

Thursday
20 June 2019

Volume 662
No. 317



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 20 June 2019

House of Commons

Thursday 20 June 2019

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ACCOUNT OF THE CONTINGENCIES FUND 2018-19

Ordered,

That there be laid before this House an Account of the Contingencies Fund 2018-19, showing—

- (1) A statement of Financial Position;
- (2) A statement of Cash Flows, and
- (3) Notes of the Accounts; together with the Certificate and Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General thereon.—
(*Iain Stewart.*)

Mr Speaker: A Whip or a Minister nods in such situations. Nothing further is said or done. There can be no opposition.

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Government Contracts: Climate Emergency

1. **Alex Norris** (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Minister for the Cabinet Office on including provisions to tackle the environment and climate emergency in future Government contracts. [911451]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): How grateful I am, Mr Speaker, to hear you say that there can indeed be no opposition.

Tackling the climate change and environment emergency is a cross-Government priority and an issue that I discuss regularly with Cabinet colleagues. The greening Government commitments include specific targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and improving sustainable procurement. Those commitments demonstrate the Government's leadership in improving the environmental sustainability of their own estate, and the 2018 revisions to the Green Book have also improved the evaluation of the natural capital impacts of Government decision making.

Alex Norris: Tomorrow, young people in Nottingham will demonstrate because we are not moving quickly enough on our climate emergency. This House declared such an emergency on 1 May, saying that the Government should

“set ambitious, short-term targets for... low carbon energy and transport”.

When we will see those targets?

Michael Gove: It is already the case that we are the first Government of a developed nation to embrace the ambition of reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. I congratulate the Members across the House who have campaigned to ensure that that commitment is at the heart of this Government's proposals—indeed, it is a vision—to ensure that we leave a cleaner, greener planet for the next generation.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Foreign Secretary and the Foreign Office team on their amazing diplomatic success in the negotiations with Italy, which mean that next year's global climate change conference is almost certain to come to London?

Michael Gove: The Foreign Secretary has done an outstanding job on the diplomatic stage and will continue to do so. Co-operating with our partners across western Europe, including Italy, will ensure that the 2020 conference of parties brings nations together to deal with this global challenge. The Secretary of State for International Development has also played a distinguished role alongside the Foreign Secretary in using our global footprint to ensure that our planet is in a more sustainable state.

17. [911467] **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): As has been said, this House declared a climate emergency on 1 May. In recent weeks, pupils at Abercanaid Community School and Ysgol Rhyd y Grug in my constituency have been in contact with me to urge this Parliament to do all that we can to address the climate emergency. Will the Secretary of State outline the specific actions that he will take on Government contracts, and on any other measures, to give the pupils in my constituency and elsewhere the confidence that this Government are serious and will meet their target of net zero emissions by 2050?

Michael Gove: I congratulate the students in his constituency and so many other students across the country on helping to ensure that our climate and environment emergency is at the heart of our decision making. We will put greening Government and greening the whole country at the heart of our decision making in the forthcoming spending review.

Food Producers: Overseas Marketing

2. **Tom Pursglove** (Corby) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on (a) promoting and (b) supporting UK food producers in marketing their produce overseas. [911452]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): I met with the Secretary of State for International Trade yesterday, and he told me that he had just come back from Turkey, where he had been exploring opportunities for British trade, including in food and drink. On Monday, I signed an agreement with China which means that British beef could be back on Chinese dinner plates by the end of the year, which could be worth £230 million over five years to our world-class beef producers. Those are just two examples of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for International Trade working closely to raise the international profile and reputation of the UK's high-quality food and drink products, to open new markets, and to boost our exports.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that timely answer. How successful has the GREAT campaign been at showcasing UK produce to markets around the world?

Mr Goodwill: It has been great, as it says on the can. DEFRA's "Food is GREAT" campaign supports DIT's trade promotion activity, including at trade shows and meet-the-buyer events. It helps businesses to succeed in overseas markets by ensuring global recognition of UK excellence in food and drink, while encouraging our food and drink companies to export more.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): This just shows what a barmy army we have on the Government Front Bench. To want more beef to be produced and shipped thousands of miles to China shows that they have not learned the lessons of sustainability or climate change danger. They had better learn those lessons quickly and do something to save our planet.

Mr Goodwill: As a former Shipping Minister, I can tell the hon. Gentleman that 30% of containers go back to China empty, so there is tremendous potential for shipping goods to China without increasing our carbon footprint.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): British breakfast cereals are among the best in the world and none is finer than Weetabix, which is based in the Kettering constituency and which sources its wheat from farms within a 50-mile radius of the factory. Will my right hon. Friend be the great British breakfast champion?

Mr Goodwill: I am a great fan of Weetabix, not least because I am a wheat producer myself. Indeed, I have driven past the Weetabix factory in his constituency with my hon. Friend, and I quite fancy going to visit when my diary allows.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): At the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that the EU would continue to protect UK protected geographical indications because they are European law. That seems to be incorrect. Was he mistaken, or did someone mislead him? Will he now put the record straight?

Mr Goodwill: Geographical indications are important not only for producers but so that consumers know they are getting the real thing. It is important that we get that protection in our negotiations with the EU through the implementation period while, at the same time, talking to other trading partners around the world who may have different systems. We need to ensure that those systems dovetail closely with ours.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): On a recent visit to seafood companies in the Grimsby and Cleethorpes area, the American ambassador encouraged Young's Seafood to export even more to the United States. What assistance can the Department give?

Mr Goodwill: We are keen to export seafood around the world. Brown crab from my constituency is exported to China, whelks are exported to South Korea, and I hope that the Americans will enjoy even more of our seafood and other products when we leave the EU and can negotiate those trade agreements around the world.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I want to press the Minister on geographical indications, which are vital in our marketing of goods and products made across the country. In the event of a no deal, about which the frontrunner in the Tory leadership contest seems quite keen, protections for Cornish pasties, Buxton blue cheese, traditional Welsh perry, Cornish clotted cream and Whitstable oysters, to name but a few, will be at risk. What steps is DEFRA taking to ensure that those vital goods produced by our farmers and growers are protected come Halloween this year?

Mr Goodwill: In a no-deal situation, we would wish to set up our own scheme and to negotiate with our friends across the channel to ensure some degree of co-operation, but I stress that no deal is not an option I would want to support. We need to get a deal, and we need to get it over the line. If, like me, Opposition Members had voted for the deal on the three occasions it came before the House, we would have left the European Union on 29 March and we would be in a much better situation for UK producers.

Tree Planting

3. **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the rate of tree planting. [911453]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): To increase tree planting rates, we have changed how our main grant schemes work. The woodland carbon fund now supports infrastructure such as roads and is available for smaller projects. The countryside stewardship woodland creation grant is now open for applications all year, rather than in short windows, which demonstrates the Government's commitment to planting 11 million trees during this Parliament.

Maggie Throup: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. However, his passion for planting trees seems to be in conflict with the practice of both Network Rail and Highways England, which have decimated thousands of mature trees that lined the railway and motorway embankments through Long Eaton, Sawley and Breaston in my constituency and that acted as a vital natural sound and visual barrier. May I urge him and his counterparts in the Department for Transport to intervene to ensure that mature trees are reinstated on those embankments as soon as possible?

David Rutley: My hon. Friend is, and continues to be, a strong champion for Erewash in all ways. I recognise that removing trees can be concerning, which is why DEFRA is working closely with DFT to deliver a new policy for Network Rail, with the aim of improving its current approach to managing vegetation so that it enhances biodiversity on our rail network. That is in line with the recommendations of John Varley's review of Network Rail's vegetation management.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I planted some 3,500 trees on my land 10 years ago, so I see the benefits. Will the Minister further outline what help, advice and practical and financial support is available for landowners to prepare land for trees to be planted?

David Rutley: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his efforts in helping to achieve our wider target. As I have explained, we are working hard to make our current schemes much more flexible. We will also be introducing the woodland carbon guarantee—£50 million in the Budget—and we launched the £10 million urban tree challenge fund just a few weeks ago.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Will the Minister join me in celebrating the 9 million trees planted over the past 30 years to create the new national forest? My constituency, at the centre of it, has seen a massive improvement in not only the environment but the quality of life, for visitors and residents alike.

David Rutley: I have had the chance to go to the national forest in my hon. Friend's constituency on two occasions, and he is a fantastic champion and ambassador for the national forest. We need to take lessons from that and apply them in the northern forest as well, to see what the exciting opportunities can be.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The role of tree planting in tackling climate change is well documented. The right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) promised during his leadership bid to plant 100 million trees. The Minister has been mentioning targets, so it is disappointing to read this week that the Government are falling woefully short—by 71%—of their targets. Can the Minister explain why that is? What is he doing about it? How long will it be before we see the Secretary of State's targets actually met?

David Rutley: We have set out a clear target of planting 11 million trees in this Parliament. We are at 3.6 million now and on the trajectory to achieve that target of 11 million, so I assure the hon. Lady that we are working in that direction. We have also set out strong aspirations to increase our woodland cover from 10% to 12% within the 25-year environment plan. We have stretching targets and we will move further forward.

Leaving the EU: Food Shortages

4. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps he has taken to help prevent food shortages in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an agreement. [911454]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): The Government have been undertaking extensive work to prepare for a no-deal scenario for the past two years, to ensure that trade continues to operate smoothly from the day we leave. We have long-established relationships with industry, and we are working closely with key stakeholders to prepare for all scenarios. The UK has a high level of food security, built on diverse sources, and this will continue to be the case when we leave the EU.

Dr Huq: In reality, only just over half of the food we eat is made in Britain, with more than a third coming from the EU. Given that the Food and Drink Federation is predicting that after a no-deal Brexit fresh fruit and veg would run out after two weeks, why are the remaining contenders in the Tory leadership battle continuing to entertain this damaging prospect? Does he not agree that scurvy back on our streets is more important than the whims of fundamentalist party members' wishes?

David Rutley: The hon. Lady has ruined a perfectly reasonable question by exaggerating. Of course we are preparing for every eventuality. As we have said already in these questions, a deal is the best outcome, and we all have a responsibility to help deliver that. We are preparing for all outcomes.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): So will my hon. Friend confirm that my constituents do not need to stock up with tins of Spam or apricots in syrup?

David Rutley: We are not going to endorse any particular brand, but it is important to note that we have a rich and diverse source of food, and that will continue when we leave the EU.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State reassure my local businesses, which supply millions of people across the UK with high-quality food products, that enough refrigeration units will be in place to cope with the predicted delays at UK ports after our exit from the EU?

David Rutley: The hon. Gentleman can be assured that I have regular meetings—each week—with the main stakeholders in the food industry to prepare for no deal. We are looking at all eventualities. Primarily, we are looking at how we can ensure the flow of trade; that is our vital priority.

Agri-Environment Payments

5. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What steps he is taking to tackle late agri-environment payments. [911455]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): Yesterday, the Rural Payments Agency announced that it will make payments next month to all those who have been waiting on the historical revenue payments, and therefore every farmer who has been taking part in environmental and countryside stewardship schemes, which deliver important benefits for our environment, will receive the money that they deserve.

Bim Afolami: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, because many farmers in my constituency have regularly complained to me about the delays in countryside stewardship scheme payments. Will he expand on that answer for those who, in some instances, have had to wait more than 600 days for payments?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a brilliant advocate for Hertfordshire farmers and indeed for workers across the English countryside. He is absolutely right: past performance has not been good enough. That is why I am so pleased that the RPA's chief executive, Paul Caldwell, will make sure that all back payments are cleared next month.

Mr Speaker: I hope the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) realises that he has just been canvassed.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last Thursday, the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman), and I visited Upper Teesdale Agricultural Support Services. We met farmers who had not been paid for 18 months, so payments in July would be welcome. Will they get interest on the late payments?

Michael Gove: The hon. Lady is a superb advocate for the farmers of upper Teesdale, County Durham and England, and it is not too late for her to cross the House. She makes a fair point, and I will look into it.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami), as we leave the European Union we will build up more and more environmentally friendly agricultural policy, so stewardship schemes will be more important than ever. There has been a loss of faith in them, and I am worried about the future programme, because farmers really do not like the complexity and have waited far too long for their payments.

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes a fair point; the schemes have been bedevilled by unnecessary complexity in the past. It is critical that as we leave the European Union and have new environmental land-management schemes, they are both simpler and more effective in supporting farmers in the wonderful work that they do.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: In calling Dr David Drew, I remind Members and inform others that the hon. Gentleman has a doctorate in rural economy.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I know that, as always, you are my biggest fan, Mr Speaker.

I hear what the Secretary of State says, but one reason for the current collapse in the take-up of environmental agri-ecology schemes is the slowness and lateness of payments, which is bedevilling the pilots for the environmental land-management schemes. Will the Secretary of State assure me that those pilots will now get under way?

Michael Gove: Yes.

Wildlife Habitats

6. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that developers in England enhance habitats for wildlife. [911456]

11. **Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that developers in England enhance habitats for wildlife. [911461]

13. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that developers in England enhance habitats for wildlife. [911463]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): We have strengthened the national planning policy framework to make it clear that all development within its scope should achieve net gains for biodiversity. We have consulted on proposals to mandate biodiversity net gain for development, and will use the forthcoming environment Bill to legislate for a net gain system.

Craig Tracey: I thank the Minister for that answer, but will she assure me that she is taking action to ensure that all major infrastructure projects comply with all environmental licences, permissions and protections?

Dr Coffey: Large infrastructure projects may require an environmental impact assessment of the likely effects. In the case of nationally significant infrastructure projects, the EEA forms a part of the planning process and the development consent order. I assure my hon. Friend that each consenting regime has appropriate enforcement mechanisms.

Robert Courts: West Oxfordshire wants the design of the Oxfordshire Cotswolds garden village to enhance, not harm, the environment. What guidance have Ministers given to developers on how garden villages can enhance things such as wildlife corridors and biodiversity in new developments?

Dr Coffey: Well-planned, locally led garden communities can play a vital role, not only in meeting the country's housing needs and providing a stable pipeline of high-quality homes but by providing such opportunities as my hon. Friend referred to. In fact, they will be mandated to do so, to improve wildlife corridors and promote health and wellbeing and quality of life. That could be a win-win for my hon. Friend's constituents.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What levers will the Minister have?

Dr Coffey: We have updated the planning guidance for the planning policy. As we set out in the consultation, we intend to develop in the environment Bill an update of metrics for biodiversity and wider environmental net gains. We will provide practical tools to support developers and, critically, local planning authorities to achieve better environmental outcomes for every development.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): A 38 Degrees petition started by Norman Pasley from Bristol is calling for legislation on the installation of swift boxes in all new housing developments, and it has more than 130,000 signatures. As parliamentary species champion for the swift, I urge Ministers to support the campaign. Perhaps the Secretary of State in particular would like to make it his legacy from his time at the Department.

Dr Coffey: Hopefully, the hon. Lady will be swift in her praise for the work we are doing with the forthcoming environment Bill. As the species champion for bitterns, which are literally booming as we speak, I know that this issue matters. We want to take more proactive approaches to how we protect species. I am not sure whether a swift box in every single house is the right thing, as opposed to all sorts of other things such as beetle hotels—there is a wide variety—but we need to make sure that we encourage a wide range of biodiversity for birds, for wildlife and for the protection of nature for future generations.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The crowing from the Department about their bird policy this morning is rather touching. The Minister will be aware that changes by the water undertakers to discharge water regulations are causing concern for the Bathroom Manufacturers Association and house builders. Will she meet me and a small delegation to discuss how future developments can better look after our waste water?

Dr Coffey: I am sure that we can work that in with the question on developers and biodiversity, Mr Speaker. I recently responded to a written question and a letter from the hon. Gentleman. Perhaps he can look at that first before we consider a further meeting.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): The RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts, which both have fantastic reserves in my constituency in the Newport wetlands and the Magor marsh, are strongly supportive of establishing a nature recovery network to restore and repair habitats. Will the Government commit to putting that on a statutory footing?

Dr Coffey: I have the wonderful RSPB Minsmere and various Suffolk Wildlife Trust sites in my constituency. That is already our pledge. It was in the 25-year environment plan and will be in the forthcoming environment Bill.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): My constituents are up in arms about the felling of trees and vegetation to make way for HS2 during the nesting season. Will my hon. Friend confirm the Government's commitment to biodiversity net gain for new developments?

Dr Coffey: That is absolutely the case. My right hon. Friend spoke to me this morning about this issue. I will follow up on it, because when major infrastructure projects go ahead, it is important that people should have confidence, and while some vegetation might need to be removed, HS2 is supposed to be planting at least 5 million trees. We will make sure that it does so.

Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot Scheme

7. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): If he will hold discussions with the Home Secretary on increasing the limit on workers in the seasonal agricultural workers pilot scheme. [911457]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): The Government have introduced a new immigration pilot scheme for 2019 and 2020 to enable up to 2,500 non-European economic area migrant workers to come to the UK to undertake seasonal employment in the edible horticultural sector. DEFRA and the Home Office will evaluate the outcome before taking any decisions on future arrangements.

Susan Elan Jones: Government Members seem to be obsessed with 31 October. That is a pity, because harvest is coming rather sooner, and I wish they would show a similar interest in that. The NFU has made it absolutely clear that we need a permanent, fully functioning system and that at least 10,000 new workers are required in this area. Why will the Government not act, and why will the Home Office not take proper action?

Mr Goodwill: It is important that we evaluate the pilot before moving further. From my point of view, we are meeting the requirements. We had 700 workers here already by the end of May and we expect to reach the peak in the middle of the summer picking season, although the Home Office might look at how many of those workers go back to the Russian Federation, Ukraine and Moldova at the end. We will need to evaluate that after the pilot before going further.

16. [911466] **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): Abattoirs and food processors in my Gordon constituency are worried about not only seasonal labour but permanent labour and are deeply concerned by the approach taken by Migration Advisory Committee. Is my right hon. Friend working closely with the Home Office to preserve the food sector's labour access?

Mr Goodwill: Absolutely. We understand how big an issue this is. Some 28% of those working in food and drink manufacturing, including fish processing, are from the European Union. That is 106,000 people. It is important that they understand that, whichever way we leave the European Union, including no deal, they will still be able to come here to work and participate in these important industries.

Tree Planting

8. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he has made on implementing the tree planting strategy. [911458]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): In November 2018 we announced that we will consult on a new English tree strategy, setting out how we will accelerate woodland creation to reach our aspiration of increasing woodland cover in England from 10% to 12% by 2060. The consultation on the English tree strategy will be launched later this year, and our recently reappointed tree champion is leading our engagement on this.

Rachael Maskell: But clearly the strategy is not working when councils such as City of York Council fail to sign up to the White Rose Forest project. As we have heard, the Government have failed to reach their target by 71%, so there is no chance that we will see a growth in the number of trees across our country. Will the Minister look at mandating local authorities to sign up to the Government's initiative?

David Rutley: We will do all we can to encourage local authorities to get involved. It is good to hear that Yorkshire Water is planting 1 million trees in Yorkshire. We need to do more, particularly in the hon. Lady's area, with natural flood management techniques upstream. There is lots we can do.

Rare and Native Breeds

9. **George Eustice** (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): What plans his Department has to support (a) rare and (b) native breeds in future agriculture policy. [911459]

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Our rare and native breeds are an important genetic resource. There are several purposes under clauses 1 and 2 of the Agriculture Bill for which financial assistance could be provided to support our genetic heritage.

George Eustice: I declare my interest in that my family are long-standing breeders of both the British Lop pig and pedigree South Devon cattle, but genetic diversity is critical to maintaining resilience in our livestock sectors, and protecting genetic resources is a primary responsibility

for DEFRA. Will the Minister therefore agree to convene a meeting at DEFRA of representatives of our native and rare breeds to discuss what support would be appropriate for them under future policy?

Mr Goodwill: I was already aware of my hon. Friend's considerable interest in this policy area. I am pleased to tell him that a workshop with breed societies will be taking place in London on 12 September to look at the issues that he has in mind. Later today I will be visiting the Lincolnshire show, where I hope to see some of the rare breeds that are bound to be there.

Mr Speaker: This is all very encouraging, but I must say that as we are discussing rare breeds, I feel a great sense of personal sadness that we are not joined this morning by the right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who knows a thing or two about these matters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): As does my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis).

Mr Speaker: I had not seen the hon. Lady but I have now, and I am grateful to the Secretary of State, who is doing what might be called a side line.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I probably should also declare an interest in South Devon cattle, as my family have bred them for generations as well. However, I wanted to ask the Minister about rare wildlife, if I might segue into the matter. Given all his work on general licences recently, what communications has he had with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds about sites of special scientific interest and the work it does culling birds in those areas?

Mr Goodwill: It is important, particularly for ground-nesting birds, that other bird species that can predate on them and damage their nests are controlled. The RSPB carries out that work on land that it controls, and I hope that it will continue doing so to protect those particular rare species.

Badger Culling Programme

10. **Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind):** What recent assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of the badger culling programme. [911460]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): During 2018, badger control operations in 32 areas of England were all successful in meeting their targets. According to Natural England's chief scientist, the results show that

“industry-led badger control continues to deliver the level of effectiveness required by the policy to be confident of achieving disease control benefits”.

Assessments of the effectiveness of badger control are published annually on gov.uk.

Stephen Lloyd: Given the extended roll-out, it is estimated that about 150,000 badgers will have been culled by the end of 2020. This animal, which has been around since the ice age, faces extinction in various

parts of the country. What would the Secretary of State say about investing the money in a national badger vaccination programme? To quote the Wildlife Trusts, should not the Government be investing in “medicine, not marksmen”?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. When it comes to dealing with bovine TB—a terrible disease that damages the lives of cattle and the livelihoods of farmers—we need to consider all steps that are appropriate. Culling and vaccination are both tools in our armoury.

Clean Air Strategy

12. **Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on delivering the clean air strategy 2019. [911462]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has regular discussions with his counterpart at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Discussions are also held at an official level about delivering the clean air strategy and relevant provisions that we hope to bring forward in the forthcoming environment Bill. Local authorities will continue to play a vital role in delivering improvements to the air that we all breathe.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister knows that Bath has a considerable air pollution problem. Idling cars make a measurable contribution to inner-city pollution. I recently tabled a private Member's Bill to give local authorities greater enforcement powers to stop idling cars. Will the Minister consider my proposal to strengthen anti-idling legislation?

Dr Coffey: I believe this is already circulating around the Government and has been for a couple of months. I hope that an announcement will be made very soon.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One local council that could do a much better job on air quality is Labour-controlled Hammersmith and Fulham, by reopening Hammersmith bridge. The diversion of traffic through Fulham and Chelsea is horrendous. Will the Minister join me in calling on the council and the Mayor of London to introduce proper air quality monitoring, particularly on Fulham High Street, to properly assess the catastrophic impact of the council's decision?

Dr Coffey: It is fair to say that air quality across the country is improving, but these sorts of congestion hotspots are really damaging that progress. I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend that the bridge should be opened as quickly as possible.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Ross Thomson) has withdrawn his question, so I call Mr David Duguid.

Leaving the EU: Fisheries Policy

15. **David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con):** What plans he has for fisheries policy after the UK leaves the EU. [911465]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): The Government's vision for future fisheries policy as we leave the European Union is set out in the fisheries White Paper "Sustainable fisheries for future generations", which was published in July 2018.

David Duguid: Will my right hon. Friend confirm his commitment to boosting investment in the fisheries sector to help with expansion outside the common fisheries policy but also to promote export opportunities and the UK domestic market for Scottish seafood after Brexit?

Michael Gove: Absolutely I will. The UK Government will work with the Scottish Government to make sure that we have investment in port facilities in Peterhead and Fraserburgh, and that we have the marketing budget necessary to ensure that the power of our United Kingdom is harnessed to help Scots fishermen and, indeed, Scottish fish processors.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): The Secretary of State has already promised Danish and Iberian fishing fleets that their access to UK waters will continue unhindered after Brexit. How many promises has he made to other foreign countries, and what percentage of the quotas is going to be reserved for UK fishing?

Michael Gove: I have promised no such thing. What I have promised is to ensure that we are out of the European Union and out of the common fisheries policy, in stark contrast to the Scottish National party, which wants to keep us in the European Union and in the common fisheries policy. The Scottish National party and the Scottish Government claim to stand up for Scotland, but at every turn they prefer the politics of grievance and the ideology of separation to the interests of Scotland's fishermen and Scotland's citizens.

Topical Questions

T1. [911469] **Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD):** If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove): I am delighted to announce that Tamara Finkelstein OBE has been appointed as the new permanent secretary at DEFRA. She is the fourth woman in succession to be permanent secretary at this Department. With respect to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), I do think it is a very, very good thing if important institutions in this country are, wherever possible, led by women.

Jo Swinson: I congratulate the new permanent secretary at the Secretary of State's Department. It is always good to see senior women in leadership roles.

The Government have set out a new net zero emissions target. Putting our country on track to meet that in order to tackle the climate emergency is going to take urgent and bold action, so will the Secretary of State commit to bringing forward the date to end the sale of new petrol and diesel cars to 2030, allow onshore wind facilities to be built again, and re-establish the Department of Energy and Climate Change?

Michael Gove: Those are important points, well made. Bringing forward the target by which we get rid of petrol and diesel cars is always kept under review. At the moment, we believe that the target is achievable and stretching, but we will of course keep it under review as more progress is made. On renewable energy, we lead the world in offshore wind, and we have also done a huge amount on solar energy, in particular—99% of the solar power generated in this country has been generated since 2010. I pay tribute to Ministers who served in the coalition Government between 2010 and 2015 for their work in this area.

T2. [911473] **Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con):** When visiting the local Co-op shop last night on my way home from Parliament, I noticed that shoppers were being presented with bags emblazoned with the words, "100% compostable". These bags were perfectly serviceable for the job that they were asked to do. Given that this technology is now available, is it not time that we banned the use of single-use plastic bags and bags for life to help the environment?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The environmental impact of bags, including bags for life, can be reduced simply through reusing them. We will be publishing our response on extending the carrier bag charge to all retailers very soon, so we are not currently considering stopping the use of plastic bags altogether. In our bio-economy strategy, we have committed to issuing a call for evidence, because it is important to note that these biodegradable bags need careful treatment when they come to the end of their life.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Following the recent Scottish deposit return scheme proposals and the conclusion of the Government's consultation on DRS, can the Secretary of State tell us how the Government intend to learn from best practice? Does he hope to emulate the 98.5% recycling rate achieved by Germany for plastic and glass bottles and metal drink cans? Will he commit to a deposit return scheme that matches the ambition of other Governments in Europe, to achieve a UK-wide standard, as suggested in "Our Waste, Our Resources"?

Dr Coffey: This is something that the Government have worked on extensively. I have visited several countries, including Germany, and it is fair to say that not all deposit return schemes take glass. As I have said to the House before, the front end of these schemes is very simple, but how we make the back end work is complex. That is why it is taking some time. We are considering carefully with the devolved Administrations how we can make progress, and I hope we will be able to announce more soon.

T4. [911475] **Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con):** Reforestation is an important part of the Conservative agenda on the environment. Does the Minister agree that the Woodland Trust's Smithills estate is a key part of that strategy?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (David Rutley): I agree. The Smithills estate was where the first tree of the northern forest was planted, which is a very important step forward. It is a great site, overshadowed by the wonderful Winter Hill TV mast. I love it, and I am grateful for my hon. Friend's support for it.

T5. [911476] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): An investigation published last week by *The Guardian*, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and “Channel 4 News” suggested that at least 3,000 deaths each year could be avoided if agricultural ammonia emissions were halved. The Secretary of State said that he wanted to close the current loopholes by 2025. May I suggest that it would be a marvellous legacy for him as he leaves the Department—which he presumably will, whatever happens today—to introduce a comprehensive ammonia reduction strategy?

Michael Gove: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s valuable advice. She is right: when it comes to dealing with air quality, we need to deal with ammonia emissions. We have a number of policies that we will implement as part of our environment Bill.

Mary Robison (Cheadle) (Con): The River Mersey, which originates in Stockport and flows through my constituency on its journey to Liverpool, has been named and shamed by Greenpeace as proportionately more polluted than the great Pacific garbage patch. That follows a University of Manchester study showing that microplastics in the river bed sediment were higher than in any other environment. What work is the Department doing to address the issue of microplastics entering the waterways, and what pressure is being put on the industry to address it?

Dr Coffey: I grew up in Liverpool, and it is sad to hear that terrible statistic revealed by Greenpeace. I think it is fair to say that the Government have already taken action by reducing microplastics from certain cosmetic products and rinse-off products. We will do more by taking forward the ban on plastic straws and other single-use plastic items. We will continue to work with the water industry on what more we can do about filtration, so that we keep plastics out of the rivers.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Given the extraordinarily high contribution of cars on our roads to poor air quality, will the Secretary of State lobby the Department for Transport to review all major road schemes to see whether they will contribute to poor air quality, and look at modal shift, to get people off our roads and out of their cars?

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman knows of what he speaks, as a distinguished former taxi driver, as well as a very effective spokesman for the people of Eltham in the Borough of Greenwich. We absolutely do need to take account in all new road-building schemes of the impact of pollution.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Yesterday I was able to sponsor National Refill Day with Water UK. Reusing our water bottles means that we could get rid of millions of plastic bottles that we do not need. It is about not only recycling plastic, but using a lot less. Does the Secretary of State welcome that?

Michael Gove: I hugely welcome that, and I am grateful to water companies and others who have made the provision of water fountains a critical part of ensuring that we use less plastic.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The Heathrow masterplan released this week promises 40,000 more vehicles on our roads, 6 million more tonnes of CO₂ released per annum and new noise for hundreds of

thousands of households. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Secretary of State for Transport about the environmental consequences of Heathrow expansion?

Michael Gove: Intense and productive discussions, but it is also important to recognise that a majority of Labour MPs and Scottish National party MPs support Heathrow expansion.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State has answered this several times, but it bears asking again: is it still his contention that other European Union countries are looking enviously at this Government’s efforts to leave the EU?

Michael Gove: Increasingly enviously, and I think it is the case that other European Union countries, many of which I love, are looking enviously at the gallimaufry of talent that exists on the Government Benches at this time. I suspect that those other European Union countries appreciate the festival of democracy in which we are currently engaged.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we turn to the next session of oral questions, I must advise the House that the urgent question I had granted to the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has now been withdrawn by the hon. Gentleman, so we will proceed from Question Time to the business question, and then to the two ministerial statements that are scheduled to follow it. That is really for the benefit of Members’ timekeeping, so that they know when the sessions they may wish to attend will be.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Serious Youth Violence

1. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps the Church of England is taking to help tackle serious youth violence; and if she will make a statement. [911477]

7. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to help tackle serious youth violence; and if she will make a statement. [911484]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church was represented at the knife crime summit organised by the Prime Minister at No. 10 earlier this year, and the General Synod will be debating this subject at its session next month. There is no question but that this issue is of the utmost seriousness, as too many young lives are being lost.

Daniel Kawczynski: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Youth violence is often a symptom of a lack of role models and moral leaders. What part does she feel the Church can play to help communities in this area?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I think it is very well known that the Church provides role models for young people, such as youth workers. In the community, we work alongside young people in schools, youth groups and congregations. Our clergy, teachers and members of our congregations are supporting young people who are at risk of getting caught up in violence and their families, and young people in pupil referral units.

Vicky Foxcroft: My constituent Ben Lindsay recently set up Power the Fight, a charity that enables churches to become part of the solution to tackling youth violence. The period after school is one of the most dangerous times for violence among young people. Churches have resources, buildings and volunteers that Power the Fight believes could be used to disrupt violence and keep young people safe. Will the right hon. Lady meet me and my constituent to talk about this valuable work?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady, who will know that the Church uses its community halls and facilities in particular to reach out to young people. There are a number of examples of that, but may I especially cite the work of Premier Christian Radio, which broadcasts from London? It has raised awareness of youth violence and what the Church can do to help. We are certainly active in this area, and I would be happy to meet her.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in praising the work of street pastors, including those active in Kettering, who often find themselves helping to defuse potentially violent situations in our town centres late at night?

Dame Caroline Spelman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to pay tribute to the work of street pastors. In Birmingham, the nearest city to my constituency, I have gone out with street pastors at night and seen them minister to very vulnerable young people, making sure they are safe on their streets. The street pastors do amazing work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Lady for her response. Will she outline the benefits that church-run youth clubs provide, and has she had discussions with the Chancellor to secure additional funding for faith-based youth clubs?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I think I have been outlining that. The Church actually provides youth workers in our communities where many have fallen away, and it continues to support the presence of such role models in our society, as is recognised by the Government. I could give the hon. Gentleman a whole series of examples of how the Government's community fund is being used, through churches, to deliver knife crime awareness training and to help to tackle this problem. Indeed, many churches provide amnesty boxes for weapons that may otherwise cause people to lose their lives.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) is a member of Kettering Borough Council and also a special constable, my only surprise is that he does not serve as a street pastor, but that may be only a matter of time.

Clergy Recruitment: London

2. **Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con):** What steps the Church of England has taken to recruit clergy in London in the last 12 months. [911479]

Dame Caroline Spelman: London presents a very positive picture in the life of the Church for the recruitment of clergy. The Church set itself a target to increase the number of vocations in all dioceses by 50% by next year. Most dioceses are well on track, and London expects to reach that target this year.

Greg Hands: I welcome that great news on recruitment in London. A year ago three of our major parishes in Fulham had vacancies, but in April I was delighted to attend the induction of Rev. Ross Gunderson at St Etheldreda. Next Wednesday will be the induction of Rev. Penny Seabrook at All Saints, and we hope soon to fill the vacancy at St John Walham Green. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating and welcoming our new clergy in Fulham?

Dame Caroline Spelman: With pleasure—I wish all those incumbents great success in their new parishes. That demonstrates that the commitment to more training for vocations is really working, and I should share with the House the fact that there is now a 50:50 ratio of men and women in training.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Temporary Chamber

3. **Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP):** What recent discussions the Commission has had on the design of the proposed temporary Chamber for the House of Commons. [911480]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Commission has heard various oral representations. At its meeting on 14 May 2018, it considered a statement of accommodation requirements for the House of Commons decant. Most recently, on 20 May, the Commission considered the northern estate programme, which includes the temporary Chamber for the House of Commons, and endorsed the scheme's proposals. Those proposals are currently out to a public consultation that closes on 28 June, and all comments and observations will be welcomed.

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised if I ask whether there is the intention to ensure that any temporary Chamber is equipped with facilities for electronic voting so that we can at least experiment with a bit of modernisation. However, when MPs and the public make submissions to the consultation, will they have the opportunity to suggest even more radical proposals, such as desks that we might lean on or facilities for plugging in electronic devices, as are seen in other Parliaments around the world?

Tom Brake: It was no surprise that the hon. Gentleman made his point about electronic voting, which is something that I would like to see tested in the temporary Chamber—that is a personal opinion. I will monitor the responses to the consultation that are received by 28 June, and I will be astonished and extremely disappointed if the hon. Gentleman does not submit a response setting out exactly how he would like the temporary Chamber to operate.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Cathedrals: Contribution to Local Economies

4. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What estimate the Church of England has made of the contribution that cathedrals make to the local economy; and if she will make a statement. [911481]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): It is estimated that in 2017 there were more than 10 million tourist and leisure visitors to our cathedrals, including Westminster Abbey, generating some £125 million for their local economies. That is a 37% increase from 2004, the last time that that was measured.

Michael Fabricant: That is encouraging news; I know how Lichfield Cathedral benefits the local community.

Mr Speaker, you may be interested to learn that next year will be the 900th anniversary of the birth of Thomas à Becket and the 400th anniversary of the establishment of the American colony of the Pilgrim Fathers. To mark that, I believe there will be an initiative: the year of the cathedrals. Will my right hon. Friend say a little more about how that will stimulate local economies?

Dame Caroline Spelman: We had a meeting of the deans of cathedrals in Parliament this week, and the Dean of Lichfield, who is a fantastic champion for that cathedral, came up with an interesting proposal, through the Association of English Cathedrals, to introduce a pilgrimage passport. That would encourage people—not just from this country, but from abroad—to visit more of our cathedrals, obtaining a stamp at every one, and would indeed assist the overall economy.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Having a cathedral city is a very fine thing, but will the right hon. Lady explain the arcane procedures through which a town can get a cathedral? Many places that I would call diddly-squat little places have a cathedral, whereas Huddersfield, a bursting, successful major university town, does not have the status of a cathedral city.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman is right: the process is arcane and complicated. My nearest city of Birmingham has what is known as a parish church cathedral, whereas Coventry, the city across the other side of my constituency, had an ancient cathedral which was bombed and then renewed. I think the best thing I can do for the hon. Gentleman is to write to him about how this is arrived at.

Mr Speaker: As the hon. Gentleman is now at the mid-point of his parliamentary career, having served for 40 years, perhaps he can devote the next 40 to campaigning on this important matter for his constituents.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Provision for Cyclists

5. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment the Commission has made of the adequacy of provision for cyclists on the parliamentary estate. [911482]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Parliamentary authorities continue to review the use of bicycle spaces to ensure that demand is met.

Rachael Maskell: Like many colleagues, I cycle to the parliamentary estate and I have to say that the parking facilities are woeful. If we are going to achieve a modal shift to encourage more employees of the House, as well as Members of Parliament, to cycle to this place, it is absolutely vital that we have adequate parking facilities. Will the right hon. Gentleman meet me and others to explore how that can be achieved?

Tom Brake: I am very happy to do so. I am a cyclist myself, and I must say that the facilities within Parliament are perhaps not quite what they should be, certainly given the lack of covered parking provision for cycles, so I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady. I should point out that access to the parliamentary estate for cyclists has been improved, but I agree that there is a need to look at not just current provision, but provision under the northern estate programme and, at a future date, the restoration and renewal of the Palace.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. We have not reached the hon. Lady yet. She is ahead of herself.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Employee Pay Gap

6. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What estimate she has made of the gap between the highest paid and lowest paid employees of the Church Commissioners. [911483]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The national church institutions have a unified pay policy that operates across all the institutions. There is an eight-band pay structure that is designed to ensure that staff in posts of equal value are paid the same. If we were to exclude staff in the Church Commissioners investment division, the ratio between the highest and lowest paid would be 7.3:1.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that answer. The Archbishop of Canterbury has talked extensively about the need for economic justice, so I was shocked to read in *Personnel Today* that the Church Commissioners have a 23:1 pay ratio between

the highest and lowest paid in the organisation. The highest paid person receives £256,000 and one staff member was given a bonus of £250,000. For charities, the ratio is 10:1 and for local government the ratio is 15:1, so what does she think about what is going on in the Church Commissioners?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I explained, the ratio, if we exclude the highest paid investment division, is 7.3:1. The investment division includes asset managers, who have to manage assets of over £8 billion. They are paid at the market rate for asset management, but they are nowhere near the top of the range. External advice is taken by the Church Commissioners on what and how we should pay, but those are the going rates for top asset managers in this country, and the assets of the Church of England have to be well managed.

Global Businesses' Working Practices

8. **Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What steps the Church Commissioners are taking to use their influence and responsible investment policy to engage positively with global businesses on their working practices. [911485]

Dame Caroline Spelman: This question relates to the previous one in an interesting way.

This month, the Church of England was ranked second globally in an industry survey of responsible investors. One of our most recent engagements has been holding to account the mining company, Vale, as responsible for the collapse of the dam in Brumadinho, Brazil. That underlines the point that really good, responsible asset management is something that one has to pay for.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for that answer. The dam collapse claimed the lives of 246 people. Vale is a British company and it is totally unacceptable to have lower standards of health and safety abroad than at home. What is the Church of England's strategy, as an investor, for tackling that?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church Commissioners hosted a roundtable meeting with other investors and senior management from a number of the largest mining companies in the world, which exposed the fact that this is a widespread problem. To date, 29 of the top 50 mining companies have made disclosures about tailings dams. This is how investors can have an influence in an ethical way over their policy.

Mobile Phone Masts

9. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What guidance the Church Commissioners issue to parishes wishing to install mobile phone masts on church buildings. [911486]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England signed an accord with the Government in 2017 that signalled its intent to support national targets on mobile and broadband connectivity, particularly in rural and hard-to-reach areas. At previous Question Times, I have encouraged Members of the House by saying that if they have notspots for broadband and mobile provision, all the towers, spires, buildings and land of the Church of England is at their disposal to address that.

Sir Desmond Swayne: But the new telecommunications code has wrecked the market by advantaging big business at the expense of small sports clubs and churches. Can I enlist the support of the Commissioners?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There is evidence that changes by the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to the electronic communications code are making it more complicated, although not impossible, for churches and other community buildings to be used to address shortcomings in the roll-out of digital infrastructure. We should work together and go and lobby DCMS to tackle the unintended consequences of the changes in that communications code.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Lady will be aware of the growing controversy over 5G and of those who worry about its installation. It would be quite wrong if the Church was brought into those arguments in such a way that an unfair burden was put on it.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman would like to join the lobbying party, because this is one more aspect that needs to be seriously looked into. There are gaps in provision under 4G, and the worst possible thing would be for the digital divide to continue or get worse as we move to 5G technology, so I think we should seek an early meeting.

Persecution of Christians: Bishop of Truro's Inquiry

10. **Andrew Griffiths** (Burton) (Con): What steps the Church Commissioners are taking to promote the Bishop of Truro's inquiry into the persecution of Christians. [911487]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church welcomed the decision by the Foreign Secretary to invite the Bishop of Truro to chair an independent review of the work of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. That is not a Church of England inquiry, but a Foreign Office inquiry. However, the Church is actively encouraging its agencies and charities to feed in their experiences.

Andrew Griffiths: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I wholeheartedly support her in congratulating the Foreign Secretary and the Bishop of Truro on producing the report, which highlights the persecution of Christians not only on a large scale, as we saw in places such as Sri Lanka, but on a small scale in everyday life. Is not promoting the good work of Christians and Christianity in our society one of the best things that we can do? May I draw her attention to the Renew church in Uttoxeter, which has its mission week this week involving digging gardens, helping schools, washing cars and showing the best of Christianity?

Dame Caroline Spelman: It is just the interim report that has been published, and the important thing was that it mapped where the persecution takes place around the world. We await phase 2 with great interest, when we expect to hear more about what we can actually get done. I agree with my hon. Friend about the kind of approach that could be taken.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Relocation of Parliament

11. **Mr Gavin Shuker** (Luton South) (Ind): What assessment the Commission has made of the potential merits of permanently moving Parliament outside London.
[911488]

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): An option to move Parliament out of the Palace of Westminster to a new purpose-built building was included in the restoration and renewal pre-feasibility study of 2012. The House of Commons Commission reviewed that study in October that year and decided to rule the option out, agreeing that no further analysis would be undertaken on it. The House of Lords Commission took a similar view, and

that commitment was reaffirmed by the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster in 2016, and more recently, in resolutions of both Houses in 2018.

Mr Shuker: I note the right hon. Gentleman's answer, but when we rebuilt this Chamber, Churchill said:

“We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us.”—[*Official Report*, 28 October 1943; Vol. 393, c. 403.]

Given just how broken our political culture has now been demonstrated to be, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that it is time to take a bold approach and move into a modern Parliament in one of the great cities of the UK?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his supplementary question; I might have expected him to call for Parliament to be moved to Luton, but he did not. Clearly a decision has been taken. Some of the things that he would like might be possible for the temporary Chamber—that matter that was raised earlier—and I hope that he will want to make a written submission pressing for that Chamber to be used to trial and test some of the things that would improve our democracy.

Business of the House

10.34 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 (Mel Stride): The business for the week commencing 24 June will include the following:

MONDAY 24 JUNE—Second reading of the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No.3) Bill [Lords], followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019.

TUESDAY 25 JUNE—Second reading of the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 JUNE—Opposition day (un-allotted half day). There will be a debate on a motion on immigration in the name of the Scottish National party, followed by a general debate on Armed Forces Day.

THURSDAY 27 JUNE—Debate on a motion relating to the contribution of co-operatives and mutuals to the economy, followed by a general debate on the children's future food report. The subjects of these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 28 JUNE—The House will not be sitting.

Colleagues will also wish to know that subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the summer recess at the close of business on Thursday 25 July, and will return on Tuesday 3 September.

Valerie Vaz: That is very helpful to all Members.

I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for suggesting the business. I am pleased that we now have a recess date, but can the Leader of the House tell us who will be at the Dispatch Box on Wednesday 24 July?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): How can he know that?

Valerie Vaz: Well, that is what I am asking him. I am asking him when the identity of the new Prime Minister will be confirmed. I understand that all the results will be out on 22 July; perhaps he could let us know. I am pleased to learn that the House will sit in September, and I am sure that the Leader of the House will announce the conference recess dates as well. I think it is only fair to the outgoing Prime Minister that she knows when her last Question Time will be, and, more important, only fair to us—to Parliament.

The Leader of the House will know that we have had a busy week. He will also know that on Tuesday we had a Back-Bench debate about the Cox report. When is he likely to table a motion for a debate in Government time? It may be necessary to change a Standing Order, so will he find a date as a matter of urgency, before the House rises on 25 July?

I know that Back-Bench debates are important, but there is a backlog of very important legislation. The Financial Services (Implementation of Legislation) Bill, the Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, the Agriculture Bill and the

Fisheries Bill need Report stages, and the Trade Bill is again stuck in the other place. When are we likely to debate those Bills?

Ministers are so occupied with their bids to become the next Prime Minister. Only after dropping out of the Conservative leadership race did the Health Secretary order a root-and-branch review of NHS food. Parts of the country have been unsettled by torrential rain, homes have been left without power and roads have been flooded in Lincolnshire—people in Wainfleet are in tears—but there has been no statement from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I know that there have been questions to him, but there has been no specific statement about the people in Wainfleet. The Home Secretary has said that he will put 20,000 more police officers on the beat if he is elected leader, but the Government have cut the number already. He is merely repeating a commitment made by Her Majesty's Opposition.

As for the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), he has been careless with his words. He has said that his comments about Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe had made “no difference”, but they were used at her trial. He has put a woman's life at risk and separated a family. For the record, Nazanin was on holiday visiting her parents. She has been in jail for three years. I met Richard Ratcliffe yesterday, and other Members have visited him too. Will the Leader of the House raise Nazanin's case with both the former and the current Foreign Secretary, and send the Iranian Government the message that they should show the international community their seriousness, and free Nazanin and reunite the family now?

A motion scheduled for next Tuesday is to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft Climate Change Act 2008 (2050 Target Amendment) Order 2019. The motion is a step in the right direction, but why are we waiting until 2050? Heathrow is already the largest single source of carbon emissions in the UK. Plans published on Tuesday revealed that Heathrow airport will construct a third runway by 2026 and complete its 50% expansion by 2050. This includes diverting rivers, moving roads and rerouting the M25 through a tunnel under the new runway. The Government's own figures show that nearly 1 million households are to face increased daytime noise from allowing a further 700 flights a day. May we have a statement on the new plans for the expansion of Heathrow airport, including the environmental impacts?

It is Children's Hospice Week this week. Hospices across the country are under threat, including one in my constituency, Acorns. It employs 70 people to care for 233 Black Country children and their families. It is facing closure due to lack of Government funding. I met my constituent Mark Lyttle, a bereaved parent, who spoke about his daughter Isabella, who was cared for by Acorns. Mark said Acorns Walsall extended and improved her quality of life and provides the family with ongoing bereavement help, because, sadly, Isabella passed away earlier this year at the age of 11. Black Country MPs across parties are working to save this hospice, and it is the only one of the three in the area to close.

I know that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care should be accountable. We have heard the phrase “A bedpan dropping and we hear it Whitehall,”

[Valerie Vaz]

but so much for accountability: at this stage we have to write to the Health Secretary and the head of NHS England, and the Prime Minister said yesterday that they would match-fund what the clinical commissioning groups put forward. May we use the good offices of the Leader of the House to raise this with the Health Secretary? We need the Health Secretary to make the decision so that children's hospices, particularly Acorns, have their long-term funding. We cannot crowdfund and fundraise to save a children's hospice.

The third anniversary of Jo Cox's murder was on 16 June. The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) is working very hard on one of Kim Leadbeater's key asks for all of us: to focus on the humanitarian emergency in Syria, one of the issues that mattered most to Jo, by highlighting the plight of civilians trapped under the merciless bombing in Idlib.

It has been a busy week for me and the Leader of the House. Yesterday we agreed that we would save the education centre. It is also Refugee Week, and the education and engagement service will be providing a workshop to the refugee and migrant centre in Walsall, "An introduction to your UK Parliament". I am pleased that that is going ahead and that education is also to be part of any restoration and renewal.

Finally, I offer my commiserations to the Scottish football team but wish the Lionesses well in the next stage of the World cup.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Lady for her various questions, which I will go through in some detail in a moment. I also thank her for welcoming the recess dates, which I think we are all relieved have now finally been announced.

Having just announced the summer recess dates, an idea has occurred to me. We meet as a merry band on Thursdays—we are like a tightly knit club—and I wonder if this recess we might perhaps keep the camaraderie going, and all go off on holiday together. I would be happy to hire a bus or a charabanc, Mr Speaker, and as the new Leader who, as you know, has brought such a powerful sense of direction and renewed purpose to this House, I would be happy to drive it. Nothing would give me more pleasure than for my new-found friend, the shadow Leader of the House, to join me. She would be serenaded of course by the ever-cheerful hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) on the pipes, or maybe the banjo, and accompanied by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) displaying his musical prowess on the spoons while spouting Wordsworth and Keats and John Clare and regaling us with cheery tales of those halcyon Victorian times when small boys cheerfully shinned up chimneys and widespread malnutrition and rickets were a mere footnote to a far happier age. And as the sun slips below the horizon we will hear the extraordinary tales of the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) explaining how he quietly took over the entire business of government with his Backbench Business Committee. Or perhaps we should stick to our original plans.

The hon. Lady raised several important points. First, she asks who will be at the Dispatch Box when Parliament goes into recess. Of course, that is unknown; I have no

crystal ball. There are four finalists, all extremely strong candidates, and we will have to wait and see. I can offer her a membership form for the Conservative party so that next time she can participate in the excitement and fun. I was grateful to receive her satisfaction, however, at our having set out the situation for September and at the fact that we will be sitting from early that month.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Cox report. Her request for a debate would need to be taken up through the usual channels, but I have taken her request on board—it is the second time she has raised it with me—and undertake to come back to her later today at least with something by way of a response, even if it is to say that I have asked the usual channels at my end of the usual channel to consider it seriously. She also asked about various pieces of future legislation and when they will be coming forward. They will come forward in due course. On flood defences, which she mentioned, we have of course just had Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions, which was an opportunity for Members to address that issue.

The hon. Lady made various important points about Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has now spent three years in jail in Iran. I can assure her that, whatever may or may not have been said by others in the past, the Government are working extremely hard to do whatever they can to ensure her imminent release. She also raised carbon emissions, which she will know the Government have reduced by 25% in terms of greenhouse gases since 2010. We have now had over 1,700 hours of producing power in our country without the use of coal, which is the longest stretch in the history of power production in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Lady made some very important points about hospices, particularly relating to the care of children, on which subject there will be an Adjournment debate on 1 July in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). The hon. Lady may wish to attend and urge others to do likewise. I would certainly be prepared to facilitate the approaches she requested to the Secretary of State for Health in terms of funding.

The hon. Lady made some very important points about Jo Cox and the excellent work of Kim Leadbeater and her concerns about humanitarian aid in Syria. In that regard, we have a proud record in this country and have allocated some billions of pounds of assistance. Given that she also referred to Refugee Week, I should remind the House that we have agreed to take 20,000 refugees and 3,000 children from Syria.

Like the hon. Lady, I was pleased that during the remaining stages of the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill yesterday we underscored our commitment to education in this place, and, like her also, I commiserate with our Scottish colleagues on the football result yesterday while also cheering on the England team.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I think that the Backbench Business Committee is universally regarded in this House as a complete success. One of the great policies of David Cameron and Nick Clegg was to bring in a business of the House commission within two years of the coalition Government coming to power. The chaos in this place over the last few months caused by people trying to suspend Standing Orders was the

result of our not having a business of the House committee. Can we have a debate on this matter? If we are to have a new Prime Minister, it would be a very good thing if all the parties could agree to have a business of the House committee so that we do not repeat the farce of the last few months.

Mel Stride: The Government's position on a House business committee remains unchanged: we will not be bringing forward proposals to establish such a committee. There was an absence of consensus on the issue at the end of the previous Parliament, and we believe that that remains the case today.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the purgatory for next week. As for his recess plans, they sound like some kind of holiday from hell, and I think I will resist the temptation to join him in that particular venture. I also thank him for his kind regards about the Scotland football team. I think we are recovering from the heartbreak of last night, and we all wish the Lionesses the very best in the remaining stages of the contest.

This business statement is unbelievable. Other than half a day for the Scottish National party, it is another week of absolutely nothing. This House should now be done under the Vagrancy Act. Never before in the history of Parliament has so little been done by so many on behalf of so few, as Churchill would never have said. But small mercies—at last this is the final day of the contest to see who will be gubbed by the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). It has become a kind of grotesque “Love Island”, without the love, the entertainment or the island. Maybe it is just Boris island. And I seriously do not get all this fuss about the issue of the racist rantings of the right hon. Gentleman being raised. If people say racist and unacceptable things, they have to expect to be held to account for them. I represent the most marginal SNP/Tory seat in the country. My leaflet is set to go, and it is simply a picture of the right hon. Gentleman and all his choice comments, with added quotes from Ruth Davidson. Scotland just will not take to his appalling “Etonic” buffoonery, and reasonable soft Tory voters in Scotland will be deserting the Tories in droves.

May we have a debate about Brexit? Remember that? They gave us extra time to try to resolve it, but they also told us to use that time wisely. We have not debated it in weeks, and there is no plan to debate it in the coming weeks. It is four weeks until the summer recess, and no progress has been made. Can the Leader of the House confirm that we will not be seeing the withdrawal agreement again? It must be dead and buried now. There is a new word that I want to introduce to the parliamentary lexicon, and that word is “unicornism”. That now seems to be the central policy of this Government in their approach to Brexit. They are doing nothing other than waste time and run down the clock. Halloween will soon be upon us, and the nightmare on Brexit Street will be set to haunt us all.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his weekly contribution. I have to say that it had a familiar ring to it, although I have to disagree with him about the summer recess. How could it possibly be a holiday from hell with him there? It would be nothing other than a great pleasure. He did give us the same old tunes, though. Last week I said he was using the Abba playbook,

but this week I am going to elevate him to the Beatles. His meandering litany of woe was “The Long and Winding Road” that we had to endure, but as we know, it will all end up in the same place for the “Nowhere Man”. Anyway. They don't get any better, do they?

The hon. Gentleman asks for a Brexit debate. The House has certainly debated Brexit at significant length over a very significant period—the best part of three years now. He could have chosen this very week to debate it in the half day allotted to the Scottish National party, although I have no doubt that, in the immigration debate that the SNP has chosen, he will be able to weave the European Union in somewhere.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the future of the BBC? There have already been concerns about taking away free TV licences from the over-75s, but frankly, after that dreadful debate on Monday between my parliamentary colleagues, the quality of public broadcasting needs to be looked at, and presumably, during the course of our debate, we could find out who the idiot was in central office who agreed to the format of that programme in the first place.

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend tempts me. On the specific issue of the free TV licence, we are urging the BBC to rethink its position. I have to say that I agree with my hon. Friend's observation on the televised hustings, which made the candidates look like some kind of boy band perched on their stools. The BBC should always be an institution that is debated, including in further debates in this House.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I was sad to see the demise of the Scottish ladies' football team last night, when they snatched defeat from the jaws of victory late in the game after taking a 3-0 lead. I was reminded that it has been only 41 years since Ally MacLeod and his tartan army ventured forth to Buenos Aires and sadly came back undone.

The Backbench Business Committee had a dozen applications for estimates day debates, and the business for those days has now been determined as relating to the spending of the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for International Development and the Department for Education. Will the Leader of the House confirm the dates for those debates? We have been led to believe that they would occur on 2 and 3 July, but I understand that there is now some doubt about that.

Despite the fact that the Backbench Business Committee has been getting an awful lot of business, I remind the Leader of the House that we still have unmet demand. He should also take note that, on Monday, the House went on to the Adjournment debate at 7.08 pm and adjourned at 7.47 pm. If the Leader of the House and the business team think that there is likely to be a shortfall in business—this was despite four urgent questions on Monday—could he think about making the Backbench Business Committee aware so that we could put something on at short notice?

Mel Stride: The dates for the estimates days are not currently available, but I will ensure that we get them to the hon. Gentleman as soon as possible. I take note of

[*Mel Stride*]

his rather interesting observation about the possibility of a Backbench Business debate coming to the Floor of the House when other business is running short. There may be all sorts of technical issues around that, but I am happy to take his suggestion away and give it some thought.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): A civilised society is defined by the way that it copes with and counters disadvantage. I was therefore alarmed to discover yesterday that 79% of assistance dog owners had been made to feel unwelcome or had received second-class service because they had their assistance dog with them, and in particular that 73% of those with guide dogs or assistance dogs had been turned away by a minicab or taxi driver. The Government commissioned a report on taxi licensing, and one of its recommendations was that we deal with this prejudice against people with guide dogs and other assistance dogs. It is time that the Government acted and joined you, Mr Speaker, and I, whose mission has always been to redistribute advantage.

Mel Stride: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question, and I agree with him that access for assistance dogs and their owners, especially in taxis and other modes of transport, is extremely important. I would be happy to facilitate on his behalf an appropriate meeting with a Minister in the Department for Transport.

I know that my right hon. Friend is rather fond of poetry and, having been forewarned of his question, I found a poem by Julian Stearns Cutler that I think is quite appropriate to him as well as to dogs:

You're only a dog, old fellow;
a dog, and you've had your day;
But never a friend of all my friends
has been truer than you always.

Mr Speaker: Well, what a beautiful reply from the Treasury Bench. I must say to the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) that I have just received his most gracious, handwritten, borderline poetic letter in his illustrious capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Lebanon, and I intend to reply by hand—although probably not, as he would prefer, by the use of the quill pen—similarly graciously and within a very short timeframe. My response to his request will be in the affirmative, and I expect that he will wish to dance round a red telephone box, if he can find one, in appreciation of my reply.

Valerie Vaz: Is it in verse?

Mr Speaker: My letter is not in verse. I know my limitations. I cannot compete with the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings on that front.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) recently joined me as a trustee of the John Clare Trust.

I welcome the Leader of the House's comments on Jo Cox. She was a Labour family friend, and her constituency was close to mine. I know we do not talk about these things, but I still worry about the safety and security of Members, particularly female Members, of

this House, and I do not think we have yet come to terms with some of the vulnerabilities involved. That is not for major debate.

In most of our towns and cities, we are poisoning many women—pregnant women and older women—and men, too with the dirty air they breathe every day. Can we have an urgent debate on a fast programme of activity, not the Government's 2040 deadline, to cut down the poisonous air our people are breathing in every day?

Mel Stride: I echo the hon. Gentleman's comments about Jo Cox and, more generally, about security. It would not be appropriate for me to discuss it on the Floor of the House, but I assure him that I have already met the Chairman of Ways and Means and others to discuss matters of security across the parliamentary estate, which I take extremely seriously.

We have a clean air strategy, of course, and the Government have done a great deal to cut many emissions substantially over the past several years. Given that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), is still looking for opportunities for yet further debates, clean air might be a good subject. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) might like to approach him on that basis.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): In eight recent Department for Work and Pensions appeal cases in my constituency the DWP has not submitted information to the court in time. That has led to the hearings being postponed, which is obviously distressing for the appellants. Will the Government make a statement on what they will do to make sure that the DWP adheres to proper timescales? Will the Leader of the House confirm that this is sheer incompetence from the DWP, and not a deliberate Government strategy?

Mel Stride: I have two answers for the hon. Gentleman. First, when it comes to specific DWP cases—he cited some cases in his question—I am happy to facilitate an approach to the relevant Minister to make sure those cases are specifically looked at. On his more general point about how these cases are handled, DWP questions on 1 July will be a good opportunity to raise the matter.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): It has been revealed today that Warrington Hospital has published a list of charges for operations that used to be free on the NHS. These are not cosmetic procedures but things like hip and knee operations and cataract removals. Can we have a debate on the creeping privatisation of the NHS under this Government and the denial of essential treatment to people who cannot afford to pay?

Mel Stride: As a party and as a Government, we are entirely committed to healthcare being free at the point of delivery and on a universal basis. The Opposition often assert that wholesale privatisation of the NHS is occurring, which is simply not the case. The private sector has been involved in the NHS ever since its inception. Most of the drugs used by the NHS come from private companies, and general practitioners are effectively employed on a similar basis. As to the record of this Government, we have made the largest cash injection into the NHS in its history.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): The Leader of the House is well aware of the plight of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, who has already been mentioned in the House this morning. Richard Ratcliffe, her husband, is now on hunger strike outside the Iranian embassy here in London to show solidarity with his wife and to highlight the appalling conditions in which she is being held.

Mr Ratcliffe's sister lives in my Newport West constituency, and she is extremely concerned about the physical and mental health of both Richard and Nazanin. Given that the previous Foreign Secretary made a bad situation worse with his comments on her detention, will the current Foreign Secretary come to the House to update us on the efforts being made to get Nazanin back home as quickly as possible to be reunited with her daughter and husband?

Mel Stride: I have already touched on the issue of Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe and repeat that it is totally unacceptable that she should be held. We are engaged with the Iranian Government. I also respect the fact that her husband has entered into a hunger strike, as she has at the same time. For that reason, and all the others of her detainment, we wish to see her released as quickly as possible. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has raised Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe's case with President Rouhani, and we will continue to push diplomatically on this matter.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am upset with the Leader of the House, as he did not invite me on his bus tour, but perhaps he will let me know what slogan he intended having on the side of the bus. I am also disappointed that the urgent question has been cancelled; I wonder whether the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) has been sat on. I will turn the homework that I had done for the UQ into a question for the Leader of the House. Will he make time for a debate, in Government time, about how extreme is the new normal in the Tory party and, therefore, the Government? He will know that a majority of Conservative party members are willing to see their party destroyed and the UK broken up in order to secure Brexit. It seems that defaulting on our debts, as Argentina did, is also the preferred course of action. So may we have that debate, when we could also debate the damage that no deal would do to the UK economy and the damage a default on our debt would do to our international credibility?

Mel Stride: May I apologise profusely for not having invited the right hon. Gentleman on our holiday? I assure him that there would be nothing disagreeable on the side of the bus, but we do have a dress code and so, for that reason, I am not entirely sure he would be able to join us—but who knows?

I have no idea why my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) withdrew his UQ, but I can assure the House that he was not sat on—and certainly not by me. I can think of nothing worse than the prospect of sitting on him. As for the issue of debates on the EU, I think I have addressed that earlier; there will be plenty of opportunities, in different guises, to discuss that, and I look forward to the right hon. Gentleman bringing his suggestions forward.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) judged that the situation had changed since his submission of the urgent question, and presumably it

had changed to his satisfaction. I know no further than that. I am not surprised that the Leader of the House did not sit on the hon. Member for Stone, and indeed I should be very surprised if any Member on the Treasury Bench attempted to do so, for there has been one consistent thread in the career of the hon. Member for Stone and that is that he has had a relationship with the Whips characterised by trust and understanding—I do not think he has always trusted them and they most certainly have not always understood him.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): New guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence says that employers should help their staff to take part in physical activity. This measure would improve mental and physical health, and support our NHS, so may we have a statement from the Government about promoting physical activity in the workplace?

Mel Stride: Before I answer that question, may I reply to you, Mr Speaker, about my hon. Friend the Member for Stone and reassure everybody I have invited on the holiday that he will not be there, and so there will be no sitting on him, be it on the holiday or otherwise? I say that just so we are absolutely clear what is going on in these important questions.

As for the issue of employers and physical health, there is clearly a link between physical activity and ensuring both physical and mental health. This might be an opportunity to speak to the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee about another worthy possible contender for his attention.

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): Yesterday, reports emerged that the Warrington and Halton Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust has been advertising a price list for operations that were once free on the NHS. Vital procedures such as hip and knee operations will cost more than £18,000, which is way outside most ordinary people's budgets. Recently, we have been seeing the privatisation of our NHS advertised to my constituents, with sick and vulnerable people being exploited for profit. Will the Leader of the House give time for a ministerial statement or a debate on this important issue?

Mel Stride: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that that question was in effect asked some moments ago. My answer remains the same.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The House will be aware that Ford has announced redundancies in my Bridgend constituency. Some 1,700 people are going to lose their and their families' income, livelihoods and futures. May we have a debate about the Treasury's benefiting from the misfortune of those who lose their job and face redundancy payments? At the moment, people will lose 40% of any redundancy payment over £30,000, and if those who will be able to access their pension once they are over 55 reach their 55th birthday after 2026, they will have to wait until 2027 to access it, thereby losing a further £40,000 to £60,000. It is wrong for the Government to benefit from the misfortune of those who are losing their jobs, and with a harsh Brexit ahead of us there will be many more to come. We need to resolve this situation now.

Mel Stride: I agree with the hon. Lady that it is most unfortunate that there are redundancies at the Bridgend plant. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial

[*Mel Stride*]

Strategy, the Secretary of State and his Ministers have been very much engaged in and closely connected to what is happening there.

The hon. Lady raised the specific issue of termination payments and rightly said that tax was due on payments over a £30,000 threshold, although there are some exceptions to that. I believe that is one of the most generous arrangements in the world and think I am right in saying—I stand to be corrected—that in Germany, for example, there is no threshold in play at all. However, she raised important points, particularly in respect of pensions, so I direct her to Treasury questions, which will be held on 2 July.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): May we please have a debate on the statutory requirements for changes to bus services and the consultation process? Stagecoach has announced that seven services in and around my constituency might change. It has not given any details on what the changes are, other than to say that people in Neston will no longer be able to go to Arrowe Park Hospital. It is all squirrelled away online and is very inaccessible. It really is not good enough. Can we have a proper consultation process on changes to important local services?

Mel Stride: That would make an excellent subject for an Adjournment debate, at which the hon. Gentleman would have an opportunity to ask the appropriate Minister specific questions about the specific routes and so on in his constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On Sunday 16 June, the Quebec Government passed Bill 21, which prevents judges, police officers, teachers and other public servants from wearing religious symbols such as the kippah, the turban and the hijab while at work. The Bill clearly contravenes article 18 of the international covenant on civil and political rights, which says that the right to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the rights and freedoms of others. To say that a teacher who wears a cross or a hijab is somehow a threat to public safety and health is an assertion that is both offensive and groundless. It is important that the UK raises this issue with our Canadian friends. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement on the matter or, better still, refer it to a Minister from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and request that the FCO contacts the Quebec Government immediately?

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his important question. Ultimately, it would not be appropriate for me to comment directly from the Dispatch Box on the position taken by the Canadian Government and their legislation—not least because I am not entirely familiar with the precise detail—other than to restate our position, which is that in this Parliament we are entirely committed to freedom of religious belief and the promotion of respect between people.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Today is Nystagmus Awareness Day. Nystagmus affects one in every 1,000 babies born in the UK and is a condition that I have. It means that my eyes wobble left and right

and up and down, and I am registered severely sight-impaired. Today, it is estimated that nearly 2 million people are living with sight loss, but the number of people registered is significantly lower. Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Nystagmus Awareness Day? May we have a debate on the importance of registering people who are living with sight loss?

Mel Stride: May I entirely associate myself with those remarks and welcome Nystagmus Day? I would be happy to meet with the hon. Lady to discuss making available appropriate time in some form or another to debate this matter.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): In 2018-19, people from Coventry spent 674 days delayed in hospital because no suitable housing was available. That is the highest number on record. It is a shocking indictment of the Government's time in office that we now have the highest number of homeless people trapped in hospital. May we therefore have a debate on the homelessness crisis in our country, its impact on our NHS and how the Government plan to improve collaborative working between housing and health services to stop people being unnecessarily pushed into homelessness or stuck in hospital for extended periods?

Mel Stride: There are several important points to make about the important issue of homelessness which the hon. Lady has raised. The first is the Government's commitment to ensuring that we build more homes. We have built 220,000 new homes, the highest number for any year other than one in the last 31 years. She will know that we have announced a substantial, multimillion pound fund to address rough sleeping. We have seen a slight decline over the more recent period, but there is still a lot more to do. This is an important issue that will always be worthy of debate, and if the hon. Lady would like to apply for an Adjournment debate, that might be a useful approach to take.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I think this is the first chance that I have had to welcome the new Leader of the House to his place. We are grateful for the SNP Opposition day, and I hope that the three hours next Wednesday will be protected.

I echo the calls for a statement by the Foreign Secretary on the situation of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. I had the huge privilege of meeting her husband outside the Iranian embassy this morning. He is showing huge determination and solidarity. I know that Members from across the House have been to visit, so perhaps the Leader of the House can encourage some of his colleagues on the Front Bench—perhaps the Home Secretary, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Foreign Secretary—to show their solidarity with Richard and Nazanin's family and finally get the justice that the family are so hungry for.

Mel Stride: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question; this matter has now been raised, quite rightly, for the third time in these business questions. I have set out the various actions that the Government continue to take to press the Iranian regime to do the right thing and release Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and I know that the hon. Gentleman's comments about Richard's hunger strike will have been heard throughout the House.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is 10 years since the Pontcysyllte aqueduct and canal became a UNESCO world heritage site, thereby joining sites such as the Taj Mahal, the Great Barrier Reef and the Great Wall of China—although Pontcysyllte is of course superior to all of them. It was built in 13 years by those great civil engineers Thomas Telford and William Jessop, and has a height of 126 feet. One can go on it on a boat; it is a most amazing place to travel. It is a masterpiece of waterworks engineering and a pioneering example of iron construction, and it was at the heart of the industrial revolution. I am a little worried that all Members will want to come on holiday at the same time, so perhaps they can promise not to do that. Will the Leader of the House explain how I can best promote the wonders of Pontcysyllte aqueduct and the canal across our nation and in this House?

Mel Stride: That was a wonderful question. I will not attempt to pronounce the name of the canal, on the basis that I will probably not do it as well as the hon. Lady, but it is a marvellous construction and was the work of Telford and Jessop, as she said. I am delighted that it has achieved world heritage status. She asked how she can promote the canal; I would suggest that she has done just that with her question, but if she wants another opportunity, we will have Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions on 4 July.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal Mail Group and the Communication Workers Union have agreed a groundbreaking collective defined contribution pension scheme for the group's 141,000 UK employees. The trouble is that it needs to be enabled by legislation. Will the Leader of the House commit to introducing the necessary legislation prior to the summer recess?

Mel Stride: I am happy to look at the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised, particularly as he suggests that it may relate to a requirement for future legislation. I also point him to Work and Pensions questions on 1 July.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Change UK): A recent Smith Institute report confirms that Enfield has the third highest number of low-paid people of all London Boroughs. Even more concerning is that, according to the report, the low pay rate is £8.33 an hour. The current London living wage is supposed to be £10.55 an hour. Ministers are often telling us about employment levels, but these can mask the growth in poverty and poverty pay. May we have an early debate in Government time on the record levels of low pay and poverty that are causing such hardship to families and children in Enfield and up and down the country?

Mel Stride: The Government strongly share the sentiments expressed by the right hon. Lady that we should do whatever we can to improve the position of the low paid. That is why we have taken 3 million to 4 million of the lowest paid out of tax altogether since 2010 by increasing the personal allowance, and why we have worked hard to get the economy moving to the point at which real pay has been increasing for the last 19 months consecutively. It is also why this party brought in the national living wage and why we saw such an increase in the national living wage at the start of this financial year.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Leo Goodwin, the managing director of TransPennine Express, received a lot of publicity last year because he earns £360,000. He is well known in Hull because he is presiding over a complete shambles in the management of Hull Paragon station. There are botched toilet facilities that were supposed to be rebuilt, there is signage covered in duct tape, and there are empty retail units that TransPennine built but cannot actually fill. To make things worse, on Monday this week TransPennine decided, without consultation with key stakeholders, to close one of the main entrances to the station between half-past 9 and half-past 4 o'clock—really putting up the white flag to a very small number of people who commit antisocial behaviour. This has meant that passengers, particularly disabled passengers, are having trouble accessing the station. May we please have a debate about companies that run stations appallingly?

Mel Stride: The very specific points that the hon. Lady raises regarding TransPennine Express, the station and access issues would probably most appropriately be directed to an Adjournment debate, which would give the hon. Lady an opportunity to address them directly with the appropriate Minister at the Department for Transport.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): My constituent was given a 10-year personal independence payment award in 2018 because of her heart condition. Recently she had a heart attack and spent 24 days in hospital. Having informed the DWP, she was sent for a PIP reassessment, at which she lost her entitlement. I was able to get that decision reversed, but we can all imagine how distressing that was for my constituent. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out the widespread concerns about PIP assessments, and how urgently this system needs to be reviewed and improved so that such an appalling situation does not happen again?

Mel Stride: The situation that the hon. Lady describes sounds extremely unfortunate, to say the least. I commend her for the work that she appears to have undertaken to ensure that the original decision was overturned at appeal. I stress that there is the right of appeal in such cases, and that is an important check and balance in the system. If she has further cases of a similar nature and wishes me to facilitate an approach to Ministers at the Department for Work and Pensions, I would be very happy to do so.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Rebecca Parker from Newport was in the news recently calling out high street retailers for the huge disparity between clothes size labels and the actual size of the garment, with the detrimental effect on self-confidence, particularly for young people, that that brings. As body image was this year's theme of Mental Health Awareness Week, could we have a debate on how the Government can work with retailers to address this?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an extremely important point. I say that as a father of three daughters, actually. I know exactly the element around body image and so on that comes at young women, in particular, from a variety of angles, including the one that she has raised. If she would like to meet me, perhaps after these questions,

[*Mel Stride*]

I would be very happy to talk further about how we could perhaps facilitate something in the way of a debate.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I say how much I am looking forward to debating the Second Reading of the Kew Gardens (Leases) (No. 3) Bill on Monday, when we will talk about 11 houses? However, I would be even happier if we were talking about the Report stage of the Agriculture Bill. Where is it, when is it coming back, and is it going to be fit for purpose when it does?

Mel Stride: The Agriculture Bill is there in draft. It is fit for purpose, and it will be coming back in due course.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The York Central development will see the wrong kind of housing built, which people in my community cannot afford. It will choke off economic opportunity and draw cars into the centre of our congested, gridlocked city. Can we have a debate on how public land must be used for the public good?

Mel Stride: I think that issue might be one for an Adjournment debate to give the hon. Lady an opportunity to discuss it with Ministers. She will know that, as I said earlier, we have made very significant progress in terms of house building. The number of homes built in the last year for which there are figures available is at the highest level for all but one of the past 31 years.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call Chris Stephens.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Tails never fails, Mr Speaker—thank you.

On a more serious note, two of my constituents were in the House on Monday as part of a Red Cross event for Refugee Week. One of them has a letter from Serco telling them to leave their accommodation—written to them two weeks ago, not this week as Serco is publicly suggesting. So can I ask, for the second week in a row, for the Home Office to make a statement or hold a debate on asylum seeker evictions in the city of Glasgow by Home Office contractor Serco?

Mel Stride: Serco has not enforced eviction in Glasgow and continues, at its own expense, to house the group that the hon. Gentleman rightly refers to. It estimated that the number of people not leaving their properties had grown to over 300 and that was impacting on its capacity to house new asylum seekers. That is the background to this matter. It is a Home Office matter, as he indicated. I would be very happy to facilitate whatever discussions he feels that he needs with Ministers there.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Today is Clean Air Day. Leeds was due to implement the first clean air zone in the country. However, this week it was

confirmed to Leeds and Birmingham Councils that the equipment for charging and for vehicle recognition would not be delivered on time by the end of the year. Given that the UK is due to host the UN climate change conference in 2020, can we expect a ministerial statement on this failure to be able to deliver the clean air zones on time in 2019?

Mel Stride: I think the Government's record on bringing down emissions—I mentioned, for example, the 25% reduction in emissions since 2010—has been a very good one. We have legislation coming on the Order Paper next week in relation to making sure that we set strong net zero carbon emissions targets up to 2050. We remain committed, through our actions on clear air, to keep moving strongly in that direction. It will not be quickly enough for the hon. Gentleman, perhaps, but there will no doubt be ample opportunities, through the Backbench Business Committee and other routes, to debate these matters very fully in the weeks ahead.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): There is growing concern that, despite all the assurances given to the contrary, as EU legislation—particularly, in this instance, pesticide policy—is being converted into British law, it is being weakened significantly. One example is the removal of a blanket ban on hormone-disrupting chemicals, which are known to cause cancer, birth defects and immune disorders. Can we have an urgent statement from a Minister on how we can ensure that the process of transferring over EU law is being done properly and with due scrutiny?

Mel Stride: The hon. Lady raises an important point about pesticide use. I know that there have been lots of debates about, for example, the effects of neonicotinoids on the bee population and fertilisation of plants. She will want to ask Ministers specific questions. We had Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs questions this morning, but if she wants to use me as a conduit to send some questions and suggestions to Ministers, I would be happy to serve that purpose.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Ah, the ever smiling Drew Hendry.

Drew Hendry: Thank you, Mr Speaker. It is always a delight to be saved and savoured.

Can we have a debate in Government time on Ofgem's handling of the renewable heat incentive scheme? Several of my constituents have been served with repayment notices of eye-watering proportions—for example, £17,000 and £20,000—to be paid within six months. That is despite them previously getting clean audits. They have been left carrying the can for the guilty companies that have simply vanished, and they are in desperate straits.

Mel Stride: That is an excellent opportunity for an Adjournment debate, and I recommend that the hon. Gentleman put in for one, so that he can grill the appropriate Minister accordingly.

Online Pornography: Age Verification

11.31 am

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement. As the House knows, the Government announced that age verification for online pornography, under the Digital Economy Act 2017, would come into force on 15 July 2019. It has come to my attention in recent days that an important notification process was not undertaken for an element of this policy, and I regret to say that that will delay the commencement date. I wanted to take the opportunity to come to the House as soon as possible to apologise for the mistake that has been made and to explain its implications.

In autumn last year, we laid three instruments before the House for approval. One of them—the guidance on age verification arrangements—sets out standards that companies need to comply with. That should have been notified to the European Commission, in line with the technical standards and regulations directive, and it was not. Upon learning of that administrative oversight, I instructed my Department to notify this guidance to the EU and re-lay the guidance in Parliament as soon as possible. However, I expect that that will result in a delay in the region of six months.

As the House would expect, I want to understand how this occurred. I have therefore instructed my Department's permanent secretary to conduct a thorough investigation. That investigation will have external elements to ensure that all necessary lessons are learned. Mechanisms will also be put in place to ensure that this cannot happen again. In the meantime, there is nothing to stop responsible providers of online pornography implementing age verification mechanisms on a voluntary basis, and I hope and expect that many will do so.

The House will also know that there are a number of other ways in which the Government are pursuing our objective of keeping young people safer online. The online harms White Paper sets out our plans for world-leading legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. Alongside the White Paper, we published the social media code of practice under the Digital Economy Act 2017, which gives guidance to providers of social media platforms on appropriate actions that they should take to prevent bullying, insulting, intimidating and humiliating behaviours on their sites. We will also publish interim codes of practice detailing the steps that we expect companies to take to tackle terrorist content, and online child sexual abuse and exploitation. These will pave the way for the new regulatory requirements.

We set out in the White Paper our expectation that companies should protect children from inappropriate content, and we will produce a draft code of practice on child online safety to set clear standards for companies to keep children safe online, ahead of the new regulatory framework. During the consultation on the White Paper, technical challenges associated with identifying the specific ages of users were raised, so I have commissioned new guidance, to be published in the autumn, about the use of technology to ensure that children are protected from inappropriate content online.

The new regulatory framework for online harms that was announced in the White Paper will be introduced as soon as possible, because it will make a significant

difference to the action taken by companies to keep children safe online. I intend to publish the Government response to the consultation by the end of the year, and to introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows after that.

I recognise that many Members of the House and many people beyond it have campaigned passionately for age verification to come into force as soon as possible to ensure that children are protected from pornographic material they should not see. I apologise to them all for the fact that a mistake has been made that means these measures will not be brought into force as soon as they and I would like. However, there are also those who do not want these measures to be brought in at all, so let me make it clear that my statement is an apology for delay, not a change of policy or a lessening of this Government's determination to bring these changes about. Age verification for online pornography needs to happen. I believe that it is the clear will of the House and those we represent that it should happen, and that it is in the clear interests of our children that it must.

11.37 am

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and the sincerity with which he has made this apology today. However, the statement is proof that a serious and important policy has descended into an utter shambles under this Government. I would like to ask the Secretary of State one question that he did not answer in his statement: when did he find out about this? He says that it was in the last few days, but could he be a bit clearer about that?

Age verification was supposed to be introduced last April; it was delayed. Then it was going to be introduced next month, and today we hear it is going to be delayed again. The Secretary of State says he regrets this. We do too, very much, because it is not good enough—it is not acceptable and it is letting children down. Recent reports showed that 70% of eight to 17-year-olds have seen images and videos that are not suitable for their age in the past year. Given the rise in the use of mobile devices and tablets in the past decade, the case for appropriate online pornography enforcement has increased.

The Secretary of State says that an administrative error caused the failure to notify the European Commission of key details, but are there more fundamental problems with this policy? Can the Secretary of State give us a commitment about exactly when it will be introduced? Indeed, is he confident that it will ever be introduced? When the legislation was going through this place, Labour raised serious concerns about whether the verification process was viable, and whether the process could work if very personal data was given over to commercial pornography sites. This delay shows we were right to be concerned. Is he confident that such extremely sensitive personal data will be safe from leaks or hacks?

Media reports from earlier this year showed serious flaws in the system, with journalists able to create fake profiles that circumvented age checks in minutes. Is the Secretary of State sure that when—if—the policy is finally introduced, it will actually work? The ultimate sanction under the age verification regime was the power to block rogue sites, with internet service providers compelled to comply, but new encrypted browser software

[Cat Smith]

is about to undermine this system fundamentally. The encryption will mean that ISPs are blind to the sites that users visit on the internet, and they will be unable to block rogue sites that compromise the safety of children. That system—DNS over HTTPS—undermines not only the age verification system, but the entire foundations of the regulation laid out by the Government in the online harms White Paper. Does the Secretary of State agree that online companies are outsmarting the Government, and that we urgently need to know how the Government plan to catch up?

Jeremy Wright: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks. As she knows, I have spoken to the shadow Secretary of State about this issue—I accept that he cannot be here today and I am grateful to her for stepping in.

The hon. Lady raised a number of issues, starting with when I discovered the error. The answer to that is Friday last week, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries found out a couple of days before that. As the House would expect, we have spent the intervening time seeking to confirm that there is no alternative way of doing what I have described. We do not believe there is, hence the course of actions that I have set out to the House.

The hon. Lady rightly asked about personal data and privacy, which is an area of concern. As she knows, it was discussed during the passage of the Digital Economy Act 2017 and subsequently. I do not believe that it is impossible to reconcile the important requirement that people's data and privacy are protected with the equally important requirement that children are protected from material they should not see. It is perfectly feasible to do those two things in parallel, which is what we seek through our approach. As she knows, the British Board of Film Classification, which will be the regulator for this, has taken steps to ensure that beyond the requirement on all relevant companies under the general data protection regulation parameters, an additional scheme will be available to those who wish to take advantage of it. That scheme will set out a higher gold standard for privacy, which we believe should be publicised to those who may wish to use these services.

The hon. Lady mentioned sanctions, but she will recognise that the issue under discussion is not sanctions for a breach of the requirements, but notification of them to the European Union. It is important to understand changes in technology and the additional challenges they throw up, and she is right to say that the so-called "D over H" changes will present additional challenges. We are working through those now and speaking to the browsers, which is where we must focus our attention. As the hon. Lady rightly says, the use of these protocols will make it more difficult, if not impossible, for ISPs to do what we ask, but it is possible for browsers to do that. We are therefore talking to browsers about how that might practically be done, and the Minister and I will continue those conversations to ensure that these provisions can continue to be effective.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Is my right hon. and learned Friend aware that this is not the first time that a DCMS measure has had to be reintroduced because of a failure to notify the EU Commission? I hope that that problem will soon be removed, but while

it exists, will he use this extra time to ensure that we get the measure right? There are still concerns on the grounds of freedom of speech and privacy, and about the ease with which measures can be circumvented through the use of virtual private networks. Will he raise similar concerns with the Information Commissioner to ensure that the age appropriate design code is right? It is much more important that it is properly designed than that it is rushed into place.

Jeremy Wright: I suspect that my right hon. Friend knows from experience that this is not the first time that such a thing has happened, but I am doing my level best to ensure it is the last. It is important that we have new mechanisms to ensure that such oversights are not repeated, and that is exactly what I am doing at the moment. He is correct that we should use the time we now have to get this right and to work through some of the additional challenges that I described a moment ago—we will do that. It is important that we understand these technological changes and, if I may say so, that validates our approach in the online harms White Paper, which was not to be prescriptive about technology, but to ensure that we adapt our systems as technology moves. We will seek to do the same on this point.

My right hon. Friend mentioned the age appropriate design code which, as he rightly says, is produced by the Information Commissioner, not the Government. He is right that it is important that we do not to rush this and that the Information Commissioner takes full account of the responses to the consultation. Having spoken to the Information Commissioner, I know that she will take full account of all the comments before taking the matter any further.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I agree with the Secretary of State that age verification needs to happen. The delay announced today is one thing, but the delays actually stretch back to April. This latest delay does not inspire confidence, which is extremely serious, given that this is about protecting children from harmful content. Another six-month delay is not acceptable. Can he guarantee that there will be no further slippage in the implementation of age verification? Does he agree that robust age verification must apply to social media companies, which may operate around the fringes of the law? Can he reassure us that he will do all that he can to prevent those who are unwilling to provide age verification from accessing pornography and other inappropriate material posted on a social media platform? Does he agree that that needs to be dealt with robustly as a matter of huge concern, as further delays will start to look like a lack of commitment on the Government's part?

Jeremy Wright: I can reassure the hon. Lady that there is no lack of commitment on the Government's part, as I hope she would expect. When we discovered that the mistake had been made and realised there was no way to avoid its consequences, the right thing to do was to come and say so to the House of Commons, to apologise not just to the House but, as I said, to those beyond it who have campaigned on this matter, and to set out what we now believe needs to be done.

We will of course do everything we can to ensure there is no further slippage. Both my hon. Friend the Minister and I will spend a good deal of time making sure that we have the necessary measures in place to ensure that such mistakes do not happen again.

The hon. Lady is right to say that social media companies have a responsibility. She will know that in our White Paper on so-called online harms, one area of focus was making sure that young people are not exposed to material to which they should not be exposed. We believe that the duty of care that the White Paper will institute should apply to social media companies across the board. They should be responsible for making sure, where they reasonably can, that harms do not reach their users. Through that process, we expect to develop a regulatory framework that will make that happen. I do not believe that online companies should wait for the regulator to be in place before they change their behaviour, and a sensible company will not do so. When the regulator starts work, it will want to be persuaded not just that an online company is doing the right thing on the day of the beginning of that work, but that it has been doing so for some time.

I very much hope that that will make a difference—I believe it will. The hon. Lady has my commitment that we will continue to work on a whole range of measures to ensure that young people are as safe online as they can be.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I commend the Secretary of State for being so open and frank about this administrative mistake; if I may say so, that is absolutely the right approach. However, as has already been acknowledged, this is not the first time that such a thing has happened. I understand that measures are being put in place to ensure that it does not happen again, but when will that happen so that we can be confident that the Department is operating as it should?

Jeremy Wright: We will conduct that exercise as quickly as we can. As I indicated in my statement, it is important that there is an external element in the process so that people outside the Department can look at what has happened and give us appropriate advice on how that can be avoided in the future. I also think that we will need to look at the mechanisms that are applied to ensure that such an administrative error cannot be made again.

It is worth my saying that it is an important convention of this House—I know, Mr Speaker, that you resolutely defend it—that Ministers should take responsibility for mistakes made by their Department. I am not here to talk about an error of a particular official; I am here to talk about a departmental mistake for which I take responsibility as Secretary of State. It is only right, too, that I reinforce the commitment and dedication of my Department's civil servants to keeping young people safe online. The measures that we have taken over the past 12 months have represented significant steps forward, and I am grateful to my Department for having achieved that. I do not in any way defend this mistake, but I think it would be wrong to give the impression that the hard-working civil servants of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport are not doing everything that they can to keep young people safe online.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a very honourable man, and it is commendable that he has come to speak to the House today, but many people will be very disappointed by this delay. He said in his statement that he expected this to

“result in a delay in the region of six months”,

but often in this place we are able to expedite matters when they are urgent. Is there no opportunity to speed things up, rather than our having to wait for six months?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for what she says, and she asks a fair question. One reason why I did not come to the House before now was that I sought to explore exactly what we might be able to do either to avoid this delay altogether or to minimise it. Perhaps it would help if I explained why I think that six months is roughly the appropriate time. Let me set out what has to happen now: we need to go back to the European Commission, and the rules under the relevant directive say that there must be a three-month standstill period after we have properly notified the regulations to the Commission. If it wishes to look into this in more detail—I hope that it will not—there could be a further month of standstill before we can take matters further, so that is four months. We will then need to re-lay the regulations before the House. As she knows, under the negative procedure, which is what these will be subject to, there is a period during which they can be prayed against, which accounts for roughly another 40 days. If we add all that together, we come to roughly six months. As she will recognise, if we could proceed quicker than that, we would, but I do not believe that that will be feasible, so it is right that I am realistic at this stage.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State has made a sincere and frank statement to the House about the reasons for the delay, and I appreciate that this is a change of timescale, not policy. I understand that the technology to enable the changes required by this policy already exists and could be implemented. Will he therefore comment on whether the stakeholders responsible for this—the key internet players—are co-operating on the right scale and at the right speed? We know that they can co-operate, but are they doing so?

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. It is important that we have the necessary co-operation. Of course, that will need to come with the regulator, the BBFC, and those discussions are continuing, as he would expect. I have been clear that the reason for the delay is an administrative error—it is not anything else. We expect compliance by the companies that provide online pornography and, as I say, I see no reason why, in most cases, they cannot begin to comply voluntarily. They had expected to be compelled to do this from 15 July, so they should be in a position to comply. There seems to be no reason why they should not, but we do not rely on voluntary compliance and we will therefore pursue—somewhat later than we hoped—the regulations that I have described.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and his honesty. The protection of our children is paramount for everyone in the Chamber. Does he agree that typing in a year of birth is not an acceptable form of security to protect children's innocence? Parents, including my constituents, demand that there must be greater verification. What does his Department believe can be done to enhance the verification process?

Jeremy Wright: I know the hon. Gentleman's long-standing commitment to and interest in this issue. He is right that we should not accept that someone simply

[Jeremy Wright]

ticking a box or saying, “I am 18,” is sufficient for the companies concerned. The regulations that we have laid once, and will now re-lay, make it clear that from the point of view of the BBFC, as the regulator, that will not be an acceptable way of complying with the regulations. Companies will need to do more than that. There will need to be a way of demonstrating that someone is over 18 before they have access to this material so that companies can be sure of that fact, with us as legislators being sure that we are taking every measure that we can to keep young people away from material that will be harmful to them.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is vital that our legislation is fit for purpose in a digital age, and it is very unfortunate that age verification for online porn is being delayed. I join my neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), in calling for us to ensure that this time is used well. I urge the Secretary of State to keep up a relentless focus on making sure that children are safe online, particularly regarding content on social media sites—especially inappropriate content on Twitter—and action on online harassment and bullying. Fundamentally, if a teenage girl walks down the street and some male in a mac flashes his pieces at her, that is illegal. It should not be legal to send that teenage girl a photo via AirDrop in a public place.

Jeremy Wright: I entirely understand my hon. Friend’s point. She is right: the principle that what is unlawful offline should be unlawful online guides much of the legislative activity in which we have engaged. As she says, we must maintain our focus on keeping young people—indeed, people of all ages—safe from online harms. As she knows, in parallel with these regulations, we will pursue the course set out in the White Paper.

We believe that the White Paper, along with the social media code of practice—which, as I mentioned earlier, has been published in conjunction with it—will start to drive these improvements, but the era of self-regulation has come to an end. It is important for the Government and legislators in the House to take seriously their responsibilities to keep people safe online, so that we know that social media companies will be more responsible in the future.

Export Licences: High Court Judgment

11.55 am

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement about the High Court judgment on military export licences to Saudi Arabia.

Today, the Court of Appeal handed down its judgment following the appeal by Campaign Against Arms Trade against the divisional court’s decision in July 2017 to dismiss CAAT’s claim for a judicial review of licensing decisions about military exports to Saudi Arabia for possible use in the conflict in Yemen. The case was heard by the Court of Appeal between 9 and 11 April this year. The original judicial review and the appeal relate to decisions made between December 2015 and February 2017.

Since the divisional court’s judgment in July 2017, the Government have continued to apply the rigorous and robust multi-layered process of analysis in making our licensing decisions, as highlighted in that judgment. We have, in the words of the 2017 judgment, engaged in “anxious scrutiny—indeed...what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages”.

The Government have always taken their export control obligations very seriously, and continue to do so.

There were three grounds of appeal. The judgment found in the Government’s favour on two of them, and against on the other, referred to as ground 1. We disagree with the judgment against the Government on ground 1, and will seek permission to appeal against it.

Today’s judgment is not about whether the Government have made the right or wrong decisions about granting export licences, but concerns the rationality of the process used to reach decisions. The process was upheld by the divisional court in July 2017. The central issue in relation to military exports to Saudi Arabia in the context of the conflict in Yemen is criterion 2c of the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria, which states that the Government will

“not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law.”

The criteria provide the rules for assessing military exports. Among other things, they cover concerns about human rights and international humanitarian law, the development of weapons of mass destruction, international obligations including sanctions and treaty commitments and the risk of diversion. They provide a thorough and rigorous risk assessment framework for the reaching of licensing decisions.

As the judgment makes clear, the Secretary of State responsible for licensing decisions has to rely on advice from those with specialist, diplomatic and military knowledge. In relation to criterion 2c, that means advice from the Foreign Secretary. Before the establishment of the Department for International Trade in 2016, the decision maker was the then Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. In July 2016, the responsibility passed to me.

So how have decisions been made under criterion 2c? We have used six strands of information and analysis to inform decisions: analysis of all allegations of breaches of international humanitarian law that are known to us;

an understanding of Saudi military procedures; continuing engagement with the Saudis at the highest level; post-incident dialogue, including dialogue with respect to investigations; Saudi public commitments to IHL; and regular IHL assessments based on developments in the conflict in Yemen.

Each of these strands takes into account a wide range of sources and analysis, including those of a sensitive nature to which other parties, such as non-governmental organisations and the United Nations, do not have access. Taken together, these strands of analysis and information, which are reviewed regularly by the FCO in comprehensive reports to the Foreign Secretary and which engage continuously with the record of the Saudis in relation to IHL, form the basis of the Foreign Secretary's advice to the Secretary of State making licensing decisions.

Given all this, why did CAAT appeal the 2017 judgment? The ground on which the Government lost in the Court of Appeal judgment concerned whether we were under an obligation to make some overall assessment of whether there had been historical violations of IHL, including whether a pattern of violations could be discerned. Our approach is in line with the EU common position; it is therefore focused on a predictive evaluation of risk as to the attitude and future conduct of the Saudi-led coalition and recognises the inherent difficulties of seeking to reach findings on IHL for specific incidents where we do not have access to the complete information. Indeed, the divisional court pointed to the "self-evident" impracticality of doing so.

Even so, we have fully and robustly engaged with incidents of concern and sought to test and understand the risk of future incidents. We have all along considered the historical record of Saudi Arabia in respect of IHL. Our whole assessment has been infused with IHL considerations; indeed, everything has been looked at through the prism of IHL.

Today's judgment is clear that the context is not one in which the Government are sitting like a court adjudicating on alleged past violations, but rather the context is a prospective and predictive exercise as to whether there is a clear risk that exports might be used in the commission of a serious violation of IHL in the future. In this context, past incidents are only part of the picture. The judgment emphasises that Government advisers were keenly alive to the question of possible violation of IHL. It also acknowledges that the processes used to advise the Secretary of State responsible for licensing decisions were rigorous and robust, upon which a decision maker could rely and, indeed, had to rely.

Nevertheless, the judgment concludes that CAAT succeeded in the central argument advanced in relation to ground 1 of its appeal. In the court's judgment the question whether there was a historical pattern of breaches of IHL required to be faced; even if it could not be answered with reasonable confidence for every incident, at least the attempt had to be made. Because the Government have not reached findings on IHL for specific incidents as part of our assessment of clear risk under criterion 2c, the Court of Appeal concluded that the decision-making process was irrational and therefore unlawful. The consequence is that we are remitted to reconsider our decisions in accordance with the correct legal approach. As I said earlier, we disagree with the judgment and will seek permission to appeal.

Alongside this, we are carefully considering the implications of the judgment for decision making. While we do this, we will not grant any new licences for exports to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners that might be used in the conflict in Yemen. As the Court of Appeal makes clear, different people may or may not approve the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia. The judicial review is not an appeal against the Government's decisions on their merits.

Once again, I stress that this judgment is not about whether the Government made the right or wrong decisions, but is about whether the decision-making process was rational, and the judgment emphasises that there would not be only one answer on future risk if historical violations were found to have taken place; in other words, changing the process as set out by the Court does not necessarily mean any of the decisions would be different.

The context is a complex and ever changing conflict. The Court of Appeal judgment does not undermine the UK's overall framework for export controls as set out in the consolidated criteria. These criteria have stood the test of time and are shared by EU member states. The Court's judgment is about how decisions were made in relation to one element of one of those criteria in a specific context, and I commend this statement to the House.

12.4 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. This week, the House marked in debate the 70th anniversary of the Geneva convention and the 20th anniversary of the United Nation's Security Council first putting on its agenda the protection of civilians in armed conflict. The irony of today's judgment by the Court of Appeal is that the United Kingdom is the penholder at the Security Council for that mandate. We are supposed to be guardians of international humanitarian law, not the people found in breach of it.

The Court of Appeal's ruling is a damning indictment of the Government's handling of export licences to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It finds that their handling has not been lawful. The Court found that the Government "made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law in the past, during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so".

Does the Secretary of State accept that this constitutes a clear breach of the Government's legal obligations to assess an export destination country's respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms and that under criterion 2c of the licensing criteria the Government should have carried out such an assessment and denied licences if there was

"a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law"?

The Secretary of State has tried to excuse himself by pleading that this judgment is not about whether the Government have made the right or wrong decision, but about whether the decision-making process was rational. Surely even he must understand that if the decision-making process was not rational, the Government could have had no confidence that it was correct and that it therefore follows that he could have had no confidence that there was no material risk of these exports being used contrary to international humanitarian law.

[Barry Gardiner]

That the Government have failed to carry out such assessments is a matter of national shame. I am afraid that the Secretary of State's suggestion that there has been anxious scrutiny of these decisions looks threadbare. I welcome his announcement that there will be a suspension of the granting of new licences to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, pending the Government's appeal, but that is not enough. Given that the process itself is flawed, will he confirm whether the same process has been used for exports to Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, which are also involved in the Yemeni conflict? Will he confirm that he is also suspending all new licences to those countries?

The Opposition believe there should be an independent investigation into the Yemen conflict and that it is shameful that the Government should seek to appeal today's judgment. We are also concerned that there should be no sudden upsurge in open licences to these countries as a way to bypass the suspension. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this will not be allowed?

During the legal proceedings in the case against the Government, it transpired that the Government had not been properly monitoring whether the Saudi-led coalition had been engaged in breaches of IHL and had refused to properly set out whether British exports or service personnel had been directly or indirectly involved in any breaches by the Saudi-led coalition, despite widespread evidence of airstrikes on non-military targets, double-tap bombing raids and the deaths of thousands of civilians. Can the Secretary of State tell the House categorically that there has been adequate monitoring of potential breaches of IHL such that no UK personnel could be implicated in any breach?

The Secretary of State is well aware that several other countries have suspended arms sales to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia over concerns about those breaches in Yemen, including our European counterparts Germany and Denmark. He has suggested that it is his view that the Government approach is in line with the EU common position. What assessment has he made of international reports into possible breaches and what discussions has he had with his counterparts in Germany and Denmark about the evidence upon which they have decided to suspend arms sales?

The Secretary of State, in his response to the claims brought forward by the Campaign Against Arms Trade, has stated that the Government monitor potential breaches in a number of ways, including a Ministry of Defence recording tool, extensive on-the-ground military and diplomatic staff, positive close relations with Saudi Arabian officials, and the findings of the 14 investigations by the Saudi-led coalition into whether they themselves had committed any such breaches. It subsequently transpired during proceedings that the Ministry of Defence tracker may not have been recording such data, so the Secretary of State's review of potential breaches of international humanitarian law seems to be entirely determined by what his Saudi Arabian counterparts have advised him. At what stage did he first become aware that the Ministry of Defence tracker programme was not recording such breaches? Can he confirm whether his Department was aware that such breaches were not being reviewed or recorded?

The Court of Appeal has determined that the Secretary of State must retake the export licence decisions and must therefore conduct a conclusive review of past violations of international humanitarian law in advance. Can he confirm that he intends to adhere to the Court's findings, and will he tell the House what steps he is taking to conduct such an investigation? Given the serious breach of this Government's duty of care with regard to export licences, we believe that there are clear grounds for a thorough investigation into the Government's handling of them, and that there must be a full parliamentary or public inquiry to find out how that was allowed to happen and which Ministers were responsible for those breaches.

I note that several times in his statement the Secretary of State was keen to finger the former Foreign Secretary as the one with the "specialist, diplomatic and military knowledge" whose advice he was obliged to take under criterion 2c of the consolidated criteria. The House may be surprised to learn of that official description of the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson). Can the Secretary of State explain, given that he has previously assured the House that he will

"personally lead on helping the defence and security industries to export and will be involved in the most significant global deals across all sectors",

why he does not take full responsibility himself?

Dr Fox: The House has grown accustomed to the outraged tone of the hon. Gentleman, but it does not actually reflect the balanced tone of the judgment. He said in his questions that this country had been found in breach of international humanitarian law. I find that outrageous, coming from the official Opposition of this country, and I hope that he will retract it. I think the record will show that that is completely untrue. It is an outrageous slur on this country.

The hon. Gentleman raised a number of valid and important questions, and I shall try to take them in turn as best I can. He asked about open licences. They are subject to the same scrutiny, and sometimes take between two and five months to pass, so they are not a means of bypassing the scrutiny set out in the consolidated criteria. I think that the House will be clear on that. As to how we look at existing licences, and at licences elsewhere, I have made it clear that we will review all licences in the light of the Court's judgment. It is worth noting, however, that the Campaign Against Arms Trade did not seek an order to suspend licences, and that the Court has not ordered that in its judgment.

The hon. Gentleman asked about how the UK monitors international humanitarian law allegations. The Ministry of Defence monitors incidents of alleged IHL violations arising from airstrikes conducted by the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen using all information available. This in turn is used to determine an overall view on the approach and attitude of the coalition. It informs the risk assessment made under the licensing criteria, where there is a clear risk that the items to be exported might be used in the commission of a serious violation. We consider a range of information from Government sources, foreign Governments, the media and international non-governmental organisations. We are now carefully considering the detail of the Court of Appeal judgment and its implications for this risk assessment and for decision making.

The hon. Gentleman asked about our discussions with the Germans. We of course have ongoing discussions with our European partners, but let me be clear that we are following the consolidated guidelines and the common EU position on this. I can tell him that there has been no breach in the duty of care in how the Government have approached this, and I make no allegations about any colleague, but I am not surprised that the hon. Gentleman has tried to drag personalities into this serious debate on such serious international issues. If there has been a breach of duty in this House, it is the breach of scrutiny by the Opposition.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Do the Government accept that, as the years have rolled by since the 9/11 atrocities, it has become harder and harder to justify the closeness of our relationship with Saudi Arabia, but in defence of what the Government are trying to do, would it not be sensible for my right hon. Friend to have conversations with the Foreign Secretary, perhaps with a view to publishing a digest of some of the representations that we make to the Saudis in trying to keep them from straying further away from acceptable standards of international behaviour?

Dr Fox: The Foreign Secretary and I have answered numerous questions on this issue in the House of Commons, and we have certainly cited some of those incidents and been questioned on specific incidents in the House. On my right hon. Friend's key point, I do not think the proximity or otherwise to 9/11 is the key determinant here; rather, it is whether Saudi Arabia acts as an important source of intelligence for this country in our shared combat against a global terrorism. It is a valuable partner in that particular battle and has helped to keep numerous UK citizens safe.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for giving me advance sight of it. I recognise that, under criterion 2c of the consolidated criteria, the Government will not grant a licence if there is a clear risk that the items might be used in the commission of a serious violation of international humanitarian law. I also recognise that the judgment is not about whether the Government made the right or wrong decisions, but about whether the decision making was rational. I also recognise the words from the 2017 ruling that there was

“anxious scrutiny—indeed...what seems like anguished scrutiny at some stages”

over the decision making process. However, that anxiety and anguish are as nothing compared to the civilians who have been on the receiving end of Saudi armaments since the war in Yemen began.

I also note that since that war started, the UK has licensed some £4.7 billion-worth of arms sales to Saudi Arabia in a conflict whose death toll is now approaching 100,000 people. So may I ask the Secretary of State two questions? The ruling means that the UK must retake its decision on the correct legal basis, taking into account past possible human rights abuses from Saudi Arabia. Will this Government now take seriously the deep concern, anguish and anxiety that there are substantial human rights abuses emanating from Saudi Arabia? Secondly, I was disappointed to hear him say that it was the Government's intention to appeal. I understand the

legal costs so far are somewhere over £100,000. May I ask him to respect the ruling today, not to proceed with an appeal, and not to throw good money after bad?

Dr Fox: The hon. Gentleman asks an important key question on the specifics. Of course, criterion 2c is a predictive element. We have to look at what we think the future risk is in granting licences, and we take into account all the information that we have had, not least since the last licensing period decision that we have looked at. That takes into account all the sources I have already given him. He asks about the wider issues. I want to make it clear to the House that in reaching the decisions, I have to rely on advice from those with specialist diplomatic and military expertise, but the law does not permit me, in taking these decisions on licensing exports of weapons, to take into account the UK's strategic economic, social, commercial and industrial interests. These are very important issues, but there are areas of wider policy and they are not areas that I am allowed to take into account when I take these particular decisions.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I have some sympathy with the position that my right hon. Friend has set out the Dispatch Box today. He will recall that I have had, to say the least, the most profound reservations over the past three or four years about the Government's policy in respect of what is happening in Yemen. However, he will also know that I have never called for an arms embargo for the simple reason that it would have little humanitarian impact. Does he appreciate that the Master of the Rolls, Sir Terence Etherton, said in his judgment today that the Government

“made no concluded assessments of whether the Saudi-led coalition had committed violations of international humanitarian law in the past, during the Yemen conflict, and made no attempt to do so”.

That is the crux of the matter that is before the House today.

I say to my right hon. Friend and to the other members of the Government Front Bench that they should listen more carefully to what Parliament has said consistently in almost every debate on this matter over the past three years. As recently as Tuesday, there was a Westminster Hall debate marking the 70th anniversary of the arrangements that were made in respect of international humanitarian law. After all these investigations of breaches of international humanitarian law, the argument has been that it is wrong for Britain and one side of the conflict to mark their own homework. It is essential that such breaches are looked at by an accepted and impartial international force, such as the UN. If the Government had heeded the warnings from the House of Commons, they would not be in the position that they are in today.

Dr Fox: I agree with my right hon. Friend about the humanitarian costs involved in the conflict, and I also agree that there can be no military solution to this particular conflict. There can only be a negotiated and political solution. However, we do monitor allegations of IHL breaches, and we do take that into account when making decisions. Of course, the predictive nature of this process means that we have to look at the past pattern of behaviour, the information we have available, and what mitigations may have been put in place to

[Dr Fox]

ensure that any incidents are not repeated. We are unable to make absolute definitions about whether there has been a breach when we are not party to the full information, but we make those decisions based on the predictive element of criterion 2c and on the evidence that is available from both public and protected sources.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Government's position is, frankly, inexplicable, because the Secretary of State referred to all the careful analysis that has been done, but anyone else undertaking an assessment of future risk—this goes to the heart of the point that the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) just raised—would look at the past behaviour of those using the weapons that we have sold to Saudi Arabia. As the Secretary of State well knows, others have done so, and the UN panel of experts found over three years ago that

“the coalition had conducted airstrikes targeting civilians and civilian objects, in violation of international humanitarian law”.

The Government cannot continue to say, “We're sorry. We haven't been able to make an assessment, but we are not sure that there is a risk about the future.” I will ask a direct question of the Secretary of State: is it the Government's view that Saudi Arabia has engaged in activities that have breached international humanitarian law?

Dr Fox: I disagree with the premise of the question itself. The right hon. Gentleman says that the Government's position is inexplicable, but it is not. We are following the EU and national criteria set out for arms exports, and we are following the EU common position. We look at all reports of potential breaches of international humanitarian law, but we must also take into account, by the nature of the predictive elements in criterion 2c, what we think the future risk will be based on, for example, any mitigations.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The Government have consistently maintained that this country has one of the strictest export control regimes of anywhere in the world, but on what grounds do they base those claims?

Dr Fox: The divisional court's judgment set out in terms why we operate a robust system, and I explained in my statement that we have gone well beyond what I think is naturally expected under criterion 2c. We operate what I believe is the most robust arms export policy of anywhere in the world. We operate under the EU and national consolidated criteria and alongside the EU common position. I do not believe that anyone else operates a more robust policy.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has referred to the European common position several times. What is his assessment of the European countries that have decided to suspend arms exports to Saudi Arabia? Why does he disagree with their position?

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady asks a good question. We discuss matters with our European colleagues, including our German colleagues, at the highest level, and it is our policy to continue to apply the EU common position to licensing. We do not comment on the commercial

arrangements that underpin the export of military equipment and services, which are, of course, confidential. Our European partners and others are entitled to deviate from the EU common position if they wish, but we intend to follow it.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): We all get emails from our constituents expressing concerns about the global arms trade. Will my right hon. Friend therefore assure me and my constituents that the UK does indeed have one of the most robust arms export regimes in the world? Does he share my wish that other countries had such robust regimes?

Dr Fox: I do wish that more countries shared the criteria that we and our European partners operate in this particular field. However, I also believe that countries are entitled to defend themselves. If we were to have no international rules around arms exports, the whole global arms industry would be a *laissez-faire* space in which many innocent citizens around the world would be denied the protections offered by our export licences.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is undeniable that the Government's defiance in respect of the Court of Appeal ruling is disappointing. Given the public interest in the unfolding tragedy in Yemen, will the Secretary of State not at least acknowledge that there must be more transparency in how his Department deals with this issue? We understand the obvious sensitivities, but the public and the House deserve to understand how the Department is coming to its decisions.

Dr Fox: I have made it clear on a number of occasions how we come to decisions and the process of ministerial accountability in that. The Court of Appeal judged that the process needs to change in order to be lawful, but it also made the point that changing the process would not necessarily have led to different decisions from those arrived at by the Government.

I say to the hon. Lady that I took offence at the comments of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), the Liberal Democrat spokesperson on this matter, when she said:

“Saudi Arabia is an enemy of British values, including human rights and the rule of law.”

Such sweeping generalisations show a lack of grasp of the detail and understanding of the complexities of international relations.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On the one hand, the Court of Appeal is saying that the British Government must investigate allegations of previous international humanitarian law violations before granting export licences but, on the other hand, the British Government are saying, “Look. That is very difficult for us to do, because some of these incidents take place in foreign countries thousands of miles away.” Does not the solution to this lie in the hands of the Saudi Arabian Government themselves? We must say to them, “If you want to buy our weapons, where allegations exist they must be properly and independently investigated, and those findings must be shared with us before licences are granted.”

Dr Fox: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The joint incidents assessment team was set up by the Saudi Government in February 2016 to help with that. It examines military activity in civilian areas to minimise

possible civilian casualties and assesses the coalition's rules of engagement. We have had input into that to ensure that the coalition is operating in a way that we would find acceptable.

Of course, we simply would not take that as being the end of the matter when it comes to information. As I have said, we look at a range of information from foreign Government sources, from our own Government sources, both those in the public domain and those that are restricted, and from NGOs and the media. It is in taking that complete picture that we were able to assess what we believe the risks to be, but we are always looking to see whether further sources of information may help to improve our decision making, alongside the decision making of our allies.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kempton) (Lab/Co-op): I have just returned from the Court of Appeal, where I listened to the judgment. The judges, in paragraph 141, say there was a decision in 2016 no longer to apply criterion 2 on the checking of IHL. This resulted in 100,000 deaths. Who made that decision?

My Committees, the Committees on Arms Export Controls, have manifestly failed to hold the Government to account. We now need urgent reform of the Committees' powers, including creating a standalone Committee. Will the Minister confirm that he will not allow the use of any existing open licences to coalition partners during this review?

Finally, after the arms scandals of the 1980s and '90s we had the Scott inquiry, and we now need an independent judge-led or parliamentary inquiry not just on this particular issue but on the failings of our arms control system—taking it away from the political interference and political control of Ministers to a truly independent and world-class system, which we do not have at the moment.

Dr Fox: We are ultimately accountable in the courts, as we have been, and the divisional court was clear in its praise for how Government rigour was applied to this process. We are not in breach of the consolidated criteria, nor has the Court of Appeal said that. What the Court of Appeal said is that the process by which decisions are reached needs to change, and needs to take into account the possibility of international humanitarian law having been breached. To compare that, for example, to the incidents in the Scott report is simply not credible.

Of course, we will review all licences in light of today's judgment, as we are required to do. That will include open licences.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The UK's significant levels of arms production and exports is often justified by the need to protect jobs, and today we have been told that there is a risk of terrorism if we do not export arms to this appalling regime. Rather than being complicit in killing almost 100,000 Yemenis, if the Government really want to protect jobs, reduce the risk of terrorism and enhance the UK's reputation around the world, why not stop Brexit?

Dr Fox: I have heard some really quite idiotic questions in my time in the House, but that one takes the biscuit.

Backbench Business

Refugee Family Reunion

12.32 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House notes that 20 June is World Refugee Day; further notes that, with record levels of global displacement across the world, many refugee families have been separated by war and persecution; welcomes that in 2018 the UK granted 5,806 family reunion visas to partners and children of refugees in the UK; and calls on the Government to introduce reforms to family reunion rules to ensure that the close relatives of all refugees in the UK have safe and legal pathways to reunite with their families in the UK.

Much has been happening in and around the House of Commons, and in many other places, to mark World Refugee Day and Loneliness Awareness Week. There has been a lack of progress on the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill, which should have been passed by the House of Commons under this Government.

The idea of a "pull factor" was one of the hares set running on Second Reading on 16 March 2018, and the Bill has not progressed much further. Lord Kerr addressed that in the House of Lords:

"Is it really plausible that, say in Idlib—
or, indeed, any city in the world—

"if it is under siege in six weeks' time, the family sits around the dining table, pick a child and tell it that it must set off across the battle lines and the Mediterranean, to try to get into England so that it can then pull the family into England? That is implausible. We are talking about refugee reunion and about children. We really must stop talking about this wildly implausible pull factor. They come here to escape being killed; they do not come here in order to become a magnet for the rest of the family."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 11 May 2018; Vol. 791, c. 372.]

If we bear that in mind in this debate, and in each and every other debate on refugees, we will do ourselves and, indeed, refugees a great service by showing them the respect they deserve for what they have been through.

It would be worth while, as I did on Second Reading, to begin by talking about the idea of refugees. I began that debate by talking about Yohannes, a young welder from Eritrea living in Canterbury. Last month, I came across an article in *The Independent* headlined, "Germany's refugee intake begins to boost economy as settlers soothe the country's worker shortage". I re-emphasise that today's refugee is tomorrow's worker contributing to the economy.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He has been a powerful champion and advocate, and I hope that, at the end, the Government will allow time for his Bill to proceed. Once families are reunited under his proposals, it is important that they contribute properly to the economy. Does he agree that the Government must move forward on extending the right to work to asylum seekers?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: My hon. Friend makes the case well. We should treat asylum seekers as normally as possible. We often talk about spectrums nowadays, and there is perhaps an argument that we are all on a spectrum of refugees, asylum seekers and movers. A person who moves from one town to another for work is a person on the move. We have various words to grade that movement.

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

I have been cautioned about making the comparison because, in a way, it minimises or downplays the trauma some people have been through, but on the other hand it is a way of partially seeing ourselves in other people's shoes. We are not quite escaping war and the threat of being killed, but moving for economic circumstances is a normal thing to do. The more we treat the situation as normal, as my hon. Friend clearly said, the better.

Germany is fairly normal. The article in *The Independent* says:

"In his native Syria, Mohammed Kassim worked as an electrician. But having learned the trade informally, he lacked the credentials to show for it. Now, in his adopted homeland, the 30-year-old is receiving the training he never had and he is getting paid to do it by a company dangling the promise of a job that could vault him from struggling refugee to member of the German middle class."

That is the sort of story we want to hear, four years after many people came to Germany. Of course, it is not all sweetness and light. A number of those people are still unemployed, but that is changing. The article continues:

"But after spending billions of euros to accommodate the newcomers, Germany is beginning to reap some gains."

The German economy is benefiting from the presence of more people, who happen to be refugees.

I will set out the global context. There are about 24 million refugees worldwide, and every day some 44,000 people are forced to flee their home as a result of conflict and persecution. To give some idea, 44,000 people would probably fill Ibrox and Parkhead in the Scottish premier league, and would certainly fill the average stadium in the English premiership. That is a lot of people who are forced to move every day, and this movement of people within and across borders is creating significant policy challenges for Governments across the world and is linked to enormous humanitarian needs.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the definition. A person seeking asylum has normally left their own country due to war, persecution or violence and has requested sanctuary in another country, and their application to receive legal protection has yet to be processed. Importantly, refugees are at the next stage—this is where my Bill comes in. A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his country and has been recognised as having a well-founded fear of persecution. They are not only fleeing as an asylum seeker, but this has now been accepted by others. The reason for persecution could be race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, as we recently saw in Myanmar. A refugee has been granted special legal protection on that basis. War and ethnic, tribal or religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their country. It is worth bearing that in mind.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In previous debates, we have drawn attention to refugee children and the fact that they cannot sponsor a relative to come over—this is unlike what happens in other countries. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is deplorable and adds to the trauma these children are already facing?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady makes a point that is central to this speech and to the reason behind today's debate.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): I agree with the hon. Lady on what she said. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the current situation has been exacerbated by the UK's decision to opt out of applying article 10 of the EU directive on family reunion, which would have allowed unaccompanied children to act as sponsors for their family members?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I am glad I have taken both interventions together, because they overlap neatly. This perhaps dovetails into something else, which is that the UK opted out of some EU directives; if only Scotland could opt out of some UK directives. We will park that one there, but it does show that the idea of Brexit—[*Interruption.*] We had better park that one as well. The hon. Lady and hon. Gentleman got it right, as did the British Red Cross policy briefing for this debate.

The Red Cross recommendations are:

"Give adult refugees the right to sponsor their parents, siblings and children up to the age of 25 to join them in the UK under family reunification rules."

That is normal in other places in Europe—places that have not opted out. It is the norm. The second recommendation is:

"Give child refugees the right to sponsor their parents as well as any siblings up to the age of 25 to join them in the UK under family reunification rules."

The third recommendation is:

"Reintroduce legal aid for family reunion applications."

Members will not be surprised to learn that those recommendations mirror closely, if not precisely, what my Bill set out to do. I refer to the Bill that has been choked by the Government in this House of Commons, despite the fact that it has had laudable and welcome support from Members from Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Change UK, Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National party, and from luminaries among the Conservative Back Benchers. All those voices from across the political spectrum were supporting the Bill.

I just want to say one thing to the Government and to colleagues across this House, as I know you want me to speak for only 12 to 15 minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] I should have mentioned that the Democratic Unionist party is supporting my Bill. Indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is here, so thank goodness I remembered before I was reminded; otherwise, we might have had an Adjournment debate on the issue. The Bill has been supported across the House, and the plea I make to colleagues is that if the Government do not move on this now—there will be reshuffles, so there will be different personnel at the Home Office and things might move on a bit better—whoever else comes out at the beginning of the ballot in the next Parliament should be willing and open to move forward on this Bill, because it is shameful that the Government have not moved with this. Time in politics is short and time in government is even shorter, and things could have been done that have not happened. The Government could have looked back proudly had they reacted and done this, but I hope, and warn them, that this will not be the only time; I expect this to come forward again.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is commendably keeping to time, and I shall be brief. One thing that the Government could do, in advance of whatever attitude they take to his Bill,

is recognise that Syrians whom many of our communities have accepted are desperate to bring their families in. Does he agree that it would be right and proper if the Government were to encourage that, rather than put hurdles in these people's way?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely; people would be able to function far better. One thing that struck me from speaking to refugees—these things do not come through in briefing papers so clearly—is the difficulty they have sleeping at night because of worry. If someone is waking up at night worrying about family members, that must have an impact on the way they can conduct, advance and live the rest of their life. That must be a problem, so I absolutely agree with what the hon. Gentleman said, and I am glad he has raised that issue.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one other barrier the Government must address is the high cost of citizenship applications, particularly for child refugees, who might have been here for many years? It costs the Government £300 to process a citizenship application, but they charge children, refugees, more than £1,200 to process one. This is profiteering; the Government make more than £2 million a week on these applications. That is one area where the Government could make the process of welcoming people to our country much better.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman presents the point perfectly, and well done for that. It shows the feeling across the House on this, and I totally agree with what he said. There is so much the Government could do. There is so much the Home Office could do. It could be a facilitator. It could help, but for some reason it chooses not to be the great help it could be, and that is very disappointing.

At one of the events we held this week, we heard from Play for Progress, which helps with therapy, counselling and dealing with post-traumatic stress disorders through music, trust and knowing people. It is run by two doctors, Anna Macdonald and Saliah Khan. I thank the Inter-Parliamentary Union for giving us the Room on Tuesday. We heard how the idea of using X-rays, which are not certain in their outcomes, to prove that people are of a certain age was unethical. We are talking about the use of X-rays to determine this from people's bones, even when a paediatrician has said someone is a child and a number of medical experts have done the same. In some cases a social worker, but in most cases a bureaucrat will be saying that someone is not a child. The doctors pointed out that not only does one try to avoid using X-rays on children, but this is being done to try to prove an inconclusive point. It is being done for non-medical needs—for bureaucratic needs. That betrays a sad attitude within the Home Office and where it is leading this.

A constituent of mine from Lewis wants the Education Secretary to “increase funding for ESOL” so that people can learn English as a second language. She said that the money that would be spent on that would soon be recouped, through taxes during a person's

“first eight months of employment at the national average wage.” I will bring my remarks to an end, as otherwise you will start clearing your throat, Madam Deputy Speaker, as is the given signal. First, however, I wish to thank the number of organisations that have been helpful to me. I am sure that if I am not in the top seven in the

ballot next time, they will help whoever is near the top. I wish to thank Lucy Wake at Amnesty International, Sam Nadel at Oxfam, James Bulman at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Seb Klier at the Refugee Council and Jon Featonby at the British Red Cross for all the help they gave on the Bill. The great thing is that that shows that many people care about refugees. We are living in fairly stable circumstances, whereas in the past many people from the highlands and islands moved for economic reasons and due to highland clearances. It is not inconceivable that things will change and in the future our great grandchildren or those who come after might be in a situation that results in their becoming refugees.

I wish to end on a case study. People's stories and situations are better here than the facts that we can drily drag from any situation. The case is as follows:

“Muhammed and Amal are from Syria. They fled to Libya with their four children shortly after the conflict began. Life in Libya became increasingly dangerous while they were there and after two years Muhammed decided to make the journey to Europe. Muhammed was granted refugee status in the UK. Aware that his son, Kusai, was due to turn 18 very soon, making him ineligible for family reunion, Muhammed immediately began the process of applying to bring his family to the UK.

That application was rejected. Muhammed knew that his 20-year-old daughter, Athar, might not be accepted but also knew that, under family reunion law, he had the right to bring his wife and any children under the age of 18 to the UK. It turned out that the reason for the rejection was Kusai's passport expiring while the family was in Libya. While awaiting that decision Kusai turned 18 and became ineligible for family reunion. Muhammed appealed, and a judge ruled that while Muhammed's wife and two youngest children were eligible for family reunion and could come to the UK, Kusai and Athar were rejected on the basis of being over 18 years old.

While Athar has remained in the region, Kusai decided to take matters into his own hands and took the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean to a makeshift camp in unthinkable conditions in Calais.”

That was in the famous jungle. That is the story that people have and it forms part of the points I can raise in my 15 minutes on refugees. Many other Members will raise different and better points, and we will all learn today from Members in all parts of the House as they say what they have to say. I look forward to hearing it.

12.49 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), not least because I can congratulate him on having secured this debate on an important topic, and also because, as he knows, my great-grandfather left the Western Isles after the clearances and was himself someone who, for economic reasons, was driven first to Glasgow and eventually to England. Had it worked out otherwise, I might have been a constituent of the hon. Gentleman's, and in a rather small constituency who knows what could have happened. Let me leave that point to one side and move on to another personal matter.

Every day—today is as every day—I walk from home down to Chislehurst railway station. I go down a road called Old Hill, and on the junction with Lubbock Road there is a seat with a memorial plaque on it that is inscribed in these terms:

“Rev. & Mrs. I. E Davidson & Friends

Gratefully remembered by

All the BMJ Children

(68 of them rescued from Central Europe 1939)”.

[Robert Neill]

The BMJ referred to is the Barbican Mission to the Jews. Reverend Davidson and his wife were based at Christ church in Lubbock Road in Chislehurst, where they set up a home for children who had been rescued, predominantly from Czechoslovakia and neighbouring countries, during the Kindertransport. They found refuge and a welcome in my home community of Chislehurst and are remembered there to this day with fondness and affection. This is an appropriate opportunity for me to pay tribute to their memory, and to all the people in our community in Bromley and Chislehurst who to this day keep alive that memory and that work for those who have suffered through displacement.

I was a sponsor of the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill and hope the Government will reflect on the failure to allow that modest Bill to progress. In my judgment it is a shame, because the attitude embodied by the Davidsons and their friends and neighbours in Chislehurst before the second world war is the most genuine reflection of this country's record and approach to refugees. The facts show that Britain has a very good track record on resettling the most vulnerable. It is worth observing that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has said that the UK maintains its standing as one of the most generous countries for refugee resettlement. The UNHCR judges the community sponsorship programme, which enables community groups to welcome and support refugees directly, to be a success, although it is still in its early phases, and hopes that it will continue. In a sense, community sponsorship of that sort builds on the work of the Davidsons and their friends in the Barbican Mission all those years ago. I very much hope that the Government will continue that work and build on it.

In a recent written statement, the Home Secretary observed:

"The UK has a long history of supporting refugees in need of protection."

He noted that we have welcomed tens of thousands of people in recent years and, since 2016, have resettled

"more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state",

and I am glad that my right hon. Friend also confirmed "the UK's ongoing commitment to resettlement and set out our plans for after 2020."—[*Official Report*, 17 June 2019; Vol. 662, c. 1-2WS.]

Compared with that good track record and generous spirit, it seems to me a little jarring that we have a restriction that prevents children who have come here lawfully as refugees—whose refugee status has been accepted—from being able to bring their closest relatives to come and support them. We are not talking about a large number of people, and nor are we talking about abuse of the asylum system. The key point to remember is that these people have been found and accepted to be genuinely in need and have proper refugee status.

As the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan Iar said, it is shame that the policy seems currently to be driven on the basis of the frankly ill-informed and unsubstantiated fear of a pull factor. The hon. Gentleman referred to the speech of Lord Kerr in the other place, in which the noble lord dismissed that fear, but I wish to take the matter one step further. This country's upper tribunal recently considered a case in relation to this

matter, and the judgement was critical of the Government's position. Mr Justice McCloskey overturned a decision to refuse the application made by a 19-year-old boy, who was recognised as a refugee when he was 16, to be allowed to sponsor his mother and brother to join him in the UK. One of the arguments on which the Government had relied in the initial decision was that it was in the public interest not to allow the family reunion application. The Government argued that other would-be child refugees

"would be at risk of trafficking and exploitation in their quest to reach the United Kingdom"—

that is the suggestion of the pull factor. In his judgment, Mr Justice McCloskey was pretty damning of that suggestion, saying that

"there is no evidence underlying"

that argument. He went on to say—I agree with him on this—that allowing reunification

"will promote, rather than undermine, the public interest in this respect."

Mr Justice McCloskey is right, the Government are wrong, and they should think again in that regard.

Because we are talking about a small number of people and because the current system is based on what appears to be a policy premise that is unsubstantiated by evidence—that position is clearly borne out by the court, and I have seen no intrinsic or palpable evidence anywhere to suggest that a pull factor can be shown to exist—it seems to me that, although in many respects I am proud of what my Government have done, in this respect they let themselves down by taking a needlessly restrictive and, forgive me for saying so, a somewhat mean-spirited approach in relation to this comparatively small number of people. We have an opportunity to look at this again. By allowing refugee children to sponsor their immediate families, we would reduce the number of people who make irregular journeys to reach the UK. There is evidence of people sometimes making irregular journeys because they are unable to come through the proper channels.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman is making a great speech. One point to consider is that over the past 18 months the Home Office has said on several occasions that it is following the progress of the family reunion Bill and talking to stakeholders—a sort of indication of change—but what has really happened, change-wise? The Home Office cannot stall on this much longer, given the body and breadth of opinion stating that the rules should change and come into line with those elsewhere, and that we should be decent to this small number of people.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman is right. Whenever I talk to people in my constituency, whatever their political association, their gut reaction to this issue is that it just seems only fair, decent and reasonable to allow reunification. That is right and I hope the Government will think again.

The hon. Gentleman observes correctly that this has been a matter of debate and consideration in a number of places. In 2016, the Home Affairs Committee said:

"It seems to us perverse that children who have been granted refugee status in the UK are not then allowed to bring their close

family to join them in the same way as an adult would be able to do. The right to live safely with family should apply to child refugees just as it does to adults.”

That must be right. If we want people who are genuine refugees to settle in this country, to integrate well with our society and to make a success of themselves, as so many of those children who were housed in Lubbock Road in Chislehurst were able to do—their stories are available in the archives of Christ church, Chislehurst—it seems to me to be only generous and decent to enable them to bring their close family, which is therefore a limited and concise number.

The Government have the opportunity to carry out a review, and I hope the Minister, who I know is a humane and caring person, will reflect on this matter. We need not put a needless stain on our reputation, which is otherwise good, by adopting such a restrictive approach in relation to this small number of children. In that spirit, I hope that the Government will think again about this matter. If this debate on World Refugee Day serves to do that, as it serves to honour the memory of the Davidsons and many others who helped people at that time, that will be a good thing and we will not have wasted our time today.

12.59 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for the Western Isles (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I apologise for not trying to pronounce his constituency, but my linguistic skills are more akin to those of Del Boy. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) on his speech. It takes great courage to speak truth to power and he always does it with such good grace.

I want to speak in favour of the motion. Today is World Refugee Day, and it is important to set out the issues in our history of supporting refugees following the second world war, as the hon. Gentleman mentioned. In my experience, there is not a great deal of understanding about who refugees are, what their background is, why they have come, and so on, and a lot of confusion about refugees and migrants as a whole. Unfortunately, in some cases that has been exploited by some people, who have sought to portray refugees and migrants as a whole as different or “others” or tried to make people afraid of them. Who can forget Nigel Farage’s infamous poster in the 2016 EU referendum, which tried to demonise Syrian refugees who were fleeing for their lives and portray them all as terrorists?

Or who can forget the shameful front pages of too many of our tabloids in the run-up to the referendum, which tried to alienate refugees from the public, or at least their readers? King’s College London has published a report, which I recommend people read, analysing tabloid front pages. Immigration was the second most mentioned issue, with 99 front pages on immigration in the 10 weeks preceding the 2016 EU referendum, 76% of them negative. Hon. Members should please read some excerpts from the report. It is shameful and begs the question of what is happening not just to evidence-based journalism, but to ethical journalism. That is compounded by what we see on social media and the lack of regulation there.

It would be fair to say that some people have raised concerns about immigration. We will all have had issues raised with us on the doorsteps, particularly where there

are housing pressures and when other public services such as the NHS and, increasingly, education are in crisis. However, immigration is also raised in areas where there is little diversity or fewer problems with services. That says a lot about how the media have portrayed the issue and how we have failed across the political spectrum to have a debate about immigration, migrants and refugees. We need to acknowledge that and step up to the plate, because we have created a vacuum and been replaced—I am not going to give a certain person the dignity of having his name mentioned in this place, but he was the leader of one party and became the leader of another.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend and many other Members, we have a high number of refugees in Coventry. We have experienced problems with people waiting a long time to find out their status. Very often they find out that a family member back home, in the country they are running away from, has been taken ill and do not know where they are. The other major problem is that some refugees spend months or maybe years without a status and unable to work, which creates a terrible situation.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I will come to that issue in a moment.

As leader of his party, that person excelled at pointing the finger at migrants, intentionally misleading the British public about EU citizens, who include the 1.3 million British people exercising their freedom to live and work across the EU, and conflating them with refugees seeking sanctuary in fear for their lives. We must not forget why we had a UN convention, as the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst mentioned, following the second world war, when Jewish people had nowhere to go. We remember what happened there. That person and his kind—I include the current incumbent of the White House in that—repeatedly use inflammatory and demonising language about refugees and migrants that is meant to instil fear. I would argue that large swathes of the print media have enabled that, which is compounded by social media.

I am proud that, in the wake of the second world war, the UK helped to draft, and was one of the first signatories to, the UN convention on refugees, so that anyone, anywhere, could claim refuge from persecution. We believe—I am talking about the people speaking in today’s debate—that most people feel that way too. But for some people, superimposed on top of those feelings are fears about jobs and public services and about difference: “What about my job? Will employers want to pay me less or even replace me? What about my children’s education? Will there be enough school places? Where will they live? What about housing supply?”

We have failed to answer those questions, and we have an obligation to do so. We must respond by engaging in communities to understand the local impacts of migration. We must make sure that communities with migrant populations are appropriately resourced and supported, so that the pressure on services is mitigated, migrant and indigenous communities get to know each other, and employers are prohibited from undercutting wages. Indeed, one issue uncovered prior to the EU referendum that got little coverage was the direct recruitment of people from abroad, which should not be allowed.

[Debbie Abrahams]

I would like to talk about a couple of refugees, Samia and Marzia, and say why they came to the UK and how I got to know them. Samia is a refugee from Syria. I first got to know her when she came to my Oldham office on a Friday night in 2015, saying that she was going to be made homeless. Although she had been granted refugee status fairly quickly, which is not everyone's experience—I would like to raise that point with the Minister—she was no longer eligible for temporary accommodation because of issues with her residence permit. She could not get the accommodation that she needed and was going to be literally turned out on to the streets.

I pay tribute to my wonderful team. My office deals with a number of immigration and asylum claims, and I cannot speak highly enough of what they do. They sprang into action and managed to get a temporary stay for Samia while her new residence permit was sorted out. While all that was happening, we learned more about why and how Samia had arrived in the UK. She was an architect in Syria and fled her home, which she loves, leaving friends and family, after the bombing started in 2014. She described her fear for life. Unfortunately, she was separated from Samir, her husband. She arrived on her own in the UK and was sent to Oldham, where we met. The next step for us was to find Samir and reunite the family.

I am happy to say that there is a good ending to this story. We were able to find Samir, and this lovely couple, who are both architects, were reunited. They now live in Oxford and are contributing to our economy. We do not hear enough about those kinds of stories or how refugees are a net benefit to this country.

I first met Marzia at an International Women's Day event in Oldham five years ago. She was a family court judge in the criminal justice system in Afghanistan. She had the temerity to set up education centres for girls, which unfortunately was not very popular with the Taliban. She was targeted by them, and after being run over and spending many weeks in hospital, she was told when finally released that she was going to be killed. She fled Afghanistan in fear for her life and arrived in the UK. Once in the UK, she moved to Oldham—I will say a little about that in a moment. As she told me, at the age of 43, having left her family, friends and career as a professional lawyer, she had to start all over again, learn a new language, which is increasingly difficult with cuts to English classes for speakers of other languages, and find a new identity and purpose.

Marzia said:

"The negative assumptions about me contributed to the deterioration of my mental health. The asylum system is harsh."

Now Marzia is a British citizen, and I was delighted to be invited to her citizenship ceremony. She works in my office as a caseworker, helping people who were once in her position. Her views on the asylum system are scathing. She says:

"We have had some refugees who have waited 15 years for a decision about their status. Do you think this is right? 15 years in no man's land... They are expected to learn English in spite of there being no free English classes, to pay for English when you're not allowed to work and have £5.00 a day to live off."

In addition to working for me, Marzia speaks about her experiences wherever she can. She has even written a book about not just her life in Afghanistan and the

circumstances that led her to leave, but her experience of the asylum system. She wants people to understand the propaganda in the tabloids and increasingly online.

We must remember why the refugee convention exists and think about what we would want if our families were affected. That is why I am calling on the Government to ensure compassion, dignity and humanity in the asylum system; not to let people languish for years in no man's land without determining their status; to ensure there are funded English classes to help people integrate in their new homes and communities; to enable people to work while they await their status; to support local authorities through a new migrant impact fund to ensure asylum seekers and refugees are properly supported and integrated into their new communities; and especially to fast-track the process of reuniting children with their families. As Marzia says,

"I am a refugee but I am a human being, like you."

1.11 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this debate and more specifically on his persistence in addressing this issue. To be honest, this could be quite a short debate, because it is on a narrow point, the issues are clear and we are going over the same ground that we have gone over many times before. What we actually need now is some action from the Government to comply with these points, not more long rhetorical speeches.

On Tuesday this week, I joined a demonstration in Parliament Square organised by Safe Passage, which is an excellent organisation that campaigns for refugee and migrant children. One of the key speakers—in the sheeting rain for some time—was the noble Lord Dubs, who I am proud to say is a near neighbour of mine in Hammersmith. As is well known, he was a refugee himself and secured the important Dubs amendment. It is still to the Government's shame that, I think, less than 300 of the 3,000 children who should have come to the UK as part of the Dubs amendment are actually here. [*Interruption.*] The Minister is mouthing from a sedentary position that the figure may be slightly more than that, but I suspect that whatever figure she comes up with will still be nugatory by comparison to not just what was required, but what was promised.

The same reasons that are given for the cases we are discussing today are given for the Dubs children—that we do not want to have pull factors or that local authorities will be overwhelmed by the numbers of children arriving. Those are very threadbare arguments. One of the other speakers at the demonstration was Stephen Cowan, who is the leader of my own council in Hammersmith and Fulham. He pointed out that that council alone, which is a small council, had agreed to take 200 unaccompanied children over a 10-year period. Other speakers at the event included a group of children from the London Borough of Islington who had got together a petition, gone to see the mayor of Islington and persuaded Islington Council to take in 100 children over 10 years. In other words, there was no shortage of compassion and practical remedies being offered, and every time it is the Government who are not stepping up to the plate.

Even if children reach the UK—often through dangerous and torturous means—they find that there are additional burdens to go through for their relatives to join them here.

I have visited Calais twice. Displaced people are seeking refuge every day, whether in Calais, Lesbos or in war zones themselves. Generally speaking, they seek refuge in other developing countries; 85% of refugees are in developing countries and 0.02% of the world's displaced people are in the UK, so although we have a good record on this issue over the decades, we are not doing enough now.

As is addressed in the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar, there are practical complexities, which are often deliberate. For example, there may be no access to consular, or indeed any, process of registration at the place that migrants are actually coming from. Whether the issues are legal or financial, the process is very difficult. Then there is the matter of legal aid, which was withdrawn under the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. Only through enforcement by the courts—and reluctantly—have the Government agreed to any restoration of legal aid, although that has still not happened. We are still in the desultory territory of exceptional case funding, and we know how limited that is.

When will the Government ensure free access to legal aid for migrant children in these circumstances? These are simple points. When will there be good representation and assistance for unaccompanied children in the UK or families who want their adult children to come here? When will family reunions be permitted—when will the rules be changed, so that reunions come within the scope of the immigration rules? When will the promises that have been previously made, including to Lord Dubs, be honoured? If the Minister can answer those simple questions today, we can move on. Otherwise, I suspect will be back here having this debate again very shortly.

1.17 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter). I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on bringing this motion to the House on World Refugee Day. I am proud to be a sponsor of his Bill, which will be of great benefit to society in general and to the young people who need the help it offers.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, as this Parliament keeps limping on, there is certainly plenty of time for the Government to get the Bill in Committee and table a money resolution so that we can make progress? I am sure that he, like me, would like to see that happen.

Bambos Charalambous: It is frustrating that the Bill has stalled because the Government will not give it a money resolution, and it is very sad that we are in this situation after the Bill has passed its Second Reading. I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to see progress.

On 9 February, I visited some of the refugee camps just over the channel with Care4Calais—a charity that distributes clothes, sleeping bags, tents and other necessities. I cannot forget the harsh conditions in which the refugees there find themselves, with little electricity or hot food, no hot water, no heating, no privacy and the constant background of cold and damp. All this is coupled with the knowledge that their loved ones still face danger back in the country they have escaped.

I heard at first hand from refugees in Calais about the life-threatening situations they had fled. For some, it was religious persecution; for others, the stark realities of war and sometimes torture. Many of the refugees were young—still in their early teens—but already they had experienced horrors in their lives that many of us would find difficult to imagine. The terrifying steps these refugees will take to escape torture and persecution are telling. I spoke to young boys who had clung to the underside of lorries, risking death for hours, and others who had been stowed in the boots of cars. I met a family who had crossed the sea in winter in a tiny dinghy the size of one of the rowing boats in St James's Park.

We must ask ourselves what prompts people to take such extreme actions. These are not the actions of people who have the choice of a comfortable life back home, nor of people who have taken decisions lightly: no, they are the actions of desperate people who want to survive and build a better life; people who need and deserve the help of rich nations like our own.

It was clear in Calais how often it is the young men who will make the journey first in the hope that they can carve an escape route for their loved ones. One young man I spoke to in Calais told me that he often speaks to his mother on the phone. I asked him, "Does she know where you're living now?" He smiled ruefully and answered, "She'll cry if I tell her, so I say I'm in a hotel. I just want a good job so I can make her safe." I asked him what brought him to the camp. Like so many others, he said that it was his family's conversion to Christianity that effectively placed a death sentence on their heads.

We cannot sit back and ignore this kind of persecution or people's death-defying attempts to escape, and should they make the journey safely here, we surely owe it to them to allow family reunion. Some argue that to reunite children with their families will mean taking in too many people. I am afraid that that argument is one of prejudice and selfishness. According to Oxfam, the UK has taken in substantially fewer people than would constitute its fair share. In 2018, the UK received five asylum applications for every 10,000 people living in the UK, while the European average is 14. Even at that number, over two thirds of applications are rejected. In this context, it seems nothing less than cruel to block the reunion of refugee children with their families. It is well known that doing so will condemn these children to greater likelihood of mental health problems and leave them less able to engage with society. This right already exists for adult refugees in the UK, who are able to bring their families over to join them having been successful in their asylum application. It is therefore perverse that the same right is not given to child refugees.

One of my own team in Parliament is part of a family who fled torture in Algeria in the 1960s. Her family are proud of their integration and achievements in this country: proud to be British, proud to contribute economically and socially, and proud to have done well in their chosen professions. They have thrived, but how many others are prevented from doing so because they are being cut off from their loved ones?

That brings me on to the subject of legal aid. It is now seven years since legal aid was made unavailable for family reunion cases. Although the need for family reunion has greatly increased, the Ministry of Justice has been prevented from bringing justice to refugee children.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

The fact that £600 million has been taken from the legal aid budget in the name of austerity has meant more isolated children, left to fend for themselves. Refugee family reunion has been described by the Government as a straightforward immigration matter, but there is clear evidence to show that this is not the case.

In its report, “Not so straightforward”, the British Red Cross argues that a substantial percentage of refugee family reunion case are highly complex. These cases are in fact anything but straightforward. Yet because of the removal of legal aid, refugees wishing to reunite with their families must apply without legal help or must themselves pay to hire legal advisers. Of course, refugees are rarely able to hire solicitors or legal advisers on their own due to financial insecurity. Instead, they are left to navigate a fiendishly complicated system that sometimes requires DNA evidence and documents that have been long since destroyed in the rush to escape war or torture.

If we are to be the open, civilised and tolerant country that we aspire to be, we urgently need to make refugee family reunion possible. Part of this would include the Ministry of Justice committing to a statutory funding regime for legal assistance for refugee family reunion cases. We cannot pass by on the other side. It is time as a nation that we behaved like the good Samaritan we should be and took family reunion seriously.

1.23 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Today marks World Refugee Day. I am proud to represent Brightside and Hillsborough in Sheffield. We have a proud legacy of welcoming and supporting refugees over many decades. My city was the first “city of sanctuary”, established more than a decade ago. We are home to a vulnerable person relocation scheme. I am pleased that our Labour council has recommitted to the scheme until 2020, and hopefully beyond. Yet the scale of the challenge is enormous. Globally, there are 25 million people who are refugees and 68.5 million forcibly displaced from their homes due to war, persecution or environmental catastrophe. Today we are reminded of their plight and suffering, but also recognise the enormous contribution that refugees make here in the UK and beyond.

In March 2018, I stood before the House to deliver a speech in favour of the Second Reading of the private Member’s Bill on family reunion introduced by the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I explained that I supported the Bill for all the refugee and migrant constituents in Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough, and for their loved ones who were unable to join them in the UK. I talked about my constituent Abdul—a young man from Syria who had settled in Sheffield after completing his degree there. Abdul attempted to rejoin his family in Syria, facing many dangerous situations along the way. It quickly became apparent to him that a reunion in Syria would not be possible due to the ongoing war, and so he returned to the UK. On his return, Abdul made every effort to ensure that his family would join him safely in the country he now called his home. He sought help from every agency and organisation available to him to be able to be reunited with his family as quickly as possible. Despite his efforts, and compliance with the

Home Office guidance and procedures, the process proved to be painfully slow and disappointing. It was an arduous journey for Abdul, separated from his elderly parents who had serious health problems for over 11 years while the request for reunion was dealt with.

I am very pleased that after that speech and following my plea to the Minister, Abdul and his family were finally reunited. I met the family a few weeks after they had arrived safely. It is fair to say that it was an emotional day for us all. Both I and his mother cried. I would like to place on record my sincere gratitude to the Immigration Minister, who responded swiftly to my request and was able to assist Abdul and his family. However, while Home Office policy can be useful in exceptional scenarios like that of Abdul and his family, I am afraid it is not good enough that families are still suffering, proving that the system is not fit for purpose—and the cases continue to come forward.

Only recently I have been approached with another deeply worrying case. Ms Sermani is a Syrian refugee, too, who came to the UK through family reunion to join her husband. She was separated from her children, aged six and 10, while undertaking the extremely dangerous journey to safety. Four years have now passed, and we are aware that the children, now 10 and 14, are currently living in Turkey. Their biological father disappeared during the war, and his whereabouts are not known. It is quite possible that he will have lost his life during the conflict in Syria.

It has been four desperately sad years since Ms. Sermani has seen her young children. I cannot begin to imagine what it must feel like to live with so much distance between them. Despite her numerous attempts to bring them to the UK, she has had no success. I have been informed by the Home Office that under current rules, as she came to the UK under her husband’s refugee status, she does not have refugee status in her own right. This means that she cannot bring her children to join her through a family reunion application. Her husband is unable to make the application for them to reunite under his status as he is not their biological father. It is beyond shocking that we are confronted with this situation. Due to Home Office rules, the children will remain in another country without either parent.

I raise Ms Sermani’s case, with her consent, to highlight her personal plight but also the real, practical problems we are facing when dealing with such cases. These arbitrary criteria leave people extremely vulnerable, falling through the cracks of the system. The current bureaucratic barriers are actively keeping parents separated from their children. This is not the Britain that I know and we must do better.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Lady highlights an interesting case. Surely there have to be guiding principles from which the Home Office’s rules stem. The rules have not been written from those principles in a way that allows that person to come here. In the absence of rules, the Home Office should fall back on principles, and the woman being able to be reunited with her children is a case in point.

Gill Furniss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those remarks. I hope that my speech today will alleviate the process for this family. I hope the Minister is willing to help, and I ask her to reconsider the application of Ms Sermani in my constituency. I also ask her to look at

what more the Government can do to ensure that the guidance allows for greater flexibility in cases that do not fit the criteria directly.

Finally, as we mark World Refugee Day, I urge the Minister to allow the Refugees (Family Reunion) (No. 2) Bill to come back to the House, so that we may move forward. It is vital that the House has the opportunity to debate the Bill in Committee as soon as possible. We owe it to the many people who will rely on the passing of the Bill to be reunited with their loved ones.

1.30 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for bringing the important subject of refugee family reunion to the Chamber—I apologise for not being able to pronounce his constituency; I promise to rectify that.

I commend the Red Cross for the drop-in event it held earlier this week, with refugees from various areas. I was able to meet up with one of my constituents, a young man called Yusuf who is a refugee. He does not sit around waiting for his status—he is helping other refugees and ensuring that they are not isolated. He is a brilliant young man and a brilliant example of how refugees want to get stuck in and involved in this country.

It is important to remember that refugees do not willingly give up their home and community to move to another country. They have been forced to flee, whether by war, violence or persecution, and have had to leave all familiar people and places and deal with a completely new life, learn a new language and set up a new home. We need to understand how dislocated and alone they must be feeling, and we should do everything we can to welcome them and help them settle.

That should include refugees being able to work—a right that is currently denied them as they go through the complex and detailed process of seeking the right to reside here in the UK. I appreciate that we are dealing with family reunion matters, but I need to highlight the need for refugees to have the right to work while they wait the many months or even years that it takes to obtain legal status. Not being able to spend their time usefully employed can have a seriously detrimental effect on their mental health. Madam Deputy Speaker, if you were alone in a foreign country with no money and had to sit and stare at four walls all day, how would you feel? How would anyone here feel? Many refugees want to work. They have the skills that we desperately need here in the UK, so we should be helping them to use those skills to help themselves and the community they find themselves in.

To return to the motion under debate, I support the call for close relatives of all refugees in the UK to be able to reunite with their families. I note with concern that legal aid for family reunion applications was removed in 2013 because it was felt that those applications are straightforward and easy to prepare. In reality, they are far from straightforward—they are difficult for any refugee to deal with, especially in a language they are not familiar with. Legal aid for these applications is available in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and in the interests of fairness, I argue that it should be reinstated in England and Wales.

Currently children who have been granted refugee status in the UK are not allowed to bring their close family to join them in the same way that an adult can. That is an unfair and discriminatory practice on the grounds of age.

In Newport West, we have a diverse mix of people from all across the globe, and we have always welcomed the stranger. However, refugees who arrive in Newport are often disoriented and need help to navigate their way through bureaucratic processes and the practical business of settling down in a foreign land. We are fortunate to have an organisation called The Sanctuary, which provides a welcome and support for refugees in Newport. The project grew out of a desire to support a few Eritrean women who started attending Bethel Community Church in the centre of the city, but it now has its own property and staff, who provide a fantastic service to refugees and asylum seekers across Newport.

The Sanctuary provides practical help and support by providing English classes, advocacy support, mother and toddler groups and an afterschool youth club, which provides a safe place for unaccompanied minors. I am so pleased that refugees in Newport West can access the services and support at The Sanctuary. The staff there play an important role in ensuring that refugees settle and integrate into our community and can play a full part in our city.

It is important that the Government act to ensure that close relatives of all refugees in the UK are able to reunite with their families in the UK, and I add my voice to the call for these reforms to be introduced swiftly and without delay.

1.34 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always good to have the opportunity to speak about these matters. I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I hope that is the right pronunciation; I have been practising it for the last 15 minutes. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) said she was challenged by it, and so was I. The hon. Gentleman has been a great advocate from the very beginning, and he deserves a lot of credit for his leadership on this matter. He has the support of a movement of MPs from all parties for what he is trying to secure.

I am pleased to see the Minister in her place. Just a few weeks ago, I had the opportunity to meet her in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, and we discussed some of the things that her Department is doing. I thank her for the way she responded to the issues we brought to her attention and for what her Department is doing. I also thank her for giving me the opportunity to name some of the refugees whose cases are in the system. All MPs probably take advantage of the opportunity of meeting her to drop into conversation the name of someone whose case we feel should be looked at urgently.

I firmly believe that, as Members of Parliament, we have a solemn duty to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak out for all those who are oppressed, regardless of their nationality, race, colour or creed. For that reason, I am delighted that Members of this House have the

[*Jim Shannon*]

opportunity and the privilege to recognise World Refugee Day. This House shines today, and Members' contributions have been excellent.

We are seeing record levels of displacement globally, with more than 70 million people displaced worldwide—70 million. Sometimes numbers are bandied around, and we do not know how to process them, so let me put it another way. We are dealing with a situation where the entire population of Ireland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are forced out of their homes. Imagine driving down London's streets with nobody there—that is what it means.

Something must be done to tackle this situation, and to do that, we need to tackle all the root causes. That is why I would like to discuss one of the biggest drivers of displacement: the persecution of religious and belief minorities and systematic violations of the fundamental right to freedom of religion or belief. I thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan Iar for referring to the persecution of Christians. In a report entitled "The Persecution of Christians and Global Displacement", Open Doors stated that religious persecution was a "dangerously underestimated" factor behind some people's decision to flee their home. The charity estimated that around half of Syria's 1.7 million Christians have left their country due to a combination of conflict and religious persecution.

When the Minister and I met a few weeks ago, I mentioned that six Syrian families have been relocated to my constituency of Strangford, and particularly Newtownards. That is an excellent Government scheme, and I commend them for that, but it is only part of the success story. Those families are traumatised and under pressure. They have come to a strange town, and not all of them can speak the language; the children can learn it quickly, but their parents cannot. I met all the families through The Link charity and Streaton Presbyterian Church in Newtownards. It was wonderful to see the community come together through their churches and their faith. These are Christian families who had to leave Syria—some of the 1.7 million people who were displaced—and come to Newtownards. The community got together, with the support of Government, to secure them housing, access to hospital care and education for their children and to try to get them employment. It always encourages me greatly as the Member for Strangford to see just how generous people are when it comes to making things happen.

We see a similar pattern in Iraq, where the numbers of Christians have fallen dramatically due to religious persecution. It is estimated that there were approximately 1.5 million Christians there in 2003, but now numbers are in the hundreds of thousands. The assessment is that there are now approximately 250,000 Christians.

As Chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, I also speak out on behalf of many non-Christians who fled their homes because it was not possible to practise, change or give up their faith or belief without suffering discrimination or, in many cases, extreme violence. For example, there are an estimated 1.1 million Rohingya Muslims in Bangladesh due to displacement by the brutal onslaught of the Burmese military. We have spoken about that in this Chamber before, and it really hurts me—it hurts us all

here—when we have to listen to horrific stories of brutality, violence, sexual abuse, physical abuse and the murder of loved ones.

Although there have inevitably been difficulties and tensions, it is deeply humbling to reflect on the kindness with which a country with extremely limited resources such as Bangladesh has welcomed those in desperate need. On this World Refugee Day, I think it is worth asking ourselves: would we have the same courage and would we have the same compassion to do the same? Bangladesh is a very poor country, but it has welcomed those people in—the 1.1 million Rohingya. It is also worth asking ourselves if the UK and the international community truly have done everything in our power to tackle this issue.

Apart from Myanmar and the middle east, there are many other parts of the world where huge numbers have been displaced due to religious persecution. For example, the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria has displaced over 2 million people. For this reason, promoting freedom of religious belief and encouraging peaceful co-existence between different religious communities is vital to any long-term solutions for the refugee crisis.

It is also why policy development for these two areas should not be totally separate; we have to marry those two together. On this point, I would like to congratulate the Home Office—I did it earlier, and I want to reiterate it—on its development of a new training module for asylum caseworkers to help them better assess applications made on the grounds of religion or belief-based persecution. I understand that all caseworkers will have received this training by the end of June—that was confirmed at the meeting—and I commend the Government for their efforts. Let us give credit where credit is due, which I think it is important to do in any debate we have in this House. This is an important step, which I hope will go some way to addressing the disproportionately low numbers of religious or belief minority refugees who have been granted asylum by the United Kingdom.

Figures obtained by the Barnabas Fund under a freedom of information request show that out of some 4,850 Syrian refugees accepted for resettlement by the Home Office in 2017, only 11 were Christian. Again, I would just say that we have over half of them in Newtownards. This is only 0.2% of all the Syrian refugees accepted by the UK. I know that the Government have been very generous, but may I very gently say that I would have liked to see a wee bit more focus on Christian refugees so that they get an equal opportunity of being accepted?

In January, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins)—he was in earlier on, but is away just now—and the hon. Members for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) visited Lebanon, with the support of Aid to the Church in Need, to investigate why so few religious minority refugees were being referred by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Can the Minister give us some response to that, although it is not her responsibility directly, so that we can hear what discussions have taken place?

Several issues were discussed during the trip, but one of the principal concerns was that there seem to be communication issues between the UNHCR and religious minority refugees. We know that through the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, as well as through the Barnabas Fund, Open Doors and

Release International, which are all coming back with the same thing. Nearly all the refugees whom the delegation met were unclear about their rights and UNHCR's available support, leading to a feeling that the UNHCR was not for them—that is very worrying—and that they should seek support elsewhere. The UNHCR has to realise that it is for everyone, and let us make sure that this is rammed home today.

It is important to note that the UNHCR is under enormous pressure, which I understand and respect, and that it is underfunded, which I understand as well, and overworked, so this is not intended as a criticism. I am trying to highlight areas where the United Kingdom and the UNHCR might be able to work together to improve the situation.

I congratulate the Home Office on the 5,806 family reunion visas granted in 2018, and I add my name to the call for the Government to introduce reforms to family reunion rules to ensure that the close relatives of all refugees in the UK have safe and legal pathways to unite with their families in the UK.

The six families that have been integrated among the communities in Newtownards and have done extremely well also have other relatives, as the Minister knows, who are still detained in and unable to get out of Syria. These are family members, so when it comes to the title of this debate—"Refugee family reunion" is what it says up there on the Annunciator and on the Order Papers in front of us—this is about making sure that the families who have also sought asylum can get asylum alongside their families. Everyone one of us has families, and knows how important it is to have family. Almost the only thing that keeps us sane is our family and it is really good to have that, but how much more so for those refugees to have their families and to have them close.

1.45 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I, too, start by paying a massive tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), first, for securing this debate, but secondly, for his relentless pursuit of reform of the family reunion rules in the face of what hon. Members have rightly described as pretty shabby Government behaviour in relation to his private Member's Bill. I dare say there were other topics he could have picked for his Bill that would have made him even more popular among the citizens of the Outer Hebrides, if that was possible, but he chose this one because he believes passionately in it. He has thrown himself into this cause heart and soul, and I thank him for doing so. More generally, we have had some incredibly powerful and measured speeches from across the Chamber, so I thank all hon. Members for their contributions.

This debate and the motion tabled have been a very fitting way to mark both World Refugee Day and Refugee Week. It is a week during which we celebrate the rights enshrined in the refugee convention—as has been pointed out, we helped to draft it—and also commit to defending the principle that states should provide shelter for those fleeing persecution from other countries. As hon. Members have pointed out, it is also a week during which we celebrate the huge benefits that refugees can bring to their new homes if they are given the chance to flourish.

It is often said in this Chamber, and it has been said again today, that we have a strong track record of offering sanctuary to refugees, and I agree, although the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) was quite right to point out some of the challenges posed by certain political and tabloid voices, and the need for all of us to be leaders in defending the rights of refugees. However, we should not see this simply as an act of charity, because this country does benefit too. We must also say thank you to our refugee community for the massive contribution they make in all walks of life.

World Refugee Day is also a good time to thank all the organisations and individuals up and down the UK that work relentlessly to support refugees and campaign on their behalf. As we have heard, many of these organisations have been in Parliament this week, either hosting or attending Refugee Week events. We have had Play for Progress, which my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar hosted. I was lucky enough to host René Cassin, and we have had the International Red Cross, the International Observatory of Human Rights and many more. I would like to take this chance to pay particular tribute to the Scottish Refugee Council, which does tremendous work day in, day out. It is a source of lots of information and ideas for me, and I wish it well as it launches its own refugee festival today.

Finally on the subject of Refugee Week, like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I am pleased to see the Minister for Immigration here today because—and this may cause shockwaves in the Chamber—I too want to commend her and the Home Office for what they have announced this week about refugee resettlement. As the hon. Gentleman has said, the Syrian vulnerable persons scheme has been a tremendous success, and it is excellent that the experience and expertise gained in operating that system, offering safety to 20,000 vulnerable Syrians by 2020, will not suddenly become redundant, but instead be put to greater use in a broader resettlement scheme thereafter. As an Opposition spokesperson, it would be remiss of me not to suggest that the Government might go further both on numbers and in giving a longer-term commitment, but it is a very welcome step in the right direction, and I thank the Minister and her Department for that.

The reason why resettlement is more important than ever is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the hon. Member for Strangford have said, that the global displacement of people has reached record levels. Just yesterday, the UNHCR reported that the population of displaced citizens has now reached 70.8 million people, and 25.9 million of them are refugees, which is almost double the number from a decade ago. The UNHCR estimates that 1.4 million refugees need to be resettled, but last year only 81,300 places were offered by 29 states—a gap of 90% that is getting bigger rather than smaller. Every place we can offer truly counts. Hon. Members have said that we can, and should, do more with the Dubs amendment, with relocations from Europe, and with the asylum system, and I agree.

The key part of my hon. Friend's Bill—family reunion—can be part of solving the crisis that I have just spoken about. Many of those who apply to come to the UK under the refugee family reunion rules—and those who would apply under the expanded rules that we seek through

[Stuart C. McDonald]

the Bill—are themselves refugees, and it makes sense for them to be alongside their refugee families in the UK, rather than isolated in refugee camps. More fundamentally, however, family reunion is about the rights of those refugees who are already here. Refugee status will never be fully effective unless it comes with all those rights that are essential to allow a person to rebuild their life. The convention relating to the status of refugees ensures that refugees can work, study, and access housing and social security on the same basis as the host country's citizens.

What could be more essential for someone trying to rebuild their life than the presence of their family? As the hon. Member for Strangford said, the Government do allow family reunion, and last year there were 5,806 cases of partners and children who were able to join refugees here. We welcome that, but our refugee family reunion rules remain more restrictive than international best practice, and more restrictive than leading refugee organisations would wish.

As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) rightly said, the reforms in my hon. Friend's Bill are modest, and they are also reasonable for all the reasons that have been set out today and in numerous debates beforehand. How can it ever be right that someone's 18-year-old daughter cannot join her refugee parents here, but her 17 and 15-year-old siblings can? How can we say to refugee children living among us in the UK that even though they know where their parents are, we will not allow them to come here?

In response to such questions, the Government generally point to alternative routes in the immigration rules, but as everyone knows, those alternatives are more complicated, much more restrictive, and they come with far fewer rights than refugee family reunion. As the hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) said, it is great that now and again there are exceptional cases and exceptional results are granted, but we want all refugees in the circumstances set out in the Bill to be able to access refugee family reunion rules in a straightforward manner.

In response to what the Home Affairs Committee called the “perverse” rule that stops children sponsoring their parents to come in under family reunion rules, the Home Office plays the “pull factor” card—an argument I hate. As the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, that argument is not founded on evidence, and it runs contrary to everything that leading international refugee organisations tell us. To my mind, it is also totally immoral because when looked at from a different angle, it essentially makes an example of refugee children who are already here. It says to refugee children, “We must ensure that you live separately from your parents so as to discourage others from coming here”, which is a brutal way for any Department to operate.

Such reasoning is also deeply flawed. If I had fled my country of origin and discovered that my child had ended up as a refugee in a third country, I would move heaven and earth to join them there. If I could not do it through family reunion rules, I would pay people smugglers or buy a dinghy to do it myself. Refusing to recognise the right of child refugees to sponsor their parents does not stop people using unsafe illegal routes—on the contrary, it forces more people to use them—and my hon. Friend's Bill is about creating safe, legal alternatives.

The hon. Members for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter), for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), and for Newport West (Ruth Jones) raised the issue of legal aid, which is also covered by my hon. Friend's Bill. I know from my experience as an immigration solicitor how complicated those applications can sometimes be. The issue is set out in an excellent report entitled “Not so straightforward” by the British Red Cross, which notes

“the need for qualified legal support in refugee family reunion”.

People can still get that support in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and they should have it in England and Wales as well.

My hon. Friend has won this argument and he won the vote last year, and it is disgraceful that the Government are not honouring and implementing the will of the House. It is not clear whether the Bill is being blocked by the Home Office or the Treasury or—more likely—by the Whips and business managers.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Is it particularly frustrating that the Government are not willing to provide time for our hon. Friend's Bill to progress, given how much time is available? Nothing else of any substance is happening, and with the greatest of respect to the next Backbench Business debate, if Members keep that going until 5 o'clock we will be quite impressed. Time and capacity is available, and many other private Member's Bills are also not getting the light of day that they deserve.

Stuart C. McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. There is enough time for a five-day debate on the Bill.

Andy Slaughter: I fully intend to keep the next debate going until 5 o'clock, and I hope that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will join me in that ambition.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): That is also subject to the Chair's agreement.

Stuart C. McDonald: I certainly do not doubt their ability to do that, Mr Deputy Speaker. In conclusion, the continued blocking of this Bill is disrespectful to Parliament, but more importantly it is disrespectful and damaging to our refugee community. A fitting conclusion to refugee week would be for the Government to listen and to reunite more families, which is exactly the instruction that Parliament has given.

1.55 pm

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this debate on World Refugee Day and on his excellent speech, and I thank all those who have contributed to this excellent debate. On this special day I thank and acknowledge the many charities that work with refugees, including Amnesty International, Oxfam, the Refugee Council, the Red Cross and the many other groups, including in my city, that have worked for decades to help refugees. The hon. Gentleman has been a consistent campaigner for refugee family reunion. I was extremely happy to speak on Second Reading of his private Member's Bill, and in his debate during refugee week last year. The Government's paralysis makes this feel like groundhog day.

I know from personal experience how frustrating it is when the Government stall a Bill's progress. I am at my wits' end about the Parliamentary Constituencies (Amendment) Bill, which has been in purgatory even longer than the hon. Gentleman's Bill. Its Second Reading was in December 2017, and we still have no money resolution. The Committee has now met 31 times without discussing a single line of the Bill, which must be a record. The Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill is another route to addressing this issue, but it has also got lost somewhere in Committee. The Government are at the end of their feeble life and are running scared of the House, even on issues as important and urgent as refugee family reunion.

The key to any successful refugee story is integration. People who flee violence come to rebuild their lives in the UK, but how can we expect anybody to recover from the trauma of conflict, and put the pieces of their lives back together, without the support of their family? Children who have had to flee their homes are currently barred from bringing close family members to join them in the UK. As the debate on refugee family reunion goes round and round, the Government continue to rely on discredited claims about "pull factors". They argue that allowing children to sponsor family members will encourage more children to make the dangerous journey to the UK, but the evidence does not support that position. In fact, providing safe, legal routes to family reunion prevents dangerous journeys, and only when people feel that they have run out of options do they take the enormous risk of making their own way to the UK.

As long as there exist the "push factors" of war, conflict and violence, children will be forced to leave their homes and become separated from their families. It is our humanitarian duty to ensure that any child who makes it to our shores has the best shot at making a better life for themselves, which must include being surrounded by their family.

The Labour party believes in the right to a family life. At the moment, the definition of "family" under the refugee reunion rules is too narrow. It includes only a pre-flight spouse or partner and dependent children under the age of 18. As someone with adult children who are no longer dependent on me, I object strongly to the insinuation that they are no longer close family. In war and conflict, family relationships can become even more complicated. For example, younger children are often under the care of older siblings. Under a Labour Government, if you are a child who is granted the right to be here, so will your parents or carers be. If you have been brought up by carers or parents with a right to be here, so will you, even after you turn 18. In the refugee context, it is essential that close family do not lose out because they are not included in the arbitrary rules set down by the Government.

I was very happy to hear Members' emphasis on the importance of legal aid in refugee family reunion cases. We recently had a major victory of unaccompanied and separated children coming back into the scope of legal aid. The fact that they were ever excluded is a testament to how far the Government went with their swingeing cuts to legal aid and the punitive hostile environment. I congratulate the Children's Society on its significant victory.

During the passage of the Immigration Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal) Bill, Labour has called for legal aid to be reinstated for early legal advice for all immigration matters. The Home Office often claims that legal aid is not necessary to complete an immigration application, but that is simply not the case, especially for children, those who do not speak the language, or people who are otherwise very vulnerable. Recent figures show that over half of all immigration appeals are now successful. That is shockingly high and shows how important court cases are in holding the Government to account on immigration. Justice is meaningless if people do not have the means to claim it, and legal aid is a fundamental part of enabling people to access justice. We know that early access to legal aid helps to save money in the long run, as people are less likely to end up in needless court hearings and appeals.

In conclusion, the Minister has been saying for over a year that she will take a close look at family reunion rules, but we have yet to see any concrete progress. The Government do not even need legislation to get these changes passed. It is in the Home Secretary's gift, under the immigration rules, to change the eligibility for family reunion and ensure refugees do not spend another birthday, Christmas or Eid separated from their relatives. I hope the Minister will commit to that today.

2.2 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): Mr Deputy Speaker, I may crave your indulgence for a bit more time than was originally anticipated, because there has been a lot of content in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) on securing this important debate on refugee family reunion. I welcome his ongoing dedication to the issue, and his insight and passionate contribution this afternoon. Indeed, we saw that from Members across the House during the debate.

It is of course apposite that we are discussing this issue on World Refugee Day and during refugee week, as we celebrate the important contribution refugees make as they rebuild their lives in the UK. We have a proud history of providing protection to those who need it, honouring our international commitments under the refugee convention and the European convention on human rights. In the year ending March 2019, we granted refugee status or another form of protection to over 17,000 people, an increase of over 20% on the previous 12 months. Over that same period, we also issued about 5,700 visas to family members of refugees in the UK.

Sadly, as we have heard from several Members, global humanitarian need continues to grow, with over 70 million people around the world forced from their homes and about 25 million refugees. The UK's resettlement schemes are an integral component of our humanitarian response to that challenge, addressing the needs of some of the most vulnerable refugees, and providing safe and legal routes for tens of thousands of people to start new lives here. In every year since 2016, the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state.

As many will be aware, earlier this week the Government reaffirmed their ongoing commitment to refugee resettlement. We are on track to deliver our current commitments to 2020 and have now resettled nearly

[Caroline Nokes]

16,000 refugees under our vulnerable persons resettlement scheme. Importantly, from 2020—I have been particularly keen on this—we will consolidate our biggest resettlement routes in a single new global scheme, under which we will aim to resettle in the region of 5,000 of the world's most vulnerable refugees in the first year of operation. More than half of those resettled under our existing programmes are children, the majority of whom have been resettled with their families. I expect that to continue.

A key part of the new resettlement offer will be that those resettled through our community sponsorship and “mandate” routes will be in addition to our yearly, global commitment. While numbers have historically been small, we intend to explore ways to maximise the contributions of both these routes. The mandate resettlement scheme resettles recognised refugees who have a close family member in the UK who is willing to accommodate them. Going forward, I will look at options to adjust the scope of those eligible to allow for a higher uptake in referrals for resettlement from UNHCR.

The hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) made reference to being the parent of grown-up children who are now independent of him. I can honestly say that I am the parent of a grown-up child who is most certainly still dependent on me. [Laughter.] I am very conscious that across the globe there are many what I regard as young people, between the ages of 18 to 25, who are still dependent on their parents. It is in that particular aspect that I have a very keen interest.

I will now turn to the comments made by Back-Bench Members, because they have been insightful and useful to this debate. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan Iar spoke about his encounter with Yohannes and the importance of work for resettled refugees. I have been impressed and delighted, over the course of the past 18 months, to meet resettled refugees who all emphasise the importance of work in giving them a route to integration. I have met employers who have played their part, too.

It is important to draw a distinction between those who are here seeking asylum and those who are here as refugees already with status. I will freely admit that the proportion of those who have status and are in work is still woefully low. We are at a time of incredibly high employment—higher than at any time in my life—yet for those who have been resettled the numbers are still low. There are some inspiring stories, but it is absolutely imperative that we work hand in glove with the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Education and civil society to help people into work.

Some of the most inspiring schemes have been community sponsorships—various Members across the House have made reference to them—where the community wraps its arms around individuals, taking them on a journey to find school places for their children, helps them with their English, ensures childcare support while they attend ESOL classes, and helps with CVs and getting into work. I pay particular tribute to World Jewish Relief, which has a fantastic programme running in Bradford. It focuses determinedly on giving people interview experience and finding them appropriate clothing to wear to interviews, help with English, help with CVs and help into work.

Jim Shannon: Some of the Christian Syrian refugees in Newtownards are talented in carpentry and their work is as good as that of any carpenter. The only thing holding them back is their grasp of the language. If they understand the language, they are then able to go on building sites in safety. Language is the thing that opens the door.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. Sometimes it is language and sometimes it is the recognition of qualifications. I tell people repeatedly the story of a Syrian refugee in Kent who was qualified as an accountant in Syria, yet can only work as a bookkeeper here. As a Government, we have to be imaginative. Her English was brilliant. She needed not English language lessons, but to be able to upgrade her qualification. It is important that we are creative in finding routes to work.

The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) gave a very wide-ranging speech and I agreed with much of it. She spoke of the dreadful language use in 2016. I am always reminded of a poster I used to drive past on the A3. I am quite ashamed to repeat the words, but I will do so. It simply said, “The Turks are coming”. I have always sought in this role to be careful and measured about the language I use, and to bring a very human tone to the debate around immigration. It has been an interesting and challenging debate over the past 18 months, but we need to move away from speaking in tabloid headlines.

Debbie Abrahams: The Minister is making some very powerful points. As I was trying to hint at, or perhaps more than hint at, does she believe that all leaders, including us—as MPs, we are leaders—and particularly, leaders of parties need to demonstrate in their language and behaviour that such language is unacceptable?

Caroline Nokes: I absolutely agree and that applies not just here, but in other Parliaments around the globe, and this is about not just language, but tone.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) spoke about the Reverend Davidson and the children brought here as part of the Kindertransport. Several months ago, I met Vera Schaufeld, who was a Kindertransport child. She had an immense impact on me and I am very much aware of the incredible work of the noble Lord Dubs in the other House, who has been an inspiration to many of us.

The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) spoke about the Dubs amendment, and I remind him of one point. While we were discussing that amendment, he cited the figure of 3,000, but the Government were always clear that we would discuss the matter with local authorities and find common ground about the number of places that they had available. The final figure that was settled on was 480. We have always refused to give a running commentary on how we are doing on numbers, but it is important to reflect that at the start of 2018 we changed the qualifying date so that more transfers would be possible. At the end of last year, we removed the date altogether, so that we could continue our work with France, Greece and Italy to meet that commitment. Of course, there is still the challenge of best interests tests, where children must go through the process with the UNHCR. Sometimes that is not as swift as either I or the UNHCR would like.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) spoke about Abdul, who had settled in her constituency, and the heartwarming story that he had been reunited with his family. She said some very kind words about me, as did various other Members. It almost felt like this was some sort of swansong at the Dispatch Box, but I reassure hon. Members that the Scottish National party has called an Opposition day debate on immigration next week and some other Scottish colleagues will see me return to Westminster Hall the week after—I am not quite gone yet.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned resettlement in Strangford and the important role of faith communities. I am always struck by that, and it is not simply Christian communities. In Lambeth this week, I saw a number of resettled refugees, including one young Muslim woman from Syria who had been resettled in an apartment in the synagogue. It was an absolutely brilliant example of how faiths are working together. I am absolutely delighted to hear tales such as that, and what has really been impressed on me over the last year is the very important role of the faith communities, and indeed, of all those involved in community sponsorship, which has been such an important part of our schemes.

Let me turn briefly to the policy background, because I am sure that I am about to run out of time. I reassure hon. Members that we recognise the importance of family reunion, and our policy provides safe and legal routes to bring families together. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough cited a particular case, but over the past five years we have granted over 26,000 family reunion visas to family members of refugees in the UK. There are also separate provisions in the rules that allow extended family to sponsor children to come here. Where there are serious and compelling circumstances, refugees can sponsor adult dependent relatives living overseas to join them when, owing to age, illness or disability, that person requires long-term personal care that can be provided only by relatives in the UK.

Child sponsors is an incredibly controversial issue and I am sure that it will provoke Members into seeking to intervene on me. It is important that we maintain the safety of children. Over the last six months or so, I have been really struck by the numbers of perilous journeys that have been made across the channel. In very many instances, children have been on board wholly unsuitable craft in the busiest shipping lane in the world. We know that those people have fallen prey to organised crime gangs and people smugglers and that they have paid enormous sums of money to have their lives put at risk. I am sympathetic to the view that we should carefully consider how we might expand our family reunion schemes, but I do not wish to do anything that sees yet more people and yet more children put in those terrible situations. We know that they are exploited by organised crime, and while we work hard with our colleagues here and abroad to ensure that there are arrests and convictions, it is an incredibly dreadful situation that we must seek to contend with.

Stuart C. McDonald: Everybody across the House wants to avoid people having to turn to people smugglers to get anywhere around the globe, but the point made by the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) was that the rules, as they stand, force parents to

turn to people smugglers if they are going to be able to join their family in the United Kingdom. It is having the opposite impact to what the Minister would like.

Caroline Nokes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention—the Whip is smiling at me. I just want to make the point, in slight defence of myself, that I am not blocking the Bill. The hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar knows that he must continue to persist with business managers, as I am sure he will.

In conclusion, I thank Members for their insightful and thought-provoking contributions. I will—I hope—continue to reflect on them in considering the Government's approach on this going forward. I look forward to further debate on these points and others with hon. Members and stakeholders, who have made such an important contribution.

2.15 pm

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I welcome the tone of this debate; it has been absolutely fantastic. By comparison with the debate on 16 March last year, there have been no voices speaking against or running up false flags. We are trying to do something that is very unambitious—we are only trying to catch up with 25 other European countries that have no difficulty operating the modest change that we are trying to bring in. As my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald) said, people are using dinghies and so on to cross the channel because they cannot get here legally, and we are just trying to open up the legal avenues.

I thank the many Members who have contributed, including the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill); I thank him for his knowledge, what he added to the debate and what he told us about Chislehurst and his honourable past. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) gave a great, wide-ranging speech. The hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) pointed out that we should not have any need for this debate. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) related the story of his trip to the jungle. I mentioned in my speech that when we meet people, it opens up another avenue of thought. People are in the jungle because they have changed their religion—in the instance he raised, they had become Christian—and have to escape for the protection of their own lives.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) made a very interesting point about the case that she is dealing with involving the woman who cannot bring her children over, and I hope that the Home Office will have been listening. I do not think I have interacted with the hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) before, but she is certainly following in the footsteps of the great Paul Flynn, who was a friend of mine in the House, and I welcome the humanitarian note that she struck. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who demonstrated his excellent Gaelic pronunciation, gave a speech, again, driven by his humanity.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East for making very good points, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for his intervention, in which he said that we have the time in this Parliament

[Angus Brendan MacNeil]

for a lot of things to happen. I take the Minister's point about an instruction to the business managers, who are just few yards outside the door, to enable this to happen. I hope that the business managers in the Conservative Whips Office are listening to this microphone and making sure that that happens.

I want to mention Jalal from Afghanistan, who spoke at our event on Tuesday about what it is like being a young refugee. He spoke very well in, I think, his third or fourth language, including about the difficulties that young men, in particular, face and how they can fall through the gaps. There is a lot to be done and yet to do, but we are only trying to do something very little at the moment.

Finally, I appreciate Members' very good efforts to say the name of my constituency. I sometimes do not find it easy to say the name of Welsh constituencies, but that gives us a little reminder, by serendipity, of the language challenge that is presented to many refugees. We only have to learn two or three words to say "Na h-Eileanan an Iar" but most Members here did it very well, albeit with concentration. I thank them for that and for their contributions, and I will let you move on, Mr Deputy Speaker, as I see that you are very anxious to do so.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): That was the longest two minutes I have ever seen.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House notes that 20 June is World Refugee Day; further notes that, with record levels of global displacement across the world, many refugee families have been separated by war and persecution; welcomes that in 2018 the UK granted 5,806 family reunion visas to partners and children of refugees in the UK; and calls on the Government to introduce reforms to family reunion rules to ensure that the close relatives of all refugees in the UK have safe and legal pathways to reunite with their families in the UK.

Court Closures: Access to Justice

2.19 pm

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered court closures and access to justice.

I am pleased to have secured this debate. It concerns a topic of extreme importance, the rule of law and justice in our country. One of the underlying tenets of our legal system is that there should be equality before the law. I shall shortly explain how the piecemeal way in which the Government have implemented the court closures, coupled with the cuts in legal aid, has undermined that principle and left vulnerable people, disabled people and those with low incomes trying to gain access to justice with the scales firmly tipped against them. Our legal system can only deliver justice if everyone can access it fairly and engage with it, but the fact is that those pursuing local justice now find that it is not so local.

My first charge against the Government is that the court closure programme, since 2010, has been disjointed and fragmented, and is not logical. Cambridge magistrates court is a fine modern court, purpose-built in 2010. It is close to the railway and bus stations in central Cambridge, has modern facilities, and is ideally placed to serve the needs of the local community. Last year, it somehow found its way on to a list of eight courts that were due to be closed this year for—allegedly—being underused, dilapidated or close to other services. Of those eight, seven have been or will be closed by the end of the year. The Cambridge court survived only because it was on a long finance lease with restrictions. Had that not been the case, it would surely have closed a mere nine years after it had opened. This bizarre situation demonstrates the inconsistent decision-making of Ministers.

Then there is the chaos and confusion surrounding the closure of Lambeth county court, in a prime location in Cleaver Square in Kennington. In 2015, it was announced that the court would close, despite overwhelming consultation responses opposing the move, and that all housing possession cases would be transferred to Camberwell magistrates court. Then Camberwell was earmarked for closure, and so a new plan was hatched. In early September 2017, Lambeth closed, but some court users were told that it would remain open to deal with some possession cases, while others would be dealt with at Stratford and at Clerkenwell and Shoreditch county court. Then court users were told that the Inner London Crown court would deal with Lambeth's possession cases. Finally, it was settled that they would be dealt with at Clerkenwell and Shoreditch. That just shows how ill prepared Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service is to deal with its own court closures.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate.

Oldham magistrates court was closed a few years ago. What is so disappointing is that there has been no compensation in the form of reasonable adjustments to accommodate disabled people—for example, those with agoraphobia who want to give evidence via a video link. Is that not an absolute travesty? Disabled people already face a host of difficulties, and this is yet another.

Bambos Charalambous: That is an excellent point. It typifies the piecemeal way in which the closures have been implemented. The process has not been joined up. I believe that it has been driven by cost-cutting measures rather than an overarching view. I shall say more about that later.

According to the Law Society, there are now no youth courts in the boroughs of Southwark, Lewisham or Greenwich. All the cases from those boroughs now go to Bromley youth court. The four boroughs have a higher total population than the cities of Leeds and Manchester combined, yet they have to make do with one youth court for all their needs.

The closure of 258 courts over the past nine years has been nothing less than shambolic. It is not part of any master plan, but is rather a slavish knee-jerk response to the Treasury's demands for more cuts from the Ministry of Justice. Worse still, it has taken no account of the impact on disadvantaged people and people on low incomes, who are disproportionately affected by the closures. That brings me to my second point. According to the Magistrates Association, since 2010 more than half the 323 magistrates courts—a total of 162—have closed. In some cases, defendants, witnesses, police, lawyers and magistrates are now travelling 50 miles to obtain local justice. I do not believe for one minute that the cost of making all those court users travel such distances has been factored into any court closure programme.

When the closure programmes began in 2010, the initial proposal behind the closures was that 90% of all court users would be able to reach the court within one hour. Since then, the goalposts have moved, and the overwhelming majority of court users are expected to reach the court by public transport between the hours of 7.30 am and 7.30 pm.

The Government have completed no equality assessment of the impact on those with protected characteristics, the disadvantaged and people with low incomes. In its evidence to the Justice Committee in March 2019, the Equality and Human Rights Commission stated that it had been told by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service that it did not hold comprehensive data on court users on which to assess the impact of court closures, but that instead it compared the local population with the regional population to establish whether certain groups were over-represented. No account has been taken of the cost of travelling by public transport at peak times, or the need for additional childcare costs to accommodate longer journey times.

The only data that has been produced on this issue is from the University of Suffolk, suggesting that another impact of long travel times could be the non-attendance of defendants. In February this year, the *Grimsby Telegraph* ran a story about the failure of a staggering 79 defendants to attend Grimsby magistrates court in the month of January 2019. One explanation given by the paper was that since the closure of Scunthorpe magistrates court, 27.5 miles away, many of the defendants had been unable to afford the train fare. If they were travelling today before 9 am, it would cost them £15.80 one way—a huge amount for someone on universal credit to pay to go to court. In cases of non-attendance at a hearing, the magistrates must issue a warrant for the defendants' arrest and they will be brought to court by the police, who will have used valuable time and resources as a result.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Will the defendant give way? [*Laughter.*] I am so sorry for calling the hon. Gentleman a defendant. He is not a defendant at all; he is an honourable and upstanding Member of the House.

The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about defendants attending court, and he has made an important point about travel costs. However, we must keep our feet on the ground. If acquitted, the defendant will ordinarily be entitled to the reimbursement of his travel costs. Only guilty defendants will be required to pay. Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that that, too, is an important point?

Bambos Charalambous: I plead not guilty to being a defendant.

While what the hon. Gentleman has said may be the case, the fact remains that those costs are incurred initially by the person making the journey, which causes hardship in the short term.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Is it not also true that people often do not know exactly what the procedures are and are deterred by uncertainty about the costs that they will face?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Many people do not obtain the legal advice that they need to make such informed decisions, and that, too, is part of the problem.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The hon. Gentleman made a wrong career move at some point. [*Laughter.*] At the risk of attempting to cross-examine him, may I suggest that the answer to that point might be that, while it is perfectly true that the acquitted defendants will be entitled to apply for the return of their costs, there is a broader public interest in bringing the guilty defendants to court so that they can be convicted and justice can thereby be done?

Bambos Charalambous: The hon. Gentleman has made an excellent point. He is quite right: that is indeed the case.

Women's Aid has highlighted that fact that, in rural areas in particular, survivors of domestic abuse must travel long distances to reach family courts. Apart from the question of childcare arrangements and the cost of travel, there is a serious safety concern, as the perpetrators of the abuse may be travelling on the same route at the same time, owing to the infrequency of public transport services in those areas. That has the potential to make an already stressful and harrowing experience even worse. I note that Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service has confirmed that it is considering whether to pay for taxis to ferry defendants and witnesses from the most remote parts of the country to hearings. This just goes to demonstrate that little or no consideration has been given to the impact of court closures on court users.

As alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), there is a court modernisation programme and most people are broadly supportive of this £1.2 billion programme and making best use of technology to help alleviate the pressures on courts and tribunals, but this is not the panacea for court closures. There are those who will be digitally excluded due to difficulty in reading or writing, but even those who can navigate their way through the technology will still need proper advice.

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

Many litigants in person do not understand the legalities in their case. This can lead to unintended consequences such as pleading guilty to something they have a defence to, or choosing a path that may lead to them being penalised with costs. The cuts to legal aid funding and the lack of access to legal advice leads to a raw deal for some. They should be getting justice. The Public Accounts Committee said in its report “Transforming courts and tribunals” that

“without sufficient access to legal advice, people could make uninformed and inappropriate decisions about how to plead, and that the roll-out of virtual hearings could introduce bias and lead to unfair outcomes.”

Video hearings are not suitable for all cases because the informality of giving evidence by video could result in adverse inferences being taken about a person’s demeanour, which would not be the case if that evidence was being given face to face.

Some courts are not even ready to deal with court modernisation. Court No. 1 in Taunton only has one plug socket on the lawyers’ bench, making it impossible for all lawyers present to charge their laptops. Wi-fi is also poor or non-existent in some courts.

The reality is that HMCTS has no overarching vision of what it expects courts and tribunals to look like in the future. Unless it provides data to make it possible to make a robust assessment of the equality impacts of current court closures, it should cease closing courts.

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend is talking about the impact of court closures on access to justice. If we look in a cumulative way at all the different cuts—for example, to legal aid—as well as what he is describing now, we see that the lack of access to justice that many of our constituents are facing is profound. Does he agree that this is a real indictment and shows the impact of this Government’s policies on the justice system?

Bambos Charalambous: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. She is certainly right about the cumulative effect of cuts to legal aid and court closures making it harder for the most disadvantaged to access justice as they should be able to.

Local justice and fairness and equality before the law need to apply to everyone equally. The court closures programme has fundamentally failed and skewed things against those on low incomes and the disadvantaged. This has to stop and has to stop now: justice must be for everyone, not just those who can afford it.

2.33 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (*Bambos Charalambous*), my fellow Justice Committee member, and I congratulate him on securing this debate on a very important topic. I was happy to have been a supporter of his application for the debate, and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for giving us this opportunity.

Access to justice is a fundamental issue. It is not just a transaction issue between the parties to a case; it is fundamental to the running of a civilised society. It ought to be regarded as not just a transactional matter between individuals either, but as something that is the warp and woof of the checks and balances that make

our society work. Therefore, the right to have access to justice is a fundamental civic right of every individual and it is important that we aim to produce a system that achieves that without unreasonable obstacles.

Of course, we are obliged to garner public funds with care and make sure they are spent wisely, but it is equally important that the state has an obligation to provide an accessible justice system as part of its duties to protect its citizens. Therefore, we perhaps need to take a step back and look at what we do in relation to courts and other justice issues in the context of that overarching principle.

The issue of court closures has been of real concern to Members in all parts of the House, and for legitimate reasons. I do not say that every court closure is an unreasonable step, and I do not say that every court that was in existence when I started at the bar is viable now. I appeared in some pretty unsatisfactory old magistrates courts and county courts up and down the country, where there was no means of separating witnesses from defendants for example. In some cases there might have been victims of crime present, and the facilities for having a conference with a client in any sort of confidentiality were non-existent. I actually had a conference in a lavatory once in an old magistrates court in East Anglia because there was nowhere else where we could not be heard by either the prosecutor or prosecution witnesses. It was pouring with rain outside so that seemed to be the easiest way to do it—I did not charge any extra, not even a penny. Courts like that should not be in use.

So there are good examples of where it was right to have got rid of old and inappropriate stock, because people who go to court as witnesses and as parties to civil proceedings are entitled to a basic level of service. Therefore, some rationalisation is legitimate and sensible but it must be balanced against the need for proper accessibility and to maintain, particularly in criminal, but also in family and civil, proceedings, a sense of local justice. I will return to that.

The courts rationalisation programme is often seen as part of a broader programme of court modernisation and rationalisation. As I have said, I do not have a problem with the overall thrust of that programme, which was endorsed by the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Chief Justice and the Senior President of Tribunals. It is based upon sound principles. It stems from two significant reports by distinguished judges: Lord Briggs’s report into civil procedure, and the report of Lord Justice Leveson—Sir Brian Leveson—in relation to criminal procedure. May I say in passing that both of those judges have given very great service to our judiciary? Lord Briggs later went to the Supreme Court and Sir Brian Leveson retires tomorrow as president of the Queen’s Bench Division. I pay tribute to the work he did; he has been one of the exceptional criminal jurists and criminal judges and practitioners of our generation, and the country as a whole owes Sir Brian a very great debt for his public service.

So these were well-founded principles and they had good judicial input into their design. The problem is that, as many witnesses have told the Justice Committee in the course of inquiries into the programme and related topics, there is concern that the outworking of that programme places more emphasis than it should on costs and savings rather than on improving services for parties to the hearing and the court user.

The chairman of the Magistrates Association, Mr John Bache, gave evidence to our Committee only a few weeks ago to the effect that, of course, there is always a balance to be struck—we want both fairness and efficiency in a justice system; nobody wants only one or the other. However, he and his members are concerned that in some cases at present the balance tips too far towards efficiency at the cost of fairness, and that cannot be the right way around.

Alex Chalk: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. In the course of this debate we have talked about convenience for defendants and witnesses, but ought we not also to consider convenience for magistrates? Magistrates give of their time to help in the community and perform an invaluable role, but if they have to travel huge distances that will inevitably provide a disincentive. The Government should be very alive to that in making these changes.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and as he will know the Committee, of which he was for a time a distinguished member and for whose work I am very grateful, recently published a report into the magistracy that deals with a number of challenges facing the magistracy. It is convenient that I refer to this point, given that 90-odd% of criminal cases are dealt with by magistrates, who, as he says, are unpaid—they are volunteers; they are the bedrock of the criminal justice system. The point of a magistrates system is that they are lay people—mini juries, in effect—delivering local justice. Defendants are thereby judged by one's peers, not only in the sense of one's status in society, but in the sense that they come broadly from the community from which they themselves come.

That has always been fundamental to our system in criminal work. The difficulty has been the number of pressures on the recruitment of magistrates, and one, which was identified to us by the Magistrates Association and other witnesses, is the effect of court closures. Where they become as drastic as they have in some cases, they act as a disincentive to magistrates to continue on the bench, as travel times are much longer than they were. They can also skewer recruitment patterns for new magistrates. A number of studies indicate that the drop-out rate for magistrates in rural areas, where courts often sit only in the county town, is more marked and that there is a tendency in areas where the court has moved to an urban centre for magistrates to be recruited predominantly from the surrounding town areas rather than the rural areas.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I wonder if my hon. Friend remembers, as I do, the very powerful evidence we heard from Welsh magistrates in our work on the Justice Select Committee about the difficulties they are having recruiting magistrates in rural parts of Wales.

Robert Neill: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The evidence from the Welsh magistrates was particularly marked. They have the additional issue that they often need to recruit magistrates who are bilingual, since the Welsh language is usable in court proceedings. Rural areas of Wales suffer greatly from the dearth of magistrates, we are told, as well as from the difficulty of defendants, witnesses, police officers and lawyers having to travel long distances to get to court. The balance there has to be kept permanently under review.

There are other challenges as well. I know that the Minister will respond in full to a magistrates report, and I hope he will take that on board. One of the things we say is that we should have a holistic approach to the recruitment of magistrates—a workforce strategy—and that must include looking at what is reasonable in terms of the travel times that they are expected to undergo.

Other unintended consequences can stem from that. The hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate referred to the closure of four youth courts in London and the amalgamation in Bromley magistrates court, which, as he says, creates difficulties. Even though the geographic distances within London—some of us here are London MPs—might not be great, travel is not necessarily easy, particularly if one is using public transport, and even more so if defendants or other parties to proceedings have chaotic lifestyles. In civil and family cases, they may be people undergoing real stress—because of relationship breakdown, debt problems in civil proceedings, and so on—and the greater the travel burden put on them, the greater the risk that they do not attend and the hearing is ineffective or that those with a legitimate claim in such proceedings are deterred from taking their case forward.

Much progress has been made to make it easier to initiate things such as money claims and divorce proceedings online, which is welcome, but as the former Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, observed wisely in the other place recently, there is a difference between an online process to deal with transactional matters and online proceedings. As the president of the family division, Sir Andrew McFarlane, observed that video or virtual evidence is unlikely to be as appropriate in family cases as in other cases. For example, it can be easier to resolve things such as straightforward claims for damages—money claims—online. It seems important to us that we find that balance and ensure greater nuance and sensitivity in where we reduce our court facilities.

There is also the issue of travel times. The suggestion seems to be that it is reasonable for someone to leave home at 7:30 am to get to a court hearing and then to get home two hours after it finishes, which might be at 5.30 pm. I did a lot of that when I was practising at the Bar, but I understood that, having chosen that job. It is not the same for someone who is a witness in proceedings or who has been summoned to assist the public good by giving evidence about an incident they witnessed. It does not seem reasonable to expect those people to put up with long journey times. Legal aid lawyers are not well remunerated, and their having to travel long hours on modest fees while also preparing their cases properly does not always ensure that justice is fully served.

I hope that we will be cautious in how far we go. It is perfectly fair to point out that the volume of work going through courts—magistrates, Crown and county—has declined and that that fact will obviously be reflected in the court estate to some extent, but I would be happier if I thought that the money being saved was being immediately spent on the upkeep of the retained estate. I regret to say, however, that that is manifestly not the case. The Criminal Bar Association recently posted online a photograph of the wall in the robing room at Southwark Crown Court. As well as various stains and cracks—it is a 1970s building—a number of phone numbers had been written on the wall next to the telephone. The phone numbers were so old they predated

[Robert Neill]

the 0207 and 0208 numbers, which shows how long it has been since the place was painted. In Snaresbrook Crown Court, I have seen buckets in the judge's corridor and so on. We are not recycling the money even to maintain the estate we have. We have to get that right somehow.

Victoria Prentis: I wonder if I could draw my hon. Friend's attention, and perhaps by proxy the Minister's attention, to the excellent and important evidence given by Ian Burnett to the House of Lords Constitution Committee about the quality of repairs to court buildings and the effect it has on judicial morale.

Robert Neill: The evidence of Lord Burnett of Maldon, the Lord Chief Justice, was most compelling, and I know that the Minister, who is a diligent Minister and who I welcome to his place in the Ministry of Justice, will want to take that heavily on board. We pride ourselves on having a Rolls Royce system of justice in this country, and in terms of the intellect and integrity of our judiciary, that is absolutely right, but sometimes the buildings in which they operate—

Victoria Prentis: They are more like a Škoda.

Robert Neill: As my hon. Friend says, they are much more like a Škoda.

Having drawn those matters to the House's attention, as well as my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which I should have done at the beginning, I hope that the Minister will take the opportunity to reflect on the voluminous evidence that our Committee and others have amassed not about how we should abandon the reform program—absolutely not—but about how we can take it forward efficiently and effectively. We must strike that balance. We must achieve efficiency but never at the expense of justice and fairness in what is a fundamental civic right.

2.47 pm

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) on securing it. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee. The £1 billion pound modernisation programme undertaken by Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service was designed to move cases online and to increase the use of digital methods to improve the speed and efficiency of our court system. However, as the Public Accounts Committee's report into transforming courts and tribunals made clear, the pressure to deliver quickly and make savings is limiting HMCTS's ability to consult meaningfully with stakeholders and risks it driving forward changes before it fully understands their impact on users and on the justice system more widely, particularly in regard to access to justice.

As a member of the Justice Committee, I am pleased that we are currently undertaking an inquiry into the courts and tribunal reforms. It is clear that the implications are going to be significant. As we have seen in countless other examples from welfare to healthcare, the digitisation and modernisation of Government systems invariably

leads to delays and operational issues. Sufficient time is never committed for proper testing and evaluation to ensure that the technology and methods implemented are actually fit for purpose.

On current predictions, HMCTS expects 2.4 million cases a year to be dealt with outside physical courtrooms by 2023, leading it to employ 5,000 fewer staff. While many organisations, including the Law Society and the Magistrates Association have welcomed the increased use of technology, they continue to express concern that the Government's desire to increase efficiency is coming at the cost of accessibility. I have concerns that by switching to a "digital by default" approach, we are in danger of excluding many people from being able to fully interact with the justice system, given that vulnerable people such as those with learning difficulties, mental health conditions, addictions, disabilities and English as a second language are often disproportionately represented among court users. By assuming that everyone is able to adjust to digital-only platforms, we risk denying people the ability to seek and access justice. The Government's desire to save money by moving to digital solutions while failing to recognise the impact of their introduction may cost more in the long run, not just financially but by reducing access to justice for many.

While the Government have accelerated the roll-out of digital portals, they have also presided over the dismantling of our court system. Between 2010 and 2019, we have seen 295 court facilities close their doors for good, including more than 50% of the magistrates courts in England and Wales. The combination of this and increased digital-only processes is another example of trying to do too much too quickly, and the results will always have negative consequences on access to justice.

Resolution, the family law group, recently ran a survey of its members following the roll-out of some of the reforms. On access to justice, 87% strongly disagree or disagree that a more accessible service is being delivered, and 94% disagree or strongly disagree that faster processing times are being delivered. Not only is access to justice being denied but the reform agenda is making an already difficult process harder still. Many cases that end up going through the court system will involve vulnerable people in difficult circumstances, such as cases involving children going into care. By limiting the processes by which people interact with the court system, along with the continued closure of the estate, we are setting up barriers that will in turn prevent full access to justice, and particularly the ability of many to access their nearest court.

Following the Lord Chancellor's recent response to the "Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate" consultation, I share the concerns of groups such as the Law Society that have drawn specific attention to the accessibility of our future court system. I am disappointed that the response categorised a reasonable journey as one that allowed court attendees to leave home no earlier than 7.30 am to attend a hearing and return home by 7.30 pm the same day, using public transport where necessary. For those who have caring responsibilities, family or childcare arrangements and for disabled people and the elderly, a 12-hour window is far from accessible. Some may have access to a car, but those who rely on public transport could have numerous legs to their journey and, given that thousands of bus

routes have faced being cut under this Government, it is inevitable that there will be a detrimental impact on the ability of many to get to court in a reasonable time. This could affect their ability to access justice.

Robert Neill: The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. Does she agree that there is another issue that can arise as a result of court closures? She and I know that the four youth courts that have been amalgamated now sit at Bromley, and that many of the youngsters who appear in front of those courts are involved in gang culture. This creates real listing difficulties for the court staff, who have to try to ensure that they do not list cases involving rival gangs from different areas of that part of south London at the same time, given the potential for disorder that can genuinely occur. This is a matter of concern for the police in our shared borough.

Ellie Reeves: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I, too, know the difficulties that this is creating for the police and the court service locally. These complex considerations have to be taken into account, but they are sometimes not thought about when introducing these sorts of reforms.

The current outline for a reasonable journey assumes that everything in court that day runs to time and to plan. Court listings are usually oversubscribed under the current set-up, so many people often make their way to court, which often takes several hours, in anticipation of a hearing that never takes place. Not only does that have negative consequences for victims, witnesses and defendants and inevitably cost more, given that solicitors' fees must still be paid, but it is quite possible that the combination of more difficult journeys and the continued floating or warned-list system will lead to the unintended consequence of people just not turning up at all. Research has shown that those effects, combined with court closures, has led to an increase in no-shows and an increase in warrants of arrest for defendants in locations where magistrates courts have closed.

Victoria Prentis: Does the hon. Lady share my concern that the Department has done no real research on the number of no-shows?

Ellie Reeves: That is a good point. The reforms are being pushed through without a proper look at what they mean in practice.

A survey of Resolution members by the Family Law Group showed that nearly 50% of respondents said that the courts that they had historically used had been closed and that, as a result, many clients' travel time to court had increased to two hours each way. There were also over 200 examples of clients suffering financially or emotionally as the result of a court closure or a failure in court administration.

I am also concerned that court closures are leading to a wider reduction in facilities and services available to those who interact with the justice system. Previously, people in court could attend a counter for assistance or advice, particularly when having to fill out the relevant paperwork for their hearings. Resolution's evidence went on to detail the struggle that many of their clients experience due to the need to phone ahead to arrange things that were previously done in court at a counter. The evidence described clients calling a centre only to

find that up to 100 people were ahead of them in the queue and finding that support staff, while not unhelpful, had only limited information, making it difficult to progress any queries. In addition, the fact that individuals now have to book an appointment before being able to attend the court counter creates another barrier to getting stuff done, both for professionals and for members of the public. As I stated earlier, given that vulnerable people are disproportionately represented among court users, reducing the availability of services and switching them to online or telephone-based solutions instead risks excluding many from full interaction with our justice system.

The overarching message from stakeholders is that, while reform can improve the workings of the court system, the pace at which courts have closed, combined with the inaccessible roll-out of the digitalisation reforms, has left behind a gulf in access to justice. Cuts to staffing will see those who have to use our courts system find the whole process even more difficult to navigate. The courts and staff who are left have to deal with increasing caseloads. The Government's reforms have a facade of ease of use and straightforwardness, but the cuts that have hit the courts have left us with a system in disarray.

In evidence to the Justice Committee, the Criminal Bar Association succinctly stated that

"many of the reforms already implemented and those proposed are framed too much around efficiency at the expense of ensuring a fair process for all."

I urge the Minister to look at the speed at which the reforms are rolled out and to consider the evidence that too much is happening too quickly. He should also listen to the recommendations of the Public and Commercial Services Union and many other bodies involved in our courts and justice system and prevent any further court closures until it can be proven that they are not having a detrimental impact on access to justice.

2.58 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and all my learned friends from the Justice Committee. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous), whose application I was proud to sponsor. The Committee has been looking at this area for some time, and the poor Minister is being inundated with the statistics and evidence that we have gathered during the course of our inquiries over the past few years.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) gave an important speech about access to justice, and Opposition Members also made important contributions, so I make no apology for going from the sublime to the very local. I am going to talk about Banbury and Bicester, because we are an interesting example of what happens when courts close.

In July 2015—remember those days?—I was a new MP and the world was rosy. Soon after I was elected, and not entirely to my distaste, it was proposed that Bicester magistrates court would be closed. At the time, along with Banbury and Oxford, it was one of three magistrates courts in Oxfordshire.

[Victoria Prentis]

I was not too distressed about the news, even as a new, keen MP, because I was told that Bicester magistrates court was operating at 11% capacity. On both sides of the House, we can probably all agree that 11% capacity is not ideal for a court to operate at; it was employing people and taking up a large building on a prime site. I did not resist the proposal, but I made strong representations on the need for Banbury magistrates court to remain open and for the Department to keep an open mind about mobile justice and the real effect on access to justice. I am trying to show that I am not anti-court closure per se, but that what matters is that people can access justice.

The closure went ahead, and the building has since been transferred to Homes England for development. Work has not yet started on the building, which irritates me every time I drive home. At the time, my general support for the proposed closure of Bicester magistrates, as the Department knows well because I told it very clearly, was predicated on Banbury still being open and having the capacity to absorb a possible surge in demand.

I also suggested, to the delight of the *Daily Mail*, that alternative venues for justice, such as pubs and town halls, be explored as part of a wider discussion about the future of the courts estate. As a Government lawyer for 17 years, I have experience of organising secret hearings in unusual locations, and I am convinced that justice is not about place but about what is done in that place. I am happy to continue making that case both to the new Minister and to the House.

North Oxfordshire is an area facing unprecedented growth, with approximately three houses being finished each day. Cherwell District Council is leading the way and, as the Minister knows only too well, the route for the Oxford to Cambridge expressway, which has yet to be announced, will almost certainly come very close to us. The local population is therefore projected to grow by 25% in the coming years.

We hope that all those people will be law-abiding and will never need recourse to either a criminal court or a family court, but the reality is that some of them will. In our daily lives, many of us do not come across the type of person who uses the courts—although, as MPs, we often do. I am talking about those who are really difficult to reach.

The Minister has done a great deal of work on hidden disabilities and authored the fantastic Maynard review. He fully understands this matter, but I implore him, when thinking about court users in the round, to really think about the type of people we are trying to get to court buildings early in the day. They often have hidden disabilities, they are often not very literate and they have difficulties with ready cash to pay for train fares and bus fares. They are genuinely one of the hardest sections of society to reach, let alone to get to a court building by 9 o'clock in the morning.

The closure of Banbury magistrates court has to be viewed against the backdrop of a febrile local atmosphere caused by the removal of some services, notably obstetrics at the local Horton General Hospital. There is considerable local disquiet about services being taken from Banbury to Oxford, with our area being used merely as a dormitory. I noticed—the hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge also mentioned this—that, snuck into the recent

“Fit for the Future” consultation document, is a measure that has moved the goalposts; it is suggested that any time between 7.30 am to 7.30 pm is acceptable for travelling to court.

For the consultation that we filled in on the closure of Banbury magistrates court—one that provoked many responses, none of which were taken any notice of as far as I am aware—the document stated that a journey from Banbury to Oxford takes approximately an hour and 10 minutes by car. I would suggest that that is a very optimistic estimate. I conducted my own travel survey in January 2017, as a result of worries locally about closing local health services. It was clear from the 450 responses I received to my survey that the average journey time to Oxford from Banbury or the surrounding villages is approximately 90 minutes.

It is not clear from the consultation document we received at the time we were consulted about the Banbury court whether consideration was given to the lack of parking facilities at the receiving site in Oxford. Court users will have to allow enormous amounts of additional time to find a parking space. Once that is taken into account, it is possible that a one-way journey from Banbury to Oxford could easily take more than two hours. If I were travelling to court in Oxford, as I did from time to time in my working life before I entered this place, I would allow two hours at least.

The other thing we have to remember is that the vulnerable group of users I mentioned do not necessarily have access to cars. As the consultation document suggests, Banbury is also served by a regular train to Oxford. Although the train provides a realistic alternative mode of transport—for those who live in Banbury itself—the 36-minute journey time suggested in the consultation does not take into account travel times to Banbury station. We have extremely limited bus services locally, and many villages are not served by public transport at all.

I am also concerned about whether real evidence was collected on the absorbing court to determine whether it could cope with the extra work. The Justice Committee had some disturbing evidence given to us last week, unprompted by me, about the shortage of judges in Oxford and therefore the inability of the court to absorb this extra work. We know that in 2016-17 Banbury magistrates sat for a total of 2,211 hours, which we think works out at about 58% usage, with 2,009 hours being spent on criminal work and 202 hours being spent on family work. During the same period, Oxford magistrates had 1,184 spare sitting hours. Even my maths can tell me that there is a shortfall in capacity of about 1,000 sitting hours, and that does not take into account any increase in crime locally which we may get because of the vast increase in the local population.

I was brushed off by representatives of the Department, who suggested that the court could absorb the gap by regular Saturday sessions or sittings beyond the usual five-hour day. I gently remind the Department, which is extremely keen to increase diversity in the professions, that sitting at irregular times does not go with increasing diversity. I hope that the Ministry of Justice will undertake specific engagement with the relevant magistrates associations to ensure all options are fully scoped before decisions are taken in the future.

I am keen, as I have said many times in this House and almost weekly before the Justice Committee, on exploring alternative venues for justice. I am therefore

very pleased to welcome the new Minister to his place, because I believe he shares my desire to do this. I met the previous Minister along with two of my favourite local magistrates, who came to help me make our case for piloting alternative venues locally. Given the limited capacity at the receiving site in Oxford, and the risk of over-centralisation and the effect that has on my vulnerable constituents, we have suggested that real consideration be given to using Bodicote House, which is the home of Cherwell District Council, as an alternative venue for justice. The Department has done some scoping work on the suggestion, and I would really like to press forward by having Banbury be one of the pilot sites for this new idea. Every time I mention the idea to certain officials, I am met with the response, “Security is a problem,” but it is a problem that we will be able to overcome if we work together in a constructive fashion.

In welcoming the new Minister to this debate and to his new position, I politely encourage him to help me in my mission to bring justice to local people, and to join me by agreeing that justice is not a place but a precious concept—but only if people can access it.

3.10 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I declare my interests as a non-practising barrister and the fifth member of the Justice Committee to speak in the debate, albeit the most junior and recently elevated to that position.

I am sure it is a coincidence, but like me other Members will have found in their inboxes this morning a press release from the Ministry of Justice telling them that £15 million of extra Government funding will be spent to improve more than 200 courts. I am sure the fact that that came out on the morning of this debate is just happenstance. When I read it in more detail and found that revolutionary things are being done such as a new roof on Chester Crown court, a new lift at Swansea civil justice centre and plumbing upgrades in Newton Abbot, I wondered whether it was really something that needs to feature in the popular press at the moment. Is it really so revolutionary that these things are happening? It is £15 million for what is actually basic maintenance.

Perhaps I can contrast all that with the £43 million that the Department made from the sale of Hammersmith magistrates court last year—that is three times the entire budget that the Department has committed to the repairs. If the tales of toilets and buckets from the Chair of the Justice Committee are to be believed, it may be that even that £15 million will be inadequate to the task. The sad thing is that at the time Hammersmith court was closed, it was a fully functioning, well-used, fully accessible building in a convenient location. It had the first ever domestic violence court in the country. Sadly, as nothing has yet happened to it, it is now used only for the filming of crime dramas. The most recent time I was there, I was down in a cell with an entire film crew.

I do not want to share private grief, but I shall briefly outline our experience in west London, because it is emblematic of what is happening across the board. The modern court in Hammersmith was built around 20 years ago, and our old, lovely but ageing Victorian magistrates court later moved into it, followed later by our lovely but ageing Edwardian county court. So be it. Over the past 10 years, the county court work was moved over to

Wandsworth to allow work from other closed magistrates courts in London to move into the building. We were then told that all the magistrates court work would go to places as convenient to my constituents as Hendon. Then, last year, we were told that Wandsworth county court was to close and that the county court work would go across London to Clerkenwell. It is difficult to keep up with this: there have been four changes in respect of county court work over a period of around 10 years.

The farce then turns to tragedy. This information has been given to me by court users, and not just users of our own courts. My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) referred to what is happening at Clerkenwell and Shoreditch county court. I am told that files are being lost there, hearings have not taken place more than a year after work was transferred, telephones are not answered, paperwork has been lost, and bailiffs warrants are being executed despite warrants being suspended. My source says:

“The court is essentially in chaos”,

with 70% of staff being agency workers. This is the court, right on the other side of London, that my constituents are being directed to.

Possession work now forms a substantial part of county courts’ work, because without early legal advice people can often end up homeless when they should have received it at an earlier stage. Most cases relate to benefit problems and defects in the benefits system and therefore involve very poor people. Lots of people now walk to court. My excellent law centre, under director Sue James, co-locates its advice services with food banks and will now have to travel across London to provide those emergency services. This is a very unsatisfactory state of affairs, particularly as nearby Brentford county court has five courtrooms, only two of which are used because only two judges sit there. That in turn makes me suspicious about the utilisation figures that we are given.

Robert Neill: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. He will have heard, as I have, the concerning reports on a number of occasions from the Criminal Bar Association about under-utilisation sometimes being caused by courtrooms left sitting empty while recorders—part-time judges who classically could be used to fill out the slack—are not offered enough slots in which to sit by the Ministry of Justice. It seems a completely false economy.

Andy Slaughter: That is absolutely right. It is the combination of cuts in service that is causing the problems, and one problem is being referenced to another. Under-utilisation is a problem of not having judges to sit in court rather than a problem of not having the cases to refer to that court, as in the example that I have given. That makes me suspicious about the longer hours—the 7.30 to 7.30 window and the flexibility, with warned lists, that means that advocates and clients could be there all day. If there are not enough judges to sit in the courts in the first place, what is the point of courts sitting from early in the morning until late at night? To put it mildly, this has not been very well thought through.

To turn from the particular to the general, it has been mentioned that half the magistrates courts in the country have closed since 2010. One of the first things I did when I was appointed shadow Justice Minister back in 2010 was to respond to that first statement. Little did I

[*Andy Slaughter*]

know where we were going—that there would be perhaps one cull a year of courts across the country from then onwards. There must come a point when matters have gone too far. One reason for the wholesale, untrammelled closure of courts was obviously austerity. We are not just talking about capital receipts for closed buildings; we are also talking about thousands of staff going—I think another 5,000 staff are due to go over the next two years.

There is no denying that, but the justification given was the now more than £1 billion digitisation programme that was being introduced. The Association of Her Majesty's District Judges says that half the money has been spent but only a limited benefit has yet been seen or realised. We have seen the sale and closure of courts and the restriction of access to justice before any of the benefits. We are taking a leap in the dark and being asked to trust that the Government have got it right. Frankly, judging by most Governments' IT programmes and success, I always think we ought to be very sceptical about whether they have got it right. The only consistent thing is the amount spent on management consultants—I see that about £61 million has been spent on them as part of this programme. None of this bodes well.

Some people will say that we can get too attached to our local courts, but local justice is important. It is a cumulative process. The cuts to legal aid, the introduction of fees and the closure of courts are having a detrimental effect on people's rights to access justice, and to do so speedily, conveniently and fairly. It therefore seems entirely reasonable to ask, as the Labour party does, for a moratorium on closures. It is also reasonable to ask for more evidence of the justifications for any closures and of the benefits that are allegedly going to be gained from the money released by those closures. There is a new Minister in post, who I am sure is looking at the issue with a fresh pair of eyes. I hope we are going to hear very shortly that he will look at these matters again and perhaps come to some different conclusions from those of his predecessors.

3.20 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I am keenly aware that I am probably the only person here who is not a member of the illustrious group of MPs on the Justice Committee. I hope that colleagues will forgive me for the fact that I am going to talk not about the intricacies of court closures, but more generally about access to justice. I am here today to share stories about justice and about what being unable to access to justice looks like. As we have already heard, these stories are all too common and an example of the Government's refusal to accept that cuts have gone too far and that we need to change direction. Our justice system is in crisis and the time has come for the Government to roll up their sleeves and do something about it.

The city of Bath has been lucky. Despite murmurs a few years ago that Bath county court might close, it remains open and is a location for people across our city to seek justice and settle disputes. However, access to justice is about far more than just a courtroom; I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) saying that we could actually be quite creative about where justice takes place.

My constituency of Bath has been rated by the Law Society as a legal aid desert. In all of Bath and North East Somerset, there is only one law firm that is authorised to provide legal aid advice on housing, including on cases of unlawful eviction, where families are faced with homelessness. This is not unusual. More than half of all local authority areas in England and Wales do not have a single housing legal aid provider. Legal aid deserts have emerged across the country in key areas of law such as immigration and mental health because normal firms can no longer afford to offer these services at a reduced price. Constituents come to my office all the time concerned about financial or civil court cases where they cannot afford representation and hope that my caseworkers can help. We do what we can, but all too often these situations are desperate, and without legal training, there is a limit to what my team and I can do.

Our justice system punishes individuals who try to represent themselves. This is very unfair in a context where ways to access legal aid are few and far between. A 19-year-old girl from Bath recently represented herself in a right to remain case that determined her right to stay in the UK. She had been brought to the UK as a child and did not know, until she tried to apply to university, that she had far overstayed the requirements of the visitor visa that she was brought here on. Not having the money to pay for representation, she represented herself and ended up giving the wrong information to the immigration authorities. As a result, she was put at risk of deportation back to a country where she did not know anyone and did not speak the language. She was lucky that we were able to build a local campaign and crowdfund money to pay for her to get a lawyer, who eventually won back her right to live in this country on human rights grounds, but our system must not rely on luck to determine who can and cannot pursue justice.

Many more constituents have come to me with stories that cannot be resolved because they simply are not able to prepare for the justice they deserve. The context varies—from abusive partners who have ignored court orders and continued the abuse, to a financial settlement from a divorce that has not been honoured, leaving a pensioner in financial crisis. The common thread between the stories is the hardship that my constituents endure after being unable to access justice.

The Government must restore early legal aid advice in cases of welfare, debt, employment, immigration, housing and family law. Although these are considered aspects of civil law, the impact on individuals in these areas cannot be overstated. Family, employment, welfare and the right to stay in one's country are basic building blocks for a settled life. When access to justice suffers, so does our society. Issues such as discrimination in the workplace go unchecked and can further perpetuate a culture of discrimination and bullying for years to come. Currently, in accusations of work-based discrimination, only one in 200 cases receive funding for representation in court. Exceptional case funding, which was supposed to fund cases involving serious human rights violations, has proven to be very ineffective. There have been 10 applications in the past year concerning work-based discrimination, and all have been rejected. This emergency funding should be reformed as soon as possible in a way that makes it accessible and useful to those who need it.

Without access, our justice system loses its authority, becoming a luxury only afforded to the wealthiest members of our communities. It is no longer simply a case of

reducing the cuts; instead, we must seriously reinvest in a fair and effective justice system that is accessible to everyone.

3.25 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) and the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill)—the Chair of the Justice Committee—for securing this debate. It is a pleasure to hear from so many members of the Justice Committee, as a former member myself.

This ought to be one of the many debates that we are having in this House about an unprecedented shift in how justice is delivered in this country. The scale of the change is enormous, with hundreds of courts closed and thousands of staff lost, millions fewer cases heard in the courts over the coming years, a £1 billion-plus reform programme and plans for annual savings of £200 million. That is a tremendous change.

Whether for good or for bad, it is undemocratic and deeply concerning that these changes are not properly debated in this Chamber in Government time before being implemented. However, in the spirit of cross-Bench co-operation that Backbench Business debates encourage, I want to acknowledge that the former Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Elizabeth Truss)—someone also from Leeds originally but with whom I have strong political disagreements, it will not surprise people to know—did present a prisons and courts Bill before the last general election, with proposals in black and white to be discussed and amended had it not fallen with that general election.

By contrast, another former Justice Secretary, now the Transport Secretary, rushed through a major justice shake-up in probation that was forced through ignoring the words of the experts, with vast cost to the public and to public safety. I warn the current Justice Secretary that emulating the Transport Secretary's approach to major justice reforms will come back to haunt him. This risks being his own probation crisis.

Of course, no Labour Member is against technology. Undoubtedly, technology can, with genuine investment and backed by rigorous evidence, aid access to justice. Likewise, no one doubts that our courts need modernisation—that needs to happen—but Labour is concerned that the court closures are a smokescreen for austerity and will cause long-term damage to access to justice. The Public Accounts Committee says that

“the planned changes to the courts and tribunal system are on a scale never before attempted anywhere in the world.”

As one former judge recently asked, why have court buildings been sold before the changes that are part of the reform programme had been put in place, tested, evaluated and shown to work? Why is there not a substantial pilot? Why has sufficient research not been done into the impacts of digital courts? Why has there not been proper public or parliamentary scrutiny?

Labour is calling for a moratorium on further cuts and closures until these reforms can be subjected to full parliamentary and public scrutiny. It is a demand that we share with the Association of Her Majesty's District Judges. While stating that it

“could not be more supportive of modernisation”,

the ADJ has called for

“a pause in the court closure programme until a proper stock take of the present position has been carried out”.

That seems eminently sensible.

We are looking at the impact on access to justice of court closures, but as many Members have said, courts cannot be seen in isolation, especially when the Ministry of Justice has faced the deepest cuts of any Department—cuts totalling 40%. Those cuts are driving a justice crisis. Cuts to police and Crown Prosecution Service budgets compound the problem, and with fewer people charged, fewer prosecutions and fewer people pursuing cases due to a lack of legal aid, justice is denied time and again. It is simply not credible to suggest that investment in technology is the answer to this crisis in access to justice.

Such austerity is the context in which half of all magistrates courts have been closed and a third of county courts have been shut. Selling off local courts piles yet more pressure on the remaining courts and risks hearings being further delayed and rescheduled. That can have a distressing impact on victims and witnesses and creates a justice system that is less accessible for local people, forcing them to travel vast distances, as we have heard today.

The Law Society notes how Her Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service's definition of a day's travel to court impacts on those with caring responsibilities, the elderly and disabled people. My hon. Friend the Member for High Peak (Ruth George) has told me about the devastating impact of the closure of Buxton court on her constituents facing eviction. Now facing a journey to Derby without any direct train, many of her constituents are simply unable to defend themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) contacted me in advance of the debate to tell me how the closure of Halifax family court left victims of domestic violence facing a 12-month wait for their day in court.

The first commissioned academic study into the impact of the court closures, by the University of Suffolk, found that costs for some defendants, witnesses and advocates to attend magistrates court had doubled. New research by Dr Daniel Newman and Dr Roxanna Dehaghani found that the high cost of transport in Wales can be prohibitive. For those who think that that is far-fetched, here is an example from the Law Society: a young person in the Greater Manchester area would have to spend almost all their universal credit daily allowance of £8.30 on a £7 tram fare from Bury to central Manchester.

While the Government flog off the family silver by selling off our courts, they are also hollowing out the service, with deep cuts to staff since 2013. Thousands more staff are set to be cut from the Courts and Tribunals Service by 2023. The number of magistrates has fallen by a third since 2012, and the number of judges by almost a fifth. At the same time, the overall case load of HMCTS is not down, but up. It is worth highlighting that around two thirds of the savings so far have come from not replacing staff who have left. Who pays the price? Victims, witnesses and innocent defendants all face a much more difficult court experience.

As judges themselves warned, there has been a “haemorrhaging of experienced staff, a serious decline in staff and judicial morale, delays in all aspects of process and court systems that are even more broken.”

[Richard Burgon]

HMCTS's staff survey found that 81% of staff say that cuts are interfering with their ability to give legal advice and ensure a fair hearing. It is so symbolic of the ideological "cut first, plan later" approach of this Government that their own figures show an increase in reliance on agency staff in our courts. I recently exposed how tens of thousands of years of vital prison officer experience have been lost due to Government cuts, which has contributed to the epidemic of violence in our prisons. I fear that the court staff cuts will be a similar ticking time bomb.

We are now told that every penny is being redirected into courts reforms, but courts were initially closed as part of the Government's austerity programme. Only the more recent court closures have been justified by investment in the courts reform programme, and most of those cannot be justified even on that basis. Labour's analysis of the sale of 126 court premises in England and Wales between 2010 and 2018 showed that 80% went for little more than the average UK house price, with some disposed of for as little as £1. Of course, tens of millions of pounds is being given to consultants to carry out the courts reforms. PricewaterhouseCoopers has done especially well, according to the Government's own figures, having received over £30 million of public money so far. Let us be clear: not every penny is being reinvested in our justice system.

To conclude, in its damning report on the courts reform programme last year, the Public Accounts Committee said:

"Government has cut corners in its rush to push through these reforms. The timetable was unrealistic, consultation has been inadequate and, even now, HMCTS has not clearly explained what the changes will mean in practice."

I, Labour and so many others share those concerns. Our fear that this is being rushed through regardless of the consequences is a fear shared across the justice sector. It is not a concern with technology; it is a concern that technology is being used as a smokescreen for cuts—an attempt to disguise austerity. It is time for a moratorium on further closures and further cuts until the impact has been properly assessed. Surely, if the Minister is confident about these reforms, he has nothing whatsoever to fear from such scrutiny.

3.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, or should I call it a Justice Committee reunion? I feel rather inadequate in never having been part of this fantastic Committee, with such wonderful people. However, this debate also brings together at least three people in the Chamber who have seen their courts close in the last round of cuts: my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis); you, Mr Deputy Speaker, have seen Chorley go; and me. I have seen Fleetwood close, which was just outside my boundary but served many of my constituents, so I have seen this issue from both sides of the fence.

The ability to access justice is a fundamental right in our society. That is why the Government are investing £1 billion in the most ambitious programme of its kind in the world. It will create a system that works better for those who need it. It will be easier to run and it will provide better value for taxpayers. Access to justice

matters because everyone should have a stake in our legal system. None of our plans replaces the need for traditional courts or for people to travel to those buildings. It will not exclude people who do not have access to a computer or the internet. However, it will transform the way people use our courts and tribunals, opening up new ways to access justice.

To undertake a radical modernisation of the operation of our courts and tribunals with the same estate that was in place in the era of carbon paper, manual typewriters and fax machines—yes, there are still some fax machines left in our court estate—would be wasteful and dilute the benefits of reform. As we modernise, it would be inappropriate to define access to justice merely in terms of proximity to our nearest court building.

However, no one should deny the challenges we have in our court estate. Many of our buildings have been underused. In the financial year ending in 2017, 41% of courts and tribunals were used for less than half their available time. Keeping these buildings open costs us money that we could spend on making justice more accessible in other ways. As it stands, the court and tribunal estate is a patchwork that has developed over time and a legacy from many predecessor organisations. This has meant a concentration of buildings in some locations. Of the 337 operational court and tribunal buildings, 245 are within five miles of another court or tribunal, so this should be kept under review. We should test whether buildings are really needed or suitable for the uses to which we put them.

The closure of a court is not a decision taken lightly, and we consult widely and think carefully about the responses we receive before making a final decision. We have changed our minds following a consultation, and retained courts because of the responses received—Northallerton magistrates' court being one example. Only when convinced that effective access to justice can be maintained has the Lord Chancellor agreed to the closure of a court. In some cases, we have moderated the impact of a closure by continuing to provide local access through a supplementary provision, such as a video link, or by holding hearings in a different public building.

I take great interest in the potential that so-called "supplementary provision" can offer, although I have a certain nervousness about pubs. I know that inquests were once held in pubs, and witnesses gathered in them back in the Victorian era. I am not sure, however, that current concern for the dignity and gravitas of the court can be met by our local Wetherspoons, but I look forward to hearing what my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury proposes for her home town.

I do not accept the characterisation of this programme as being just about cutting costs without any regard for those who use our courts, and neither do I recognise the stories of inconsistency and chaos set out by the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous). At the start of last year we engaged widely on our future strategy, and many Members have referred to the document, "Fit for the future: transforming the court and tribunal estate", which underpins much of our decision making. I urge a further reading of paragraph 2.5, which lists the issues that must be considered. Those include the length of a journey, and the timeframe of between 7.30 am and 7.30 pm.

“the difficulty of the journey, including frequency of public transport and the number of changes required; the cost of potential journeys; the type of cases heard at the court or tribunal; the opening hours of the court or tribunal; the needs of vulnerable users; and whether there are available mitigations to reduce the impact on users with longer journey times, if the numbers of such users are small.”

We also consider supplementary provision where that is appropriate to the nature of the case, the court’s workload, and the agreement of the judiciary. Our assessment therefore goes much deeper than whether to tick off two particular times of the day.

I heard about the study that has taken place in Suffolk, and I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), who has been particularly affected by that issue. We have set out a clearer definition of what we consider to be a reasonable journey, but in my view the issue has not affected the failure-to-attend rate. Indeed, since about 2013, studies show the numbers of those affected by this issue to be in the low to mid 90,000s, which has declined since 2010. We wish to take into account a range of factors. Compared with December 2010, the proportion of the population now within the stated distance for reaching a magistrates’ court has declined by just 1.6%, so people are not being affected to the extent that many are concerned about.

I urge anyone with an interest in the future of our courts and tribunals to read our response to the consultation, and our new “Court and Tribunal Design guide”, which I fear has not received the same level of attention, despite being just as interesting. It sets out how we will make our courtrooms more flexible, enhance security standards, and provide for the needs of vulnerable victims and witnesses. Those things are just as important for access to justice as the other issues raised today.

As a former Minister for transport accessibility, who is also sitting next to the current Minister responsible for that, I am all too aware of the importance of inclusive public transport. I tried to introduce the idea of the inclusive court to my Department, and the work done by my hon. Friend and I focuses particularly on the needs of those with hidden disabilities. Accessibility is not just about the wheelchair ramp into court; it is about understanding those who have speech, language and communication difficulties, so that when they are in court they understand what is occurring.

I referred to the “Fit for the Future” document, but there is no Government document that cannot be refreshed when evidence changes. We are working hard to improve the quality of the court and tribunal estate. Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service was formed from a diverse range of earlier organisations. No one wants to see buckets in the court, or ripped seats, soggy walls, and chipped paintwork. Since 2016 we have invested more than £148 million in capital improvements, including the £15 million from the Treasury that so underwhelmed the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) at the start of his speech. I agree that that would not solve every problem in the estate, but I think of it as a down payment in our initial efforts to make a difference. If anyone wishes to visit Blackpool court just outside my constituency boundary they, will see another court that is in serious need of investment, although we are hoping to move site very shortly. I am all too familiar

with the need to ensure that we have a dignified court network and I recognise the role it plays in maintaining judicial morale.

The hon. Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves) mentioned digital services. The principal aim is not to close off routes to justice, but to open new ones. We will continue to support paper processes for those who need them. For some, that will still be the best route into our courts and tribunals, but for those who want to use digital services but have trouble doing so, we are providing a range of support to help to ensure the process is accessible to all through telephone support, webchat, or, when required, face-to-face support. We have seen an improvement with online applications for divorce. When it was paper-based, 40% of forms were being returned and that is now down to 2%. That makes life easier for those engaging with the process. Online pleas are possible for traffic offences and a significant number of online civil money claims are now taking place with significant support for those participating in them. However, as she mentioned, evaluation does matter. Merely because we can do something online does not mean that we should do it in each and every case, so it is right to interrogate the overall reform programme.

Court reform is just one way to deliver the inclusive court that I personally want to see. There is no location in the public realm where the vulnerability of the individual can place their liberty at greater risk than in our justice system. If justice is truly to be done, it is vital that all sides, whether as a defendant or as someone bringing a case, understand how justice is being done to them.

Robert Neill: Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will always give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Robert Neill: I am grateful to the Minister and I appreciate what he says. He raises a specific point about the justice system being seen to be available. One concern arising in evidence given to the Justice Committee about the use of online procedure is that we must be careful that it does not develop into a situation where justice is not done in public and is therefore not seen to be done. This is another case where it could be a good idea, but we have to be careful to get the balance right.

Paul Maynard: I have heard many of those concerns, not least from judges themselves, about the role of video hearings. I recognise that there is a particular sensitivity here, which I am exploring carefully.

I was going to mention the Select Committee’s report on magistracy—that is a complicated word for me to get out—which I thought was fantastic and chimed with much I have encountered already in my short time in the role. I met a young magistrate called Luke Rigg a couple of weeks ago. He is a shining example of those we wish to see taking up the role of magistrate. Magistrates are the glue that holds our justice system together and they often go unrecognised. I urge anyone watching this debate to seriously consider becoming a magistrate. It is a fantastic way to get under the skin of a local community and I hope that far more people will do it.

On that note, I thank all Members for their participation. They have given me plenty of food for thought in my early days. I look forward to being grilled more heavily when the Select Committee drags me before it.

3.48 pm

Bambos Charalambous: I thank all members of the Justice Committee for their excellent contributions. I also thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for her contribution on legal advice. She is welcome to join the Justice Committee.

I am pleased to hear that the Minister wants inclusive courts, but he needs to take note of the lack of data on the impact of court closures. Any future court closures will have a cumulative effect due to the closures that have already taken place. As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burdon) said, we need to consider having a pause before any further court closures take place, because they will have an impact on the disadvantaged.

This has been an excellent debate and some excellent points have been made. I hope the Minister takes them on board and that we see a proper consultation process in the future where a difference is made, voices are heard and justice is the winner at the end of the day.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered court closures and access to justice.

PETITION

UK Bid to Host UN Climate Conference 2020

3.49 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I rise to present a petition from 125 pupils of Western Road School in Lewes, in addition to the 624 signatures presented to this place earlier this week from constituents in Lewes. The petitioners declare that

“climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world”,

and further, that the UK has leading role to play in tackling climate change in the future.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Lewes,

Declares that climate change is a serious and pressing concern and needs urgent attention from the Governments of the world.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that London hosts the upcoming COP 26 Climate Change Conference in 2020.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P002475]

Port Agents: Medical Duty of Care

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

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call Alec Shelbrooke, I just say that we recognise that your family are here today and that this is going to be a difficult time.

3.50 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Deputy Speaker. For transparency, I make the House aware that I have declared a relevant interest with the Table Office.

On 13 February this year, Gordon Hoyland Spencer passed away at the Sue Ryder Wheatfields Hospice in Leeds. He was a beloved husband, father, grandfather, and also my much cherished father-in-law. This did not need to happen.

Gordon Spencer was a hard-working entrepreneur who, with his wife Jackie and family, built a large and successful enterprise. Gordon and his wife Jackie started life in the back streets of Leeds, working on the shop floor in the industrial and textile mills. However, both of them had an indomitable entrepreneurial spirit and, coupled with a hard-working ethic, this led to them building two large and successful businesses in facilities management and property. Their facilities management company started out as a window-cleaning round that Gordon bought to earn some extra income in order to buy a carpet for their cottage some 60 years ago. Their son, daughter, daughter-in-law and grandson all work in the business, making the companies a truly family enterprise. Combined, these companies today now employ over 11,000 people in the UK and it is one of the largest privately-owned facilities management companies in the country—a true facilitator of the northern powerhouse.

Gordon was also instrumental, as part of a group of Leeds-based landlords, in contributing to the Housing Act 1988, which brought in protection for both landlords and tenants through the shorthold tenancy agreement. He wanted to ensure not only that landlords would be able to receive the rent that they were owed but that tenants had protection from unscrupulous landlords.

Gordon and Jackie were married for 62 years—something quite unheard of these days. They have three children and two very adored grandchildren. Gordon was very much a family-oriented man and loved nothing more than spending time with his family. He was a devoted dad, husband and grandfather. In their retirement, Gordon and Jackie enjoyed travelling and had undertaken several world cruises, but two destinations had always eluded them: the cherry blossoms in Japan for Jackie and the Taj Mahal in India for Gordon. On 5 January this year, Gordon and Jackie set sail on a four-month world cruise with Cruise & Maritime Voyages that would take them to these last two bucket-list destinations.

Shortly after the cruise started, Gordon became unwell with a chest infection and cough. Jackie took Gordon to see the ship’s doctor, who diagnosed double pneumonia and high blood pressure and started treatment with antibiotics. Through an ECG, it was diagnosed that Gordon had a left bundle branch block, which causes an irregularity in the heartbeat but is not considered pre-emptive to a heart attack. The doctor also performed

troponin tests and categorically confirmed that Gordon had not had a heart attack. Troponin is an enzyme that the heart emits. A higher level of troponin is the indication of myocardial infarction, or a heart attack. Despite the high blood pressure and the left bundle branch block, because Gordon's troponin tests were negative, there was not sufficient evidence to suggest that Gordon had had a heart attack or was at risk of having a heart attack. This is a very significant point, in relation to the actions that happened next when Gordon and Jackie were disembarked in Barbados and where they consequently were sent for medical treatment.

Bridgetown is the capital of Barbados and is home to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, which is the island's primary acute medical care facility and provides extensive care in a wide array of medical specialties. A report in 2013 entitled "Caring for Non-residents in Barbados" by the Medical Tourism Research Group outlined the medical arrangements in Barbados. It states:

"Within the Caribbean, Barbados is regarded as a favoured destination for regional patients, particularly for those from smaller islands lacking advanced diagnostic and treatment facilities and the capacity to offer to treat high-risk patients...BFC, the Sparman Clinic, Island Dialysis, and Bayview Hospital all attract private regional patients; however, according to our interviewees, the public Queen Elizabeth Hospital is the primary health care destination for regional patients.

The Queen Elizabeth Hospital serves as the main referral hospital for the entire Eastern Caribbean... Consultants at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital...have the ability to admit private patients such as ill vacationers not covered by the island's public system".

On Friday 18 January, with a major hospital available just two miles from the port for an 86-year-old man with double pneumonia—who, according to the ship's doctor, was improving at the point of medical disembarkation—the port agent in Bridgetown decided to send Gordon to the privately run Sparman clinic, some three miles from the port. The clinic is owned and operated by Dr Alfred Sparman, and is advertised as a heart specialist clinic. The ship's doctor's notes and lab results, which clearly stated that Gordon had not had a heart attack, were given to the Sparman clinic on Gordon's arrival. However, the medical notes made by Dr Sparman afterwards state that Gordon was admitted to the clinic with double pneumonia and having had a heart attack, which was not the case.

On arrival at the clinic, Jackie was asked to pay US\$10,000 before the clinic would admit or treat Gordon. Jackie maxed out her credit cards to pay the upfront costs, which left her without funds to find accommodation while in Barbados. On Monday 21 January—I emphasise that I am speaking about this year—Gordon's children arrived in Barbados to assist their parents. At that point, Gordon was on a nasal cannula and an antibiotic drip, but had received no further treatment during the three days since being admitted to the clinic. He appeared to be weak and short of breath, but was able to sit up in bed, was eating, and was fully coherent.

Jackie had been sleeping on the couch in the observation room, because she did not have the funds to procure other accommodation. The Sparman clinic is actually a doctor's surgery with a waiting area, one small operating theatre where most cardiovascular surgeries are performed, and an observation room which doubles as a patient bedroom and intensive care unit and contains mostly wooden and soft furniture.

Dr Sparman met the family to discuss Gordon's prognosis in the clinic's conference room, which contained a cracked board table held together with gaffer tape and several broken and cracked leather chairs. In addition, client records were strewn across the floor and piled high in boxes. I mention the dilapidated state of the entire clinic because, given that a state-of-the-art hospital was less than half a mile away in Bridgetown, it is difficult to understand how this clinic was deemed appropriate to offer any level of suitable healthcare to a critically ill patient with double pneumonia.

During the meeting, Dr Sparman advised the family that Gordon was very ill and had suffered a heart attack as a result of the strain that the pneumonia had put on his heart. He suspected that Gordon also had a blockage in one of his arteries, and therefore needed an angioplasty and an angiogram. He ended the meeting by stating that once the surgery was completed, Gordon would feel much better—better than he had felt for years—and that the family would be able to fly him home via a commercial airline by the end of the week. However, the medical report received from the clinic after Gordon was released clearly shows that at the time of the meeting with Dr Sparman, Gordon's troponin levels, while now showing positive for the enzyme, were still well outside the parameters that would indicate that a heart attack had occurred or was likely to occur.

In the days leading up to the operation, Gordon's condition began to deteriorate. He was in a highly agitated state. He lacked the strength to move his position in the bed, and was offered little assistance from the nurses, which led to great discomfort for him. Moreover, the air conditioning in the observation room, where Gordon was staying, was not working, which resulted in uncomfortable temperatures in a Caribbean hospital—so much so that Gordon had struggled to sleep since his arrival at the clinic, and was now exhausted. Despite several requests from the family for the unit to be mended, the clinic never repaired it. Gordon was clearly weakening. By the day of the operation he had been refusing food for more than 24 hours, had developed spasms that wracked his entire body, and had begun vomiting.

The operation finally took place six days after Gordon had arrived at the clinic. This was a man who had been able to walk, talk and eat just a few days earlier, but who was now visibly declining in front of everyone. This was due to a combination of lack of sleep because of the broken air-conditioning unit, lack of nutrition because Gordon was not placed on a protein drip until several days after he had stopped eating, considerable discomfort from his lack of strength to move position, and no aid offered and an overall general lack of proper nursing care.

Yet there were still more delays, not least when the family were then presented with a bill for \$45,000 and advised that Dr Sparman would not perform the surgery without the money first. The family came up with the money and, despite Gordon's severely weakened state, Dr Sparman proceeded with the surgery.

If Gordon had been admitted to the general hospital in the first place it is highly likely that he would have received pre-emptive treatment much earlier and would not have had to wait six days for a corrective procedure had he needed it. He most likely would have been making a full recovery, but at the Sparman Clinic there were continuous delays and a general lack of care.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

According to the lab results, half an hour before the operation a troponin test was conducted. At this point, Gordon's troponin levels had elevated to a point that showed that a heart attack was imminent. The family was not aware of this, but Dr Sparman would have been. Within half an hour of the operation commencing Dr Sparman returned to the family and said he had been unable to perform the procedure as Gordon had started going into cardiac arrest, so the operation was aborted.

After the operation Gordon began to deteriorate rapidly and within 24 hours he was under sedation and had been placed on tracheal intubation. A ventilator did the breathing for him, which was strapped to Gordon's face using string. His blood pressure was now dangerously low, his body was still racked with spasms and he now also had kidney failure.

Gordon was initially sedated using Valium, but after he came round twice and tried to pull the tube from his mouth Dr Sparman changed the sedation to diazepam and tied Gordon's hands to the bedframe. The diazepam worked in terms of ensuring that Gordon did not come round again and it also stopped the spasms; however, Gordon never fully regained consciousness after the drug was administered. For the remaining three days that Gordon spent at the clinic under sedation and intubated his body position was never moved once by the nursing staff and his family were not permitted to move him.

At this point, a member of staff at the clinic—who would prefer to remain anonymous—advised that Gordon should be airlifted out of the clinic as soon as possible. It was implied that he was not going to get better at the Sparman Clinic. The family immediately started to arrange a medical airlift back to the UK. At this very stressful time, the family were presented with another bill, for \$11,000.

I hope I have managed to describe to the House the utter lack of care that Gordon received, and that the primary motivation appeared to be to delay the correct and proper treatment that Gordon needed in order to extract more money from the family.

The family were now working fastidiously with a medical flight team to repatriate Gordon to the UK. However, after speaking with consultants in the UK it was deemed that Gordon was too ill to endure the flight and needed to have an angioplasty and angiogram prior to repatriation, but it was also advised that in Gordon's present condition this operation was high risk. Gordon was critically ill, and the risk factors associated with either the operation or the flight carried great life-threatening consequences.

Dr Sparman made it clear that the decision to have the surgery was entirely up to the family. I must reiterate this point: Dr Sparman placed life-threatening medical decisions in the hands of Gordon's family, who had no medical training whatever. At a loss to know what choice to make, the family consulted the head cardiologist at the Queen Elizabeth hospital, who advised them to remove Gordon from the Sparman Clinic immediately and bring him to the hospital as soon as possible, and not to go ahead with the surgery. The family began making plans to move Gordon, but Dr Sparman advised

them that he was too ill and would not make the journey and now began pressuring them to go ahead with the surgery.

In desperation, the family sought further advice from a relative in England who is a doctor. Based on the information that Sparman provided to the relative, it was advised that the surgery should go ahead. So the family had no choice but to put their faith in Dr Sparman.

At this point, the family were presented with another bill, for a total of \$70,000, of which the family had already paid \$56,000. The family were advised that the surgery would not go ahead without the balance being paid, so they had no choice but to once again come up with the money. It would appear that, in response to the threat to move Gordon out of the clinic, Dr Sparman was determined to now go ahead with the surgery, putting immense emotional pressure on my family and presenting more bills, in case he lost "the business."

Gordon came out of surgery with only a 10% chance of survival according to Dr Sparman and two days later he was deemed stable enough for the medical evacuation. Dr Sparman arranged the medication to be administered during the medical flight, and this was given to the flight team—in a fast food bag. The sedative he provided for Gordon for the flight was once again diazepam. The air medical team queried the use of the drug as a sedative, saying that such a high quantity as had been prescribed to Gordon was not administered in the USA because it took far too long to disperse through the system in patients with that level of critical illness and especially patients with kidney failure. The absolute failure to care for Gordon's wellbeing, coupled with a wholly inappropriate drug for his age and state of illness and in a quantity that was beyond irresponsible, placed a constant strain on his heart.

I must emphasise that we would never have been in this position had Gordon been sent to the main hospital and properly treated for the pneumonia the moment he arrived.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I interrupt my good friend to ask something I have been waiting to hear. Who made the decision to send Gordon to Sparman rather than the hospital? Was the decision taken on board the ship? Was there some kind of cosy arrangement or deal? Does he know?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend. I will come to that in my speech, but it was not the decision of the cruise liner; it was the decision of the port agent.

In the 11 days Gordon spent at the Sparman clinic, he received limited nutritional care and substandard nursing that gave rise to horrific first-degree bed sores that visibly shocked the medical staff at the Leeds General Infirmary and was placed in a poorly air-conditioned room, which led to his exhaustion. This all led Gordon to have much higher levels of anxiety, fear, pain and rapid health deterioration, which put increased pressure on his heart, at a time when he should have been able to rest, be properly hydrated and nutritiously fed, and so continue the recovery from his pneumonia that the ship's doctor said he was comfortably making without any heart issues at that time.

Gordon was repatriated to the UK and admitted to the Leeds General Infirmary early on Tuesday 28 January. On inspecting the report from Dr Sparman, the consultants could not understand why Gordon was still so critically ill. The medical reports implied that he was and should be in recovery. They were also very concerned at the gravity of Gordon's bed sores, which were first degree and had resulted from his position not being changed whilst he was in the Sparman clinic. I re-emphasise that not only did the nursing staff refuse to move Gordon, but Dr Sparman had tied his hands to the bed and prevented the family from moving him. These are basic nursing practices. Anybody in the medical profession knows that patients left in the same position will develop bed sores. I emphasise again that the staff at the Leeds General Infirmary audibly gasped when they saw the state of my father-in-law. They also questioned the prolonged use and high dosage of the drug diazepam that was administered.

Sadly, after the consultants at the LGI had performed their tests on Gordon, it was determined that his heart had greatly deteriorated and was in a much worse condition than had been reflected in Dr Sparman's notes. In fact, the prognosis was not good. In addition to chronic heart failure, Gordon had kidney failure and brain damage from lack of oxygen. Despite his being taken off the diazepam sedation on arrival at the LGI, Gordon's kidneys were not able to dispel the drug, and that, coupled with his now having multiple organ failure and brain damage, meant that Gordon never properly regained consciousness. Thirteen days after being admitted to the LGI, the family, with very heavy hearts, had to admit defeat and Gordon's life support was stopped. He died on 13 February, leaving behind a devastated and traumatised family.

Owing to the circumstances around Gordon's death the post mortem is still ongoing as the Coroner's Office considers it to be a very complex case, which means we have been unable to get the final pathology report and still await his final death certificate.

My family paid approximately \$200,000 in total for the barbaric treatment my father-in-law received in Barbados and the subsequent medical repatriation to the UK, and they have nothing to show for that money other than traumatic memories of the tragic and painful death of Gordon. After the horrific treatment and trauma my father-in-law had been through, we did not think we could be hit with anything else, but we were. It was only after returning to the UK that the family started doing simple Google searches on Dr Alfred Sparman, and they highlighted a horrifying picture.

In 1986, Sparman was convicted of the offence of disorderly conduct, to which he pleaded guilty. In 1991, he was convicted of the crimes of sexual abuse in the first degree and unlawful imprisonment in New York and sentenced to five years' probation. In January 1996, Sparman was registered as a sex offender in Florida, but in June he applied for licensure to practise medicine in Florida. The state of Florida revoked his medical licence in 1997. In 1999, Sparman received a licence to practise medicine in Tennessee, but this was revoked in February 2001 owing to

"unprofessional conduct; a previous felony conviction for sexual abuse in New York, and false statement on medical application."

In June 2001, he was again registered as a sex offender in the state of Florida.

It was in 2001 that Sparman went to Barbados and opened his clinic. In 2004, he had his board certification in internal medicine suspended by the American Board of Internal Medicine, but he continues to this day to advertise himself as an "American Board-Certified Physician". In 2005, he was reregistered as a sexual predator and offender in the state of Florida. In 2010, he was reregistered as a sex offender in the state of Tennessee, and the register also contains a list of Sparman's aliases: John W. Freeman and Alfred W. Eversley.

On top of the crimes for which he has been convicted, Sparman has advertised himself as a "Board-Certified Cardiologist" but never passed the board certification cardiology exams in the USA. He has also advertised himself as a Fellow of the American College of Cardiology but the FACC has no record of his being a fellow. He was reprimanded by the Medical Council of Barbados and asked to remove "FACC" from his letterhead. He advertises himself as an interventional cardiologist but has no specialist training in interventional cardiology. He has had a number of complaints made against him to the Medical Council of Barbados. He has also tried to poach paying cardiology patients—that is, tourists—from the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. All this information can be found in a simple online due diligence check. In addition, there are countless stories online of other people who have suffered at the hands of Dr Sparman.

So why was Gordon sent to the clinic of a supposed doctor who was stripped of his licence to practise medicine in the US, who is a registered sex offender, who has numerous speculations surrounding him regarding his conduct and who has blatantly lied about his accreditations? Why was Gordon sent to a heart clinic in the first place when he was diagnosed with double pneumonia, rather than being sent to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital? We will never know the answers to those questions.

A representative of Cruise & Maritime Voyages has confirmed that it was the port agent who determined where my father-in-law was taken for his medical care once he was disembarked. The port agent is governed by maritime law. A port agent is the designated person or agency held responsible for handling shipments and cargo and the general interest of its customers at ports and harbours worldwide, on behalf of ship owners, managers and charterers. Quite frankly, the decision that the port agent made to send Gordon to the Sparman clinic, instead of to the main hospital, killed him. And to add a final insult to all the injury, instead of Gordon visiting his "bucket list" destination, the Taj Mahal, with his beloved wife, Jackie instead laid his ashes there.

I ask the Minister and her Department today to seek a change to international maritime law, by lobbying the International Maritime Organisation, regarding the duty of care and due diligence, through a fit and proper persons test, that a port agent must carry out when identifying and commissioning onshore medical facilities and practitioners for those who are disembarked for medical emergencies. The international conventions for the safety of life at sea of 1974 and 1988 have been used to bring in the highest standards of health and safety for those at sea, whether they be crew or passengers. These provisions were amended in 2004 through the international ship and port facility security code after the security concerns raised after 9/11, and I would argue that this shows that the wellbeing of seafarers carries on within the port, not just on the vessel.

[Alec Shelbrooke]

Gordon was always proud of the work he did in bringing about changes to landlord law to achieve the protection and standards required, especially for tenants, and although this will never bring him back, it would be a final fitting tribute to his life to know that, even in death, he was able to try to make the world a better place, to ensure that this never happens to anybody else.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I must start by passing on my deepest condolences to my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) and his family on the tragic death of Gordon Hoyland Spencer. I had the privilege of meeting Mr Spencer's family earlier today and saw their grief and despair. My hon. Friend gave a powerful, brave, emotional speech, and it was incredibly difficult to digest such a long list of tragic incidents that should just not have happened. What makes Mr Spencer's death all the more heartbreaking is that it could so easily have been prevented by prompt and correct treatment and good quality care. Quite understandably, my hon. Friend wants action to prevent any other families going through a similar agony.

Under the International Labour Organisation's maritime labour convention, ships carrying 100 or more persons and ordinarily engaged on international voyages of more than three days' duration shall carry a qualified medical doctor who is responsible for providing medical care. Ships' doctors, like any other doctor, have a duty of care to their patients governed by ethical responsibilities. That would usually include discharging sick patients into what they consider appropriate medical care facilities ashore, in compliance with the code of medical ethics in their country of registration or licence. In doing so, a ship's doctor may liaise with an assistance company appointed by the passenger's insurer, which should be able to advise on appropriate care providers ashore.

According to my hon. Friend's account, it would appear that Mr Spencer received appropriate care and treatment while on board the vessel and was recovering—we must note that. However, the facilities available on board were not sufficient to further Mr Spencer's recovery and a decision was made that he should be medically discharged in Barbados. I understand that the port agent facilitated the transfer of Mr Spencer to a cardiology clinic rather than to the general hospital.

The port agent's role is primarily to help facilitate the ship's transit through the port, and the engagement and choice of an agent is at the shipping company's discretion. A ship's agent may, if asked, provide the details of local medical facilities, but the responsibility remains with the ship's doctor to discharge sick passengers into what they consider to be an appropriate medical facility ashore. My hon. Friend has requested that international maritime law should be amended to place a duty of care and due diligence on a port agent, through a fit and proper person test, when they are identifying and commissioning onshore medical facilities for those who are disembarked for medical emergencies.

Port agents are required to comply with relevant domestic law and the port statute, but they are not regulated by international maritime law. However, considering the case that my hon. Friend has presented today, I will

ask the officials at the Department for Transport and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to consider whether such regulation would fall within the remit of the International Maritime Organisation or whether it would be appropriate for another international body. I will also write to the Cruise Lines International Association, the international trade association for the industry, to highlight the issues that this incident has raised in order to highlight its duty of care and responsibilities with regard to port agents.

Furthermore, I will raise the case directly with the IMO, and, considering how personal the case is for my hon. Friend, I wonder whether he could bear to share his experiences again. I know that this will be emotional and difficult for him, but I respectfully ask him to join me for a meeting that I will convene directly with the IMO's secretary-general so that my hon. Friend can share his experiences and make representations to see whether we can lobby and obtain a change in the law.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for that offer. I wonder whether the invitation could be extended to my family, who were in Barbados at the time and experienced what happened at first hand.

Ms Ghani: That would be absolutely fit and proper. I accept it, and we will do what we can as soon as we can.

We have heard this afternoon of the tragic and preventable death of Gordon Hoyland Spencer. I share my hon. Friend's commitment that, although nothing can be done to reverse what happened, Gordon's death should act as a call for action to the maritime industry. Passengers should be cared for to the highest possible standard, particularly when they are most in need, and the Government will play their part in helping to ensure that no one has to repeat the painful experiences of Gordon and his family.

Bob Stewart: I believe the Minister is shortly to finish, but I wonder what the heck is going to happen to this so-called Dr Sparman. How can we allow this man to continue his work in Barbados? What can the British Government do to stop it? Are we going to report the man to the Barbadian Government? And are we going to complain about how the port agent dealt with this case? I believe that practical step might prevent another family from going through the hell that the Shelbrooke family have been through.

Ms Ghani: Absolutely. The fact this has been raised on the Floor of the House will be reflected by all Government agencies, and I do not doubt for a moment that this message will reach Barbados, especially once the meeting takes place with the IMO.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell for bringing this debate to the House. Once again, I express my profound sympathies to him, to Gordon's widow Jackie and to the entire family. I look forward, if I can use that word, to working with my hon. Friend to campaign on this incredibly important issue and to ensuring that we do all we can to prevent another incident like this one.

Question put and agreed to.

4.21 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 June 2019

[DAME CHERYL GILLAN *in the Chair*]

Sudan

1.30 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move, That this House has considered the political situation in Sudan.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I have put in for a debate on this subject on a number of occasions. I was getting a bit despondent that I had not secured one, given the depth of the crisis in Sudan, so I was pleased that the unusual channels managed to find space for one. I hope everyone present contributes. I do not intend to say much; rather, I intend to ask a series of questions of the Government, and I hope we can move forward on what we should be doing.

I went to Sudan in September with the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We had some inkling that problems may be afoot, but I do not think any of us anticipated how bad things would become. That is why I am pleased that we can at the very least debate the issue today. It is such a tragic situation.

My interest in Sudan goes back a long time. I have visited the country four times. I was always interested in the religious aspect of the conflict before the country split. We now have two elements to Sudan: the situation in South Sudan does not quite mirror what has happened in the north, but that country has its own problems. Perhaps we will discuss them on another occasion.

The Library produced an excellent briefing for the debate. For hon. Members who do not know, those briefings are always published online. It gives as good a summary of the background as is possible in three pages. I will not go through it, except to say that when Bashir was removed in April, some of us feared that there would at the very least be a vacuum, which would be filled by someone else, who would not necessarily be any better.

I welcome the Minister, and I look forward to hearing what she has to say. I also welcome the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on Sudan and South Sudan with great alacrity. We are here to ensure that we do what I have always pledged to do when I have met the Sudanese: not to forget the situation in Sudan. They often feel that their crises, while not belittled, are given a secondary level of interest because of all the other things going on in our world.

Sadly, following the removal of Bashir, violence broke out on the streets of Khartoum at the start of June, and what is happening in other parts of the country will be as bad as, if not worse than, whatever is going on in Khartoum. I will mention later what my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton and I found on our visit to Darfur.

We will keep our eyes very much on what is happening. We will not let the atrocities escape our notice. I hope that, in due course, we will have got a bit more stability into the country and that the Government will take appropriate action with international colleagues to deal

with those responsible for the worst aspects of those atrocities. I will talk later about my discussions with the diaspora. I hope the Minister is able to respond to the things they have to say—I am only their mouthpiece—and to the things I ask of the Government.

The EU has taken a strong stance on what has been happening in Sudan, but we must understand that the situation will not be sorted out quickly. The African Union has made its own representations to try to bring about peace. Egypt, because of its relationship with Sudan, has expressed concern, and it was good that the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, visited in an attempt to mediate between the Transitional Military Council and the Forces of Freedom and Change, which seem to be the two sides most engaged in what is going on. Sadly, as a result of that, some FFC people were arrested, and at least one has been thrown out of the country. That is not exactly helping the dialogue.

I am concerned about the relationship between Sudan and the United Arab Emirates and particularly Saudi Arabia. For those who do not know, most of the fighting in Yemen is being done by Sudanese Rapid Support Forces, which we would call Janjaweed. That has added to the escalation of the troubles on the streets of Khartoum. At a time when the UK Government are being called to account for their own arms shipment arrangements with the Saudis, it is apposite that we recognise that we must put pressure on the Saudis, who hold the ring with respect to the arrangements by which the Transitional Military Council—the Government, if we can call it a Government—currently holds power. I hope the Minister says a little about that.

I will ask a series of questions of the Minister and then finish with what the diaspora have to say, which is very important. We have many thousands of Sudanese in this country, who are at the very least intensely worried about what is happening to their families and friends and who want, for reasons we know, a new Sudan to come out of the current situation.

The UK Government have made clear public statements condemning the way events have evolved. Our brave ambassador has been called in at least once to be dressed down by the Sudanese regime. Having known that regime for many years, I know that is not a good experience, so I pass on my thanks to him. It is important that we put on the record that the Government believe the Transitional Military Council, and in particular Hemeti, who seems to have taken control, is responsible for what is happening and will pay the price. We should use all diplomatic means to ensure that, in due course, there is a proper transfer of power from the Transitional Military Council.

I take the word “transitional” to mean that this is not another Bashir regime in the making, but something that will genuinely begin to govern Sudan in the way it should be governed. The new Government have to recognise the diversity of the people of Sudan, including women and younger people. I have hope for Sudan because I know from talking to younger people that they believe there is a different world out there. They believe something could be done to bring the country forward into the 21st century. Sadly, too often, they are disappointed.

We should lead efforts at the United Nations Human Rights Council, and we must ensure, as a member of the Security Council, that Sudan is properly held to

[*Dr David Drew*]

account through international mechanisms. I would say that even if it were not for the current difficulties in Sudan. I have said before to the Minister—she will not be surprised to hear this—that I hope she talks to the Home Office to ensure there are no deportations to anywhere in Sudan. There should have been no deportations anyway to Darfur, because of the ongoing problems there. It is important that people here and people there know that we recognise that the situation is so dire that we cannot send anyone back to that bedevilled country at the moment.

Because of the UK's relationship with the other members of the troika—the US and Norway—it has a key role to play in making sure that the diplomatic effort is stepped up and that we bring the different parties together, which must include a real effort to de-escalate what is happening on the streets. We must condemn all state and pseudo-state armed actors, particularly the paramilitary groups—whether we call them Janjaweed or RSF—and individual militias, which have sadly always played a part in Sudan.

The eyes of the world are on Khartoum, but I fear that problems may break out again in Darfur. The Minister kindly said that the British Government are committed not to draw down further the numbers of military and police there, but we must keep our eyes on the situation, because if it explodes again, it would be catastrophic. I would be grateful if the Minister said that we were categorically committed to that, and that we welcomed the others that provide the numbers—mainly African Union players now—keeping to their side of the bargain to make sure we do not reduce the numbers anymore.

We must also make sure that no one can escape here. One aspect of trying to control how certain people have behaved and of holding them to account is freezing their assets and dealing with them through unexplained wealth orders and repatriation. We have a history of certain people visiting for health treatment, which does not go down well with people who know enough about what they have done in the past. That takes me to the International Criminal Court. Bashir is cited, but it is no good just citing these people; we have to follow that with action, which must include other people who have perpetrated violence in Sudan.

The British Government have to explain to the Government of Sudan, as far as they exist, that they have to keep their obligations under international law and that any transgression of it will be punished. I am not in favour of disengagement—it is important that we keep our ambassador there—but they have to understand that they are accountable for what they have done, including the way they are imprisoning people, the aspects of completely out-of-control behaviour by some militias on the streets, and the torture. Sudan is notorious for ghost houses. We need to know that people are not being tortured as a matter of course. I hope that we will follow that up and deal with it subsequently.

We must uphold international law on all the conventions on torture and any other inhuman or degrading treatment. That dovetails with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, which should hold a rule 112 hearing on the implementation of cases that have been brought to light at the 65th ordinary session in Banjul, Gambia.

I will finish with a few comments from the diaspora, who are clearly desperately worried. There are thousands of Sudanese people in this country. We have to remember that, at one time, one in five refugees was Sudanese—that is what comes from 50 years of civil war. Clearly, refugee numbers from other parts of the world have grown, but there are still an awful lot of Sudanese people trying to get out of that country or already here.

The diaspora are adamant that they want a full international investigation into what happened on 3 June and subsequently. They want to make sure that the Government are not in any way fuelling the problem by finding ways to get money through to the regime. I made a Channel 4 programme—it has not yet been broadcast, so I do not want to spike its news—that discovered that the EU moneys that have been going into force protection and border controls have found their way to Janjaweed, because it has been doing some of that work. We need an investigation to make sure that those moneys have stopped.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have an interest in Sudan, in so far as when I was a young boy living in Aden, my nurse came from there, and I have a great deal of affection for her still. In my experience, the problem with aid is that it needs to be supervised all the way down. When we give money or goods to somewhere such as Sudan, the only way to guarantee its effectiveness is to have someone on the ground watching it being distributed at the point of delivery. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Dr Drew: I do, and that is the allegation about some of the EU money. We wanted to stop the flow of migration, but this is a case of out of sight, out of mind, so we have not taken much notice of how these things have been done. If that money has found its way to the RSF, we should do something about that immediately. It is shameful, because that is not what the money was for.

The diaspora have also made it clear that they do not want any further cuts to the money going to UNAMID—the United Nations-African Union hybrid operation in Darfur. They would like access to the potential international mediation talks on 25 June in Berlin for the Sudanese Professionals Association, which has been a leading body in the Forces of Freedom and Change and has been instrumental in holding the Government to account. They also think it is important not to cut diplomatic ties, but they want to make it clear through our condemnations that people who have perpetrated the violence, and worse, will be held to account. That means that the RSF should be disarmed and removed from the streets of Sudan immediately.

It is important that we play our part. Britain is a key player in Sudan. We cannot ignore our past—it was a British colony. More than anything, however, because of our relationship with the troika—the Americans and the Norwegians—the Sudanese people look to us to provide leadership to make sure that what is happening is not ignored and is given the correct priority, and that peace is brought to that bedevilled country. That will not be done easily—we have taken 50 years so far, unsuccessfully—but there is hope. We have to make sure that we put pressure on the transgressors and that we follow it through. We have done that in the past, but we must be even keener now to ensure that our obligations are fulfilled.

1.47 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), who, as the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group, has been indefatigable in his support of Sudan and South Sudan. I declare my interests, particularly as the chair of the APPG.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman has said, because when General Omar al-Bashir finally departed on 11 April, there was a great deal of hope and rejoicing. It was a remarkable event, because it marked the end of 30 years of brutal dictatorship. During that time, huge misery was heaped on Sudan; appalling crimes against humanity were committed in Darfur, South Kordofan and Blue Nile; and there was the secession of South Sudan.

Incidentally, we should not forget the plight of South Sudan, where little progress has been made on the peace process. Some 60% of the population does not have food security. Of a population of 12 million, 2.2 million are refugees and 1.9 million are internally displaced people. Since 2013, 100 humanitarian aid workers have been killed there.

The removal of President General Omar al-Bashir was an extraordinary event. As the hon. Member for Stroud said, there were high hopes for the future at the time, and there have been a number of positive developments and trends. In some ways, the uprising was one of the most progressive in the region. The Forces of Freedom and Change, which some people call the alliance, and the Sudanese Professionals Association combined management organisations, workers' organisations and trade unions—not that there are trade unions in that country as we know them here—and also managed to bring in a number of the more liberal Muslim groups. Crucially, unlike in Syria, Libya and Yemen, Sudan's Islamic fundamentalists were kept out of it.

One of key characteristics of the demonstration was that the demonstrators were determined to keep them as peaceful as possible at all times. After seeing the General deposed, they rightly did not want to leave the squares and areas around public buildings empty; they wanted to continue occupying them. That appeared to be working, and there was ongoing dialogue with the Transitional Military Council under Abdel Fattah al-Burhan. A lot of us at the time were quietly optimistic that progress would be made, but then the appalling events of 3 June happened, when the Transitional Military Council used total brutality and force on unarmed, innocent protesters who were sitting in and doing nothing but peacefully protesting for the future. Well over 100 were killed, and a number of key people were arrested, including SPLM-N leaders Ismail Jalab, Yasir Arman and Mubarak Ardol.

I share the concern of the hon. Member for Stroud about the role of the Rapid Support Forces. The former Janjaweed militia, under Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who is now the deputy head of the Transitional Military Council, has brutalised people on the streets, and we understand that it has used rape as a method of putting down demonstrations. Reprehensibly, some soldiers are preventing medical staff from going into hospitals.

All that is very depressing and, in some ways, unexpected. We must look at the international response, as the hon. Member for Stroud has done. I agree that the EU has been very strong and powerful in its condemnation. I would like to see more coming out of the UN. One of the problems is that if a more robust and direct resolution is drafted, the danger is that it will be vetoed by either China or Russia. I ask the Minister to tell us what more can be done within the UN. One of the strongest messages that the UK can send is that there can be absolutely no impunity or any form of amnesty for the people in the Transitional Military Council who have committed crimes against humanity and crimes against innocent people. Any indication that those wretched crimes will be swept under the carpet will only encourage the TMC to carry on with its current attitude, which is improving somewhat but there is still a long way to go.

Bob Stewart: I thank my hon. Friend for letting me intervene. It is crucial that the International Criminal Court now takes more of an interest in what is happening in Sudan and South Sudan. It has the capability to investigate, and we should put the Government of Sudan on notice that if they do not take action, which is their first duty when war crimes have been committed, the International Criminal Court will come knocking at some stage—albeit in 10 or 20 years' time.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I certainly agree. There can be no question of General Omar al-Bashir escaping those charges in the ICC. There needs to be an ICC investigation into the crimes that took place in early June. It is absolutely essential that that happens.

Bob Stewart: All of them—not just June.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Exactly. Of course, General Omar al-Bashir has committed crimes in the past in Darfur and elsewhere. The crimes committed by the Rapid Support Forces and the TMC very recently must be fully investigated. I would be grateful if the Minister can comment on that point, but it seems that UK has significant influence over that, particularly through our position in the UN.

As far as the regional players are concerned, I was—like the hon. Member for Stroud—encouraged that the Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, recently visited Khartoum and had discussions with the TMC. There is quite a lot of evidence that the pressure from the international community is changing the attitude of the Gulf states that were fairly equivocal towards Sudan. The latest news is actually fairly encouraging. The protesters have agreed to end their campaign of civil disobedience and resume talks, so we are at a pivotal point. That is why it is absolutely essential that the troika put maximum pressure on the TMC and use the threats that my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham referred to. This is an absolutely vital moment for states in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to put pressure on the Transitional Military Council to ensure that if the protesters end their campaign of civil disobedience, as appears to be happening, talks take place immediately. The protesters should end the campaign only if the TMC acts in good faith and enters into dialogue.

There is a great deal at stake for the people of Sudan, who have suffered so much for so long, for the region, given the strategic importance of Sudan in the horn of

[*Sir Henry Bellingham*]

Africa, and for the UK. We have a historical duty to Sudan, and we must ensure that, if the country can move forward in a democratic direction, its huge potential is exploited and made the most of. The prospects for enhanced trade and building ever greater links between the UK, the diaspora here and Sudan, are limitless. Furthermore, we are obviously very involved in the Khartoum process, which is looking at the refugee crisis in the Sahel and the Maghreb. If this tragedy and disaster is not solved quickly, the refugee crisis will get worse.

Given the country's tumultuous history and the tragedy since independence from Anglo-Egyptian rule 60 years ago, it is easy to be cautious and pessimistic, but I have always been a glass-half-full person. In my visits to Sudan, I have always been impressed by the optimism and the sense of aspiration among the Sudanese people. That has always struck me as being one of the great features of that country. As we waited patiently for the dictatorial rule of General Bashir to come to an end, that optimism increased.

I will end with a quote from someone many of us know quite well—Alex de Waal, who is a long-time Africa expert. He said that Sudan

“is poised between an inspirational transformation and dangerous disorder.”

Let us hope that, with the Minister's help and the help of all the other agencies and organisations involved, it will indeed be the former—above all, for the sake of the Sudanese people.

1.59 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and to follow the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who chairs the all-party group for Sudan and South Sudan so well. He has demonstrated his great knowledge of that part of the world and his staunch commitment to continuing to shine a light on what is going on in Sudan. We must make it clear, through our voice in this place, that we support the Minister and the shadow Minister in their work to bring about improvements through the leadership that the United Kingdom has always been able to provide in the world. Sudan needs the United Kingdom's leadership at this time, in this matter.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew); his great knowledge of that part of the world shone through his remarks. He cares deeply, and his concerns about what is happening in Sudan, how the situation affects the diaspora living here, and the threats it is creating for neighbouring countries, are important.

I am afraid I do not have the knowledge or expertise of the hon. Members who have already spoken and said so much. The hon. Member for North West Norfolk was right when he said that when these disturbances began in December, around bread and grain shortages, and gathered pace to become a more general expression of dissatisfaction about the need for this regime to come to an end and to move on to a new chapter, there was a sense of optimism in the world, and among friends of Sudan who saw what was going on. Sadly, on

3 June, when peaceful protesters were killed in Khartoum and the images broadcast across the world, that initial hope was dashed.

We have continued to receive reports of the military killing unarmed people in hospitals and elsewhere, and shocking reports of other dreadful things taking place. It was right for the African Union to cut off all activities with Sudan following the extreme bloodshed, demonstrating its clear position. It is good that the pressure from the United Kingdom, the United States and others, and the clear voice of the EU have led some Gulf states to soften their behaviours since their initial reaction.

It is a very difficult situation at the moment. As both my colleagues have said, everyone who knows Sudan well remains hopeful about what is going on with civic society, and about what is going on with younger people, but there is a need to provide the opportunity for that hope to thrive. As has been said, it is important that it is made very clear that the people responsible for what is happening at the moment will be held to account by the international community, and that the temporary Transitional Military Council should be exactly that—transitional—as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said. There should be a clear path to proper democracy and order in government, in which the people of Sudan can have confidence.

It is a troubled region. Darfur is synonymous with awful historical events and we do not want that awfulness to return. Leadership from all of us, working together, is needed to support the UK Government to provide leadership through the Troika, the United Nations and the EU. The United Kingdom has a pivotal position. I look forward to what the Minister and the shadow Minister have to say about how we move forward, building on the strong, unified messages that have already been coming across the political landscape in the UK. I hope those messages are being well heard in Sudan, and that we can take the necessary steps forward to help that troubled country to a better future—the future it deserves.

2.4 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for securing this important debate.

The SNP would like to see a multilateral approach to this issue, where we can work with colleagues in the European Union and the African Union. It is an exceptionally distressing conflict situation, as other Members have rightly highlighted. There are incredibly worrying reports of civilians being killed, and, as the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), highlighted, there are also reports of sexual violence being used as a tool of war.

Those responsible must be held to account; that includes the militias. As the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) pointed out, even if they are not held accountable tomorrow, the day after or even the month after, they need to know that they will be held accountable. He was right to say that; I recognise the work that he has done and his track record in helping to ensure that people are brought to justice for heinous crimes, even years afterwards. The international community does not, and should not, go away just because these things have disappeared from the front pages of the newspapers or are no longer being debated in Parliament.

Bob Stewart: I intervene on my friend because if 100 civilians had been killed in a European country there would be one hell of a row about it. Although people here, such as my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), and the Opposition speakers are raising this issue, there are not many people here today. That is sad, because what has happened is something approaching genocide. We have not even touched on some of the other issues, such as the persecution of Christians.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman; as usual he raises an incredibly important point that, given his experiences and his track record, has particular resonance. I pay credit to him. As I have said to him, I was a great admirer of his before I came to Parliament because of his work on this. I acknowledge that we may disagree on an issue or two, but I pay credit to the work he has done, and continues to do, in pursuing these issues.

Years from now, we will continue that work and accountability will be key. I know that in her remarks the Minister will reaffirm our utter steadfastness in defending human rights, along with our partners in the African Union and the European Union. I add my words to those of the hon. Member for Beckenham in expressing my thanks to the UK ambassador to Sudan and members of staff in the embassy in Khartoum, who have an extraordinarily difficult job and who are carrying out their duties in a brave and dignified fashion. I hope the Minister will pass on that message from me and other Members.

In terms of the UK Government's own powers, I hope the Minister will continue to make clear statements of condemnation about militias like the Janjaweed and make it clear that although militias appear to be involved in the Transitional Military Council, the council will bear full responsibility for the actions of the militias, as well as their own army. That is a lesson taken from other conflict situations.

I am not sure whether the Minister is able to touch on issues about misinformation; there are concerns about it and we have seen it deployed as a tactic elsewhere in the world. Will she and her Department look at instances of misinformation and how we can counter them? Ensuring that there is a true and accurate reflection of what is going on is important for accountability, but also for our own policy making and making sure that we respond in an appropriate manner. Misinformation is appearing increasingly often throughout the world.

I add my support for the argument that inclusion must be at the heart of any transfer of powers, and I hope that the UK will pursue it, but I also add my voice to those saying that we must halt the deportations to Sudan. I know it is a Home Office issue, but will the Minister pass on that message from this debate? The deportations must be halted; it is not appropriate, and especially now, on World Refugee Day of all days, it is fitting to stress that again. Can we also learn from mistakes elsewhere—as we have learned in Myanmar, for example—that sufficient time and capacity must be given to any transfer to a democracy, along with de-escalation work? That takes investment and it takes more time.

I thank the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk, for his reference to the situation in South Sudan, which is also incredibly important. I pay

tribute to non-governmental organisations from across the United Kingdom that are working in both South Sudan and Sudan in very difficult circumstances. I know that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development try to support them, but I wonder whether there is any additional support or capacity building with those NGOs. I hope that colleagues will not mind if I thank in particular Ian Macaulay and the Church of Scotland for their fantastic work across Sudan and South Sudan.

Finally, what interventions does the Foreign Office plan to make with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over their links with and influence over the militias and the Transitional Military Council? What conversations have been had with those countries? If they have the influence that has been reported, we need to have some pretty tough conversations with them, to say that we are paying attention and that what is happening is unacceptable. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, and I particularly thank the hon. Member for Stroud for bringing this debate to Parliament.

2.12 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl.

I thank everybody who has made a contribution to the debate, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew). He spoke about the delegation to Sudan that he and I took part in last year, and he is right to say that we had an idea of the problems that were brewing at the time. President Bashir had been selected as the candidate for the next elections; there was a feeling in the country that, while there were issues, he had brought stability to the country. There was a strong feeling that he was the candidate—with serious reservations. We had many meetings with politicians in Sudan, and that thread ran through all our discussions. But as my hon. Friend said in his opening remarks, none of us quite anticipated the scale of the current crisis. I think of the relative calm we encountered in September last year, and the protests and killings that have taken place since in Khartoum and elsewhere in Sudan. Everybody has talked about the difficulties of accessing information from Sudan. The news we have had does not cover the whole story, and I will go on to talk about press freedom later in my remarks.

I thank all hon. Members who have spoken—the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), who is a fount of knowledge on Sudan and South Sudan, my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) and the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins), who made some pertinent points. He put one question to the Minister that I would also like to ask, about calling a halt to deportations to Sudan in the midst of the current crisis. I would be interested to hear from the Minister in her closing remarks whether she has had any discussions with the Home Office on that issue. It is vital that we do not send people back to a conflict zone.

Many MPs with Sudanese diasporas in their constituencies have approached me in the past few weeks, bringing messages from their constituents and asking me why we are not talking more about Sudan. I

[Liz McInnes]

am therefore grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud secured this important debate, and there was also an urgent question last week. However, although it is important that we have these debates, talking on its own is not enough. What we need is action, and with that in mind I have several asks of the Minister, which I hope she will be able to address.

The first thing I want to ask the Minister is what we can do to put pressure on the internet providers in Sudan. I have already mentioned the difficulties we have in getting information out of Sudan, and one problem is that the internet providers have shut down the internet, or have been shut down by the Sudanese authorities. The major providers are the South African company MTN and a Kuwaiti company. It is unlikely that the UK can do much about them, but, nevertheless, I would be interested to hear what action the Foreign Office is taking to try at least to restore internet access to the people of Sudan.

There is also the important issue of press freedom—I know it is an issue dear to the Foreign Secretary's heart, because he is holding a conference on it next month. Sudanese journalists have been targeted since the public protests began. Their media accreditations have been revoked, and many journalists have been detained. The International Federation of Journalists has joined its affiliate, the Sudanese Journalists Union, in condemning any attempts to intimidate the press. The IFJ is urging the authorities to end the clampdown and respect journalists' rights to report in a safe working environment.

In May, the Sudanese authorities closed al-Jazeera's offices in Khartoum and withdrew the work permits of all its staff. Again, the IFJ and the Federation of African Journalists have condemned the move as an attack on freedom of information and called for an immediate end to the clampdown on the media. Given the Foreign Secretary's major and important work on press freedom, I would be interested to hear the Minister's comments on how the UK intends to support press freedom in Sudan, which is vital.

It has been noted already that the Ethiopian Prime Minister has tried to mediate; sadly, one result was that some of the opposition politicians he spoke to were then imprisoned. It is important to note that, while the Ethiopian position is that Sudan should move to any civilian Government, many people, including many members of the Sudanese diaspora, would prefer groups that are already in the Forces of Freedom and Change and not Islamist or unheard-of groups. I would be interested to the Minister's thoughts on that and on whether it should be UK foreign policy to support groups from the Forces of Freedom and Change.

The African Union has quite rightly suspended Sudan's membership until a civilian-led transitional authority has been established. We need to place further pressure on the Transitional Military Council to continue the political transition. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud is right to raise the UK's important role as part of the troika, and it is vital that we use our influence there.

We need an internationally led independent investigation into the recent events. We need an investigation into the killings, the rapes and the injuries inflicted on innocent, peaceful protestors. Britain must recognise its historical duty to Sudan and play a key part in enabling that.

I want to make a few remarks about UK aid. My hon. Friend raised the issue of EU moneys finding their way to the RSF, but I will concentrate on DFID moneys. We will provide £65 million of aid in 2018-19 and £50 million in 2019-20, the majority of which will go on humanitarian assistance and development work. However, given the current crisis, has the Minister given any thought to increasing or redirecting UK aid, and will she make aid conditional on achieving a peaceful transition to a civilian Government?

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for North East Fife both talked about the bravery of the UK ambassador, and I support those remarks. He provides people with support, and it is vital that we keep up that vital diplomatic role in Sudan.

Bob Stewart: On bravery, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) raised the issue of the number of casualties among non-governmental organisation workers. My wife was a delegate in South Sudan and was actually taken hostage for three weeks, so I am speaking out of self-interest here. The people who operate for non-governmental organisations in Sudan and South Sudan put their lives at risk all the time, because they are incredibly brave. We should mark that point. I am in awe of some of those I have met.

Liz McInnes: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to comment on the bravery of people who work for our NGOs, including his wife, who I have had the pleasure of meeting. She is an indomitable woman. We had a debate here a while ago on South Sudan, and my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe talked about South Sudan being the most dangerous place in the world for aid workers—in our discussion on Sudan, we must not forget the work that goes on in South Sudan as well. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that timely intervention.

I agree with the chair of the all-party parliamentary group, the hon. Member for North West Norfolk, that we need more action and a strong resolution from the UN. We are grateful to the UN for halting the drawdown of UNAMID. When my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud and I were in Sudan, we visited Darfur and spoke to people involved in UNAMID, the police and the military, who told us their concerns about the drawdown, but this crisis has necessitated the UN's keeping UNAMID as it is. Rather than a policy of no further drawdown, does the Minister think we should engage in talks about increasing UNAMID's presence? I am interested to hear her thoughts on that.

The two final points I want to make are on the involvement of the ICC and the investigation of war crimes, which I think have been mentioned by everybody who has spoken. We absolutely have to hold the TMC to account for what has happened in recent months. There are also the outstanding ICC charges against President Bashir for war crimes and human rights abuses. All these issues need to be investigated, and we in the UK should put pressure on Sudan to ensure that those investigations take place.

Sir Henry Bellingham: For the last, I think, 10 years, General Omar al-Bashir has avoided travel to countries where he might be arrested, having been indicted for war crimes by the ICC. Now is surely the time when he must be taken to The Hague to face those serious charges regarding crimes against humanity.

Liz McInnes: I entirely agree. This situation has been allowed to sit in limbo for far too long. It is a matter of international law that President Bashir should face up to the charges against him.

Bob Stewart: As soon as possible.

Liz McInnes: Yes.

Finally, I want to press the Minister on UK attempts to strike trade deals with Sudan, which I raised with her last week. I would also be grateful if she could comment on our current approach to trade with Sudan. Given the current political crisis, I am really interested to hear her view on potential trading relationships and on whether we will see a change of view from the current Foreign Secretary, given that his predecessor was very keen to hold UK-Sudan trade and investment forum talks in December 2017.

2.25 pm

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): It is an absolute honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, particularly while you are having such a busy and prominent role on national television. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) on securing the debate and on showing the importance of persistence when applying for these things.

What has come through loud and clear, through the participation of so many members of the all-party parliamentary group, is that the British people and the British Parliament have certainly not in any way forgotten this crisis. We will continue to play close attention, both through our diplomatic networks but also as parliamentarians, to the situation in Sudan. We stand with the Sudanese people and their desire to move from 30 years under the military rule of President Bashir to a brighter future under civilian-led government.

It is been an historic year for that transition. If someone had said to me when the shadow Minister and I visited that there would be a popular uprising and that Bashir would be gone at this point, I think we would all have found it very difficult to believe, but it has happened. As a number of Members noted, the situation in Sudan is incredibly fragile. It does not have the strength of the democratic institutions that we have here. Clearly, the talks between the Transitional Military Council and the protestors represented by the Forces of Freedom and Change have been fraught and require a certain amount of external pressure and mediation to make sure that they continue to progress.

The quality of the debate raised a range of important points, which I will try to tackle. A number of them were common points. There was common acknowledgement that we value the strength of the diaspora here in the UK and those people-to-people links. We all send our great respect to our ambassador in Khartoum and his team, who have twice had to draw down to essential staff only and are working under difficult circumstances. I certainly have great pleasure in passing that on from parliamentarians. There was also a request that the UK continue, in all the different international forums in which we participate, to use our diplomatic connections to make sure that we not only keep this at the forefront of international forums but that we try to unite the international messaging around a common position. That is important.

We have been playing that role, whether on Monday, when I was at the EU Foreign Affairs Council or in our ongoing discussions with representatives from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, or with other friends of Sudan. Importantly, we row in behind our friends in the African Union and the initiative shown by the Ethiopian Prime Minister, always remembering how important it is that we send a unified and coherent message at every diplomatic opportunity. That has been more challenging in the context of the United Nations Security Council, where we have been able to get a statement issued, but probably not as strong as the one that we would have wanted to put out on our own. We will also, at next week's United Nations Human Rights Council, be able to lead a discussion; we are giving leadership on that as well. The UK has in a range of ways been trying to ensure that the diplomatic community and the international community are sending a common message, and I can assure colleagues that we will continue to use every single one of those opportunities.

A number of different points were raised by hon. Members. On the important point about returns, we have been in contact with colleagues at the Home Office. I can tell the House that the Government's published statistics for the year up to the end of March 2019 show six returns in total, for non-asylum cases and asylum cases. The Home Office recognises that the human rights situation is very difficult in Sudan. In the first quarter of 2019, three quarters of the people claiming to be Sudanese asylum seekers were granted protection. All asylum claims made by Sudanese nationals in the UK are considered on their individual merits against relevant case law and up-to-date country information.

A number of colleagues raised the important question of overseas development assistance and whether any of that is inadvertently supporting the Government or Transitional Military Council, or finding its way to the Rapid Support Forces. I can assure colleagues that last December I took the decision to suspend some of the work that we were doing, after a full look at some of the economic support work that we were proposing to take forward in terms of the Government. On the EU's work specifically in relation to the regional operations centre in Khartoum, which is funded by EU funds and obviously therefore has a 15% contribution from the UK, I can inform colleagues that as a consequence of recent events, EU-funded work on the regional operations centre is currently suspended. That suspension lasts until the end of this week. There will be a decision tomorrow on a resumption of activities; that will take place after tomorrow's management board, but I cannot see that anyone will argue for a resumption in the current situation. There are often reports that the UK, via the EU, funds the Rapid Support Forces, but I can assure colleagues that that is not the case. The question of misinformation came up, and I think it is always important to be factual on these things.

I think that accountability was mentioned by everyone in the debate—by the hon. Member for Stroud, by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham), by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) in his intervention and by the hon. Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). We would encourage the Sudanese people to retain and preserve evidence to

[*Harriett Baldwin*]

enable future investigations to take place. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is looking to draw on recent experience in other countries—for example, Syria and Myanmar—to see whether it applies in this instance, so I would encourage people to retain evidence for future investigations.

The latest UN reporting on violence in Darfur is the statement made on 17 June by the humanitarian co-ordinator in Sudan. The main points are reports of intercommunal violence in various Darfur states, including recent clashes in Deleij, which left 17 people dead and 100 dwellings destroyed; and calls for the Transitional Military Council to ensure access for humanitarian supplies and timely facilitation of administrative procedures for entry of aid workers into Sudan and internal travel within it. That statement was published. There is also, should people wish to download it, an emergency flash update, dated 12 June, from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. That is helpful information. I want to reassure colleagues that the UK's humanitarian assistance is delivered through organisations such as the World Food Programme and other UN bodies.

A range of colleagues asked about current UNAMID troop numbers. After the technical roll-over, which we hope will be adopted on 27 June, there will be 4,375 troops in UNAMID. That is 325 above the mandated ceiling, as the mission has been unable to undertake some planned team site closures because of the issue with the Rapid Support Forces. It is important for colleagues to understand that although I have set out the UK's position very clearly on a number of occasions, that roll-over has not yet been agreed.

On the question about media freedom and the bravery of journalists—bravery that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is rightly putting at the forefront of next month's conference—I can update colleagues. Since President Bashir's removal on 11 April, the BBC has had access to Khartoum and has been able to broadcast its morning programme from there. BBC Arabic TV and radio are quite widely available via satellite, but since 2010 the BBC has been banned from broadcasting on FM radio. Our ambassador has for some time been lobbying the information Ministry for restored access. I concur with the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton, that there is a long way to go to a free media in Sudan.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Scunthorpe, a clear path is what is needed. This will clearly be a long road; it is not something that can be switched on overnight. Donor countries such as ours, working with like-minded countries, can set out a path, which will have conditions attached in relation to progress. There is huge potential for the Sudanese economy should that transition path be followed and should things evolve. There is enormous potential for us as a member of the international community, working with the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, other like-minded countries, EU development assistance and some of our own bilateral funding, not only to step up the humanitarian assistance—bearing in mind how widespread food insecurity is in Sudan—but to make the long-term inward investments that will be needed for that economy to prosper. Although we are not currently able to move forward on trade deals—clearly, there is no trade deal with the EU because the Cotonou conditions were never met—I think the

sincere hope of everyone here is that the transition to a civilian-led Government will include our being able to engage more deeply at an economic level.

Bob Stewart: I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister is already on this one, but in Sudan and South Sudan, there is quite a lot of religious persecution. I hope that the Foreign Office is keeping an eye on that as well as, of course, racism between tribes. We think racism is just in Europe, but there is a heck of a lot of racism between tribes in Africa. But I am particularly concerned about Christians; there is quite a lot of persecution of Christians, still, in Sudan and in South Sudan.

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. and gallant Friend is right to raise that matter. He will be aware that the Foreign Secretary has put freedom of religion and belief at the heart of our work, which is led by the Bishop of Truro, who has visited recently, as has Lord Ahmad, who leads the ministerial team on this work. My hon. and gallant Friend is absolutely right that we benefit from a tolerant, multi-faith and multi-ethnic society in the UK, and we encourage other countries to move forward on that agenda.

The shadow Minister asked some sensible questions on internet access. There has been an 80% drop in connectivity—it has not been completely obliterated. There is some food for thought there about what we can do through the International Telecommunication Union. I will take that away and see whether we can do something internationally on that.

In conclusion, the political situation in Sudan is very difficult. We know it is extremely fragile. The transition from authoritarian rule to a civilian-led Government will be difficult. The UK will row in behind the legitimate demands of the Sudanese people for a better future for Sudan. Ensuring a swift, orderly and peaceful transition to civilian-led Government is an important priority. The UK will continue, as part of the troika, to work with our international partners, including the African Union-led initiatives and our friends in the European Union. We will use our seat at the United Nations Security Council and the UN Human Rights Council, and work with regional allies, to continue to further those objectives.

2.41 pm

Dr Drew: Although we have not had great numbers, we have had a very thoughtful and comprehensive debate on Sudan. No doubt, we will have to revisit this matter. In conclusion, the role of the Americans cannot be underestimated. When we were there, we were always told that the Americans sent their heavy battalions to talk to the Sudanese when President Bashir was out of the country. Now that Bashir is no longer the key player, it is important that we directly address the new special envoy, Donald Booth, as well as Tibor Nagy, the US Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs.

Harriett Baldwin: Donald Booth is in town today, and I met with him earlier.

Dr Drew: That is good news from the horse's mouth. It is important that we understand that the Americans may not have played the role of removing Bashir, but the impacts of the sanctions—remember that the country is still seen as a potential threat for terrorism—have

brought the country to where it is. We need to lift the country to ensure that we, with the Americans and Norwegians, can bring some sort of ceasefire to the streets, and then we can move forward to a proper peace settlement.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the political situation in Sudan.

2.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Secondary Education: Raising Aspiration

[MR VIRENDRA SHARMA *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered raising aspiration in secondary education.

I am grateful to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. I am not sure whether anything else is happening in the House today that means that Members might be otherwise engaged, but I am very pleased to have the opportunity to have this debate and to ask the Minister some questions about how the Government are addressing the issue of aspiration.

Aspiration is important to me. In my maiden speech on 24 June 2010, I told the House about a constituent whose only aspiration in life was for her child to receive the tenancy of her socially rented property. On the other side of my constituency, parents told me about their children—about how they were going to go to university, how they would certainly buy their own home in the local area and how they hoped to get married as well. That really illustrated to me the disparity in aspiration between different parts of my constituency and, I believe, across the country as a whole. I repeat today what I said in my maiden speech nine years ago: we live in one of the most prosperous cities in the western world, but there remain yawning chasms between the aspirations of some of the people I and other MPs represent and the aspirations of others. However, for some people, including Members of this place, aspiration is not that important—I will not take the number of Members here as a reflection of that, although I have to say to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), that I will take any interventions at any time he wishes to intervene on me.

The reason aspiration is not important to everyone is that some people are of the view that people are either born with a spirit of aspiration or have had it bought on their behalf. That view fosters an assumption that some people are born into this world with a natural capacity to lead, while everybody else does not have that capacity, and that nothing can therefore be done to change the situation.

I certainly do not agree with that view, but we have only to consider our recent record on Prime Ministers to see the strength of it. Only three of the last 11 British Prime Ministers have attended state secondary schools. In total, 28 Prime Ministers have been educated at Oxford University and 14 at Cambridge, and nine Prime Ministers were educated at Eton and Christ Church. John Major was the last Prime Minister not to have attended a university; overall, only nine British Prime Ministers did not graduate from university after leaving secondary education. I present those figures not as an attack on private education—I believe strongly in private education and anyone's right to attend a private institution—but as an illustration that aspiration is imbued in some people.

People may know that tonight there is the premiere of Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje's biographical film "Farming". It tells the story of how Adewale, who is Nigerian, was "farmed out" as a boy by his parents to a white British

[*Dr Matthew Offord*]

family in Dagenham, in the hope that he would have a better future than he might otherwise have had. When I heard that this morning on the radio, it illustrated to me that aspiration is affected by not only class and financial attainment but racial and nationality backgrounds.

However, I would go further. When I conducted my PhD research, I attempted to discover whether UK legislation was implemented consistently across different rural areas and, if not, how that affected social exclusion and particularly tackling the problem. The first criterion was objective, as the law is the law, but the issue of social exclusion is subjective in the eyes of decision makers. On many occasions, I was told things such as, “We don’t do things like that here”, “That is not something that would be part of our local economy” and “Access to higher education, certain public services, housing or financial attainment is difficult to achieve in places like this.”

Those views are borne out by the Department for Education’s own research. In its report “School and College-level Strategies to Raise Aspirations of High-achieving Disadvantaged Pupils to Pursue Higher Education”, which was published more than five years ago in January 2014, the DFE said:

“Prioritisation of aspiration-raising varies by geographical location, with London schools making this a particular priority... the difference appears to relate to the relatively high proportion of disadvantaged students in London schools and colleges as well as their close proximity to a large number of HEIs”—

higher education institutions—

“including selective or leading universities”.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am listening with great interest to what the hon. Gentleman is saying; he has spoken previously in the House on these issues and commanded my attention. Does he believe, as I do, that London is, of course, a great place, but it also has many cold spots as well as hot ones, and that is also true of coastal and rural areas and schools? As a Blackpool MP, one of the problems I have found over the years is that the overall statistics for a constituency might look great, but the cold spots, which are often difficult to address in policy terms, are also substantial.

Dr Offord: I certainly agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I will take this opportunity to say that my PhD—I am sure he has not read it—was about rural areas and coastal communities, which are very similar in terms of their ability not only to attract inward investment but to provide the kind of public services that many people want. I know well not only the coastline of his own constituency, but that further up the coast, around Cumbria, where I have also lived. There are some coastal communities in that part of the world—I look towards my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Trudy Harrison) as I say this—in places such as Flimby, where it is difficult to obtain access to not only employment but higher and indeed secondary education; in those kinds of places, gaining access is not as easy as it is in parts of London. I attribute that to issues such as the difficulty of attending schools or further education colleges because of their geographical location.

When I was preparing for this debate, George and Hilary in my office asked me what I meant by “aspiration”, and it is important that I set out what I mean. By

“aspiration” I mean what a child or young person hopes to achieve for themselves in the future. In my mind, that is very different from educational attainment, although for people to achieve their aspirations—in particular, for young people to achieve their aspirations for careers and education and their financial aspirations—they need good educational outcomes. Consequently, I believe that raising aspiration incentivises improved educational attainment.

In an attempt to focus on what I would like the Government to direct their attention towards, I have identified three categories of interventions that I believe foster aspiration: first, interventions that focus on children’s parents and families; secondly, interventions that focus on teaching practice; and, thirdly, out-of-school interventions or extracurricular activities, sometimes involving peers or mentors. The approaches used in these interventions are particularly diverse. Some aim to change aspirations directly by exposing children to new opportunities, while others aim to raise aspirations by developing children’s general self-esteem, motivation or self-efficacy.

I spoke in a recent education funding debate about Copthall School in my constituency, which is for girls. Around 80% of the pupils speak English as a second language, and around half are entitled to free school meals or the pupil premium. The staff and governors are making a great effort to promote aspiration among their pupils, and I am enormously encouraged by what they are achieving. One initiative they are very pleased to promote is the Gatsby career benchmarks, which they describe as

“aspirational and absolutely necessary as a vehicle for social justice.”

It is worth commenting on that programme, as it achieves three vital outcomes: first, it raises aspirations among young people and promotes access to all career paths, not just academic ones; secondly, it enables the development of the skills and the outlook that pupils need to achieve career wellbeing, including adaptability and resilience; and, finally, it underpins the Department for Education’s own guidance to schools on meeting their statutory responsibility to offer career guidance.

As I was writing this speech yesterday, I received a letter from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton), about the Gatsby programme. In concluding, she requested feedback from colleagues about any conversations they might have with schools in their constituencies in the coming weeks. However, I can give some feedback right now to the Minister here today. I have been advised by Copthall School:

“As you will see from the list at the end of this email, at Copthall we are doing a lot to meet the eight Gatsby benchmarks. However, it is a challenge to meet them all, particularly at a time when school funding is in crisis. Most schools have insufficient funding to fully implement the Gatsby benchmarks.”

Yesterday, the Minister and I had a discussion in the corridor, and he said he looked forward to this debate to hear more about my education history, following some of my revelations in previous debates. However, I have to disappoint him: I do not consider this as a confessional chamber, but as somewhere where I represent my constituents, so on this occasion I will not reveal more. My experience at school certainly had a dramatic impact on my views on aspiration and education, but it

would be unfair of me to criticise my school, and particularly the teachers, 30 years after I left, because most people have moved on from their posts, and life was a great deal different then. It would also be wrong of me to comment on the life achievements of others—my peers—who are completely content with their personal history, although I am keen that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.

One mistake that existed in the past and that continues to exist today is the tendency to separate academic and technical education routes into two simplistic alternatives. The problem is that that does not reflect the learner's journey, which often moves between academic and technical routes at different times in their life. Permeability and flexibility between types of learning in our education system are vital if we are to enable learners to fulfil their potential and progress through both A and T-levels to higher level learning, and to achieve the goals in the Government's industrial strategy of increasing social mobility and productivity.

As T-levels are introduced, it will be important to avoid sweeping away other qualifications, such as BTECs, which provide important and established progression routes into higher education, in the interests of creating a tidy qualification landscape. More than 100,000 students a year progress with a BTEC on its own or in combination with A-levels. UCAS data shows that, for the 2017 application cycle, only 61% of 18-year-olds held only A-level qualifications, with 11% of remaining applicants holding BTECs only, and 8% a combination of BTECs and A-levels. As a higher proportion of students opting for BTECs come from disadvantaged backgrounds, those qualifications play a critical role in supporting social mobility, providing a pathway for disadvantaged students to progress through to higher-level learning, either on an academic programme or on a higher or degree apprenticeship.

Our most disadvantaged children are often those in care and in need, something that the Secretary of State has also written to me about. Many have little aspiration and currently fall unacceptably far behind in attainment. Last year, the equivalent of one in 10 children needed a social worker at some point. The attainment of children who require such help is greater than that of those who come from a low-income background. What hope do we give to those children? We must raise their aspiration so they expect more of themselves and believe they can succeed, and we must support schools to support children themselves.

Last year, the number of looked-after children in England reached 75,420, an increase of 4% on the previous year, and it has been increasing since 2008, when the total was 60,000. Young people in care are six times more likely to be excluded from school and more likely to be unemployed after leaving school, and 45% of them suffer from mental ill health. They are clearly being failed.

When I was deputy leader of Barnet Council, I introduced a scheme whereby the council would effectively act as a family business. If we have a family business, we often employ our own children or relatives. My initiative allowed the looked-after children, who we were corporate parents to, to have a place in a family firm. I was very pleased that one individual not only took the opportunity to involve himself in marketing, but went on to university and provided a career for himself. Others fell by the wayside. It was not a scheme where everyone had an

automatic right to a place, but there was an opportunity for them to aspire to achieve something through the services available through the local council. I was keen on the scheme because, as a child, I had a friend who lived in a children's home, and I always understood that the opportunities available to him and other people in the care home were not the same as those available to someone like me, who lived in a loving family environment. I would like the Government to promote such initiatives. Indeed, local authorities could take the initiative to promote themselves within their communities.

To return to A-levels, high-quality careers information, advice and guidance for students and parents is essential to ensure successful implementation in the coming years. Clear signposting is needed within the curriculum to create awareness of the T-level option and ensure that young people avoid shutting down options—for example, by choosing academic subjects that will not feed into T-level study. That is particularly important, as the choices made about post-16 study will narrow further study and career options. Students at this age are still forming their identities and expectations of life, so it is vital that early information is provided.

Universities have direct experience of recruiting students from a diverse range of qualification backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education. It will be important to engage with higher education admissions professionals on T-levels to ensure that universities develop an understanding of T-levels and are able to communicate entry requirements to prospective students and level 3 providers. It will also be important to assist universities in meeting the specific needs of students progressing from those qualifications into higher education. Information around access to higher education from T-levels should also be communicated to students further down the line when they are making choices about level 3 study in schools and considering pathways and routes from T-levels.

The promotion of aspiration should occur not only in the secondary school sector. Middlesex University is located in my constituency. It has demonstrated to me on numerous occasions its considerable experience and expertise in raising aspiration and boosting social mobility. Some 52% of its current students are eligible for free school meals; 85% of the cohort falls into one of the five widening participation categories; and 50% of students are the first in their families to go to university. There seems to be a link between the university's promotion of aspiration and its student numbers, as can be seen in its innovative Make your Mark initiative.

In 2018-19, Middlesex University engaged 6,986 school and college students and 286 parents through its outreach activity in 86 workshops in local schools. The outreach work helps young people to understand the opportunities available to them. The Make Your Mark initiative provides guidance for young people on what is likely to be the best pathway for them, including vocational routes such as apprenticeships, through an interactive web microsite. The university has produced a guide and website for 11 to 16-year-olds, featuring blogs, quizzes, insight into what university life and study are all about, and tips on exam success and money matters.

Universities, given the access that they have to schools, have more potential to be the one-stop shops for careers information and guidance at every level. There is also scope for employers, FE and HE to collaborate more effectively in providing high-quality careers information

[Dr Offord]

and guidance in schools, centred around the key themes in the Government's industrial strategy. The careers and qualifications landscape is becoming increasingly complex, and school careers teams struggle to provide guidance where it is needed most.

Instilling a sense of aspiration in young people would set their lives on a trajectory for success, so I would like the Government to take certain actions. A sense of aspiration would create an inclination for learning that continues after formal education and would create a foundation that can be built on in future years to achieve what, for some people, would be incredible results.

I want the Government to engage with the aspiration agenda; the last time it was considered was five years ago in the report that I mentioned. In that time, life has certainly moved on. I want the agenda to expand beyond education attainment and higher education and to promote not only lifelong learning, but other aspects of vocational qualifications. I want more action to address imbalances in connections and opportunities between deprived pupils from comprehensive schools and those from private and grammar schools with more affluent governing bodies. And, as I said, I want lifelong learning promoted.

Finally, I ask the Minister to recognise that not all parts of the United Kingdom are the same. There are places in my constituency where there is still a yawning chasm in aspiration, and they are not the same as other parts of the country, as the hon. Member for Blackpool South mentioned.

In conclusion, the Government can do a lot more to work in collaboration with not only schools and universities but local government, which is in a unique place to be able to deliver an agenda that has been included in the industrial strategy.

3.19 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on securing this afternoon's debate. We have quality, not quantity, today; quality was certainly there in great profusion in his speech. He placed a very thoughtful focus on the disparity of aspiration and the issues of achievement. He usefully identified the three key areas, which we could all riff off—the focus on parents and families, on teachers and on extracurricular activity. He reminded us that this subject has been a passion of his and was included in his maiden speech some nine years ago.

I listened with great attention to what the hon. Gentleman said. In this House there is a small group of people who are very dedicated on this subject, but we do not always address in an integrated way the issues of those smaller groups of people, such as looked-after children or young care leavers. There are about 1,000 identified young care leavers in Blackpool. I was interested to hear of the hon. Gentleman's Barnet initiative—I was going to say the Barnett formula—and he may remember from a previous debate that for a small portion of my life as a student, I resided in his constituency, so I know the differentials of which he speaks.

I was particularly interested in the hon. Gentleman's comments on the Copthall School. The Gatsby benchmarks are great, but they demand a very intensive approach.

We have to be careful that for groups such as the Copthall School they do not end up as the equivalent of the freedom to dine at the Ritz. That is an important issue, which politicians of all parties need to address.

I agree with what the hon. Gentleman said on the flexibility to move between the academic, the technical and the vocational. Those words get bandied about too often in this place as if they were in silos, which then achieves that result. Flexibility has always been vital and it is even more vital now, given the speed at which subjects, their teaching and careers will mutate over the next few years. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), the former Skills Minister—I am proud to call him my friend, although he is on the other side—along with my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), is addressing that point as we speak, taking forward a skills commission that will look at some of those areas. What the hon. Member for Hendon said on that subject was absolutely spot on.

I was glad to hear the hon. Gentleman's comments on BTECs. We agree with him. A consultation is out, and the Minister might wish to tell us today when he expects to be able to respond to that consultation. The Minister knows that there has been a very broad chorus of concern about the possibility of BTECs and other qualifications being swept away before T-levels have been able to prove their worth in practice.

Finally, the hon. Member for Hendon mentioned the importance of the university contribution, and I shall mention a couple of universities as I go along. He mentioned Middlesex University, which I am familiar with. I am pleased to say that I shared a platform with the current vice-chancellor, Tim Blackman, only a few weeks ago at an event at the Bridge Group, and I am absolutely delighted that, the Open University's 50th anniversary year, Tim is to become its new vice-chancellor. All those are good and positive things.

I believe that aspiration and austerity are incongruous bedfellows. If a Government of any description decide to implement an austerity programme over a long time, as this one and their predecessors have done, there is a danger of that aspiration diminishing. In our view, the Government's decision to go down that road was not an inevitability—certainly not for the long period of time that it has continued. I shall not go over the arguments about whether they inherited a growing economy in 2010—we believe that they did, on the base of 2008—but whatever the case, it is concerning that the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights recently said that the Government's policies of austerity have continued unabated, and that a third of children are now in poverty. Austerity is always a political and ideological choice in some sense or other, and that has been clear in the education system.

I am sad to say that we have seen about 1,000 Sure Start programmes cut from the early years; I genuinely mean that, because Sure Start was one of the great achievements of the Labour Government of 1997 to 2010. Children's services, schools and further and higher education have also seen considerable cuts since the Conservative Party came to power in 2010. The Minister and his colleagues in the Department, in their heart of hearts—I know he has one—know that this is not acceptable. After all, the Secretary of State only recently said that he had heard the concerns about funding loud

and clear, and last year it was reported that he was trying to squeeze more money out of the Treasury. However, the Government took £3.5 billion out of the capital spend at the last Budget, and so far the Treasury—although we await a spending review, of course—has only offered schools £400 million, in October 2018. That is thin gruel indeed.

To summarise, those cuts, along with the impact of the public sector pay freeze and then the cap, have created a serious problem in teacher recruitment and retention. The hon. Member for Hendon referred to the importance of teachers. There have been inevitable consequences. The Government have missed the teacher recruitment and retention target for five years, and in the past two years, more teachers have left the profession than have joined it. The hon. Gentleman referred to that in the House, when he said:

“Under this Government, the number of teachers has not kept pace with increasing pupil numbers.”—[*Official Report*, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 482.]

I have a question for the Minister: how can we expect schoolchildren to aspire in the way that the hon. Gentleman talked about when there are not enough teachers to encourage them?

On top of that, we have the Government’s commitment to T-levels. The hon. Gentleman talked about their importance, and I agree with him. We share the long-standing concerns of Lord Sainsbury and support the recommendations of the skills plan that was drawn up and presented to the Government, which the Government approved; my friend, the principal of Blackpool and The Fylde College, Bev Robinson, had a considerable part in that plan. Despite all those things, schools and colleges are still unable to deliver at a secondary level the high-quality education that people deserve, because they simply do not have the funding to make ends meet.

The aim, of course, is to expand and attract the coverage of vocational education schools to the secondary sector, and it is a laudable one, but the question is the same. The Government have talked about the subjects and standards that they want to roll out for T-levels, but as to who will actually teach them, there has barely been a peep. Maybe there will be a peep today—I do not know. Are they going to be existing secondary school teachers? Are they FE college lecturers, or associates, or other people entirely? If the Government are serious about T-levels being an ecosystem and not another shiny brand that goes the way of other initiatives, they really must focus on them and not simply spend a quarter of a million pounds on a T-level logo.

Those are important issues. Aspiration, of course, can be hugely developed by teachers, but there is so much more that we can do to unlock the innate inquisitiveness, interest and ambition of young people as they enter secondary education. That transition from primary to secondary, as they approach puberty, in schools where they may have left their primary school friends behind, is often very challenging, not least for young people with special educational needs and disabilities, as the hon. Member for Hendon said. That is why the Sutton Trust and others have said over the years that we need earlier interventions and encounters to play a vital role in improving that aspiration. As I said, I recently argued at the Bridge Group and at this year’s Annual Apprenticeship Conference that it is as relevant to achieving wider social mobility in the vocational and technical sphere as it is in the academic.

I believe we should be looking at sustained and dedicated programmes with schools, for children at a much earlier age, and for particular social and ethnic groupings. I believe that approach is likely to yield much better results than many of the current interventions, late in secondary school, where universities will spend tens of millions of pounds but sometimes, arguably, only strengthen offers and representations from some young people who are likely to have gone to there in substantial numbers anyway.

Earlier this week, in the House of Lords, I was privileged to be present at the launch of a new initiative by the National Education Opportunities Network. Graeme Atherton, who founded NEON in 2012 and has directed it since then, was launching its initiative to improve access for white students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Some 10 new HE provider initiatives are being brought together to better support that group, which is one of the least able and likely, from a secondary background, to attend higher education. It is about raising horizons and expectations, not about fixing pupils’ future career patterns at the age of 10. However, I believe the Government urgently need to look at how that integrates with their careers advice strategy—focusing on what happens in individual areas and the way in which Labour, as a party in government, would make more sense of the fractured and fragmented system of information, advice and guidance that we currently have at secondary level, which we believe is an important consideration. I and my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner)—our shadow Education Secretary—were at a roundtable with stakeholders only this week, discussing how that work might go forward. The Office for Students also has an important role in this area, and I am pleased that it is encouraging collaborative outreach programmes such as those that I have described.

We have been saying for some time that, in a secondary system in which students in schools, FE and sixth-form colleges gain their all-important A-levels or other qualifications at around the age of 18, there must be a robust, independent and wide-ranging review of admissions processes to higher education. That review should focus on a range of things, but particularly the unconditional offers to students of that age that have exploded in recent times, which some have said put those from disadvantaged backgrounds at a key handicap. That is why we believe there is a case for post-qualification admissions, and we were interested to see that the Government have recently asked the OfS to conduct such an inquiry.

The latest OECD international survey on teaching and learning does not, for us in England, make for great reading. England has the world’s eighth-biggest problem with secondary school teacher shortages and the third-highest level of shortages in Europe. For a long time, our party has called for a laser-like focus on the problem of teacher workload; across the continent, secondary school teachers work 37.5 hours a week on average, but in England, that figure is about 47 hours. The question is how much of that is actual teaching, as opposed to paper or virtual bureaucracy. In an environment that leaves many feeling like the proverbial mouse on the treadmill, how are those teachers going to communicate ambition? The digital world and the fourth industrial revolution are all moving ahead at an

[Gordon Marsden]

incandescent pace, and teachers are an absolutely vital element in taking that forward, whether in colleges or schools.

We have 600,000 young people in the category of NEETs—those not in education, employment or training. The Government tell us that that is a stable figure, but it should not be stable; we should be moving on, and I do not see where the Government are taking that issue at the moment. Perhaps the Minister would like to enlighten us.

The Timpson review, which the Government have received, points out that excluded pupils are more likely to already be disadvantaged by class, income, special educational needs or disabilities, with certain ethnic minority groups at a higher risk. Those are the students most in need of support. “Newsnight” recently uncovered more than 1,500 children with SENs or disabilities who are without a school place in England, which only emphasises the problems that Edward Timpson—a respected former Conservative MP and Education Minister—sought to address. The issue of off-rolling needs to be a priority.

The situation, as I say, puts aspiration at serious risk. Right hon. and hon. Members may be familiar with the House of Lords report on the future of seaside towns and cities by my noble Friend the Lord Bassam. That report found that significantly fewer young people from seaside towns and coastal communities can access higher education than those in other parts of England, and that since 2010, there has been a 27% decline in the number of those young people accessing HE. That is another important issue; the Government have identified opportunity access areas, one of which has been Blackpool, but those need to be dealt with more expansively and progressively. The Government’s disappointingly tepid response to the excellent Lords commission illustrates the urgent need to plug this in as a priority for social mobility and economic progress. Many seaside towns suffer from low educational attainment, and local economies then suffer due to skills shortages. These are obviously areas where educational aspiration needs to rank high, and I hope the Minister will consider his Department’s response to that report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) has spoken in the House about last year’s BBC report that found that malnourished pupils in poorer areas were filling their pockets with food from school canteens due to poverty. My colleague and hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the shadow public health Minister, has also raised the issue of food at school, school meals, and the gaps through which pupils will fall. As any teacher will tell us, they cannot teach children properly if those children are starving, let alone encourage aspiration.

The hon. Member for Hendon talked about lifelong learning; we agree with him entirely. Of course, people can have second and third chances if they have failures at secondary level, but the whole process needs to reflect that. That is one of the things that we are trying to do through the Lifelong Learning Commission that we have set up, which is looking at these issues. The hon. Gentleman, however, has given us a great deal of food for thought—the Minister especially, I hope. We await his response.

3.36 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma; I think it is the first time I have done so. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) on having secured this debate, and on the interesting and persuasive way in which he introduced it.

Since 2010, the Government have worked hard to drive up academic standards. Our mission has been to ensure that every state school is a good school, teaching a rigorous and balanced curriculum and offering pupils world-class qualifications. Only by having high standards across the board can we enable secondary schools to raise and meet young people’s aspirations. In schools, we are transforming careers education—something dear to my hon. Friend’s heart—to harness young people’s aspirations. Our 2017 careers strategy committed investment, support and resources to help schools make visible and lasting improvements, and since 2010 we have seen an increase in the proportion of pupils receiving a good-quality education. As of December 2018, 1.9 million more children were in good or outstanding schools compared with 2010. Some 85% of children are in good schools, compared with only 66% in 2010, which is partly due to our reforms.

As with implementing any effective change, there is no single silver bullet that will bring about a significant and sustainable improvement in standards. We are under no illusions: there is still much more to be done. However, since 2010, the Government have made radical reforms with a focus on improving school standards. As part of our aspiration to provide children with a world-class education, we reformed the national curriculum, restoring knowledge to its heart and raising expectations of what children should be taught. That is now being delivered by all maintained schools, and sets an ambitious benchmark for academies that we expect them to at least match.

Too many pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were being entered for low-quality qualifications. We therefore reformed GCSEs to put them on a par with qualifications in the best-performing jurisdictions in the world. The result is a suite of new GCSEs that rigorously assess the knowledge and skills acquired by pupils during key stage 4, and are in line with expected standards in countries with high-performing education systems. A-levels have also been reformed to improve students’ readiness for the demands of higher education.

We introduced the English baccalaureate school performance measure, consisting of English, maths, at least two sciences, history or geography, and a language. Those subjects form part of a compulsory curriculum in many of the highest performing countries internationally, at least up to the age of 15 or 16. The percentage of pupils in state-funded schools taking the EBacc has risen from 22% in 2010 to 38% in 2018. My hon. Friend mentioned Cophthall School, and I pay tribute to the headteacher and staff of that school, which has high rates of pupil progress. It is well above average at 0.76 for Progress 8. That does not mean much to many people, but that is a high level of progress. The EBacc entry rate is 50%, which is significantly higher than the national entry rate of 38%. The Government’s ambition is for that entry rate to rise to 75% by 2022 and to 90% by 2025. I do not underestimate the challenge that presents, and I will go on to say what we are doing to

support schools to achieve that aim. It is right that we aim to provide the best possible education and therefore more opportunities for young people.

Getting the fundamentals right at an early age is vital for a pupil's success at secondary school and in later life. Children who are reading well by the age of five are six times more likely than their peers to be on track by age 11 in reading and, counterintuitively, 11 times more likely to be on track in mathematics. Ensuring that all pupils in England's schools are taught to read effectively has been central to our reforms, and we are now beginning to see the fruits of that work. By the end of year 1, most children should be able to decode simple words using phonics and, once they can do that, they can focus on their wider reading skills and develop a love and habit of reading. In England, phonics performance has significantly improved since we introduced the phonics screening check in 2012. At that time, just 58% of six-year-olds correctly read at least 32 out of the 40 words in the check. In 2018, that figure was 82%.

We can see how that work is having an impact. In 2016, England achieved its highest ever score in the reading ability of nine-year-olds, moving from joint 10th to joint 8th in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study rankings. That follows our greater focus on reading in the primary curriculum and a particular focus on phonics. Continuing improvement in reading ability should mean that more children arrive in secondary school able to access the curriculum and with a higher level of literacy than their predecessors.

Maths, science and computing are also fundamental to raising aspirations. We have funded 35 maths hubs to spread evidence-based approaches to maths teaching through the teaching for mastery programme. An investment of £76 million will expand the programme to reach 11,000 primary and secondary schools by 2023. To encourage more pupils to consider level 3 mathematics qualifications and to continue the rise we have seen in A-level entries over the past eight years, we have launched the advanced mathematics support programme, giving schools an extra £600 a year for each additional pupil taking maths or further maths A-level or any level 3 mathematics qualification.

For the good of our economy, we need more young people to pursue degrees and careers in the sciences, including computer science. We have already seen excellent progress, with entries to STEM A-levels increasing by 23% since 2010. We have also launched a four-year computing programme supported by £84 million of funding. That includes a national centre for computing education, at least 40 hubs providing training to schools and a continuing professional development programme to train up to 8,000 secondary teachers without a post-A level qualification in computing.

My hon. Friend talked a lot about careers advice. He is right that if young people are to raise their aspirations and capitalise on the opportunities available to them, they need good careers guidance. In December 2017, the Government published our careers strategy, setting out proposals to improve the quality and coverage of careers advice in schools and to give more aspirational careers advice for young people. The strategy identifies how the worlds of work and education can come together to support young people, using the Gatsby benchmarks, to which he referred. They are based on rigorous national and international research and are the gold standard for

careers provision in England. As part of meeting the Gatsby benchmarks, schools should make sure that students understand the full range of education and training opportunities available to them. Exposure to further and higher education and apprenticeships helps to raise aspiration and allows young people to make the right choices for them.

Information on education or training options provided by schools at key transition points too often fails to correct, or even reinforces, the impression that technical and professional education and apprenticeships are second best to academic study. My hon. Friend is concerned about that, and we share that concern. A new law, introduced in January 2018—commonly known as the Baker clause—requires all secondary schools and academies to open their doors to university technical colleges, FE colleges and apprenticeship providers. That will give all young people a better understanding of the qualifications, courses and subjects available at key transition points.

Gordon Marsden: The Minister knows that we strongly welcome the Baker clause. There are anecdotal accounts about how successful or otherwise it has been so far. Does the Department have any statistics on how the Baker reforms have impacted on that area as of yet?

Nick Gibb: I do not have those figures to hand, so I will write to the hon. Gentleman when and if we have those statistics. We are as concerned about the issue as he is.

We expect to see schools setting up careers events, assemblies and options evenings so that providers can talk to pupils about what they offer and what it is like to learn in a different environment. The evidence is clear that sustained and varied contacts with mentors, coaches, employer networks, FE colleges, universities, alumni or other high-achieving individuals can motivate pupils to think beyond their immediate experiences, encouraging them to consider a broader and more ambitious range of future education and career options.

Activities involving employers, such as careers insights, mentoring, work tasters and work experience are important in giving young people the skills they need to succeed. Such interactions help open young people's eyes to choices and opportunities, raise aspirations and prepare them for the world of work. As such, we want to create quality interactions between schools and businesses. The careers statutory guidance makes it clear that schools should offer work placements, work experience and other employer-based activities as part of their careers strategies for pupils in year 8 to year 13. Secondary schools will be expected to provide pupils with at least one meaningful interaction with employers per pupil per year, with a particular focus on STEM employers.

With an expanded role, the Careers & Enterprise Company, which was established in 2014, works to link schools with employers, making sure that every young person has access to inspiring encounters with the world of work, including work experience and other employer-based activities. It does that through its enterprise adviser network, which is delivered in partnership with local enterprise partnerships, providing information tailored to local skills and the local labour market. The network operates in all 38 local enterprise partnership areas and has grown rapidly. More than 2,000 business volunteers have been mobilised to work with schools and colleges

[Nick Gibb]

on their careers strategies through the enterprise adviser network, and participants have reported a 50% increase in employer encounters for pupils. That partially answers the question raised by the hon. Gentleman, but we will come back to him with a fuller answer.

Through its work, the Careers & Enterprise Company has identified and is targeting those areas where additional provision is most needed. It is funding work during 2019-20 to test new approaches and produce resources to improve careers information, advice and guidance for individuals who are disadvantaged, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, looked-after children and those from minority ethnic groups.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon referred in particular to children in care. Last Monday, we published our children in need review. He also referred to the post-16 qualification review and expressed his view about BTECs. That consultation opened on 19 March 2019 and closed on 10 June 2019. We will respond in due course, and the views that he has expressed today will be taken into account as part of that review process.

Since 2010, the Government have introduced a range of reforms with the sole focus of raising standards. I have set out those standards in relation to secondary education and highlighted how those reforms have been complemented by a range of targeted programmes to support and develop teachers' practice and to provide timely and effective careers advice for students.

3.49 pm

Dr Offord: We have certainly had a good opportunity to discuss the issue. Given the nature of today's debate, I did not want to intervene on either the Opposition or Government Front Bench. However, I will raise a few issues.

The Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), mentioned young carers, which is a very important aspect that is often overlooked. They are a hidden problem within the education system, and it is not always possible for teachers or other school staff to be aware of the requirements being levied on young pupils through disability and other social problems experienced by their parents. We certainly need to take their responsibilities at home into account, particularly with regard to their attainment and aspirational opportunities.

The hon. Gentleman spoke particularly about teachers. However, I discussed the influence of not only the teaching establishment but external education providers, such as the Duke of Edinburgh scheme. It is not just about the number and remuneration of teachers. I disagree profoundly with the Labour party's recent policy of opposing SATs, and their commitment to abolish them. That would be a retrograde step. Parents need the opportunity to gauge a school's progress and understand how their children's education is being advanced.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the 600,000 NEETs, which he said has been a stubborn figure that has not moved. That is certainly another area that I would like to look at, and I encourage the Government to do

likewise. The Local Government Association should take the lead when it comes to both NEETs and young carers. The Local Government Act 2000 allows local authorities to do anything within their social, environmental and wellbeing powers to address problems in their local areas. It is a particular problem, not only in rural areas but in coastal constituencies, and local authorities are best able to address it.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned a 27% decline in access to higher education among coastal communities. We should be careful with statistics—I certainly have been very careful with the ones that I have used today—because it could simply be that those people have gone into forms of education and training other than higher education. Indeed, they may even have gone into employment of their own accord, such as self-employment.

To address some of the Minister's comments, I have become a great fan of the EBacc system. Making choices about A-levels at a younger age—often 15 or even younger—is not always the best option. When I visited Middlesex University I was told that when pupils are asked whether they want to be a doctor or surgeon most of them say, "No way! Why would I want to do that?" However, when they are asked questions such as whether they want to work with people, they are more likely to say that they would. That can be extended to considering other opportunities. Whether somebody ultimately engages in medicine and becomes a surgeon or looks at other areas, offering an occupation rather than an opportunity at a young age is the wrong approach.

The Minister and I have previously discussed reading, which he is as passionate about as I am. I know that he reads every day before he goes to sleep, and I read every day, on the tube and whenever I can. I am very encouraged by the statistics that he mentioned about reading ability. For me, reading has become a lifelong passion. It is my mother teaching me to read, as well as my education, that has led to lifelong learning. That has all come from reading, so it can only be good.

Finally, the Minister mentioned the Baker clause, which is very welcome, and the 23% increase in the number of STEM subjects at A-level. I have certainly seen that in schools in my constituency, including Copthall School for girls, which I have now mentioned on two occasions in this place.

Action has been taken by the Government and progress has been made, but raising aspiration cannot be achieved simply by Government. I mentioned the Local Government Association, and the Opposition spokesman mentioned teachers. Parents and relatives also have a responsibility to ensure aspiration in their children by providing guidance and encouragement along their pathway through life. Through a collaboration of all those different influences, we can achieve higher rates of aspiration, and make our country an even better place than it is today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered raising aspiration in secondary education.

3.55 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 20 June 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Small Businesses: Late Payments

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): On 4 October 2018, we launched a call for evidence, asking for views on how to create a responsible payment culture for small business. I have published the full Government response to that call for evidence and placed copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

The Government are committed to supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to start well and grow, including a network of 38 growth hubs across England providing advice, guidance and support. As part of our industrial strategy we have an action plan to unlock over £20 billion of investment in innovative and high potential businesses. And where we see practices that unfairly constrain SMEs' finance choices, we are prepared to act. For example, we recently removed a barrier that was preventing some SMEs from using invoice finance because of prohibitive contract terms imposed by their customers. This new measure is expected to provide a long-term boost to the UK economy worth almost £1 billion.

While there are a number of measures already in place to tackle late payment, from the prompt payment code, the ability to charge interest on late payments and increased transparency through the payment practices reporting duty, the call for evidence told us that there is more to do to improve the payment landscape. This is why I have announced that I will now take further and firmer action to tackle the scourge of late payments, while maintaining a holistic approach to culture change by using all of the avenues available to us in this space.

I will shortly be launching a consultation seeking views on strengthening the small business commissioner's (hereafter "the commissioner") ability to assist and advocate for small business in the area of late payments, through the provision of powers to compel the disclosure of information and seeking views on suitable sanctions for failure to comply.

I have also announced that the responsibility of the voluntary prompt payment code is to move to the commissioner and be reformed: this will unify prompt payment measures with the commissioner and address weaknesses within the current code's operation.

I will take a tough compliance approach to large companies who do not comply with the payment practices reporting duty. The legislation allows for the prosecution of those who do not comply and I will use this enforcement power against those who do not comply where necessary.

The Government will launch a business basics fund competition with funding of up to £1 million, which will encourage SMEs to utilise payment technology.

I also intend to establish a ministerially led group to bring together key Government Departments to act on improving prompt payment across both the public and private sectors.

We are working with UK Finance and the finance sector to review the role supply chain finance plays in fair and prompt payment, including the potential for an industry led standard for good practice in supply chain finance. We also want to bring greater transparency to how supply chain finance is reported in company accounts and assessed in audits, by working with the Financial Reporting Council to develop guidance and build it into their sampling of companies' accounts.

Our modern industrial strategy aims to make Britain the best place to start and grow a business and removing barriers to growth is key to this. The response to the call for evidence and the package of measures I have announced will tackle the continuing issue of late payments to ensure this happens.

[HCWS1645]

Competitiveness Council 27-28 May 2019: Post-Council Statement

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Competitiveness Council took place on 27-28 May. The UK was represented by Katrina Williams, deputy permanent representative to the EU on day one (Internal market and industry); and by myself on day two (Research and space).

Day one (Internal market and industry)

The final Competitiveness Council of the Romanian presidency agreed three sets of Council conclusions: on the single market; on industrial policy and on tourism and reviewed the legislative achievements of the last six months.

The Council discussed the link between competition policy and EU competitiveness. Commissioner Bienkowska presented the Commission's analysis on market integration, market concentration in the EU and protectionist practices in third countries. Ministers discussed EU competition rules and EU trade policy with regards to third country competition. The UK cited the Furman review which recommends updating competition policy for the digital age.

Ministers held a wide-ranging discussion on priorities for the future of EU industrial and single market policy. On industry there was broad agreement that the new Commission should develop an integrated industrial strategy which recognises global challenges. Discussions focused on the need to develop strategic value chains within Europe and welcomed the focus on important projects of common Europe interest (IPCEIs). The UK highlighted the need to recognise the global nature of value chains when developing policies. The increasing servitisation of manufacturing, the importance of digitalisation and the need to support the transition to a low-carbon economy were also key themes. The Council adopted conclusions on a vision for an EU industrial policy strategy (9263/19) and the future of the single market (9402/19). Ministers also agreed conclusions on the importance of tourism (document 9264/19).

The Commission reported progress on current legislative items: the directive on cross-border conversions, mergers and divisions; the directives on the modernisation of the EU consumer protection rules; and the collective interests of consumers and the general safety of vehicles regulation. The Commission also outlined its work on better regulation and provided an update on the future of the Rapex market surveillance system following the 2018 assessment.

The presidency reported on its conference in Craiova, Romania on the automotive sector on 18 March. The forum discussed challenges around low emission vehicles; connected and autonomous vehicles; and the competitiveness of European industry.

The Commission reflected on work to move the EU towards a circular economy and to achieve the objective of recycling 10 million tonnes of plastic by 2025.

The incoming Finnish presidency set out its future priorities: environmentally and socially sustainable growth with an integrated view of the single market and a modern industrial policy.

Day two - Research

Day two of the Competitiveness Council (Internal market, industry, research and space) took place on the 28 May in Brussels. I represented the UK.

The Competitiveness Council started with a policy debate on strengthening Europe's role as a global actor and promoting international co-operation, space diplomacy and contributing to building the global space governance. The UK stressed the importance of open collaboration with third countries and entities with expertise, such as the European Space Agency (ESA), in order to achieve the strategic objectives of the EU in space.

Following the policy debate there was a brief "extraordinary ESA Council", which adopted the "space as an enabler" conclusions.

The 11th EU-ESA Council was jointly chaired by the Spanish ESA presidency and Romanian EU Council presidency. They facilitated an exchange of views on the topic of "space as an enabler". In the UK's intervention Minister Skidmore highlighted the need to focus on better exploitation of the new technologies—artificial intelligence, internet of things and quantum technology—which would drive the 4th industrial revolution.

The Romanian presidency then resumed the Competitiveness Council with a policy debate on research and innovation as a driving force for a more competitive European Union. The UK stressed the importance of researcher freedom, closing the innovation gap and operating in a global context—as well the importance of training the next generation: in this context, the UK announced that EU students starting courses in England in the 2020-21 academic year will have guaranteed home fee status and financial support for the duration of their courses. EEA/EFTA and Swiss nationals (and their family members) will remain eligible for support on the same basis as now.

During any other business the Slovakian delegation outlined the recently signed BIOEAST initiative whilst the Romanian presidency recalled the launch of the joint strategic research and innovation agenda for the Black sea (SRIA) on 8 May. The incoming Finnish presidency concluded the Council by providing information on the work programme of their EU Council presidency.

[HCWS1640]

Groceries Code Adjudicator

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I have today launched the statutory review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA).

The GCA was established by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013 ("the Act"). Its role is to monitor and enforce the groceries supply code of practice ("the code"), which the UK's designated large grocery retailers must comply with when dealing with their direct suppliers.

Section 15 of the Act requires the Government to review periodically the performance of the GCA. The first review carried out in 2016 covered the period from the creation of the GCA (in June 2013) to 31 March 2016. The second review will cover the period from 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019.

The primary purpose of the review is to look back over the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2019 and to seek views and evidence which will allow the Government to make an assessment of the performance of the GCA against the measures set out in the Act. These measures are explained in the terms of reference. The statutory review is not a review of the code or the remit of the GCA. The code is a competition measure owned by the Competition and Markets Authority as the UK's independent competition authority.

The Act requires us to consult the following:

- the GCA;
- the Competition and Markets Authority;
- the retailers subject to the code;
- one or more persons representing the interests of suppliers;
- one or more persons representing the interests of consumers;
- and
- any other appropriate person.

The consultation will run for 12 weeks and can be accessed at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/groceries-code-adjudicator-statutory-review-2016-to-2019>. Stakeholders have until 12 September 2019 to respond. Following this, BEIS will analyse the responses. A report on the findings will then be published and laid before Parliament.

The Terms of Reference for the GCA Review have today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1641]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): The Education, Youth, Culture and Sport (EYCS) Council took place in Brussels on 22-23 May 2019. The UK's deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK for the youth session on 22 May. The Minister for School Standards, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Nick Gibb), represented the UK in the education session. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Lord Ashton, represented the UK on 23 May for the culture/audio-visual session and part of the sports session.

Youth

The session began with the adoption of both the Council conclusions on young people and the future of work and the resolution on the governance of the EU youth dialogue.

This was then followed by a policy debate on young people as agents of democracy in the EU.

Other

There was information from the European Commission in regards to DiscoverEU and information from the Portuguese delegation on the world conference of Ministers responsible for Youth 2019 and Youth Forum Lisboa (22-23 June 2019).

Culture/ audio-visual

The meeting began with the adoption of both the Council conclusions on young creative generations and conclusions on co-productions. This was followed by a policy debate on “from tackling disinformation to rebuilding EU citizens’ trust in the media”.

Other

Information was provided by the Hungarian delegation on the nomination of Veszprém for the European capital of culture 2023. In addition, information was also provided from the Spanish and Portuguese delegations on celebrating the fifth centenary of the first circumnavigation of the world, led by Fernão de Magalhães and Juan Sebastián Elcano.

Sport

The sport session of EYCS began with the adoption of a resolution on EU member states’ representation and co-ordination for the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) meeting in Montreal. In addition, Council conclusions on access to sport for persons with disabilities we also adopted.

The session then proceeded with a policy debate on increasing the participation of children and young people in sport in 21st century Europe.

Other

There was information from the EU member states’ representatives in the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) foundation board on the meeting with WADA that took place in Montreal on 14-16 May 2019, information from the Finnish presidency on the work programme of the incoming presidency and information from the Danish delegation about the Council of Europe convention on the manipulation of sports competitions (match fixing).

To conclude, there was information from the Bulgarian, Greek and Romanian delegations on the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Bulgaria, Greece, Romania and Serbia to host either the Euro 2028 championship or the 2030 World cup.

[HCWS1644]

Telecoms Council

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Telecommunications formation of the Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council took place in Luxembourg on 7 June 2019. The deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council held a policy debate and adopted conclusions on the future of a highly digitised Europe beyond 2020: “Boosting digital and economic competitiveness across the Union and digital cohesion”. The Council then considered a progress report on the e-privacy regulation.

The Romanian presidency then provided information on the digital Europe programme in the next multi-annual financial framework from 2021-27, and the proposed regulation establishing the European cybersecurity competence centre and the network of co-ordination centres. The Czech presidency then provided information on the Prague 5G security conference. The EU’s counter-terrorism co-ordinator provided information on 5G and law enforcement.

The Romanian presidency then provided an overview of presidency events in Romania. The incoming Finnish presidency provided information on its work plan.

Due to a lack of ministerial quorum at the Council, the decision on the position to be taken by EU member states on behalf of the European Union in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) world radiocommunication conference 2019 (WRC-19) will now be adopted at the Employment, Social Policy, Health, and Consumer Affairs Council as an A-point on 13-14 June. The recast public sector information directive was adopted as an A-point at the Justice and Home Affairs Council on 6 June.

[HCWS1643]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr Robert Goodwill): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government’s strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England by 2038.

Bovine TB remains one of the greatest animal health threats to the UK, causing significant hardship and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities. Government and industry are therefore continuing to take strong action to eradicate the disease.

Professor Sir Charles Godfray’s independent review of the strategy highlighted a number of potential further actions while noting the difficulties associated with eradicating bovine TB. The review’s conclusions include improving surveillance in cattle herds, the need to continue to address the disease in badgers and for more research and development (R&D). We continue to assess the review’s findings and plan to publish a full response in due course. I am however today providing further information on reinforcing TB testing in the high-risk area, announcing plans to invite further applications to our badger vaccination grant scheme and confirming the licensing and authorisation by Natural England of three supplementary badger control areas for 2019. Further information is available on gov.uk.

In May 2018 we announced that from 2020 we would introduce six-monthly cattle surveillance testing, with less frequent testing for lower risk herds, in the high-risk area (HRA) of England to enable earlier detection and eradication of disease, and to prevent it spreading to new areas. Having considered the likely demands that roll-out across the whole of the HRA in one step would place on cattle herd owners and the veterinary businesses that carry out the vast majority of the testing we are now working on a phased introduction from 2020. We will provide further details to affected cattle keepers and veterinary businesses in due course.

Vaccination of badgers against TB using BCG can provide a level of protection and can play a role in limiting TB spread to healthy badger populations. Therefore, a third round of applications for the “Badger edge vaccination scheme” (BEVS 2) is now open, with further grant funding available to private groups wishing to carry out badger vaccination in the edge area of England. Groups will receive at least 50% funding towards their eligible costs. This builds on the four initial four-year projects we have funded.

Alongside this we are investing in social and economic research to understand farmer behaviours and drivers of: cattle purchase and movement; attitudes to risk-based trading; attitudes to biosecurity, wildlife control and vaccination; and analysis of pros and cons of compensation versus insurance schemes.

In May 2019 fieldwork closed on a self-completion postal survey. Over 1,250 responses were received from herd owners across England. This will provide national representative estimates of cattle farmers’ attitudes and behaviours and towards biosecurity, cattle purchasing, and what influences on-farm decision making. We expect to publish headline findings in July 2019.

In July 2019 fieldwork will commence on a telephone survey of 1,500 HRA and edge area farms which have suffered a breakdown. The survey will estimate the monetary costs involved in a bovine TB breakdown which herd owners are not compensated for, including increased staffing and housing costs, and loss of productivity. This will allow accurate analysis of the financial impact of the disease to industry and individual farms. The project will report early in 2020.

We are determined to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible.

[HCWS1637]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Archdiocese of Birmingham Case Study

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): Today the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse has published its latest case study report, which can be found at www.iicsa.org.uk

This report relates to the Archdiocese of Birmingham in the inquiry’s Roman Catholic Church investigation. I pay tribute to the strength and courage of the victims and survivors who have shared their experiences to ensure the inquiry can deliver its vital work.

Government will review this report and consider how to respond to its content in due course.

I would like to thank Professor Jay and her panel for their continued work to uncover the truth, expose what went wrong in the past and to learn the lessons for the future.

[HCWS1642]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council took place on 13 June 2019 in Luxembourg. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council adopted conclusions on: closing the gender pay gap; implications for the safety and health of workers in the changing world of work; and the EU Council auditors’ report on the fund for European aid to the most deprived (FEAD).

The Council noted a progress report on the directive on equal treatment and debated employment and social policy aspects of country specific recommendations.

The presidency gave updates on two current legislative proposals: a regulation on European social statistics and revision of the regulations on the co-ordination of social security systems. The Council closed with information on events and initiatives in the broader field of employment and social policy.

In the margins of the meeting, Bratislava, Slovakia, was elected to host the new European labour authority.

[HCWS1638]

Office for Nuclear Regulation Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Later today the Office for Nuclear Regulation’s annual report and accounts for 2018-19 will be published. Having consulted the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who is accountable for nuclear security, and the Office for Nuclear Regulation, I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published document on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS1639]

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 20 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	345	ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—	
Cathedrals: Contribution to Local Economies.....	345	<i>continued</i>	
Clergy Recruitment: London	344	Government Contracts: Climate Emergency	327
Employee Pay Gap.....	346	Leaving the EU: Fisheries Policy.....	338
Global Businesses' Working Practices	347	Leaving the EU: Food Shortages.....	331
Mobile Phone Masts	347	Rare and Native Breeds.....	336
Persecution of Christians: Bishop of Truro's Inquiry	348	Seasonal Agricultural Workers Pilot Scheme	335
Serious Youth Violence	342	Topical Questions	339
		Tree Planting	330
		Tree Planting.....	336
		Wildlife Habitats	333
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	327	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	346
Agri-Environment Payments.....	332	Provision for Cyclists	346
Badger Culling Programme.....	337	Relocation of Parliament	349
Clean Air Strategy	338	Temporary Chamber.....	344
Food Producers: Overseas Marketing	328		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 20 June 2019

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL		ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	18WS
STRATEGY	13WS	Bovine TB.....	18WS
Competitiveness Council 27-28 May 2019:Post- Council Statement	14WS	HOME DEPARTMENT	19WS
Groceries Code Adjudicator	15WS	Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse: Archdiocese of Birmingham Case Study.....	19WS
Small Businesses: Late Payments	13WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	20WS
DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	16WS	Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council	20WS
Education, Youth, Culture and Sport Council	16WS	Office for Nuclear Regulation Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19	20WS
Telecoms Council.....	17WS		

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Thursday 27 June 2019**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 20 June 2019

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 327] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
Church Commissioners
House of Commons Commission

Business of the House [Col. 351]

Statement—(Mel Stride)

Online Pornography: Age Verification [Col. 367]

Statement—(Jeremy Wright)

Export Licences: High Court Judgment [Col. 374]

Statement—(Dr Fox)

Backbench Business

Refugee Family Reunion [Col. 384]

Motion—(Angus Brendan MacNeil)—agreed to

Court Closures: Access to Justice [Col. 414]

Motion—(Bambos Charalambous)—agreed to

Petition [Col. 437]

Port Agents: Medical Duty of Care [Col. 438]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Sudan [Col. 175WH]

Secondary Education: Raising Aspiration [Col. 192WH]

General Debates

Written Statements [Col. 13WS]

Written Answers to Questions [The written answers can now be found at <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenanswers>]
