin you up against the wall, smack your head against the wall, drag you across floors, wrap you round doorframes...People sat on your head and on your legs...this would be big men, not women.”

[Barbara Keeley]

That was the unit where she said she did
“the worst amounts of self harm”

that she had ever done in her life. Despite Natasha’s history of self-harm, she was left unattended with razors and cut herself 26 times. She needed 200 stitches.

The constant threat of self-harm is a massive strain and worry for parents when their daughter is hundreds of miles away. A mother with a daughter in one of the units that was shown in the Sky News film described how when she wakes up she thinks, “Is she all right? Will she manage to achieve her self-harm aim today?” She added, “You are hundreds of miles away. If anything happened, you would not get there on time.” As the Sky News report showed, the toll of self-harm and suicide in these units is too high. Natasha explained how she lost 24 of her friends to suicide in such mental health units, including three or four in one unit alone.

Hon. Members here today will know how it feels when a desperate constituent tells us about their child’s mental health condition and the struggle they face being unable to get their child access to the services they need. This is intolerable. We have seen mental health services being underfunded—I know the Minister will tell me about the future funding that is coming in, but we have to think about where we are today—and we know that mental health budgets fell by nearly 8% between 2010 and 2015. Sadly, we are still seeing one in 10 commissioning groups unable to meet the investment standard expected of them by the Government, which means they are failing to give mental health services the funding priority they need. We must do better than that.

In 2017, Labour set out a clear plan for how we would do better than that. I want to touch on those points. Over the past decade, mental health spending has been a part of broader NHS budgets, but as budget pressures emerged, NHS trusts and commissioning groups raided their mental health budgets to prop up services elsewhere. To that end—I know the Government have not been keen on this—Labour would ring-fence mental health budgets, which is important to ensure that the money that those services need is not siphoned off to fill gaps elsewhere.

As we think about children, young people and their families, it is important that we question why only 6% of mental health spending goes to services targeted at children and young people, despite them making up some 22% of the population. Labour would dramatically increase the proportion of the mental health budget spent on children and young people.

Following on from what I said about yesterday’s Sky News programme, we would end the disgraceful practice of sending people hundreds of miles for mental health treatment when there is no good reason to do so. In the past year, sadly we have seen the number of inappropriate out-of-area placements rise from 640 to 720, despite a Government pledge to reduce their use. I see these out-of-area placements as a tragedy for families. They jeopardise the recovery of people receiving treatment and force parents and other family members to travel long distances to support the young person. With Mental Health Awareness Week, let us not persist in treating mental health as the Cinderella service of the NHS, and children and young people’s services as the Cinderella service inside that Cinderella service.

My plea is this. Let us help children and young people in need at the time of their need, rather than making them wait 18 months to get specialist support or letting them end up in very long-term placements in locked mental health units far from home. Let us do something about the fact that the number of autistic people detained in inappropriate in-patient facilities on dubious mental health grounds remains stubbornly high, and includes a rise in the number of children in what have been seen as modern-day asylums. Let us do better. We can do better than this for our children and young people and their families.

Sir David Amess (in the Chair): Just before the Minister responds, I should have announced at the start that, because the second debate was cancelled, this debate could actually continue until 4.30 pm. I will leave it with hon. Members.

2.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): Thank you, Sir David. I am sure you do not want to listen to me until 4.30 pm; in fact, I know very well that you do not. It is a pleasure to be here with you this afternoon.

I have really enjoyed listening to this debate. There have been some compelling arguments on a subject that we do not really discuss very often, yet it is the foundation of our society. This debate is a welcome opportunity to do that. Certainly, listening to all hon. Members’ remarks, I was given considerable food for thought, so I shall do my best to address the points that were made. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) on securing the debate and on having the imagination to bring together National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about who might have responded to the debate were it not for the reference to mental health, which is an interesting question. Various Departments have an interest, including the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education where the issue affects children, my Department where it impacts on mental health, the Ministry of Justice where it might lead to offending behaviour and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in so far as it might lead to addiction.

This all comes back to the state delivery of services and how it tends to rely on a uniform process, yet we are dealing with human beings. If they require support, a one-size-fits-all, tick-box approach will not necessarily be effective in all cases. To be honest, when we see people whose adverse childhood experiences have led them to harm either themselves or others, I view that as a state failure. Perhaps we ought to look at the drivers of child poverty and see whether we can ensure a more effective Government response. When I sit on various cross-departmental working parties looking at domestic violence, mental health or knife crime, I often think they could all be brought together to look more holistically at the children who need early intervention. We need to get much better at that.

Obviously, how we raise our children and family relationships are crucial to how they turn out. We know that for some people, particularly those living in poverty or with an addiction or those who suffer stress, life can

be hard. It ought to be available to us to give people extra help. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton referred to the troubled families programme in her opening remarks. The ethos behind the programme was to support the families that needed extra help. We need to learn from that programme to see what works best so that we can do things better. That is very much in our thinking.

My hon. Friend also talked about some of the initiatives that we are already taking with respect to mental health and highlighted the new mental health teams that we are creating. She suggested that the teams need to work not only in schools but in families. Sir David, you heard me speak about the Charles Dickens primary school in Southwark in another meeting. I visited it as we were developing our thinking on the new support teams, and it had taken a very imaginative approach to embedding mental wellbeing throughout the school and the curriculum. Instead of having teaching assistants in the classroom assisting, the teaching assistants were doing one-to-one interventions with children. As well as one-to-one tuition, some of them were involved in reaching out and building relationships with the parents. Our school network is exactly where we ought to be able to identify the people who need a little more help.

Fiona Bruce: I am delighted to hear that. I do not know whether the Minister has heard of a similar approach taken by Middlewich High School in my constituency, but what is excellent about that is that the school is now reporting improved GCSE results because it works not only with the pupil, but with the whole family.

Jackie Doyle-Price: As my hon. Friend says, it is not rocket science. If someone is physically, mentally and socially fit, they will have a feeling of wellbeing overall. If any of those pillars falls down, it drags down the rest. If people have a happy environment at home, they will be happier in school and more disciplined and focused. If they live in a dysfunctional environment, they will want to escape, and that will not be good for their GCSEs or anything to do with their long-term development.

Fiona Bruce: Will the Minister allow me to intervene again? I do not want to interrupt too many times.

Jackie Doyle-Price: We have plenty of time.

Fiona Bruce: Yes, so we have heard from Sir David. Corporates are also realising how important this is to the bottom line: productivity. If people arrive at work having left a happier home, they will be more productive, which is an interesting factor to consider if we multiply it across the nation. It is fascinating that we have one of the highest levels of family breakdown in the world, but also low productivity compared with many of our competitor countries. The Minister touches on that when she talks about the flourishing of a human being in terms of relationships and productivity, which are not disconnected.

Jackie Doyle-Price: That is a very good point. We can expect employers to start doing things when they can see a return for themselves. It is interesting also that, as we reach higher levels of employment and as an appropriately skilled workforce is harder to come by, employers see the advantage of giving more help and

support to their staff in order to retain them and keep them productive. We look forward to seeing more of that. Certainly our work through “Thriving at Work” with Mind, Paul Farmer and Lord Stevenson is designed to share best practice and encourage more.

My hon. Friend also talked about the long waits for children’s mental health services, which the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) also talked about. We have to concede that, historically, children’s mental health services have been very poorly funded and supplied, and we are dealing with the aftermath of that now. Everyone knows the extent of our ambition to deliver much improved mental health services to children and young people. However, we still have to properly address the situation that we have inherited. We are playing catch-up, but we will push forward and make sure that children have access to services. The mental health support teams are the first point of contact for children, helping them look after their own wellbeing.

Barbara Keeley: One interesting point, which I did not make, from the piece of work that I referred to from yesterday is that placements for children and young people in private units of the type that I talked about are more expensive. They can be £500,000, £600,000 or £700,000 a year, whereas support in the community would doubtless not be as much as that. They would not be 200 miles away from the families, and they would have the support that they need.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I agree completely. The reason why we have so many children in out-of-area placements—which, as the hon. Lady says, are expensive—is that there has not been sufficient support in the community. Nor has it been available early enough to give the children support. They have been badly failed. It has done them harm and made them more ill. The issue of out-of-area placements is of massive concern to me. I am making it a personal priority to fix it. I am concerned that, because it is seen as a specialised area of commissioning for NHS England, it commissions a quantum of beds, but that is what leads to them being out of area, and children are referred to them. We all know that their recovery will be much better if they are in their support networks near their friends and families.

When the system works well, it is absolutely inspirational. I visited an intensive care unit in east London last year. A young lady had come out the other side, having gone in for treatment for self-harm and anorexia. She was very clear that being able to undergo treatment while still being able to attend school was crucial to her recovery. To me, that seems compelling. I am deeply unhappy at the extent to which out-of-area placements are still being used. I am afraid there will probably be a need for them until we can be properly confident in our community services to work more effectively, but I am sure we all agree that we need to tackle it as soon as we can.

I enjoyed listening to the observations of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about what makes a happy marriage. He is right that hard work is a big part of it.

The hon. Gentleman also shared the length of marriage in his family. This year, my parents are celebrating 50 years of marriage. Having lived with them for 21 of

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

those, I have to say that that is quite an achievement. Obviously, it takes real work. As he says, quite often we do not like our partners, but clearly, notwithstanding the difficulties, they give us comfort and security. Not having a support network to rely on, whether that is a partner, wider family or friends, makes life a lot more difficult. I recognise that some relationships will be rollercoasters. Pressures, such as financial debts, can cause untold difficulties in relationships. There will be times when people need support and we need to make it easy for them to ask for it. We have heard several references to organisations that try to give support to couples, such as Relate. A problem shared is a problem halved—we need to encourage more of that.

I was horrified by the story that the hon. Gentleman shared of the couple neither of whom wanted custody of their children. That suggests that they were the product of dysfunctional families, which is another thing to consider. If we leave children to grow up in dysfunctional families, they will repeat that experience. We need to try to do better to improve the quality of family relationships, because that would be good for society. When we look at the back stories of people who end up in prison, we see that there were no end of opportunities where they came into contact with the state, either at school or in other ways. That is a failure for us and we need to tackle it.

It is always a pleasure to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire, who really is a social justice warrior. Again, he brought home clearly the effect of the state applying process to everything and forgetting the humanity of people. We need to be more sensitive about how we intervene supportively. The institutions and the way we organise society can be excessively intimidating and formal, which is not the way to deal with people who need more emotional support. We need to think carefully about what sort of agencies should do that. The beauty of schools, and directing support via schools, is that they are not intimidating or formal institutions. Parents and children have peer support there, over and above their actual attendance, from friends and other people attending and taking their children.

We need to look at the avenues for engagement with people and make sure that they are fit for purpose, and to recognise that all Departments have a role in that. We siloed that contact. Mrs Bloggs takes little Jimmy to school, has a nice relationship and feels that they are being supported, but when she goes to the Department for Work and Pensions, she is treated as an operational performance and it is dehumanising. That is where we need to be more joined-up in the support that we are giving to families. There is a lot to learn. State institutions rely on process to ensure uniformity and fairness, but that does not always lead to good outcomes.

As my hon. Friend said, Governments are expected to do everything, but for the reasons I have outlined they are not always best placed to do that. Sometimes, rather than inventing processes and grand programmes, we should look more actively at letting 1,000 flowers bloom. Where third-sector organisations bring value, we should look at directly commissioning more services from them. That is the case in respect of mental health, because not all support for people suffering mental

ill-health is clinical. Quite often, they will benefit from support that just helps them to get through life. That is something that third-sector organisations can do well. I have challenged clinical commissioning groups to look more actively at what they can do, because they will be able to deliver more care by not always relying on clinical staff.

I greatly enjoyed listening to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). He is wearing a fetching tartan and I am jealous that we have only the green ribbons. I will think about how we can outdo the Scottish tartan for Mental Health Awareness Week next year. He reminded us that it has been quite a week for mental health and mentioned the axing of “The Jeremy Kyle Show”. The incident that preceded that axing is a wake-up call; it shows that dysfunctional families have become entertainment. What does that say about how we operate as a society? I hope this gives everybody an opportunity for some self-reflection; it is not something that we should use for entertainment.

Barbara Keeley: I wanted to refer to what the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said about detoxifying issues, which is important. The worst thing that I have read about “The Jeremy Kyle Show” is not that it focused on dysfunctional families, but that it set people against each other in an aggressive way, so it needed bouncers and security staff on hand to part people. The programme seems to have used a toxic formula, which is something that the House could look at through an inquiry, because that could persist in other types of filming. Clearly, it has had a tragic outcome, which, given the Minister’s brief, we have to take seriously.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I share that view. By definition, if people are making TV that is designed to be entertaining, it will be manipulative and exploitative. A good friend of mine went on “I’m a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!”—not the person who was an hon. Member, but someone else. He told me in great detail about how situations were manipulated to generate conflict. Because he is already a celebrity, he is resilient and well equipped for that, but we can imagine that for people who are not, and for whom being in the public eye is new, the risk of harm is significant. I understand that the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee will be looking at the issue, and I welcome that inquiry. If someone switches on the TV, there will be any number of reality TV shows on—often because, in truth, they are cheap to make. Given their proliferation, perhaps we ought to have some standards that producers should respect.

Another example—this shows how much rubbish I watch on TV—is the axing of “Celebrity Big Brother” earlier this year, or perhaps last year, because of an incident between two celebrities on it. I think the public showed such revulsion because they were celebrities whom the public perceived they knew. If it had been the non-celebrity version and they were two strangers, I doubt that there would have been the same reaction. That tells us that, actually, we have all been manipulated by it. It is only when something terrible happens that we stand back and think, “Hang on a minute, we shouldn’t be doing this.” But here we are.

The hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South made some very fair criticisms about the challenges to children and young people’s mental health. I agree that

one of the reasons that we are where we are is that, historically, child and adolescent mental health services have been far less effective than they ought to have been. I watched the Sky film that the hon. Lady referred to, and I have to say that some of the practices that were referred to in it are utterly unacceptable.

I have been very clear with the CQC that institutions that apply restraint to the extent that the hon. Lady described are totally unacceptable, and it is now being much more aggressive in implementing inspections. We will hold organisations to account. In that respect, the Bill in the name of the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) will be a great help. We are in the process of agreeing guidance to deliver that. It will require a real cultural change, but I often say that sunlight is the best disinfectant. The best led institutions are open about when they have to use restraint and fully document it; the worst do not report it at all, and that really has to change. That is something that the CQC challenges now when it visits organisations. I want the number not only out-of-area placements, but of in-patient placements more generally, to come down. That will be a mark of success and a sign that we really are investing in improved community services for our children and young people.

The hon. Lady also referred to the appalling extent to which the young lady in the film had come across people who had engaged in suicide and self-harm. I am pleased that we now have the Zero Suicide Alliance, which is led by the fabulous Joe Rafferty, the chief executive of Mersey Care. Our ambition is to have zero suicides as a consequence of any NHS-funded care. That was launched at the end of last year, and we need to use it as a tool to drive improvements in this area.

As the hon. Lady said, we have the mental health investment standards, whereby we expect local trusts and CCGs to spend more of their budgets on mental health. She suggested that funding should be ring-fenced. I have always felt that ring-fences can be seen as ceilings. However, we are committed, through the long-term plan, to ensuring that all local commissioners abide by those standards, which are a ring-fence in all but name. We are closer than we have been on that issue.

I again remind hon. Members about the troubled families programme, which has been dealing with 400,000 families. It will be revisited next year, and we would welcome any representations from hon. Members about how we can learn from it and improve how we help families with complex needs. Obviously, we need to develop better outcomes for all family members.

Coming back to Marriage Week, we know that good quality relationships are critical for all of us, as they add to our overall happiness. As my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire said, some people do not necessarily want their relationship to be recognised as a marriage. None the less, we all benefit from stable, loving and supportive relationships. With my suicide prevention hat on, I will say that relationship breakdown is the biggest driver of suicide. That is another reason why we should always enable people to find help when they need it.

As far as the impact on children and their life chances is concerned, we know that by the age of five, almost half of children in low-income households have seen their families break apart, compared with only 16% of

children in higher-income households. As my hon. Friend said, we must address that social injustice because when relationships break down, there is a risk of poor outcomes in the long run.

I see health visitors as very important partners—I always refer to them as my army. They are on the frontline, and their contact with people is less formalised. They are the one group of people who can engage with the entirety of the family. They look not just at the baby and mum, but at dad and the siblings, too. We need to take advantage of those interventions to do better for families in general.

We are spending £39 million on the reducing parental conflict programme, which is designed to reduce conflict between parents who are still together, and work with them to strengthen their relationship, exactly as my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton wants, to help them to stay together if that is what they want. We should also recognise that separation can sometimes be the best option, particularly if there are other factors involved that can cause distress for the children. Even in the event of a separation, continued co-operation and communication between parents and their children will give advantage to the child.

Although the Government will continue to support and champion marriage, we will not discriminate against other types of families who require our support. We will ensure that parents can access help when they need it, whether they are already married and need help to sustain their partnership, are not married and wish to improve the health of their relationship, or have chosen to separate.

I turn to what we are delivering through the NHS long-term plan. The improvement in perinatal mental health services will help us to engage people when they are at risk, assess people's circumstances, give peer support and perhaps just make a decisive intervention at a time of real stress for families, where either the mother or the father becomes ill.

The theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is not marriage but body image. The two are not entirely unconnected, because how we think and feel about our bodies obviously affects how we engage with other people. Just as we need to get real and think about working harder, not everything will be ideal. We are not all going to have a marriage that is like a fairy tale 100% of the time, and we are not all going to look like Claudia Schiffer. That is okay—that is normal—and we just need to be aware of that.

It is worrying that, according to the Mental Health Foundation, 39% of children feel shame in relation to body image. We ought to think about the causes of that stark statistic. People are bombarded with images via social media, and so on, so we need to encourage parents to spend time with their children and make sure that children know what they can realistically expect. They cannot expect to look like the doctored images that they are being shown.

That comes back to the issue of quality time. Smartphones have been absolutely revolutionary for our society. Is it not fantastic that we can find information about anything we want and contact people at any time? However, face-to-face engagement, especially between parents and their kids, is really important. I pay tribute to Frankie & Benny's, the restaurant chain, which has

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

said that to encourage parents to speak to their children while they are having a meal, it will give them a discount if they hand their phone over.

We are so easily distracted by time spent on a phone. The first thing I do in the morning when I wake up, and the last thing I do at night, is to look at my phone. It is not very healthy, to be honest. We need to encourage our children to have a healthy relationship with their smartphones, and the same is true for ourselves. There is no substitute for some good parent-child conversation, and that does not need to take place via WhatsApp or text.

Broader mental health support is available to people who suffer from mental health problems. IAPT provides couples therapy for depression, which is available through the NHS. That directly helps relationships.

This debate has been interesting and thought provoking, and it has highlighted many issues that, although we may agree about them, we perhaps need to be more proactive about properly addressing. They are not the easiest things to deal with, because they are about human failings, but it is good to hear that so many colleagues are bothered about them and actively think about them.

Mental health problems can affect anyone, any day of the year. Those problems have a bearing not only on the wellbeing of the individual, but on marriages, relationships and children. We must continue to work together, across Government and with our partners, to address some of those issues. As a society, we all need to be more sensitive about the stresses of particular times, such as when people experience job loss, debt or relationship breakdown, to ensure that we give people appropriate support.

I am sure we can all agree that Marriage Week and Mental Health Awareness Week provide us with excellent opportunities to bring those subjects together. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton for bringing those subjects forward for debate.

3.21 pm

Fiona Bruce: I am sure, Sir David, that colleagues were relieved and impressed by your astute wisdom in announcing after I had spoken that the debate could continue for longer. I thank all hon. Members who spoke, and I particularly thank the hon. Member for

Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) for their thoughtful contributions. I was very pleased to hear the Minister respond in such a constructive way. Her tone, as well as her words, said a lot when she recognised both the impact of family relationships on mental health and the fact that more needs to be done.

I thank the Minister for not sticking to her notes, but instead responding so thoughtfully to so many of the comments that were made. As we have heard—it is a matter of social justice—there is a real need to put strengthening relationships at the heart of Government policy, nationally and locally, to provide joined-up support for families. As the Minister said, the troubled families initiative has started to do that.

As the Minister also said, we need to better support the many excellent voluntary organisations engaged in this area. Crucially, today we have also recognised the importance of marriage in helping to address the country's major mental health problem. As Members have said, that is not in any way to criticise or condemn those whose home circumstances are different—far from it. We are saying that building relationship capability is for all of us, because we all aspire to have beneficial and flourishing relationships in our lives. We know their benefits.

I was particularly interested to hear the Minister say that because these issues straddle so many Government Departments, and because of the processes and the way that Departments work in silos, addressing them is quite a challenge. That is exactly why the proposal of a Cabinet Minister for the family, to draw together the work on such issues across Departments and support people more effectively, is so important. I close by saying that after the authoritative and compassionate speech that he gave today—it represented the tip of the iceberg of many years' work on this issue—I cannot think of any hon. Member who would better fill that role than my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire; I hope the Minister will forgive me for saying so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered National Marriage and Mental Health Awareness Weeks.

3.24 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 May 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

ENABLE Guarantee Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): ENABLE guarantee is a scheme administered by the British Business Bank that encourages participating banks and other financial institutions to lend more to small and medium-sized enterprises by either addressing the high capital consumption associated with such lending for banks or by reducing the cost of funding for other financial institutions in order to increase the supply and diversity of finance to SMEs.

British Business Bank programmes are supporting more than £5.9 billion of finance to over 82,000 smaller businesses (as at September 2018). The Department has approved guarantee facilities totalling £1 billion within the ENABLE programme.

We are now extending the scheme to other financial institutions (as defined in the request for proposals available on the British Business Bank's website), in order to further increase the diversity of supply of funding available to SMEs. This extension will not create a new contingent liability.

The aggregate amount of the guarantees issued by the Department under the scheme is expected to be circa £2 billion, with extension beyond this subject to further review. Within this £2 billion, the aggregate notional amount of the guarantees extended to other financial institutions is capped at £400 million. This enables the Department to manage its risk appetite and limit its credit risk exposure.

As a matter of record, I will be laying a departmental minute today.

[HCWS1560]

Industrial Strategy (West Midlands)

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Our modern industrial strategy is a long-term plan to boost productivity and earning power for people throughout the country.

Since 2010, local leaders, working in partnership with Government, have delivered historic city deals with Greater Birmingham and Solihull, Coventry and Warwickshire and the Black Country. Having secured significant growth deal funding, the west midlands then came together as one to capitalise on these important new powers and establish new leadership through two successful devolution deals.

Building on these strong foundations, we set out in the modern industrial strategy to work in partnership with places to develop local industrial strategies. Local

industrial strategies are central to our aim of creating prosperous communities across the country. They are being developed locally and agreed with Government. They are long term, based on clear evidence and aligned to the modern industrial strategy.

Today we launched the first of these strategies—the west midlands local industrial strategy. This has been developed locally by the West Midlands Combined Authority, led by Mayor Andy Street, supported by the local enterprise partnerships and agreed with Government.

This strategy sets out how, in partnership with west midlands local leaders, we will work to deliver on a range of commitments including:

delivering on our future of mobility grand challenge, which aims to be at the forefront of the development of cleaner, safer, easier and more reliable future modes of transport, cementing the west midlands' position as the UK's automotive heartlands;

playing a leading role in the UK's trials of connected autonomous vehicles, with the west midlands aiming to deploy the first fully operational connected autonomous vehicles in advance of the 2022 Commonwealth games;

driving investment into electric vehicle manufacturing in the region, completing the UK battery industrialisation centre and maximising the impact of the Faraday battery challenge; putting the west midlands at the heart of transport innovation in the UK by delivering the UK's first large-scale 5G test bed; and

helping meet the artificial intelligence and data grand challenge by supporting the development of a west midlands translational medicine and med-tech commission to accelerate the "lab to patient" ecosystem.

The west midlands is a global force and a major part of the UK economy, generating £99 billion of GVA—5% of UK output. The region is growing fast, with output up 27% over the past five years. A record number of people are in work and the lowest number are out of work. Productivity is increasing too, at twice the rate of the UK in 2017-18, while carbon emissions have reduced by 18% over the last five years—showing that while we grow our economy we can reduce the impact on our planet.

The west midlands is a region in renaissance. Together, this work sets the long-term future for how the west midlands can fully realise its potential

A copy of the west midlands industrial strategy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1559]

CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND CABINET OFFICE

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and Common Frameworks

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): I have today laid before Parliament a report, "The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks - 26 December 2018 to 25 March 2019" as required by paragraph 4 of schedule 3 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The report is available on gov.uk and details the progress made in discussions between the UK Government and devolved administrations regarding common frameworks in the third reporting period covered under the legislation, and sets out that no “freezing” regulations have been brought forward under section 12 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act.

A copy of the “The European Union (Withdrawal) Act and Common Frameworks - 26 December 2018 to 25 March 2019” report has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The publication of the report reflects the Government’s continued commitment to transparency.

[HCWS1565]

TREASURY

ECOFIN

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Brussels on 17 May 2019. The UK will be represented by Mark Bowman (Director General, International Finance, HM Treasury). The Council will discuss the following:

Early morning session

The Eurogroup President will brief the Council on the outcomes of the 16 May meeting of the Eurogroup, and the European Commission will provide an update on the current economic situation in the EU. Ministers will then discuss the possibility of the European Investment Bank developing country strategies.

Excise duties

The Council will be invited to reach a political agreement on the directive on general arrangements for excise duty (recast), the regulation on administrative co-operation of the content of electronic registers, and the directive on the structures of excise duty on alcohol and alcoholic beverages.

Economic and monetary union

The Council will hold an exchange of views on the way forward in areas of the economic and monetary union, specifically in regards to the reform support programme.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Romanian presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

International meetings

The presidency and Commission will update the Council on the outcomes of the G20, IMF and World Bank spring meetings that took place in April, and the Council will be invited to approve the terms of reference for the upcoming G20 meeting in June.

The Council will then hold a policy debate on digital taxation in the international context, and the Finnish delegation will debrief the Council on the first meeting of the Finance Ministers coalition for climate action.

European semester

The Council will be invited to adopt conclusions on the outcomes of the 2019 in-depth reviews of macro-economic imbalances in member states as part of the macroeconomic imbalances procedure; and the implementation of 2018 country-specific recommendations.

Institutional cycle priorities

The presidency will inform the Council on the follow-up discussions in regards to priorities for the next institutional cycle in the ECOFIN area.

Working lunch

Following on from the discussions at April informal ECOFIN in Bucharest, EU Finance Ministers will hold a working lunch to discuss the challenges of labour mobility and their potential solutions.

[HCWS1564]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Iraq: Export Licence System

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This statement updates and supersedes the written ministerial statement of 11 November 2010 on the “Iraq: Export Licence System” (*Official Report*, 11 November 2010: column 24WS).

UN Security Council resolution 1546 of 2004 (UNSCR 1546) includes an exemption to the arms embargo on Iraq for supplies of arms and related matériel required by the Government of Iraq (GoI) or the multinational force to serve the purposes of the resolution. The written ministerial statement on 11 November 2010 stated that Her Majesty’s Government would consider as exempt from the embargo exports to the GoI, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq, diplomatic missions in Iraq, the US forces in Iraq, the NATO training mission in Iraq, the UK naval training mission training the Iraqi navy and entities contracted or subcontracted to the GoI, US or UK forces or NATO.

In the light of the deployment of military forces of non-NATO EU countries in Iraq and in accordance with the GoI request for international support, the Government wish to make clear that they consider as exempt from the embargo exports serving the purposes of UNSCR 1546 to the forces of EU as well as NATO countries deployed in Iraq at the request of the GoI. The Government also wish to make clear that they consider exports serving the same purposes to United Nations agencies present in Iraq at the request of the GoI, and their contractors and subcontractors, as exempt from the embargo.

Accordingly, the Government consider as exempt from the embargo exports to the GoI, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), UN agencies in Iraq, diplomatic missions in Iraq, the NATO [training] mission in Iraq, the forces of NATO or EU countries in Iraq, and entities contracted or subcontracted to the GoI, NATO, the forces of such NATO or EU countries, UNAMI or such UN agencies. As in the statement of 11 November 2010, export licence applications to these end users will not therefore require the approval of the GoI prior to approval of the application but may require extra information to be provided by the entity seeking the export licence. For exports serving the purposes of UNSCR 1546 to entities other than these, the exporter is required to provide a supporting document from the GoI to demonstrate that the proposed export is required and thus exempt from the embargo. All export licence

applications for Iraq as elsewhere will be assessed on a case-by-case basis against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria and the Government will not issue a licence where to do so would be inconsistent with the criteria.

[HCWS1561]

NATO Parliamentary Assembly

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) has replaced the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) as a member of the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

[HCWS1562]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU JHA Opt-in: Cyber-crime

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): The Government have decided not to opt into (under the UK's JHA opt-in protocol) either the proposed EU Council decision to participate in the negotiations of the second additional protocol to the cyber-crime ("Budapest") convention or the proposed EU Council decision to authorise EU-US negotiations on a cross-border data access agreement.

The first proposed Council decision enables the EU Commission to participate in negotiations relating to the second additional protocol to the Council of Europe cyber-crime ("Budapest") convention, on behalf of the European Union.

The second proposed Council decision authorises the EU Commission to commence negotiations with the US on an EU-US international data access agreement,

with the aim of ensuring compliance by US-established service providers to requests from EU member states for stored electronic content. The US's Clarifying Lawful Overseas Use of Data (CLOUD) Act provides that only an international agreement between the US and a foreign Government can allow for such compliance by US established service providers.

I have decided not to opt into the EU Council decision on participating in the second additional protocol to the Council of Europe Budapest convention to ensure that the UK is able to negotiate its own position and interests, without being limited or bound by the EU negotiation policy. This includes enabling the UK to ensure that a flexible approach is taken in negotiating the protocol to accommodate the different systems and processes of a wide range of participant states (beyond the participating EU member states).

The UK is already in the process of negotiating its own reciprocal UK-US data access agreement, a bilateral treaty (as required under the CLOUD Act) that enables US companies to comply with lawful orders from UK authorities for the production of electronic communications without any conflict of law. As such my right hon. Friend the Minister of State for Policing and the Fire Service has decided not to opt into the Council decision on opening EU-US negotiations on cross-border data access. This is in line with the UK's decision not to opt into the draft EU e-evidence regulation, which sets internal EU rules relating to the production of electronic communications.

Until the UK leaves the EU we remain a full member, and the Government will continue to consider the application of the UK's opt-in to EU legislation on a case by case basis, with a view to maximising our ability to protect the public.

[HCWS1563]

Petitions

Thursday 16 May 2019

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Maintenance of stroke services at Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother Hospital Margate

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Thanet,

Declares that the Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother Hospital (QEQM) in Margate is much valued by local residents and is the only regional general hospital servicing the population of Thanet and the north and east Kent coastal communities; further that the Joint Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups for the Kent and Medway Stroke Review have concluded that stroke services at the QEQM will be closed in favour of three Hyper-acute Stroke Units to serve Kent and Medway with Darent Valley, Maidstone and Ashford hospitals being the preferred future sites, this will leave local residents with a journey time of an hour to the nearest hospital to receive stroke care.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to reference back to the Secretary of State the conclusions of the Joint Committee of Clinical Commissioning Groups and the Joint Health and Overview Scrutiny Committee in Kent to ensure that the outcome thus far presented is credible and soundly based and whether the maintenance of stroke services at QEQM would not be the better option for local clinical care.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Craig Mackinlay, *Official Report*, 19 March 2019; Vol. 656, c. 1180.]

[P002442]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy):

The reconfiguration of services is a matter for the local NHS. It is right that these matters are addressed at a level where the local healthcare needs are best understood rather than in Whitehall. The proposed service change has recently been referred to the Secretary of State who will decide whether to refer the matter to the Independent Reconfiguration Panel for Investigation.

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local facilities on the Hull Boothferry Estate

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the facilities on the Boothferry Estate in Hull are woefully inadequate and need to be improved, notes that there is only a single pharmacy to support a population of 3028 and further notes that Hull City Council has lost one pound in every three from its budget since this government came to office in 2010.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to release more money to Hull City Council to improve local facilities on the Boothferry Estate.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Hardy, *Official Report*, 8 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 146.]

[P002445]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak):

Local authorities are democratically elected organisations and so are independent from central Government. They are responsible for managing their financial budgets and for making spending decisions in line with their priority needs. The issue of local authority spending priorities is ultimately a matter for local discretion.

All of Government have had to make to make savings to help deliver our deficit reduction programme. The Government's approach is working and we are seeing positive signs for the future, but we know demand on services is increasing. As announced in the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2019-20, there is a cash-terms increase of 2.8% funding for English councils; rising from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20. Hull City Council has £214.6 million available for 2019-20, an increase of 2.4% on 2018-19.

The overall level of future funding available for local government will be a matter for the spending review. This is our opportunity to look at Local Government spending in the round; and I want to ensure that councils have the resources and flexibilities to deliver efficiently and effectively.

Community Pharmacies are private businesses and make their own business decisions on whether or not to open. Market entry is governed by legislation that requires local authorities to carry out a pharmaceutical needs assessment and the local NHS England team to have consideration of that assessment when considering applications to join the pharmaceutical list to provide NHS services in an area.

The Government protect patient access to pharmaceutical services through the Pharmacy Access Scheme which tops up pharmacy incomes for those pharmacies that are 1 mile from their next nearest pharmacy and dispensed less than 109,012 prescriptions in 2015/16, the year when eligibility was determined. The Pharmaceutical Needs Assessment for Hull states that the provision of pharmaceutical services in the Boothferry Ward is considered adequate by the local authority.

TRANSPORT

Closure of Suggitts Lane Level Crossing, Cleethorpes

The petition of residents of North East Lincolnshire,

Declares that the proposed closure of the level crossing (number 42, O.S. Grid ref. TA300097) at Suggitts Lane Level Cleethorpes by National Rail is at this time not warranted, and substantial investment and enactment of safety at the crossing should be explored and enacted before any other option is considered. This is to avoid loss of a vital historic, public amenity and would also result in a significant proportion of the public (who for

health and disability reasons are unable to use the footbridge) being denied access to the Sea Front and Local Amenities.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons urges to instruct Network Rail to consult with users of the crossing in order to establish a viable plan to keep the crossing open.

And the Petitioners remain — [*Presented by Martin Vickers*, *Official Report*, 9 April 2019; Vol. 658, c. 147.]

[P002446]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones):

The UK has one of the safest railways in Europe, but this Government strive to ensure that safety continues to be improved. Level crossings remain one of the most significant risks to public safety on the railway network and it is therefore right that, where justified and practicable,

they are closed to eliminate this risk. However, this should not be at the expense of local community access to both sides of the railway.

I am well aware of the complex issues surrounding Suggitt's Lane level crossing and the depth of feeling in the local community. Whilst it remains the responsibility of Network Rail, as the infrastructure manager for the railway, to take the decision on whether to close the private crossing, I have urged it to arrange a meeting at the earliest opportunity between all parties that have an interest in Suggitt's Lane. I have made it clear that this meeting should include North East Lincolnshire Council, local residents' representatives and, of course, Network Rail itself. This should provide an opportunity for the concerns of the local community to be considered. I hope that this meeting will enable all parties to agree a solution that addresses both the safety and accessibility issues relating to Suggitt's Lane.

Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 16 May 2019

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pension Credit Changes

The following is an extract from a Westminster Hall debate on Pension Credit Changes on 24 April 2019.

Ruth George: When the changes were debated back in 2012 as part of the Welfare Reform Act, universal credit was still a similar level of benefit to tax credits. Since then, following the 2015 budgetary changes, universal credit has been worth significantly less, and increased numbers of people on universal credit are in poverty. Does the Minister not agree that that should be a reason for Parliament to debate again the changes that will affect hundreds of thousands more, often vulnerable, households, in the light of the changed circumstances?

Guy Opperman: With respect, Parliament has debated the matter and made a decision. The hon. Lady will be aware of the 2011 equality impact assessment, **the 2012 risk assessment**, the universal credit impact assessment, and the ad hoc statistical analysis that was published on 28 February, which outlined the number of people affected, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned—approximately 115,000 mixed-age couples in the United Kingdom.

[Official Report, 24 April 2019, Vol. 658, c. 315WH.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman):

An error has been identified in my response to an intervention from the hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George).

The correct response should have been:

Guy Opperman: With respect, Parliament has debated the matter and made a decision. The hon. Lady will be aware of the 2011 equality impact assessment, **the 2012 universal credit impact assessment**, and the ad hoc statistical analysis that was published on 28 February, which outlined the number of people affected, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned—approximately 115,000 mixed-age couples in **Great Britain**.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health

The following is an extract from my reply to an Opposition day debate on Health on 14 May 2019.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) spoke about local mental health provision and the experience of his young constituent. NHS England's planned spend on mental health in the year ending 2019 was just over £12 billion. For children's mental health services, it is nearly £7 billion—an increase of 5.6% on the previous year. I would like to reassure him that we are definitely not aiming for a one-size-fits-all service.

[Official Report, 14 May 2019, Vol. 660, c. 191.]

Letter from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy):

An error has been identified in my reply to the debate. The correct wording should have been:

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) spoke about local mental health provision and the experience of his young constituent. NHS England's planned spend on mental health in the year ending 2019 was just over £12 billion. For children's mental health services, it is nearly **£700 million**—an increase of 5.6% on the previous year. I would like to reassure him that we are definitely not aiming for a one-size-fits-all service.

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**not later than
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