

Tuesday
25 June 2019

Volume 662
No. 319



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 25 June 2019

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rules-based International Order

1. **Jack Brereton** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the rules-based international order. [911539]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): International institutions and international law have since 1945 provided the framework for a sustained rise in global peace and prosperity. As a permanent member of the Security Council, we consider the United Nations to be the foundation of peace and security around the world. The UK has been at the forefront of efforts to defend the system—for example, by challenging Russian attempts to undermine international institutions and international law.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for that response. Further to UN resolutions 39 and 47, and the 2018 report by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights detailing the shocking human rights violations in Jammu and Kashmir; what steps is he taking with India, Pakistan and other regional powers to secure a further resolution at the UN Security Council and a lasting settlement between these two nuclear-armed nations?

Sir Alan Duncan: The UK's position is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution to the situation in Kashmir, taking account of the wishes of the Kashmiri people. We consistently encourage India and Pakistan to engage in dialogue as a means of resolving differences. It is not for the UK to prescribe a particular solution or act as a mediator.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the international rules-based order is underpinned by treaty, and if Britain were to leave the European Union with no deal we would be walking away and turning our back unilaterally on treaties? Not only would it be an act of self-harm to our country, but it would undermine the system of the rules-based international order itself.

Sir Alan Duncan: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his ingenuity in crowbarring this into questions, but my main focus under this question is much more about the United Nations and multilateral institutions.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Does the Minister agree that if the Opposition want a deal, they should vote for one?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I do not know whether to be pleased or astonished at the Minister singing the praises of the United Nations. Presumably, this means that the Government will be taking every step they can to comply with the recent resolution on the sovereignty of the Chagos Islands?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not a binding judicial decision, as the hon. Gentleman absolutely knows. He can expostulate as much as he wishes—it is a great act to watch—but he know the facts and I am sure he would admit it if he were pressed further.

Mr Speaker: I note that the hon. Gentleman is advised to expostulate rather than to expatiate. It is an interesting essay question in its own right as to the respective merits of each.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): There are clear international rules regarding British sovereignty in Gibraltar, yet Spain continuously and repeatedly breaches the integrity of the maritime waters surrounding the Rock. What will the Minister do to remind Spain of its obligations under the rules-based international order?

Sir Alan Duncan: Any such incursions in the proper waters of Gibraltar are always responded to by us. We watch them closely, but I very much hope that there can be no increase in tension and that we can in the years ahead reach a very settled position between ourselves and Spain on the absolute rights of Gibraltar as a British sovereign Rock.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I had hoped to start by congratulating the Foreign Secretary on making it to the final two in the Tory leadership race, but unfortunately, to coin a phrase, he has chosen to bottle the very first question, perhaps because he knew some of the issues that we were going to raise. But if the Minister of State is answering on his behalf, may I ask whether our potential future Prime Minister will commission an independent public inquiry or authorise a full parliamentary inquiry to establish which Ministers or civil servants over the past four years have been responsible for authorising arms sales for use in Yemen, even when, as the courts have found, it is clear there was a high risk that those arms would be used to commit war crimes?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very happy to join the right hon. Lady in congratulating my right hon. Friend on reaching the final two and indeed the final one—that is what we look forward to, for the good of the country. I am sorry that she was not sufficiently nimble of foot to save up such a question for topicals, when I am sure she will get such a chance. However, as she well knows, all of our arms sales meet the most rigorous rules, and we will continue to adhere to them.

Emily Thornberry: I thank the Minister for that answer, but all the arms sales have not met the most rigorous rules. That is the whole point. He knows that there are

men in this Chamber and beyond—Ministers—who ignored the evidence of risk to innocent civilians; guilty men, Ministers who signed off the export of arms that have now been found to be unlawful. Two of the men responsible for those decisions are the candidates to be our next Prime Minister.

Let me ask a related question, for which the Foreign Secretary has exclusive responsibility. It is now almost nine months since Jamal Khashoggi was murdered. Thanks to the Senate, we know that the CIA has concluded that Crown Prince Salman most likely ordered that murder, and we have heard from the United Nations that there is credible evidence for that conclusion. Will the Minister simply tell us, nine months on, when he will produce an official assessment of who ordered the murder of Jamal Khashoggi? Unlike Yemen, this is entirely on his watch.

Sir Alan Duncan: I am afraid the right hon. Lady appears not to have read the 20 June Court judgment, which acknowledged “rigorous”—her very word—“robust” and “multi-layered” processes

“carried out by numerous expert government and military personnel, upon which the Secretary of State could rely”.

As the right hon. Lady appreciates, my responsibilities do not cover Saudi Arabia, but we speak directly to our Saudi counterparts on all such matters, including arms and human rights.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State, who we hope will get to his feet for once on this question, not agree that the selling of weapons to a regime that murders journalists and civilians and repeatedly breaks international humanitarian law entirely undermines the United Kingdom’s role as a proponent of the rules-based international order?

Sir Alan Duncan: I hope that for the time being at least I am an adequate substitute for the Foreign Secretary in answering these questions; it is a perfectly reasonable allocation of a question to a broad thematic policy area for which I am responsible. Within that broad theme, I assure the House that we endeavour to maintain the highest standards, not only within the rules-based international system but when it comes to the export of arms.

Chris Law: I welcome the Minister’s response, most notably his reference to this House, because earlier this year it was our own House of Lords Select Committee that reported that UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia were “unconscionable” and that the UK Government are “on the wrong side” of the law. Last week, the Court of Appeal ruled that arms sales to Saudi Arabia are unlawful. The Government’s actions have been denounced by the upper House of the legislature and ruled unlawful by the judiciary, so on what grounds does the Secretary of State, or, indeed, the Minister, still insist on selling weapons to the regime?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Court judgment did not say that our arms sales are unlawful. It criticised an aspect of process that we are studying very closely and will address. It is incorrect to say that our arms sales to Saudi Arabia are wholesale unlawful.

Trinidad and Tobago: Criminal Justice

2. Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What support his Department is providing to Trinidad and Tobago to improve that country’s (a) handling of murder cases involving UK citizens and (b) criminal justice system. [911540]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): Since 2017, under a bilateral security memorandum of understanding with Trinidad and Tobago, the UK has delivered targeted programmes to improve local judicial and policing capacity.

Neil Coyle: I ask this question with specific reference to my constituent Sharon St John, whose son Adrian was murdered three years ago. She is still waiting for justice. I thank the Foreign Office for belatedly getting more involved in the case, but what further pressure can Ministers and the Government put on the Trinidad and Tobago authorities to set the date for a full trial as soon as possible?

Harriett Baldwin: I commend the hon. Gentleman’s assiduousness in raising this truly terrible constituency case. He can be reassured that we have taken every opportunity to raise the case with Trinidad and Tobago. We obviously cannot interfere specifically in Trinidad and Tobago’s judicial process, but we are extending every possible support where we can. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that in May last year the magistrate committed the accused to stand trial for murder, but we acknowledge that the trial date has not yet been set.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): When I visited Trinidad, I found the people and nation to be peaceful, loving and entrepreneurial. There are some specific problems, but will the Minister confirm that the Foreign Office advice is still that British citizens can travel to Trinidad and Tobago? Many people will enjoy a vacation there.

Harriett Baldwin: Yes, of course. Thousands of people from the UK and elsewhere enjoy holidays in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is of course a close friend and Commonwealth partner. The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) is right to raise the issue, and I am sure that my hon. Friend would do the same should a constituent have such a bad experience anywhere in the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Over 30,000 British nationals visit Trinidad and Tobago every year. Forty people were murdered there in January 2018 alone, and the deaths of Mr and Mrs Wheeler in particular exposed the need for protection measures for British citizens visiting Trinidad and Tobago. Will the Minister outline the steps being taken to secure the safety of UK citizens when they are on holiday?

Harriett Baldwin: Millions of citizens travel world wide all the time, and we ensure that we provide good and up-to-date travel advice. We always encourage travellers to take out insurance policies when they are going on business trips or holidays and to look at the Foreign Office’s travel advice pages.

Hong Kong

3. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What representations he has made to his Chinese counterpart on the proposed Hong Kong extradition treaty and the UK's responsibilities under the 1984 joint declaration. [911541]

Mr Hunt: We remain very concerned about the situation in Hong Kong, and I raised those concerns with the Chief Executive on 12 June. Today, I urge the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government to establish a robust, independent investigation into the violent scenes that we saw. The outcome of that investigation will inform our assessment of future export licence applications to the Hong Kong police, and we will not issue any further export licences for crowd control equipment to Hong Kong unless we are satisfied that concerns raised about human rights and fundamental freedoms have been thoroughly addressed.

Mr Sharma: I join my colleagues in congratulating the Secretary of State on the position he is in now and wish him good luck for the future; it is a good achievement.

Will the Government fulfil our moral responsibilities and offer refuge to Hong Kong residents who are at risk from the extraterritorial application of Chinese law?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his good luck wishes and ask him not to pass that on to Labour party members in Ealing, because it might discourage their Conservative party counterparts. I also thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her congratulations; she is a gracious person and I would expect nothing less of her.

On more serious matters, we were very concerned about this extradition law because the fundamental freedoms of Hong Kong are what has made it such a stunning success since 1997—and, indeed, before 1997. Anything that contradicted the letter or spirit of the Basic Law that preserves those freedoms should not happen.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend has spoken out very powerfully on Hong Kong at other points. Will he recognise the report on China by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and the work that we put into the Hong Kong Administration, and the fact that the UK is in many ways still underpinning the economy of Hong Kong through the application of justice and the lending of judges to guarantee the courts? At what point does the Foreign Secretary think that civil rights can be divorced from property rights, and at what point would that mean that British judges are actually whitewashing a now failing civil rights Administration?

Mr Hunt: I do not think we can divorce civil rights and political rights. My hon. Friend and his Committee are absolutely right to raise those concerns. An independent judiciary, where people can be confident of their basic freedoms, is at the heart of what has made Hong Kong such an extraordinary city. We do not just have a moral obligation to stand up for the people of Hong Kong; we actually have an internationally binding legal agreement signed with China in 1984 by Margaret Thatcher and Deng Xiaoping. We will stand by that agreement and we expect China to do the same.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Foreign Secretary may not know that at the time two parliamentary delegations went to Hong Kong to check how the declaration had been accepted by local people. I was on one of those delegations, led by Ian Mikardo, and we all came away absolutely convinced that one nation, two systems was a solemn, sacred obligation. Will the Foreign Secretary give a message to the Chinese Government: none of their nonsense—we know who is behind this and that they want to crush democracy in China, and that if it comes to it, we could have a system of embargoes on their goods coming to this country and to Europe?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his passionate support for the people of Hong Kong, and I want to reassure him on this. On my first visit to China as Foreign Secretary, I spoke to my counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, about the very issue of Hong Kong to underline just how important it is not just to this Government but to everyone in this House.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): As a former investment banker specialising in the markets of Hong Kong up to and beyond the 1997 handover, I fully appreciate the incredible efforts made by Governor Chris Patten in securing the one country, two systems agreement for 50 years. Economic stability is an incredibly fragile commodity. Will my right hon. Friend reinforce and redouble his efforts to make sure that the one country, two systems arrangement does continue for the next 27 years?

Mr Hunt: Absolutely. I think that what happens in Hong Kong is, for us all, a litmus test of the direction of travel that China goes in, because we had an internationally binding agreement signed in 1984 that Britain feels very, very strongly about. It is, as my hon. Friend rightly says, at the heart of Hong Kong's economic success as well as its political freedom.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not the real problem that although the Chief Executive may not directly take her orders from Beijing, she often looks over her shoulder to find out what the Communist party of China is saying? Is not the fundamental truth that in the end one can repress human freedom for a while but one cannot finally quash it?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman puts it beautifully; he is absolutely right. Whatever the pressure that may or may not be exerted on the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, what works in Hong Kong at the moment is that the judiciary is independent, and that must not change.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that one country, two systems must mean exactly that. Will he support the legitimate demands of the protesters, many of whom are waving Union flags in the hope of support from this Government and this House for the permanent withdrawal of this most contentious Bill?

Mr Hunt: I called publicly for the Bill to be halted, and I agree with what the Hong Kong Government belatedly decided to do, which is to commit to not bringing it back until concerns about democratic rights have been addressed.

UK Soft Power

4. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to enhance UK soft power overseas. [911542]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The UK has recently been rated the world's No. 1 soft power. Our strengths in sport, education and culture are a vital diplomatic asset.

Craig Tracey: I really welcome the upcoming conference on media freedoms that the Minister is hosting next month. What specific asks can be made of the countries attending to ensure that they promote the values of democracy and free speech?

Harriett Baldwin: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to the important media freedom conference that we are hosting jointly with the Canadians in London in a couple of weeks' time. He will be glad to hear that so far Ministers from 50 countries will be coming along to that event. We are asking countries to sign up to a pledge welcoming the value of a free media in holding the powerful to account and stressing the importance of the free exchange of information.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you have just graciously opened Parliamentary Links Day, celebrating science in Parliament and the UK's world-leading position as a science nation. Unfortunately, all too often African scientists are prevented from coming here to collaborate because of the UK's outdated and arbitrary visa system. The all-party parliamentary group for Africa, which I chair, is conducting an investigation into this. Will the Minister commit to joining us for the launch of the report on 16 July and to working with the Home Office to address this real barrier to our soft power in the world of science?

Harriett Baldwin: I commend the hon. Lady's chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa. As she knows, I try to come along to all her meetings when I can, so I will add that request to the list and hope I will be able to join her. She will be glad to know that we have recently gone out to every part of our diplomatic network to find out from the frontline where there are issues with the UK visa system. She knows how many millions are processed every month. We want to see what we can do, working with our colleagues in the Home Office, to make sure that everyone who wants to come to visit the UK, for scientific or other purposes, and who has a legitimate reason to be here, the means to be here and the opportunity to return can do so.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Secretary of State clearly believes that he is a master of soft power and diplomacy. He says that Europe will be willing to renegotiate the Brexit withdrawal agreement if a new Prime Minister comes forward with ideas on how to solve the Northern Ireland border issue. I presume that, like her colleague the Minister for Europe and the Americas, the Minister is supporting the Secretary of State for the premiership. If she is, can she please tell us what those ideas are?

Harriett Baldwin: Let me take this opportunity to say that, yes, I do support the Foreign Secretary's campaign to be the next leader of the Conservative party. The hon. Gentleman has been extremely ingenious in this question on soft power in shoeorning the sort of questions that will rightly be asked by members of the Conservative party in this campaign. What I will say from this Dispatch Box is that I am absolutely confident that, whatever the outcome of those negotiations, the UK's leadership in soft power will continue to shine brightly in the world.

Middle East

5. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What recent discussions he has had with his Iranian counterpart on the political and security situation in the middle east. [911543]

13. **Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the potential risk of military conflict between the US and Iran. [911552]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): We are very concerned about the situation in the middle east and the risks of an accidental war. We have made serious efforts to de-escalate tension, including the visit by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East to Tehran at the end of last week.

Alan Brown: With regard to the recent tanker attacks, the UN Secretary-General has stated that the truth will be known only if an independent entity verifies the facts. Does the Secretary of State agree with that and will he confirm that the UK will not be dragged blindly, with the US, into a war against the wider wishes of the international community?

Mr Hunt: The US is our closest ally. We talk to it the whole time. We consider any requests that it makes carefully, but I cannot envisage any situation in which it requests, or we agree to, any moves to go to war.

Daniel Zeichner: I think the whole House appreciates the efforts that were made by the Minister for the Middle East at the weekend to de-escalate this crisis, but can the Secretary of State tell us what work is being done with the UN to make further progress?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question. We have been doing extensive work. The message that we are sending with our partners in the European Union, particularly the French and the Germans, is that, with respect to Iran's nuclear programme, this is a crucial week. Iran has said that it will reach the limits of what it is allowed for low-enriched uranium by 27 June, which is later on this week. It is absolutely essential that it sticks to that deal in its entirety for it to be preserved and for us to have a nuclear-free middle east.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): May I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East on his visit to Tehran, which I know that he will have found as fascinating as I always did? In his conversations about Iran with his US counterparts, may I ask the Foreign Secretary to remind them of

David Petraeus's key question: "Tell Me How This Ends?". Although it is very clear that Iran has to take actions to assuage regional tensions, does he agree that the United States needs to move cautiously and listen to wise voices such as those of Dr Anwar Gargash who urges political solutions to long-standing and complex regional problems?

Mr Hunt: No one speaks more wisely on the middle east than my right hon. Friend after his very long and distinguished time in the Foreign Office with responsibility for that brief. He is, of course, right. Neither side wants war in this situation, but it is very important that there are ladders for people to climb down so that discussions and negotiations can take place.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I, too, commend the Minister for the Middle East for his visit to Iran. Time and again, Iran demonstrates that it has no intention of being a serious and responsible member of the international community through its human rights abuses, its ballistic missile tests and its export of terror and violence throughout the region. Are we not naive in thinking that with a bit more love and a bit more carrot, Iran will change its ways?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend speaks very wisely on this. The truth is that the only real solution to this problem is for Iran to stop its destabilising activities in Yemen, which has seen missiles being fired into airports in Saudi Arabia; in Lebanon, which is seeing Hezbollah activity and attacks happening on Israel; and in Iraq and in Syria. That is the long-term solution.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): US President Donald Trump said this weekend that all the current tension with Iran could disappear if only Tehran agreed to co-operate on ending its nuclear programme. Have the Government tried to explain to the President that if he wants to achieve that outcome, all it takes is for all sides to honour the terms of the Iran nuclear deal—the joint comprehensive plan of action?

Mr Hunt: May I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the cause of the problems is that destabilising activity by Iran has continued even after the JCPOA? It has had success in restraining Iran's nuclear ambitions, and that is why we continue to support it, but we are not going to get proper peace in the middle east unless we end those thoroughly destabilising activities.

Journalistic Rights and Freedoms

6. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What steps he is taking to protect the rights and freedoms of journalists throughout the world. [911544]

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): This year, the UK is spearheading a global campaign on media freedoms, and our diplomatic missions around the world have stepped up their activity accordingly. We have announced the appointment of Special Envoy Amal Clooney, establishing a high-level panel to drive legislative reform throughout the world, and we will announce further practical steps with wide international support at next month's UK and Canada-led conference.

Jeremy Lefroy: I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer, but at least 94 journalists were killed in the course of their duties last year. Will he and his ministerial colleagues undertake, on every occasion when they travel overseas or meet foreign Heads of State, to raise this issue, which is so vital if we are to get real news, not fake news?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. As it happens, at the weekend I was in Tehran, and I made the points that he has made to my interlocutors. It is absolutely vital that journalists are able to do their work unhindered and certainly unthreatened, and the secret to peace and prosperity across our world—our troubled world—today is the ability to have the transparency that is the stock in trade of journalists.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Change UK): Will the Minister look at the situation of journalists in Turkey, and in that context, will he welcome the victory of the opposition in Istanbul as a sign that at least in Turkey there are people fighting against the authoritarianism of President Erdoğan?

Dr Murrison: Istanbul has very much been in the spotlight over the past few days, and I think we probably welcome the political vibrancy that we have seen in Turkey over the past few days. Of course, Turkey is a very dangerous place for journalists right now, and the hon. Gentleman is right to underscore the importance of Turkey in particular engaging with this process. I very much hope that Turkey is represented at the conference in London next month.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): We all welcome the Foreign Secretary's decision to host a ministerial summit on media freedom next month. However, can the Minister of State explain why it took an outcry from Britain's National Union of Journalists even to get an invitation to the summit and why, even though journalists have now been invited, they are still not being allowed to speak? Will he also say what involvement the International Federation of Journalists has had?

Dr Murrison: I am absolutely delighted that journalists, and of course their representative bodies, will be represented at this conference. I am very keen for them to suggest what part they might play in the proceedings, and I am looking forward to hearing from them. This is meant to be Britain being a window to the world on the importance that we assign to journalistic freedom and a free press. Let us see what they have to say.

Departmental Staff Pay

7. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent steps he has taken to ensure that staff working in his Department are paid (a) on time and (b) at the correct rate. [911545]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has well-established processes in place to ensure that our staff, wherever they work around the globe, are paid correctly and on time.

Diana Johnson: I am disappointed that the Secretary of State is not answering this question, because in the last set of questions he said of the Interserve dispute going on in his Department:

“If we failed to pay any of our staff on time, I take full responsibility.”—[*Official Report*, 14 May 2019; Vol. 660, c. 88.]

I understand that nothing has happened, and in fact the FCO is now the second Department to set up a food bank to help its staff. Are these really the actions of a person who wants to lead this country? He cannot even sort out what is going on in his own Department.

Sir Alan Duncan: The hon. Lady is completely misinformed to say that nothing has happened. What did happen is that Interserve changed the date in the month on which the salary of some of the lower paid workers in the Foreign Office was paid, and it made some errors in calculating what was owed. It was thanks to the personal intervention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who not only wrote to the CEO of Interserve but called people in the Foreign Office to account, that, first, those people were properly paid, and secondly, they received a subsequent and additional good-will payment.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): One set of staff who are deservedly well paid are Her Majesty’s trade commissioners. The nine have been in place for a year and have been a big success. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the new position shows how well the Department for International Trade and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office work together to promote trade by hiring the right people to lead that work?

Sir Alan Duncan: My right hon. Friend is a champion of international trade. Trade commissioners are of great value and of course—in line with the question on the Order Paper—they are paid appropriately and on time.

Climate Change

8. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling climate change through international co-operation. [911546]

9. **Alan Mak** (Havant) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to lead the international effort to tackle climate change. [911547]

14. **Stephen Morgan** (Portsmouth South) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling climate change through international co-operation. [911554]

15. **Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): What diplomatic steps the Government are taking to lead the international effort to tackle climate change. [911555]

21. **Ruth George** (High Peak) (Lab): What recent progress the Government have made on tackling climate change through international co-operation. [911561]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The FCO is playing a leading role in promoting international co-operation on climate change, maintaining the momentum generated by the Paris agreement, and raising ambition, as indicated by our new net zero 2050 target.

Afzal Khan: This Government pride themselves on the special relationship with the United States. With record low temperatures gripping the US last winter, President Donald Trump tweeted that it would be good to see some of

“that good old-fashioned Global Warming”.

What progress was made during Donald Trump’s recent state visit on making him see sense on climate change?

Mr Hunt: We are very direct with President Trump. We do not agree with him on climate change, which is why we continue to uphold the Paris accord and why we are championing a UK bid to host the next big climate change conference, COP 26. We want it to be held in London at the end of next year, and if we are successful, it will tell the whole world how seriously we take the issue.

Alan Mak: I welcome my right hon. Friend’s efforts to secure the COP 26 summit for Britain. If he succeeds, how will he ensure that schools in Havant and across the country can contribute to the summit, given the importance of climate change to the next generation?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to focus on young people, and I am sure there will be a youth event if we are successful in our bid to host COP 26, but in some ways I want to have an oldies event as well, because I want young people to see that older generations really do take this issue seriously. Their concern is that we are not as committed to it as they are, and we must prove them wrong.

Stephen Morgan: The UK is now exporting more waste to countries with the highest levels of ocean plastic pollution. The ban on plastic exports to China has led to the UK offloading its waste on nations with questionable records on marine pollution. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to reduce environmentally costly plastic exports?

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the scenes in Malaysia and other parts of the world of plastic waste that has often come from us are not acceptable. All I can do is salute the extraordinary work done by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in championing an end to plastics in the ocean. The international leadership he has shown is extraordinary.

Bim Afolami: I welcome the fact that, yesterday, this House of Commons voted to make the UK carbon-neutral by 2050. That is a great achievement for this Parliament. The Foreign Secretary is fully aware that the UK accounts for only a very small percentage—about 2%—of global emissions, so for the change to be made a reality for the world, other countries need to follow suit. What is his assessment of how the effort is going in other developed countries to ensure that they follow our lead?

Mr Hunt: I think we are making progress, despite the setback of not having the United States on board. As for exactly what the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is doing, we have 299 people across the world whose job is entirely or partly to advocate on climate change. We are using our diplomatic network to its fullest effect.

Ruth George: At present, there is no primary legislation to prevent this Government or future Governments using carbon offsetting in other countries to reduce our own carbon emissions. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to such legislation to ensure that we are not simply exporting our own problems?

Mr Hunt: I recognise the fairness of the hon. Lady's point. There will, of course, be legislation to follow relating to our net zero 2050 target and that will be the moment to have that debate.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Handling plastic waste is a key environmental challenge, as was highlighted earlier. Last week, I met Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir, who agreed on the importance of partnership between our two Governments to tackle the issue of unrecyclable waste illegally exported to Malaysia. Our high commission in Kuala Lumpur is already on the case. Will my right hon. Friend pass on to colleagues in the Cabinet the importance of reviewing penalties for subcontractors in the UK who are illegally mixing waste for export? This is not the sort of export that the Foreign Office or the Department for International Trade want to support.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a very well connected fellow indeed. I have had cause to observe that before and I do so again.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is extremely well connected, Mr Speaker. You are absolutely right. Prime Minister Mahathir is just one of many Prime Ministers that I know he knows. Perhaps he should be doing my job. What he says is right. As was mentioned in an earlier question, we are responsible for only 2% of emissions, so the power of UK leadership is the power of the example that we set. That is why on these issues we have to ensure that we get it right.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I am asking a rare third question on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). She cannot be here for family reasons, but she wanted me to join in the important discussion on climate change. It gives me the opportunity to congratulate the Foreign Secretary directly not just for getting into the final two, but for being the only candidate who has the police outside his house for the right reasons. *[Laughter.]* Aside from the very welcome conversation on climate change that the Prince of Wales had with Donald Trump during his state visit—*[Interruption.]* I'm sorry, does the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and Atcham (Daniel Kawczynski) wish to intervene?

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con) No.

Emily Thornberry: Okay, well perhaps I can start again. I want to ask the Foreign Secretary this. Aside from the very welcome conversation on climate change that the Prince of Wales had with Donald Trump during his state visit, I want to reiterate the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan). What progress did the Foreign Secretary and the Government make in trying to persuade the President of the United States to take climate change

seriously, given that his response following that visit was to say that all this fuss was simply about changes in the weather?

Mr Hunt: I talked very openly with President Trump about the fact that we disagreed. He also had extensive discussions with other people on his visit. I do not comment on royal conversations, but I do know he spent a lot of time with His Royal Highness Prince Charles. The point I would gently make to the right hon. Lady is that when we disagree with our friends we do have these conversations and it would be great if she did the same with people like Maduro and Putin as well.

US-UK Special Relationship

10. **Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con):** What recent progress the Government have made in strengthening the UK's special relationship with the US. [911548]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): As it happens, we are on the same topic. The state visit of President Trump was a tremendous success, although the absence of the Leader of the Opposition from the state banquet was noted but not regretted.

Stephen Metcalfe: I am sure my right hon. Friend will therefore agree that those who tried to disrupt and denigrate the recent state visit of the President of the United States were deliberately and shockingly trying to damage our special relationship and betray what the President has rightly called the greatest alliance in history.

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Every day I walk up the Foreign Office staircase and pass a bust of one of our greatest Foreign Secretaries, Earnest Bevin, who was both a Labour Foreign Secretary and one of the founders of NATO. What a betrayal of his remarkable legacy to have a Labour leader who takes money from Iranian state TV and is a friend of terrorists.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): President Trump made it clear that the special intelligence-sharing arrangements with the UK might be cancelled if the British Government persisted with their compromised arrangements with Huawei on 5G. How have the Government responded to that threat?

Mr Hunt: By saying two things: we will never do anything that will compromise our intelligence-sharing relationship with the United States and we will take all such decisions in the British national interest.

NGOs: Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories

11. **Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to ensure that Human Rights Watch and other civil society organisations can conduct humanitarian and advocacy work in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [911549]

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): We firmly believe that civil society organisations should be able to conduct humanitarian work in both Israel

and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and I saw some of that work in action on the ground during my visit last month. We are aware of reports of pressure exerted against NGOs, particularly those critical of Israel's conduct in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. We continue to make it clear that a vibrant civil society is in Israel's interest and encourage the Palestinian Authority to ensure that NGOs can work unimpeded.

Andy Slaughter: I thank the Minister for that refreshing answer, but I ask him to pursue the case of Omar Shakir, the director of Human Rights Watch, who has been harassed for two and a half years. Is the Minister also concerned by the wider hostile environment for NGOs, which has seen the *Daily Mail* pay £120,000 in libel damages to Interpal this month for impugning its humanitarian work in Gaza and by the summit taking place in Manama this week on the future of the Occupied Palestinian Territories that does not even have the word "Palestine" on the agenda?

Dr Murrison: There was a lot in that question; I will do my best to answer it. The Manama conference is in train right now, and that gives me the opportunity to say again, so that there is no confusion, that Her Majesty's Government are fully behind the two-state solution, with Jerusalem as a shared capital. I hope that makes it clear.

The hon. Gentleman mentions Omar Shakir, the director of Human Rights Watch, and I share the hon. Gentleman's dismay at what has happened to him. I note that his deportation has been stayed and I encourage that stay of deportation to be made permanent. It is important that Human Rights Watch continues to do the important things that it does in Israel and the OPTs. I very much encourage both the Palestinian Authority and the Government of Israel to ensure that NGOs such as Human Rights Watch are able to continue doing what they do. It establishes credibility for both of them in the international community, and any attack on them, I am afraid, does them inestimable damage.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be well aware that numerous NGOs operate both in Israel and Palestine. Does he agree that NGOs that encourage Palestinians and Israelis to come together, such as the Parents Circle-Families Forum and MEET—the Middle East Entrepreneurs of Tomorrow—should be encouraged and that the refusal of Palestinian Authority to allow these NGOs to operate causes more dissension and concern?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend speaks from a position of some strength because he takes a great deal of interest in these matters. Dialogue is terribly important. When I have spoken to both my Israeli and Palestinian Authority interlocutors, I have made it absolutely clear to them that the only way forward for peace in the middle east is for dialogue to be facilitated and continued. NGOs of the sort that he has described are an important part of that.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): The Israeli NGO, Save a Child's Heart, which I had the honour to visit recently, just performed its 5,000th life-saving operation. The children come from all over, including Africa and

the Palestinian territories. Will the Minister join me in commending and celebrating this fantastic achievement by this wonderful organisation?

Dr Murrison: It does sound like a wonderful organisation, and it is important to commend the activities of NGOs and particularly medical charities, large and small, that operate in this space. Too often, we hear about the large ones and not so much about the small ones. I am particularly conscious of those operating in relation to Gaza and the west bank and the difficulties that some are having, particularly with their patients gaining the access that they need. Organisations of the sort that the right hon. Gentleman describes are very important in that respect.

International Economic Crime

12. **Stephen McPartland** (Stevenage) (Con): What diplomatic steps he is taking to help tackle international economic crime. [911551]

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): We are working with a range of countries to demonstrate UK global leadership by increasing our capabilities in the overseas network, including establishing joint serious organised crime teams in over 80 countries.

Stephen McPartland: The line between rogue nation states and terrorist organisations sponsoring organised criminal activity is increasingly blurred. They are attacking our national institutions and millions of residents in this country. Does the Minister believe that diplomacy is working?

Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the importance, given that we are one of the world's leading financial centres, of our being as rigorous as possible and taking a zero-tolerance approach. I am sure the House will welcome the fact that last December the Financial Action Task Force review took a close look at our system and concluded that the UK had the strongest anti-money laundering regime of the countries assessed to date, but clearly we cannot be complacent; there is much more to do.

Venezuela

17. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the political and humanitarian situation in Venezuela. [911557]

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The political stand-off in Venezuela continues and the humanitarian crisis deepens. We support initiatives by the Lima Group, the International Contact Group and the Norwegian-facilitated talks in Oslo to make progress towards a solution. We have committed significant humanitarian aid and are supporting the UN and the Red Cross movement operating in the region.

Bambos Charalambous: Will the Minister join me in welcoming the visit of the UN Human Rights Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, to Venezuela and endorsing her demands that, whatever else needs to happen there, we must see the immediate release of all political prisoners being held by the Maduro Government?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I am very happy to confirm that, but of course we need to see far more than that in Venezuela. Maduro has brought his own country to its knees. Millions of people have fled to neighbouring countries. The country has been ruined by the lunacy of one man, and we all, as the international community, need to work together to do everything we possibly can to restore the fortunes of that once great country.

Topical Questions

T1. [911564] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): This might be my last Question Time as Foreign Secretary—or indeed it might not—but one important event that will happen before the result of the Conservative leadership election is announced is the launch of a major global campaign to protect the safety of journalists around the world. The UK has joined forces with Canada to spearhead this campaign, which I will be launching next month with Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland. It will be the world's first ever ministerial summit on media freedom, here in London. We have 700 confirmed attendees from media and civil society across 98 countries and from 45 different Governments. Together we will shine a light on abuse and raise the price for those who would harm or imprison journalists.

Rushanara Ali: I thank the Foreign Secretary for announcing that conference. Whether he remains Foreign Secretary or becomes Prime Minister, or takes any other post, I hope that he continues consistently to champion human rights and media freedom.

I declare an interest in that last month I was part of a delegation with Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Council for Arab-British Understanding that visited the Palestinian refugee camp of Dheisheh in the occupied west bank. There we witnessed the vital work in education, health and other areas of humanitarian relief that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency does but which is now at risk because the US has threatened to defund and delegitimise the agency. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that the UK intends to support the renewal of UNRWA's mandate at the General Assembly later this year so that it can continue its vital work of protecting people and giving them a sense of hope?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her good wishes. She once bought me a cappuccino in Portcullis House, and I look forward to returning the favour in No. 10, if that is what happens. I can confirm that we will continue to support the renewal of UNRWA's mandate and the vital work it does.

T2. [911565] **Paul Masterton** (East Renfrewshire) (Con): Earlier this month, a school in the beautiful Israeli town of Sderot was hit by a rocket—one of 800 fired from Gaza this year. What message do the UK Government have for the innocent Israeli civilians living in constant fear of terror, and does the Minister agree that there will be no progress until terror groups stop prioritising the eradication of Israel over peace?

The Minister for the Middle East (Dr Andrew Murrison): As it happens, I recently visited a kibbutz very close to the Gazan border, and I saw for myself the effect that such attacks were having on the civilian population, despite Israel's Iron Dome, which is good but not infallible. We condemn all rocket attacks from Gaza towards Israeli. They are completely unacceptable. While they and other violence like that continues, there is no realistic prospect of peace being forthcoming in that part of our troubled world. We must see the cessation of rockets from Gaza into Israel.

T4. [911567] **Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Disturbingly, medics dealing with the aftermath of the 3 June attacks in Khartoum have said that, as well as 100 people dying, about 70 women may have been raped. Many of my constituents who have links with Sudan have suggested not only that the Janjaweed should be internationally proscribed—even, potentially, as a terrorist organisation—but that we should apply sanctions to those responsible. Do the Government hear my constituents' call?

The Minister for Africa (Harriett Baldwin): The hon. Lady can tell her constituents, and indeed the people of Sudan, that we stand with them in their desire for a transition to civilian-led government. As she knows, there have been widespread reports following those horrendous attacks, and we encourage everyone to keep documentation of such atrocities. Justice will come eventually, but I summoned the Sudanese ambassador to express our disagreement with—our real abomination of—what had taken place on 3 June.

T3. [911566] **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): Last Friday, the Financial Action Task Force extended its deadline for Iran to commit itself to compliance with crucial financial anti-terrorism measures. Did that form part of the Minister's discussions in Tehran, and does he share my concern about the extensive reports of Iran's financing of international terrorism?

Dr Murrison: Of course I share my hon. Friend's concern about Iran's support for international terrorism, particularly through its proxy groups, which I discussed at length with my interlocutors over the weekend. I think it only fair to say that the Financial Action Task Force has recognised that there has been some progress in Iran but is disappointed that it has not been comprehensive, which is why it is felt that, on balance, it is right to extend the deadline to October 2019. I hope very much that the outstanding issues in the action plan will be addressed during the intervening time.

T6. [911569] **Afzal Khan** (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary condemn the repeated expressions of Islamophobia from the President of the United States, including the sharing of a tweet by Katie Hopkins that attacked the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, referring to London as "Londonistan"?

Mr Hunt: I utterly deplore what Katie Hopkins said—I condemn it in the roughest terms—but I also support the view of the President of the United States that the Mayor of London needs to do more about knife crime.

T5. [911568] **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): Over the weekend, the chief of the general staff of the Ethiopian army, the president of the Amhara region and several

other high-ranking Ethiopian citizens were murdered. Will my right hon. Friend join me in sending condolences to the people of Ethiopia and to its excellent Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed? He is trying to secure reform in that great country, but clearly there are those who are trying to oppose him.

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's excellence as a trade envoy between the UK and Ethiopia. Ethiopia's trade has increased by some 80%, which must surely be one of the records among trade envoys.

We are truly appalled by those killings, and our thoughts are indeed with the people who have been affected by them. We support Ethiopia's progress in political and economic reforms, and we do not want such events to influence that agenda.

T9. [911573] **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What assessment have the Government made of the impact that the Windrush scandal has had and the impact that wider "hostile environment" policies are still having, on our relationships with key allies in the Commonwealth and beyond?

Mr Hunt: I think the action that the Government have taken to address the Windrush scandal has been noted by the countries affected, and I think they understand that we see that an injustice was done and we are putting it right.

T7. [911571] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): This is UK-India Week, and a large contingent from India is visiting the UK for business purposes and to establish closer ties. Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming UK-India Week, and will he give us a message of support for the building of that strong and stable relationship between the UK and India?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do that. India is a country that I want to visit at the earliest opportunity to strengthen our relations. I am trying to avoid the use of the phrase "strong and stable", but I will say that that relationship with India is incredibly important to both countries, and we will do everything we can to further it.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My constituent Mr Rishikesh Kardile has been in custody since a business conference in Barcelona in February. Will the Minister's officials ask the Indian Government to lift their extradition application so that he can return to his young son and family in my constituency and the matter can be resolved through the normal legal process?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Further to my letter to the right hon. Gentleman last month, Mr Kardile has now been released from prison. He is required to remain in Spain, because he is the subject of an Indian extradition notice. It would be very difficult, and possibly inappropriate, for us to intervene, as this is a matter for the Spanish courts, but we are extending to Mr Kardile and his family the fullest consular support possible.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): Nobody can criticise our Government's reaction to atrocities committed against the Muslim community, or indeed Muslims around the world; however, given that my

right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary seeks to lead this Christian country, has his Department not rather let him down in the way we have sought to protect Christians abroad?

Mr Hunt: I think that has been somewhat of a blind spot, but we are putting it right, and that is why I asked the Bishop of Truro to conduct an independent review into what more we can do to tackle the persecution of Christians, which accounts for about 80% of the religious persecution in the world. That report will be received next month.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Foreign Secretary not agree that whether it is the tear gassing and rubber bulleting of peaceful protestors in Hong Kong or the mass detention without trial in concentration camps of civilians in the United States by Trump, our hand is much weakened in upholding the fundamental values of human rights if we are under the pressure of seeking trade agreements with China on the one hand or the United States on the other, and therefore we are better off staying in the EU and having a final say on that?

Mr Hunt: This is the trouble with Labour, if I may say so: the United States supported the people of Hong Kong but Labour boycotted the state banquet of the US President but went to the state banquet of the President of China. What sort of priorities are they?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Foreign Office questions without the voice of Sutton Coldfield would be like dinner without a main course; we cannot have it.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Many of us hope that my right hon. Friend will continue his brilliant work as Foreign Secretary for many years to come, but may I take him back to his earlier remarks about Sudan and the present position of the long-suffering people of Sudan? Will he ensure that the British Government do all they can to make certain that, in line with the International Criminal Court indictment of General Bashir and Salah Gosh—two people who have been identified as perpetrators of mass atrocities in Darfur and elsewhere in Sudan—they are held to account and taken to The Hague as swiftly as possible?

Harriett Baldwin: I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his assiduous pursuit of this agenda; he knows how closely we are working with both the ICC and other international forums to ensure that the situation in Sudan remains at the forefront of the international agenda and that we do everything we can to ensure a swift and orderly transition to civilian rule in that country. Clearly, accountability will not be forgotten by the international community.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Last week, the Minister for the Middle East suggested that we would have no ideas how to increase the pressure on Russia to stop targeting hospitals in Syria. He is wrong about that: we sent him a number of ideas just this morning. Will he meet us to discuss them, and will he consider those measures, including expelling the Russian ambassador for these atrocities?

Dr Murrison: I remember our conversation across the Floor of the House and look forward very much to receiving the hon. Gentleman's helpful ideas. It is vital that the parties to the Sochi ceasefire are mindful of the obligations they signed up to in September. The events of 6 May and subsequently are deeply regrettable and stand the very real risk of causing a huge further humanitarian crisis with further internally displaced people. We have to avoid that at all costs. I therefore gently suggest that the parties get back around the table and ensure that as a safe first step they stop their hostile activities in north-west Syria.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I have just returned from seeing Richard Ratcliffe, who is on the 11th day of his hunger strike in support of his wife Nazanin, who still languishes in a prison in Iran. Given the current increased tensions with Iran, what more can we do to keep Nazanin at the forefront of the profile and make sure the message to get her released is not lost among the other discussions we must have?

Mr Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for visiting Richard Ratcliffe, who is a very brave man. I met him the weekend before last, and he is doing a remarkable job. I know that the whole House is thinking about Nazanin, about her five-year-old daughter and about that family. Our message to Iran is very simple: whatever disagreements you have with the UK, do not punish this innocent woman. It is not her fault. Let her come home.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): Further to the earlier question about self-determination for the people of Kashmir, will the Minister confirm whether he has approached the United Nations to take a more direct and active role in recording, monitoring and reporting human rights abuses in Kashmir?

Sir Alan Duncan: Obviously, we oppose human rights abuses anywhere. I have only recently and temporarily assumed responsibility for that part of the world, but I take fully on board what the hon. Lady says and assure her that the Government pay full attention to any human rights abuses anywhere in the world, but particularly in the Kashmir region.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary update the House on the progress being made with the prevention of sexual violence in conflict initiative?

Harriett Baldwin: The UK has shown leadership on that initiative relentlessly since 2014, and I can announce that this November, five years on, we will host a summit to document progress and to highlight the fact that the world needs to continue to focus on this important issue.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): There is considerable potential for trade and for increasing Britain's soft power in developing our relationship with the Kurdistan region of Iraq. What more can be done to review the Foreign Office security advice on Kurdistan, and can it be viewed differently from the advice relating to wider Iraq?

Dr Murrison: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. As it happens, I met Minister Hakim, the Iraqi Foreign Minister, a few hours ago to discuss a number of these issues. He is keen to normalise the trade and commerce relationship between Iraq and the rest of the world at the earliest opportunity. We discussed a range of issues, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will discuss them further when he meets his Iraqi interlocutors later today.

One of the issues is, bluntly, the exchange of people and the establishment of a visa regime that facilitates the passage of people between Iraq and the UK. I know that that is an issue of great importance to Iraq as things return to some level of normality after a very troubled period.

The hon. Gentleman mentions Kurdistan. We hope that President Barzani will visit this country in the near future. I have no doubt at all that some of these issues will be returned to when he comes to London.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): This Foreign Secretary deserves credit for setting up an independent review into the persecution of Christians worldwide, but will he ensure that a lasting legacy is achieved, whatever the outcome of that review, by ensuring that diplomats who are sent to countries where persecution occurs receive training in religious literacy?

Mr Hunt: That is a very interesting suggestion, and I defer to my right hon. Friend's great knowledge on these topics. I would like to wait for the Bishop of Truro's recommendations, which we are expecting next month, before I consider that idea in the round, but it is certainly worthy of consideration.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I was incredibly moved to meet Richard Ratcliffe last week. A similar question has been asked today, but I do not feel that it was answered as well as it could have been. His wife is enduring an unjust incarceration in Iran, and I would like to know what the Government are doing specifically to provide us with an update on the steps they are taking to bring her home.

Mr Hunt: We have left no stone unturned. I went to Teheran on 19 November, and I have given Nazanin diplomatic protection. I have changed the travel advice to try to prevent this from happening to other dual nationals, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East raised the matter in Teheran at the end of last week. We are doing absolutely everything we can, because this is an appalling injustice.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Since the joint comprehensive plan of action was signed in 2015, there have been over 30 long-range missile launches from Iran capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. What are Ministers doing to tackle that aspect of Iran's nuclear ambition?

Dr Murrison: It is vital that the JCPOA remains in place. It is also vital that we make progress with the E3 on the special purpose vehicle that we have designed to take this matter forward. At the weekend, I left my interlocutors in no doubt about our insistence that they maintain their commitment to JCPOA, specifically in

relation to the nuclear issue. They must also desist from their ballistic missile programme and their support for proxies that are destabilising the middle east.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, you might be interested to know that Blowfish Theatre has a travelling show “Boris the Musical 2”, which will be performed in the forthcoming Edinburgh festival in the Gilded Balloon theatre. If the Secretary of State has not seen the show, I recommend that he does so. The Edinburgh festival is the finest arts festival in the world. May I ask what Her Majesty’s Government

are doing to support the theatre groups that take part so they can perform overseas, which would offer a strong boost to the UK’s soft power and, better still, I say to my SNP colleagues, to Scottish soft power?

Mr Hunt: I was in Scotland at the weekend, and I had the most delicious fish and chips I think I have ever had. We do an enormous amount of work to support the Edinburgh festival, the Edinburgh Tattoo and all the incredible tourism opportunities in Scotland. We do so as the Government of the United Kingdom, because we are stronger together.

Point of Order

12.41 pm

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Kerry Foods made the sad announcement at 5 o'clock yesterday that it intended to close its production factory in Burton, leading to the loss of between 690 and 900 jobs. That is a clear blow to my constituency and the people employed there, and we looking to the Government to come together with a cohesive plan not only to see whether there are alternative people to take over the factory but, if not, to help those 700 back into work and come up with a proper plan for the use of the site.

Can you, Mr Speaker, advise me how I can use the House to bring together the necessary Departments—the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Work and Pensions—to make sure that the employees of Kerry Foods get the help and support they need?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman, whom I thank for his point of order, is well able to advise himself, and he has advertised his concerns for starters today. In so far as he seeks my counsel, and I focus it on matters appertaining to the Chamber, I suggest that he seek to catch my eye at an early stage, perhaps in a Question Time session this week, in which he might be able to raise the matter at a very high level in question form. If thereafter he wishes a fuller consideration of the matter, he could always apply for an Adjournment debate. There is a ballot for such debates, which, I can advise him, is of a guided character—it is a guided ballot—and he may well find that he is successful in that ballot.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As the MP for the neighbouring constituency to Burton in South Derbyshire and as an HCLG Minister, I very much look forward to having further conversations with my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) about this issue, which is very important to our neighbouring constituencies.

Mr Speaker: That is extremely helpful. The hon. Gentleman's cup runneth over, such is the plentiful supply of assistance and advice. I look forward to hearing further from him about this matter in the days to come.

Ground Rents (Leasehold Properties)

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

12.44 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to regulate ground rents charged on leasehold properties; to make provision for a cap on ground rents; to make property developers liable for the legal costs of leaseholders seeking to vary certain ground rent contracts; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker, imagine for a moment that you own a lovely one or two-bed apartment with your family, or perhaps even a recently built house. You have lived there quite happily for a few years, but you decide it is time to move, perhaps because of schools, for work or to move up the property ladder. You are primed and ready to go, but the estate agent asks for a copy of your leasehold agreement and there in the small print you get hit with the fact that you cannot sell your property—you are trapped. Tens of thousands of people across the country are in this position, and it simply cannot be right. This leasehold ground rent scandal needs attention right now. In many cases, developers have created leases with feudal ground rent clauses that have since fallen out of favour with lenders, leaving owners stuck with an unsaleable property because prospective buyers cannot get a mortgage to purchase the property.

In some cases, the ground rent doubles every 10 years. In others, it doubles just once. There are reports of lenders refusing to lend on what they deem as unreasonable or onerous ground rent clauses. Some will not lend if the ground rent exceeds 0.1% of the property value at any point during the lease. Leasehold campaigners argue that there are close to 100,000 people affected by terms that leave them with a ground rent in excess of 0.1% of the property value. I would argue that such circumstances are onerous. The result is an unsaleable property and, in many cases, the developer is long gone, having sold the freehold on to a distant investment company. They have, of course, made their money twice—not only from selling the leaseholds in the first place but from selling on the freehold.

Ground rents can, of course, be peppercorn or set at a reasonable rate, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government report shows that the market place is mixed, but it is important to clarify that ground rents have nothing to do with the maintenance of a building. They are simply an income for the freeholder. As the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has responsibility for housing and homelessness, told the MHCLG Select Committee:

“One of the things I do find utterly fascinating is that a building might be beautifully maintained at a peppercorn ground rent or poorly maintained at £500 ground rent. The amount of ground rent payable is no indication of the quality of the maintenance and services provided.”

There is nothing wrong with a freeholder taking a reasonable ground rent, but when that ground rent becomes onerous and stops someone selling their home it becomes a problem. The rights between freeholder and leaseholder need to be redressed.

[Eddie Hughes]

As the Select Committee commented:

“Any ground rent is onerous if it becomes disproportionate to the value of a home, such that it materially affects a leaseholder’s ability to sell their property or obtain a mortgage. In practical terms, it is increasingly clear that a ground rent in excess of 0.1% of the value of a property or £250—including rents likely to reach this level in future due to doubling, or other, ground rent review mechanisms—is beginning to affect the saleability and mortgage-ability of leasehold properties.”

My Bill seeks to address this.

The result of developers selling on the freehold to investors is that some freeholders are remote and uninterested in helping their leaseholders. Those who are interested charge unfair fees and legal costs for what should be a simple solution. I know of one such scenario in which there is a £180 charge just to discuss terms with the freeholder.

The freeholder could of course just ignore the problem, or say no. There is currently no obligation on the freeholder to help to sort the problem out—except good will. It cannot be right that in 2019 we have leasehold properties unable to be sold because of ground rent clauses. Behind each problem is a person, an individual, a family, a couple or perhaps a small investor. They do not deserve to be forgotten and left high and dry, trapped indefinitely with their property.

What can be done? Currently, the law allows 50% of leaseholders in a block of apartments to get together to buy the freehold—quite a task, and a long and expensive process if you just want to sell your property. Leaseholders could try to extend the lease, but again there is an elongated process, with expenses running into thousands of pounds. There is also the possibility that the leaseholder negotiates a variation of lease with the freeholder. This is also costly, and there is no onus on the freeholder to do the deal. It is probably the simplest solution, but with prohibitive expenses and no obligation on freeholders to engage, we have a postcode lottery of failure and success.

The Select Committee noted:

“The options for leaseholders with onerous ground rents are limited. House owners are entitled to pay to enfranchise after two years of ownership, thus removing any obligation to pay ground rent, onerous or otherwise. However, this would only be possible if the cost of enfranchisement... is both reasonable and affordable for the house owner. Flat owners, similarly, are entitled to enfranchise, although this is a much more difficult process, requiring the

consent of 50% of the owners in a residential block... Otherwise, leaseholders are reliant upon the benevolence of their freeholder to remove unreasonable terms.”

That is why I am proposing this private Member’s Bill.

I am aware that the Law Commission is currently contemplating a solution to the thorny issue of onerous ground rents on existing leases, but I propose simple solutions. First, we need to create a legal obligation on freeholders to grant a quick and simple lease variation to leaseholders where ground rent prohibits a sale. Secondly, it is important that ground rents are capped at the lower of £250 per annum or 0.1% of the property value.

I am also considering including an obligation on the original developer to foot the leaseholder’s legal bills in such situations. After all, why should families have to find a large sum to solve a problem not of their making? If the Bill progresses, I hope we will be able to shape it more specifically in Committee—I imagine that might be somewhat optimistic.

Systems and institutions are supposed to serve the public, and I hope we can all agree that we cannot have people unable to sell their property. Drastic and immediate action is required. I believe there is growing concern on both sides of the House about leasehold properties, and the Select Committee should be commended for its excellent report. I am also pleased to see that the Competition and Markets Authority has taken this issue on board and is looking at mis-selling in this arena. I hope both the Government and the Select Committee will keep this under further review.

I believe there is a wide cross-party consensus in Parliament on this issue, and the time for Parliament to intervene on the leasehold ground rent scandal is now. I hope hon. Members will help me to change the law to restore fairness in this sector and to stop people being trapped in unsaleable properties.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Eddie Hughes, Kevin Hollinrake, Mr Edward Vaizey, Bob Blackman, Teresa Pearce, Andrew Lewer, Matt Western, Siobhain McDonagh, Mary Robinson, Mohammad Yasin, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi and Neil O’Brien present the Bill.

Eddie Hughes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 409).

Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill

Second Reading

12.53 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Marriage will always be one of our most important institutions. It is vital to our functioning as a society, as we all know instinctively from our own lives and from the lives of family and friends. Rightly, then, none of us is indifferent when a lifelong commitment cannot continue, but it cannot be right for the law to create or increase conflict between divorcing couples.

I am encouraged by the many colleagues and others who have told me that the law must change to take unnecessary conflict flashpoints out of the legal process. Like me, they believe in the importance of marriage but see the destructive effects of what the law demands. People going through divorce already have to face more than enough emotional upheaval without the conflict that can be created or worsened by how the current law works.

I have reflected at length on the arguments for reform, on what people have said in response to the Government's proposals and on the painful experiences we all know from talking to family and friends. I have heard from people who have been through divorce, from people who support divorcing couples through the legal process and from people who say they cannot afford to live apart for two years—without finally sorting out their finances—but, at the same time, cannot bring themselves to throw hurtful allegations.

The Bill responds constructively to the keenly felt experience of people's real lives. This is a Bill for anyone who agrees that the end of a relationship should be a time of reflection and not of manufactured conflict.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the Government and the Secretary of State on introducing this Bill. I think I have married more people than anybody else in this House, in the transitive use of the word. I was always painfully aware that, when two people come together, it may well be that, in the end, they need to part, but the idea that they would have to prove in court all sorts of reasons for why the marriage had fallen apart—relying on the common law understanding of adultery, for instance—is just nonsense and adds to the sense of pain that there could already be within a family.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and this Bill is by no means anti-marriage. As he rightly says, this Bill seeks to ensure that, in those unfortunate circumstances where a marriage comes to an end, it comes to an end in a way that minimises the conflict between the parties. That, in my view, has to be a sensible way forward.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There is undoubtedly fault in a divorce but, in my experience from continual exposure at constituency surgeries, the attribution of that fault leads parents to use their children as weapons in a continuing battle with their former partner.

Mr Gauke: My right hon. Friend makes a good point, and it is worth bearing in mind that, where children are involved, it is all the more important that we minimise

the conflict. The current requirement incentivises that sense of attribution of fault, which does nothing to ensure that the relationship between the two parents can be as strong as possible, and it is the children who lose out in those circumstances.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I have thought about this with care. Obviously, to practising Christians and those of other faiths, the end of a marriage is not to be taken lightly, but I am glad the Secretary of State has accepted the proposition put by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that causing more conflict at the end does not help.

Will the Secretary of State confirm that in no other respects any of the protections for often the more vulnerable party to a marriage, the woman, will be affected by this measure, particularly in relation to financial arrangements and the custody of children, and that it simply removes the evidentiary requirement for a fault to be attributed to one side or the other?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice, is right. This is about the attribution of blame and fault, and no more than that. Indeed, the protections in place for the vulnerable party remain just as they are. It is often the vulnerable party who suffers most from the need to attribute blame, because that can be difficult. In the context of domestic abuse, for example, it is striking how the likes of Women's Aid have been very supportive of these measures because of their concern that there might be women trapped in marriages who do not want to attribute blame because they feel that may result in a further deterioration in the relationship.

The truth is that when a marriage or indeed a civil partnership has sadly broken down and is beyond repair, it stops benefiting society and the people involved. At worst, continuing in a legal relationship that is no longer functioning can be destructive to families, and the law ought to deal with the reality of marriage breakdown as constructively as possible. The current law does not do that. The requirements of the divorce process at present can often give rise to a confrontational position, even if the decision to divorce is mutual. The incentive to make allegations at the outset, to avoid otherwise waiting for two years' separation, becomes ingrained. Divorce is traumatic, and children are inevitably affected when their parents separate—that goes without saying. I agree that marriage has long proved its worth for bringing up children, but the reality is that not all marriages last. The law should deal with that reality as sensibly as it can. When a marriage has failed, we have to take a serious look at how to reduce conflict for everyone involved, not least for children. Research shows that it is conflict between the parents that has been linked to greater social and behavioural problems among children, rather than necessarily the separation and divorce itself.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I very much welcome the proposals in this Bill. Getting rid of the fault-based approach to divorce and the conflict is a good thing, as is ensuring that people do not have to wait for two years. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and with Resolution, the organisation for family lawyers, that we also need to provide earlier

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

advice for cohabitantes who believe that common law spousal rights might exist for them? Legal advice on whether such rights exist would be beneficial. Does he agree that including provision for early advice in the Bill would be welcome?

Mr Gauke: Obviously, this Bill's focus is on divorce for those who are married. There is a point about advice where we can have a wider debate. I will focus my remarks today on the contents of the Bill and the argument I am making about the problems with fault in the current divorce system, and I welcome the hon. Gentleman's support on that. Clearly, there is a debate to be had as to how we can provide support to couples, be that about reconciliation or in other contexts.

Whatever family structure children grow up in, they benefit most from stable, loving and caring relationships with parents and other close family members. We are clear that when parents have taken this difficult decision, children's best interests are served by minimising conflict during and after the legal process, to support co-operative parenting and positive parenting relationships. This Bill is in the best interests of children whose parents are divorcing. It will therefore remove the harmful requirement for wives, husbands and civil partners in England and Wales to hurl blame or to go through the waiting limbo of separate lives. It will help them move forward more amicably and constructively. It will make a genuine difference to many thousands of children and families who each year, sadly, experience divorce.

It is 50 years since the Divorce Reform Act 1969 gave rise to the law we now have, and few of us will have known anything else. Some among us will have divorced under this law. All of us will be conscious of the bitter experience of friends and constituents who have. Even so, the existing law is not always understood. It allows divorce only on the ground that the marriage has broken down irretrievably. The court cannot hold the marriage to have done so unless it is satisfied of one or more of what the law calls "facts". Three of the five facts—adultery, behaviour and desertion—relate to conduct of the respondent. The other facts are two years' separation and five years' separation, the difference being that two years' separation requires both parties to agree to the divorce—the same applies to civil partnerships, except that the adultery fact is not available. But the fact someone chooses does not necessarily bear any resemblance to the real reasons the marriage or civil partnership broke down. Those reasons are often subtle, complex, and subjective. Who, if anyone, was responsible is a question that can be answered honestly only by the people in the marriage.

We are probably all aware of situations where a couple have sadly grown apart over time and jointly agree to divorce. The current law does not allow them to do so, unless they are first financially able to live apart for two years. They might be forced to present events in a way that serves the system; minor incidents become stretched out into a pattern of behaviour to satisfy a legal threshold, which then bleeds over into how a couple approach negotiations over arrangements for children and finances; or there may be a coercive relationship, where one partner is desperate to divorce but is too scared of the consequences of setting out the

evidence of their partner's unreasonable behaviour to the court. It should be enough that the relationship has irretrievably broken down.

I do know where people are coming from when they say the requirement to prove a fact is useful, because they think that someone must be held responsible for the break-up of the marriage and that this requirement lets the court determine blame for that. The court, however, cannot do so, and the law does not require it to. Instead, making allegations or having to live apart in a marriage introduces conflict or makes it worse—this conflict can continue far beyond the legal end of the marriage and hurt children's life chances. That is the reason for this reform.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the careful way in which he is taking us through these proposals and for his indication of support for marriage. Will he look, perhaps in the context of this Bill, at supporting marriages before they have broken down irretrievably and providing support where couples are under pressure, to reduce marital breakdown by intervening earlier?

Mr Gauke: The last two words, "intervening earlier" are key. Once the point of a divorce is reached, it is likely—the evidence suggests this—that it is too late. The question is: can we provide support earlier? In all honesty, I do not believe that the Bill provides the vehicle to address that point, because if we try to provide that support in the context of the divorce itself, we will be too late. Clearly, however, there is an argument—one that I suspect is for the next spending review—as to what assistance can be provided to couples at an earlier stage in the process. I completely understand where my hon. Friend is coming from and I very much agree that the point is about earlier intervention, but where someone is going through the divorce process, making that process more difficult and confrontation is counterproductive.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State understand the circumstances where a resident parent turns children against the non-resident parent where no abuse whatsoever is involved? That causes estrangement for the child, often for many, many years. Is it not time that we found a legal framework—early intervention is important in this respect—to tackle this problem? I have only recently become involved in this campaign on parental alienation, and I was shocked that hundreds if not thousands of parents are estranged from their children because the resident parent seeks to manipulate the child against a non-resident parent for no reason whatsoever.

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention on a matter that I suspect all of us have had experience of as constituency Members of Parliament as well as citizens. These circumstances are hugely difficult. To some extent, the existing divorce law can somewhat encourage that behaviour, because of the need to attribute blame, but he is right to suggest that this is a wider issue, one that is hard to address in the context of divorce. He is right to highlight the difficulties that can exist and how parents can be alienated from their children in what are difficult circumstances.

When I became Justice Secretary last year, I was able to take a deeper look at the issue of divorce. What became clear to me was that making allegations does

not serve any public interest. It needlessly rakes up the past to justify the legal ending of a relationship that is no longer a beneficial and functioning one. At worst, these allegations can pit one parent against the other. I remain deeply concerned that what the existing law requires can be especially damaging for children.

The law on divorce and dissolution is out of step with the constructive approach that family law takes in other areas and that practitioners take every day. It is time to change that. Resolution is the lead organisation representing family lawyers who subscribe to a non-confrontational approach. Resolution's chair, Margaret Heathcote, has said that

"because of our outdated divorce laws"

practitioners have effectively been working

"with one arm tied behind their backs."

The Bill will change that.

At the beginning of my speech, I spoke about the confrontational position that the law sets up and about its harmful impact on children. That confrontational position undermines not only good co-parenting but any prospect of reconciliation. I understand concerns about people being divorced against their will. The reality is that under the existing law the court can refuse a divorce only if a legal requirement is not met, and never simply because one party wants to stay married. Only about 2% of respondents say that they want to contest the divorce. Hardly anyone continues contesting all the way to a court hearing. Marriages are not saved at all by the ability of a spouse to contest the divorce.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): When I got married, as a Catholic I did not think the option of divorce was open to us. I genuinely thought that under all circumstances our marriage would be forever; my wife decided otherwise. That was a very emotional time. Does my right hon. Friend expect that when the change comes in some people will find it easier to divorce and that there be a spike in the divorce figures? A period of reflection sometimes gives people the opportunity to save their marriage, and that opportunity might be missed under the proposed changes.

Mr Gauke: I agree with my hon. Friend about a period of reflection. In fact, the Bill will ensure that there is a longer minimum period of reflection for people in a marriage to consider whether reconciliation is the right course. The evidence suggests that by the time things get to that stage, reconciliation happens very rarely, but we are extending that period, so it is not really about making divorce easier but about making it less confrontational.

On my hon. Friend's point about whether we anticipate a spike in divorces, there is international evidence as to what is likely to happen following such a reform. I shall be open with my hon. Friend: there will be people who are currently waiting for two or five years for a divorce, and that divorce will be brought forward, so the likelihood is that there will be an increase because of that waiting list. However, the international evidence suggests that once that initial spike has been dealt with, in a steady state the divorce rate is unlikely to increase; it is likely to remain much the same. I hope it is clear to my hon. Friend that although we would anticipate that some divorces will be brought forward, the change is unlikely to increase the divorce rate in a steady state.

Let me turn briefly to the measures in the Bill: it does not create a new process, but instead retains the framework of the existing law and removes those aspects that are considered to cause conflict. The Bill therefore retains the two stages of divorce and dissolution orders. The Government believe that the need to confirm to the court that it may make the conditional order, and to apply to the court for the final order, means that a divorce or dissolution is never automatic and that the decision to divorce is a considered one, with opportunities for a change of heart right up to the last moment.

The reform will retain irretrievable breakdown as the sole legal ground for divorce and dissolution. It will replace the current requirement to evidence irretrievable breakdown through a conduct or separation fact with a statement of irretrievable breakdown of the marriage or civil partnership. For the first time, couples will have the option to make this a joint statement, to reflect some couples' mutual decision to divorce. It will remove the possibility of contesting the decision to end the legal relationship, as a statement of irretrievable breakdown will be conclusive evidence to the court that the marriage or civil partnership has irretrievably broken down.

The reform will introduce a new minimum period of 20 weeks from the start of proceedings to the point at which the applicant—or applicants jointly—can confirm to the court that a conditional order may be made. I hope that that gives my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes) some reassurance about that moment of reflection. Our proposal will make the court process towards a conditional order less rushed and give couples further time to consider the implications of the divorce. Between 2011 and 2018, around two thirds of cases reached conditional order in less than our proposed 20-week minimum period. That included approximately one in 10 cases within eight weeks, and four in 10 cases between nine and 16 weeks. The Bill also modernises language such as "decree nisi" and "decree absolute", to bring terms in line with the more modern terms used in civil partnership law.

The reforms I have set out will deliver a system of divorce that is fit for the 21st century. It is time to end the blame game. The system we have now does not support the reality of marriage and civil partnership breakdown. It has been criticised as a system that "is, and always has been, a sham".

Those are the words of Sir Paul Coleridge, former family judge and chair of the Marriage Foundation, who, like all of us, believes strongly in marriage but sees that by reforming the law to remove from it unnecessary requirements that can fuel conflict, we will not undermine marriage and will support people to look to the future as they go through very difficult times. For that reason, I commend the Bill to the House.

1.16 pm

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I welcome the Bill. Labour supports the introduction of a no-fault divorce procedure, which we committed to in our 2017 general election manifesto, and we are pleased that the Government have acted, especially in the light of the troubling case of *Owens v. Owens*. We will therefore vote to support the Bill if a vote is called at this stage. We will use our time in Committee to amend the Bill, if need be, to ensure that it is the best law possible for those who are already going through a difficult time in their lives.

[Richard Burgon]

The existing procedure and law managing divorce and the dissolution of civil partnerships is not fit for purpose and is in clear need of updating. A fundamental problem with the existing law, which is set out for divorcing couples in the Matrimonial Causes Act 1973 and for the dissolution of civil partnerships in the Civil Partnership Act 2004, is that it requires people who seek a divorce to prove that the marriage has broken down, either by establishing fault on the part of one partner, or by showing that the couple have lived separate lives for a number of years. In reality, for those who cannot afford to live in two separate households for years in order to prove that their marriage has broken down, the only option currently available is to establish fault on the part of their partner. That is one way in which the current divorce law discriminates against women, particularly those on a low income, by reducing the options available to them to a fault-based divorce.

Establishing of one of the three faults—adultery, unreasonable behaviour or desertion—can be difficult, and often heightens tensions at an already stressful time. We know the hurt that such heightened tension can all too often cause. There are widespread concerns about the increased risk of domestic violence faced by women who go through this fractious process. Surveys of people who have gone through the divorce procedure show that in excess of one in four people who go through a divorce have cited a fault that is not in fact true, simply because it is their only way to secure a divorce. This is plainly an unacceptable state of affairs, and it is right that the Government are now acting to address it.

A conflictual process is deeply damaging to children's life chances. Children will of course be better served by parents who co-operate, and if their parents have a constructive relationship. The law is a real barrier to that.

Mr Ivan Lewis: I reiterate the point I made earlier to the Secretary of State, who rightly talked about the impact on children of an acrimonious divorce. We need to protect children from the risk of abuse—everybody would accept that—but if a resident parent turns a child against a non-resident parent, that can cause massive long-term damage to that child. The current legal framework does nothing satisfactory to tackle that particular problem. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that now is the time to look again at what can be done differently in respect of the whole question of alienation and the impact on children?

Richard Burgon: My hon. Friend raises an important wider point. Further assistance and early intervention, which was mentioned by the Secretary of State, is required to protect all concerned.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There are very often issues with how the family courts go about these custody matters. I get lots of cases like this, as I am sure my hon. Friend does. It is an area that needs to be looked at. Equally, some lawyers—not all—can exacerbate the situation in the way they handle the case. I get lots of complaints about family courts, particularly with regard to who is right and who is wrong, and there is a lot of antagonism. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said, this can be very damaging to children.

Richard Burgon: That is why we are very supportive of mediation in family cases in general, and why we have made announcements in relation to legal aid and early family law advice. I hear my hon. Friend's point about the role of solicitors not always being helpful, but there can also be problems when people end up being advocates for themselves.

The need to apportion blame and ratchet up the acrimony is one of the main reasons that so many of us want to see an end to this fault-based law—not least because of the impact on children. For example, the present divorce ground of unreasonable behaviour requires allegations that are hardly ever challenged and can sometimes be exaggerated by one spouse against the other, which can exacerbate tensions between them. It also makes it more difficult to agree arrangements for children. Indeed, one of the most urgent reasons for these reforms is to alleviate the harm caused to children, including to their mental health, by acrimonious separations. For a child of a divorcing couple, the divorce can be one of the most difficult times in their life. As the Secretary of State has indicated, the introduction of a no-fault procedure should mean that the whole process can be quicker and less stressful for them. At an emotionally traumatic time, such as a divorce or separation, parents want and need support in order to put the best interests of their children first.

This change to the law has public support and the support of family law experts. Margaret Heathcote—the chair of Resolution, which represents more than 6,000 family law practitioners and is a strong supporter of this change—said:

“Every day, our members are helping people through separation, taking a constructive, non-confrontational approach in line with our code of practice. However, because of our outdated divorce laws, they’ve been working with one arm tied behind their backs.”

In fact, the Secretary of State quoted her himself.

Professor Liz Trinder, who led the Nuffield Foundation's 2017 research into divorce law, is also supportive of these reforms, saying that

“making people produce a ‘reason’ to obtain their divorce—as they are currently required to do—does not save marriages and instead just creates a meaningless charade that can create conflict, confusion and unfairness.”

And Christina Blacklaws, president of the Law Society, said:

“Making couples attribute fault...can escalate the differences between them in an already charged situation.”

The recent case of *Owens v. Owens* highlighted a particularly iniquitous aspect of our existing divorce laws: the possibility for one party to attempt to refuse a divorce by defending it.

Eddie Hughes: Does the hon. Gentleman think this change will in any way lessen the seriousness of the marriage contract? Will people entering into it feel that they can do so more lightly because, from a purely contractual point of view, escaping from it is made easier by this legislation?

Richard Burgon: I know that marriage is technically a contract, but it seems strange to think of it that way when it is such a personal and emotional thing. I do not believe that this change in the law, which is welcome, will lead to an overall increase in the number of divorces in the long run. However, I do think that it will reduce

the unnecessary tension, conflict, distress and damage to children in those divorces, which would take place in any event.

In the case of *Owens v. Owens*, the family court judge refused to grant a divorce to Mrs Owens, who made the application for a divorce in 2015, despite finding that the marriage had in fact broken down. This was because she failed to prove, as required in the 1973 Act, that her husband's behaviour was such that she could not reasonably be expected to live with him. Mrs Owens's appeal was dismissed at both the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court, leaving her unable to divorce her husband until 2020—a clearly unacceptable case. The judges who heard the case at both the Court of Appeal and the Supreme Court expressed their dissatisfaction with the existing law, with Sir James Munby, the then president of the family division, suggesting that divorce law was based on a “lack of intellectual honesty”, and Lady Hale concluding that it was for Parliament to make any changes to the law. It is therefore right that Parliament is now able to take up this issue and make the reforms necessary to ensure that no one has to go through what Mrs Owens experienced in this case.

The new divorce laws that we are considering today should aim to secure a number of desirable outcomes. They should ensure that people can separate as amicably as possible, keeping conflict to a minimum, so that the chances of reaching agreement are maximised and the risk of domestic abuse is as low as possible. Where there are children, their interests must be paramount, and a safe, secure and sustainable outcome for them should be promoted wherever possible. Unlike the existing system, these new divorce laws should not discriminate against women, especially those on low incomes. The new divorce and dissolution laws must also protect vulnerable and marginalised groups throughout the divorce process. In particular, they must not weaken the hard-won rights of LGBT people.

One issue that has been raised by charities working to support victims of domestic abuse is that the Bill as drafted does not remove the bar on petitioning for a divorce in the first year of a marriage. This can leave women who are suffering domestic abuse trapped in the abusive marriage during that year. Will the Secretary of State address that issue during the passage of the Bill, and will he tell us whether he has met Women's Aid and other charities to discuss these concerns?

Since 2013, legal aid for divorce cases in England and Wales has been withdrawn by the Government—in most cases as part of a wider attack on access to justice that has had a very detrimental impact on family law cases. Groups including Citizens Advice have highlighted how legal aid cuts add to strain on divorcees, and more widely it is lower-income people and those with children who are more likely to be litigating in person than any other group. Resolution, which was mentioned earlier, has previously stated that providing legal aid for a single, initial meeting with a lawyer would provide separating couples with clear “signposts” about their legal options and encourage more people to use mediation as an alternative to courtroom confrontation.

Even with the welcome changes contained in the Bill, divorce will still be an often confusing legal process. There is a clear public interest in people being supported to achieve amicable resolutions to financial questions and arrangements for the care of children following a

separation. Will the Government therefore commit to reintroducing legal aid for early legal advice for couples going through the divorce procedure?

In conclusion, bringing our divorce laws into the 21st century can form an essential part of the efforts to protect women from domestic abuse, limit the damaging impacts that fractious separations can have on children and encourage amicable separations wherever possible. For those reasons, I am pleased to support these overdue reforms.

1.29 pm

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I rise to support this proposed new legislation from the Government. It is a long overdue reform, and I certainly commend it.

Marriage is a very serious, lifelong commitment, and we all enter into it in that spirit. It is very clear that it is the best outcome for a stable family life and, indeed, delivers the best outcome for children.

But we live in the real world, and we know that every marriage has its ups and downs. Although it is not a matter for this Bill, many have talked about the need to give advice, but advice should be given before entering into marriage, not as it draws to a close. We all had relationship education at school, but, when it comes to marriage, what does that really mean in terms of a relationship, of finance and sharing the benefits and the burdens of our shared working lives, and of what we might or might not inherit? What does it mean for children? Have the couple discussed whether they want children? Is the lady going into this arrangement expecting that that is the norm while the gentleman does not have the same concept at all? Increasingly, marriages are not all about having children. Outside this Bill, we ought to look at that. If we do so, we will have better and happier couples who will stay married longer.

Some marriages, clearly, do not weather the storm. People change. We cannot deny that; we cannot expect people always to be the same. Events impact hugely on people's lives. The impacts on people's lives are many and varied as we travel more and as a result of the internet. When a marriage does irretrievably break down, the clear focus must be on good post-divorce relationships. That is not just about the children, although they are absolutely key; it is also about the relationship between the two people who were married. There should be a focus on mutual support for the children of the marriage. At this point, I should make it clear that we are not just talking about biological children of that marriage. Marriages today are quite complex, and there will often be a number of stepchildren and others to be taken into account.

Blame is not helpful. It is destructive and it impacts mental health. As we have heard, it can place children in very unpleasant situations where they are asked or expected to take the side of one partner or the other, or almost emotionally bullied into doing so. In some cases, children are even led to believe that the breakdown of the marriage is their fault. That cannot be right in today's society. This Bill is absolutely a step in the right direction. It removes blame and it removes fault.

There is, however, more to do. I understand the Government's caution in tackling the causes that need to be proved for divorce, but the financial arrangements on separation and divorce and for children do not work and must be readdressed in the context of the modern

[Anne Marie Morris]

world, not the world as it used to be. The world is no longer about two people getting married and staying together for their lifetimes. It is not always about having biological children. Indeed, as I said, it is not always about having children at all.

When looking at finances and at the arrangements for children, the problem is that the courts are not well guided, because the original rules and regulations were set for a time that no longer exists and need to be reviewed. We have a common law system. We have a background of evidence that, to some extent, has evolved to help these newly changed situations.

Unless there is a readjusted start point, however, gaming comes in, whether it is about arguments about finance or about children. For many people, this creates a very unfair situation that cannot lead to what, for me, are the key objectives—good relationships between the parting parents and with the children. Indeed, the antiquated nature of the current legislation actually prevents marriages. Many will say, “Well done, Government, because at least we now understand that if things do not work out, there is a non-blaming way of parting ways.” We had not dealt with the acrimony and blame that goes with financial settlements and settlements for children.

The concept of a pre-nup is a great start, but the problem is that they create more discord between couples before they are married than is absolutely necessary. They can create great bitterness. There are still huge questions about whether they are legally binding. It might not be for this Bill, but we have to look at and consult on those matters again.

Not all marriages are about children. There may be no children produced, but there will be children in the marriage. Often there will be a mixture of biological children, stepchildren and step-grandchildren. Under the current system, the interests of all those parties and their relationships are not properly taken into account. As adults, we have to grow up and live with the consequences of the decisions we make, but for children who have built very close relationships with stepchildren or grandparents these situations can be devastating. All this really needs to be thought through again.

Too often, the parent who has the children has the opportunity to game the system and cast aspersions on the behaviour of the absent parent of such a vicious nature that the court is left with little option but to accept that the risk is too great and, as a consequence, that the individual making the accusations must be believed. This system does not work. It is often abused for financial advantage, it having nothing to do with the children. I strongly recommend that we look at this again and do the job better.

I support the Opposition’s request that legal aid be brought back into this area, because we have clogged up the courts with cases that are not going to deliver a good outcome for anybody. The court system is completely stymied because the judge finds himself or herself having to give advice to the litigants in person. That is not good for children, for parents or for anyone involved with the family in its broadest terms.

The issue of finances becomes a terrible wrangle about who is entitled to what. We start with the principal assumption of a 50:50 split. In the old days, when often

one party worked and the other looked after the children, it was absolutely fair that the work involved in creating, bringing up and nurturing the family was valued. That would be a sensible starting point. Increasingly, though, both parties work, and both bring very different financial contributions to the marriage. We need to look again at how we assess the right starting point. We then need to assess what criteria will enable us to move away from that starting point.

The most important thing is the needs of the children. That should be the first thing taken into account. Secondly, there is the need for each of the spouses to make sure that they are still able to live well. However, it is unrealistic, for a number of reasons, for anyone to go into a marriage and assume that when it breaks up there is necessarily an entitlement to live in the same style as they did when they were married. Financially—usually—it is not affordable. While marriage is for life, increasingly individuals are marrying more than once, more than twice—indeed, three times—and therefore to make financial provision that assumes that that individual will be single for the rest of their life simply is not realistic.

We need a much more realistic approach to marriage, and to the financial settlement. We need to recognise that people will often marry more than once—and that is not a criticism; it is actually a good thing, because marriage, as we know, is a very good environment in which to bring up children. If we can make marriages happy, if they can deliver long term, and if there can be many long-term happy marriages, that is not something to eschew, but something to welcome.

This reform is very welcome, but the reality of how people marry—the circumstances in which they marry and the circumstances around children—has changed so fundamentally that the law on financial settlements and on arrangements for the children must be fundamentally reviewed. Nevertheless, this is definitely a good start in the right direction, and I commend the Minister and the Government for introducing this Bill, which I will support.

1.40 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is very refreshing to see such widespread consensus; I take the fact that the Chamber is relatively empty this afternoon as a sign that we all know that the Bill is a very welcome step forward and that there is widespread consensus. As has been said, the Bill makes our legal practices around divorce fit for the 21st century, and the Liberal Democrats very much welcome the changes.

Divorce can be traumatising and affect whole families for years after the event. Up until now, the legal process by which divorce happens has further exacerbated that trauma, dragging out the process and forcing couples into conflict to assign legal blame. Currently, it is impossible to seek a no-fault divorce unless the couple have been separated for at least two years. To file for divorce more quickly than that, couples must claim unreasonable behaviour or adultery.

The impacts of such a system are devastating, especially for children. Divorce and family breakdown are considered an adverse childhood experience that has lasting impacts on the children. Recently, we have talked about adverse childhood experiences around knife crime, the penal system and policing. I hope and wish, because I am a

member of the all-party group for the prevention of adverse childhood experiences, that the whole approach—the trauma and fault approach—to a lot of services will be much better and more widely understood, and that all 650 MPs in this country will understand what trauma and fault mean. I encourage all hon. Members to attend at least some meetings of our all-party group. Family separation is an adverse childhood experience.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We are all very concerned about the impact on children. The reality of the damage of divorce is manifest, not just in the process, which we are discussing, but primarily in the separation of parents and the subsequent years in which children live torn between them. Does the hon. Lady agree that whenever divorce is granted, there must be greater focus on the children of the break-up?

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman. Throughout the years, we have understood how important it is that we take children seriously and focus a lot on their mental health and wellbeing. I totally agree.

Living through adverse childhood experiences hugely influences the likelihood that a child will end up serving time in our criminal justice system, have poor mental and physical health and find it very difficult to build stable, loving relationships. Our divorce legislation must take that into account and be trauma-informed.

People often come to the decision to divorce at the most chaotic times of their and their families' lives. We must have a system that tries to restore order—not fuel further chaos—and we must absolutely support children throughout that process.

The new legislation, which would allow couples to file for no-fault divorce and complete the process in six months, would leave space for families to continue to function in very difficult circumstances. It would encourage couples to be mindful of their marriage and the impact of divorce, while not pushing them towards further conflict.

Each year, over 100,000 couples get divorced in England and Wales. In the years that have passed since the most recent significant family legislation, over 1.7 million people have assigned blame in the divorce process. Needless to say, this Bill is long overdue.

There is much more that can be done to bring our marriage laws into the 21st century, as the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) said. We must recognise that marriage and civil partnerships are not for everyone and that young people who do get married are doing so later and later. Our legal system needs to catch up with society, in which millions of couples choose to live together without making a formal commitment. The Law Commission suggests granting essential but limited legal rights to couples who have lived together for at least three years. Such legislation would complement the new divorce, dissolution and separation laws, and I urge the Minister to take another look at that proposal.

Family law defines millions of lives, young and old. We have an obligation to ensure that the law is up to date and empowers people, instead of holding them back. Changing the current legislation to focus on reconciliation, as opposed to conflict, is a very positive first step in the process, but there is more to be done.

1.46 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

This is a sensitive subject and I hope to approach it in that way. Divorce can never be easy—not for the parties, nor for the others involved, such as children or the wider family. People who marry do so in the hope that their relationship will be long lasting, but when relationships do break down, often, the impact is devastating for many involved. I will never forget a grandmother coming to see me to make a will—I practised for many years as a solicitor in a community law firm, although never as a family law specialist. She broke down in tears as she told me that, following her son's divorce, she had lost all contact with her grandchildren for years.

However, when couples do stay together and weather the inevitable storms of marriage, the stability that that engenders benefits not just the parties, but their children. Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged that, even where there is an argumentative marriage—as many are—where parents stick together, the stability benefits the children. Indeed, the Lord Chancellor talked about stability benefiting children. The wider community and society benefit, too. Sadly, the UK has one of the highest levels of family breakdown in the developed world, with profound consequences for children's mental health, housing pressures, homelessness, addiction, loneliness in old age, and much more. So, to promote stability, the Government are justified, and have an interest, in helping couples stay together and in counteracting wherever possible the consequences of the high level of relationship breakdown in this country.

Jim Shannon: I fully support what the hon. Lady has put forward. I talked to her beforehand about this subject—indeed, we have talked about it on many occasions—and she and I agree that we see divorce as bad for children. Does she agree that this might minimise some forms of conflict in the short term, but that the long-term negative impact of divorce on children's development and adult wellbeing will become more prevalent as divorce increases? Does she see in her constituency office, as I see in mine, the side effects of divorce and the impact on children?

Fiona Bruce: I do, very much, in many cases. It is that break-up that causes so much hurt. Very often, it is not so much the conflict; in fact, a lot of emerging research shows that the shock of marriage break-up can be greater for children when there has not been conflict in the parents' relationship than when there has been.

I accept that not every marriage can be maintained and that it is sometimes better for one to end. I am also very much aware that many single and separated parents do a brilliant job. However, this Bill not only makes it easier to leave a marriage, but fails to take the opportunity properly to promote reconciliation where that may be possible. It fails to instigate better mediation procedures. At present, mediation procedures do not work well, according to family law practitioners. They need to be much more wisely applied at a more timely point during the legal process. If need be, I shall say more about this at a later stage of the Bill's progress. I sincerely hope that an amendment will be tabled to reflect that need.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): As ever, my hon. Friend is making a thoughtful and compassionate contribution to the debate. I agree with the tenets of the Bill and I slightly disagree with some aspects of her speech. We need to take confrontation out of the break-up process. I certainly agree with her that we need to signpost people towards relationship counselling services. In effect, as part of the trade-off in allowing a more simple, streamlined divorce process, we need to support those who wish to make a success of such counselling.

Fiona Bruce: Absolutely, and that is very much the thrust of what I want to say today. The Government need to do much more to help to strengthen family relationships.

Jim Shannon: I want to make a quick intervention because the hon. Lady mentioned the words “family relationships”. When the Conservative party came to power, one of the policies it pursued at that time—I supported this by the way—was to fix broken Britain. In relation to striking at the institution of marriage, does she feel that this divorce Bill, as it is coming forward, fixes broken Britain, or does it make it worse?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting intervention because the phrase “broken Britain” came from a report by the Centre for Social Justice that was produced a decade or so ago. Sadly, relationship breakdown is even greater now than it was then. I do not believe that successive Governments have put in place policies and procedures to help to strengthen relationships, and this Bill will not do so either. In fact, sadly, I believe it will make divorce easier. Why do I say that? Simply because it will allow one party to walk away from the most important commitment they are likely to have made in their lifetime, without giving any reason at all and without their spouse being able meaningfully to object to their decision to do so. The removal of fault sends out a signal—I am particularly concerned about the signals sent out by the Bill to young people—that marriage can be unilaterally exited, on notice, by one party, with little if any recourse available to the party who has been left. I fear it signals that marriage need no longer be entered into with the intention of its being a lifelong commitment, as it is today—perhaps it will be signalled more as a time-limited arrangement that can be ended at will. Indeed, it is interesting that, in my law firm, I am now hearing the phrase “my current partner” coming into usage.

As I say, the removal of fault, without any opportunity to challenge, means that some who are genuinely wronged—it may be only a tiny number, as the Secretary of State has mentioned—cannot put anything on record on what they feel about the reasons stated for the divorce. The Bill simply says that a court must make a divorce order merely on the bald statement by one party that a marriage has broken down irretrievably.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for taking a further intervention and you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for letting me intervene. Does she accept this concern—I believe it is her concern as well? This change to the divorce law proposes irretrievable breakdown as a sole ground for divorce, but what is actually proposed is unilateral, no-reason divorce. That is what it is about.

Fiona Bruce: That is exactly the point I want to make. I am concerned that, if marriage can be seen as so easily exited, more and more young people will think, “Why bother entering into it at all?” Marriage rates may well, and likely will, further decline.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The hon. Lady has been incredibly generous with her time. She, like I, views marriage through the prism of our faith, but I hope that she recognises that not everyone who engages in marriage sees it that way. They do not see it as a covenant from God. They do not see it in the same way she and I do. May I ask her to reflect on why, where a marriage has broken down, the process should be elongated and why somebody should feel trapped in a marriage in which they are no longer invested? Would she also give some thought to the notion that, when somebody has to give a reason over and above irretrievable breakdown, it leads to the conflict she is seeking to avoid?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman, whom I deeply respect, has made a number of points and I will address particularly the point about conflict in a moment. However, may I first respond to the point about where a marriage may have—so-called—irretrievably broken down?

Despite what the Secretary of State said, I think these proposals will do even less than current procedures to help to promote dialogue and potentially therefore reconciliation. Currently, each year, approximately 10,000 divorces are started and then dropped. Many couples do give their marriage another chance. However, these proposals—in effect, promoting unilateral divorce on demand simply by serving a notice on the other person that the marriage has broken down, without having to give any reason at all and without the spouse being able to contest this should they want to—will, I believe, inhibit the dialogue that could promote reconciliation in some cases.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Wera Hobhouse: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Fiona Bruce: It is a luxury to have the time to do so. I will give way to the hon. Lady first and then to the right hon. Gentleman.

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Lady is very generous and we do have the luxury of a proper debate. Does she not accept that a marriage takes two and the tragedy is always when one side feels something has irretrievably broken down? It is a tragedy, but it is at the heart of why it is difficult to keep something going when one side clearly does not feel they can keep it going. For that reason, this change in the law is very welcome.

Fiona Bruce: I note what the hon. Lady says, but I am saying that we should give more support to the opportunity for dialogue and potential reconciliation—for example, through better mediation services than we currently have.

Sammy Wilson: Whether we view marriage through the prism of faith or simply as an arrangement in which people come together because they wish to be together, does the hon. Lady agree that, with no-fault divorce, the process by which a couple come to the conclusion that

the marriage has irrevocably broken down, has been made so much easier that the full extent of the considerations that ought to be taken before the marriage is broken up will not have been taken? That is why the Bill is flawed.

Fiona Bruce: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. It is that thoughtfulness that I am seeking to preserve. There is something also about the thoughtfulness that goes into preparing for the marriage ceremony, including—to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) about not all marriages being religious—secular ones. There is a thoughtfulness about that ceremony and the public commitment it entails, with the support of friends and relatives who witness it, all of which helps to strengthen the relationship and often enables people to weather the inevitable storms. I am concerned that the thoughtfulness the Bill will extract through the ending of a marriage will denude the necessity, importance or encouragement of the thoughtfulness at the start of and during the relationship.

It is deeply worrying, because at the end of the day, one of the most precious things in life that many if not most of us want is the fulfilment of a loving, enduring relationship. Is the fact that people construct a reason for applying for divorce, as the Minister mentioned, a good enough argument for abandoning altogether the requirement and the thought that has to be put into it?

I am deeply concerned that marriage rates are likely to decline further. Interestingly, that is the conclusion of research drawn on by the authors of “Finding Fault”—the paper the Government rely on heavily in promoting the Bill. The authors of “Finding Fault” choose to ignore that conclusion and instead rely on Professor Justin Wolfers’s study, which cites a 2004 piece of research on other jurisdictions where no-fault divorce has been introduced. They do not quote it, but I shall. The research showed that

“the marriage rate declined by about 3 to 4 percent following the adoption of unilateral divorce laws.”

The likelihood of remarriage is also affected by such laws; according to the research,

“unilateral divorce led remarriage rates of divorcees to decline by around one-third to one-half.”

Jim Shannon: I intervene to back up the hon. Lady’s argument. To make marriage a relationship that one can exit unilaterally simply by saying that one wants out will fundamentally change its nature and undermine the ability of marriage to bring stability to the lives of adults and children. Does she agree that the ethic of marriage embodied in the Bill prioritises individual freedom and liberty, rather than encouraging, as it should, self-giving, sacrifice and commitment?

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman makes a profound point. Without going too far into philosophy and theology, I will say there is something to be gained from the giving as well as the receiving within a marriage. It is difficult to understand why the Government are proposing legislation that will make the fulfilment that can be obtained from that harder to achieve. It is already hard enough for so many young people, with few role models of sustained relationships to look at and with media misconceptions about relationships so prevalent today.

What is truly tragic is that it is the poorest in our society who are not now marrying in great numbers and who are the least resilient when relationships break down. Marriage brings stability. Just one in 11 married couples split before a child’s fifth birthday, compared with one in three unmarried couples. As the Minister says, children benefit from stability. The well-off are still marrying and still benefiting. That is not social justice. Sadly, as the Minister acknowledged, many families will be affected by an immediate increase in divorce rates that even proponents of the Bill accept will inevitably follow the Bill’s passage, as those who currently wait for two or five years opt for a quickie divorce instead. I understand that it could take a decade for the spike to dissipate to our normal rates of divorce—already the highest in Europe—and the heaviest effect will be felt by the children involved.

It is especially concerning that the Government are ignoring the result of their own public consultation on the matter. Of those who responded, 80% did not agree with the proposal to replace the five current grounds for divorce with a six-month notification process; a mere 17% were in favour of the proposals in the Bill. No less than 83% wanted the Government to retain the individual’s right to contest a divorce; only 15% said that that right should be removed. What reason did the Government give for ignoring those responses? It was that the respondents who objected to the proposals did so as a result of a campaign to raise public awareness about the proposals. That is laughable—not just laughable, but deeply worrying. Why should the public bother responding to consultations if they are ignored in this way? Are we in this place not already being ridiculed for ignoring the public’s view on another grave matter?

The tragedy is that the premise on which the Bill is founded—reducing conflict—is a false one. Solicitors specialising in family law tell me that no-fault divorce is no silver bullet to reduce family conflict and acrimony. They say the real source of contention between spouses and ex-spouses is finance and the division of assets. The Bill will do nothing to change that. Indeed, the Government are missing an opportunity in the Bill to tackle some grave injustices in that regard, while creating others. One solicitor who has specialised in family law day in, day out for 25 years says of the Bill:

“It will in my view lead to more not less divorce”

The solicitor continues:

“I have dealt with a lot of cases these last few years where people have done the divorce themselves”

and says the Government are

“trying to make it easier to exclude lawyers—but”

the divorcing couples

“have not sorted out the finances correctly, either by not getting a clean break order (therefore the former spouse can still make a claim years after the divorce) or not sorting finances at all, as a dominant party (usually man) puts pressure on the other to do nothing—often causing that other to be in financial hardship.”

He goes on:

“The issue is and always has been finance in divorce, not the divorce process. No-fault divorce will not solve anything in my view. Instead they should look at ways to provide financial equality in the process of sorting divorce and finances, as it is still often one party who is more able to pay for good legal support. The Financial Services order is supposed to allow the other to

[*Fiona Bruce*]

apply to court forcing the financially stronger to fund both lawyers but in reality the process is...difficult...restricted and doesn't work."

It seems the Government have missed the opportunity to address that problem, too.

Sadly, despite the Minister's words, the proposals will do even less than the current procedures to promote dialogue and potential reconciliation. As I approach the end of my speech—as I said, it is a luxury to be able to speak at the desired length and to take as many interventions as people wish to make—I will quote from the explanatory notes on the Bill. They say:

"The Government's policy intention behind the reformed law is that the decision to divorce should be a considered one, and that separating couples should not be put through legal requirements which do not serve their or the state's interests and which can lead to ongoing conflict and poorer outcomes for children."

Jim Shannon: Is the hon. Lady aware of a story in the press a month or so ago about a father and mother who were divorcing, and when it came to deciding who would have responsibility for the children, neither parent wanted it? Is she as dismayed as I was that neither the father of the children nor their mother wanted anything to do with them? Does that not disappoint her? It disappoints me.

Fiona Bruce: That is heartrending. Words fail me.

Returning to the more prosaic words of the explanatory notes, I remind colleagues of the statements that

"the decision to divorce should be a considered one",

and that

"couples should not be put through legal requirements which do not serve their or the state's interests and which can lead to ongoing conflict and poorer outcomes for children."

In my view, this Bill fails on every one of those counts. As I have explained, it will make divorce not a more considered decision but a less considered one, with no reason needing to be explained. It will do nothing to reduce the ongoing conflict that arises from financial disputes. It will increase divorce rates and reduce marriage rates.

The very recent Centre for Social Justice report on families leads me to the inevitable conclusion that the Bill will not serve the state's interests and that it will lead to poorer outcomes for children. Time prohibits me from quoting much of the excellent and well-evidenced research in the report, but I will simply quote from it as follows. It concludes:

"Marriage leads to better life outcomes for children. Marriage promotes stability. Children of married parents are more likely to achieve at school, have better mental health, less likely to use drink and drugs and less likely to get involved in offending behaviour."

As I said at the outset, there are always exceptions to every such statement, and I repeat that many single and separated parents do an excellent job. Having said that, however, divorce can be deeply hurtful and costly for those involved, for their children and for wider society. It is already at epidemic levels. The Bill will make it worse. The Government should be actively seeking to strengthen family relationships, not weaken them.

2.10 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker—Mr Deputy Speaker. That was, perhaps, a Freudian slip.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Move on!

Robert Neill: It is a pleasure, as always, to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). She made a heartfelt speech. I know that this is a matter on which she feels very strongly. It is an issue to which I myself have given considerable thought. It is sensitive and important, particularly for those who have a faith and regard marriage as a sacrament as well as a legal contract.

I look at this issue from the point of view of someone who happens to be a practising Anglican, as someone who has for 25 or 30 years been a practising lawyer—not predominantly in the field of family law, although I did practise family law to some degree in my earlier days—as someone who served as a councillor in a local authority, and as someone who has the honour of serving as Chair of the Justice Committee. I have had the chance to see the issue from a number of points of view and I have come to a different conclusion from my hon. Friend. I do not say that with any disrespect for the strength or genuineness of her feeling; I am just persuaded, on balance, that the Secretary of State is right and that the evidence points quite clearly to this being an appropriate and necessary reform.

As Chair of the Justice Committee, I have had the opportunity to engage with leading members of the judiciary, particularly, in this context, with those of the family division. It is the overwhelming view of family practitioners, including solicitors, barristers and senior judges, that the current arrangements, which require fault to be used as a proof of irretrievable breakdown, do not work satisfactorily and do not achieve what is ultimately the necessary objective of enabling people whose marriage has sadly broken down irretrievably—I suspect that none of us want that to happen when we embark on a marriage, but it does happen in some cases—to leave their marriage with a measure of dignity and to do so in a way that enables the important issue of financial fairness to be resolved, and, in the case of children, to enable civilised and caring arrangements to be made for them and their children. That, ultimately, must be the chief and principal objective.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend gets to the heart of the matter: the fault aspect. What persuades me is that the requirement to assign fault can itself be a polluting element within the divorce or separation process. It may actually make what could be a more amicable separation more poisonous and more difficult when it comes to discussing other matters such as finance.

Robert Neill: I agree and that was certainly my experience as a lawyer. That is the experience of the majority of practitioners and the majority of the judiciary to whom I have spoken. When I started my practice at the Bar, the Divorce Reform Act 1969 was comparatively recent and the law was developing. There was an issue then and it has remained a constant. There is an underlying risk of tension and antagonism in the course of family proceedings, which spill on from the divorce itself into the proceedings thereafter, which, for the future, are

very often much more important. I very much take on board the point my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton makes about the value to society of stable marriages—indeed, the value to society of stable relationships of any kind. If I thought that the Bill would seriously harm that, I would take a different view towards it, but I do not think that and the evidence does not suggest that that is the case either.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I strongly support the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's argument and I strongly support the Bill. I am very sorry I was not here for the earlier speeches. All the representations I have received from the legal profession support the Bill. I was a practising solicitor, but I did not do matrimonial law. My daughter does and she strongly supports the Bill. I think it is overdue and I will be strongly supporting it today.

Robert Neill: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have to say that from my own limited experience and from speaking to those who continue to practise, no area of law is perhaps more sensitive or more emotionally draining—not just for the parties, but for the practitioners who seek to advise them and the judiciary who sit on these cases—than family work. It is inevitably stressful and we ought to have a system that reduces stress, rather than makes it greater.

The evidence from other comparators also shows that the Bill is an advantage to the overall social objective and that some concerns are not justified. It is suggested that the Bill imports into law a concept of unilateral no-fault divorce. That is not strictly correct. It is currently the case that after two years of separation with consent or five years without consent, divorce can be granted without any allegation of misconduct. The truth is, as I will refer to later and as Sir Paul Coleridge, the chairman of the Marriage Foundation and a former High Court judge of the family division himself observed, that that does not keep up to date with the way people now change and move on with their lives. It certainly does not reflect my experience, and the experience of most people, that the divorce petition comes at the end of the breakdown of a relationship, not the beginning. Time and again, I have seen that with people who come to my surgery, with court cases I have been involved in or observed, and, as most of us have, with friends and acquaintances—people we know—where it has been the end of a sad and painful process that ultimately leads to the conclusion that the marriage is no longer sustainable and they want to move on. We ought to help them to be able to do that. My experience has certainly been that divorce is not undertaken lightly and I think the Secretary of State is right to recognise that.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the sacrament of marriage is made stronger or weaker by the passing of the Bill?

Robert Neill: As an Anglo-Catholic, I take the hon. Gentleman's point about the sacrament strongly, but I do not believe, in societal terms, that it makes very much difference. In truth, many marriages are not entered into in a religious context. The weight that is placed on the sacrament, even with those of faith, may vary. Perhaps it should not, but I think that is the reality. For those for whom it is important, it will be a difficult personal decision, as it has been for friends of mine for whom the end of their marriage was very

difficult indeed. None the less, they thought it was appropriate to recognise what had happened and to make a break. It is a profound point for those of faith, but I do not think it is an argument against the Bill, as I think the hon. Gentleman agrees.

We also have to bear in mind the suggestion that there might be manipulation of a vulnerable party. I take that seriously and it has been raised by a couple of constituents of mine who think carefully and closely about these matters. However, my experience and all the evidence seem to suggest that the greatest risk of manipulation and pressure being put on a vulnerable party is during the period when the marriage has broken down and people have to wait perhaps for two or five years, especially if, as hon. Members have observed, they are obliged for financial or childcare reasons—or a mixture of both—to continue to live under the same roof. That is the point at which the vulnerable party is often most at risk.

It is perhaps significant that the study, "Finding Fault?", points out that, at the moment, the system is to some degree "manipulated" by fault being used as a ground to speed up divorce. It is not that the marriage has not broken down, but that it is quicker for someone to get divorced if they allege fault than if they wait two or five years. That can have perverse consequences: people have to say hurtful things against the party with whom they are still living and attempting to bring up their children, so that they can speed up the divorce that they both know is inevitable. I cannot see how that benefits society or, for those of us to whom this is important, a Christian ethos for that family.

Julian Knight: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct and makes another persuasive point, because it means that a divorce is based on a lie. Frankly, we should not have any lies in a legal process. Years ago, I remember reading Evelyn Waugh's "A Handful of Dust", in which a character has to abscond to Brighton, seemingly with a woman, to provide the grounds for a divorce. This stuff is from 40 or 50 years ago and is nonsense. We need a bit more honesty in the process.

Robert Neill: I take my hon. Friend's point. My pupil master, when I started at the Bar, had practised in divorce work under precisely those arrangements prior to the 1969 Act. They used to get what was called "ordinary hotel evidence", which was an affidavit from the chambermaid or the waiter, who happened to have taken breakfast in bed to a couple. That was a pretty demeaning way of having to go through a legal process and it was rightly got rid of, but at the time, people genuinely thought that that might undermine marriage. It did not, of course, but that is the sort of thing that we have all recognised we need to move on from, and this is just a further adjustment.

There is another serious point about the inability of a party who feels aggrieved by the behaviour of their husband or spouse, who might have left them, to have the ground on the record. With respect, that misunderstands the legal test, which has always been, and continues to be, that the marriage has irretrievably broken down. That is not changed by the Bill. The question of behaviour and conduct is relevant only as one of the facts that is relied upon to support the ground for divorce, which is the irretrievable breakdown of the marriage. Moving to

[Robert Neill]

a single approach to that—the service of the petition, or the application—simplifies that and does not change the legal test.

Although it is tempting to think that an aggrieved party can get their hurt and concern on the record, it is not relevant as a matter of law because there is no causal connection between the conduct and the ground for the dissolution of marriage, and there never has been since the 1969 Act came into force. It also has the detrimental effect of creating a much more antagonistic attitude, because, first, there is good evidence that people game the system and will exaggerate behaviour to speed up the divorce, and secondly, this clouds the subsequent relationship as parties work out the consequences of the breakdown for finance and families.

It is important that the financial protections for a vulnerable party are specifically preserved under paragraph 10 of the schedule to the Bill, which maintains the existing arrangements. For those concerned about this, it is worth noting that in making a determination on financial arrangements,

“the court must consider all the circumstances including...the age, health, conduct, earning capacity, financial resources and financial obligations of each of the parties to the marriage”.

The suggestion that the change in any way undermines the protection for a vulnerable spouse during a divorce is simply not borne out by that measure, which preserves in the Bill exactly the same test that we have in the current law. I hope that that reassures people who are understandably concerned about that point.

That leads me to my final point, which my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) rightly raised: we cannot really justify a legal process that encourages people to be untruthful. That is what is happening and what has been attested to by the judiciary at the highest level. The late, much missed Sir Nicholas Wall, the former president of the family division, spoke on this during his tenure in office. His successor, Sir James Munby, one of the most experienced family division judges of his time, has spoken very bluntly about a system that involved hypocrisy and a “lack of intellectual honesty”. To go back to my hon. Friend’s point, Sir James referred to the “‘hotel divorce’ charades” that had been played out in the past. If there is collusion, it is the collusion that is sometimes needed by parties to invent conduct to speed up the divorce rather than waiting two or five years. Somebody may, for whatever reason—because the marriage has been breaking down for a long time—already have a new partner and there may be a new family on the way. One may or may not approve of that, but it is a reality of the world, and we have to have a justice system that recognises it and enables the best outcomes for that world rather than creating an obstacle.

Lady Hale, the president of the Supreme Court, said that the system is misleading because, as she put it, the “fact used as the peg on which to hang the divorce petition may not bear any relationship to the real reason why the marriage broke down”.

If we are going to tackle marriage breakdown, as I believe we should, we should put the emphasis and resource into intervening much earlier to prevent the breakdown and not to involve a charade, in some cases, at the end of the divorce arrangements. I agree very much with the observations on that from my hon.

Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who is not in her place. I would also make the case that if there is an area where funding can be made available to restore elements of legal aid, compelling evidence to the Justice Committee has suggested that early advice on family matters should perhaps be the highest priority for its use. I know that the Secretary of State is someone who will be driven by the evidence when he considers those matters.

The person who perhaps clinches it for me—this is important because of his background—is Sir Paul Coleridge, to whom I have already referred. For many years, he was a family division judge, who practised throughout his professional career in family division work. He is also a practising Christian. Against that dual background, he has come to the view that the law requires reform and that the removal of the fault requirement would be a positive benefit and an advantage. He supports the change on that basis. He said that nowadays, most regard the delays under the current system as

“an intolerable block on their ability to move on with their lives. So to get around the delay they invent allegations to satisfy the court and enable it to turn a blind eye to what is really going on.”

Sir Paul also tackles the issue of divorce rates. He says:

“Since 1970 the divorce rate has fluctuated”—

he practised for a great deal of that time—

“For some periods it has gone up and for other periods, including now, it has dropped. There is simply no discernible connection between the type of divorce process and the rate of family breakdown. The two are unconnected.”

I have been driven by the evidence to agree with him. I hope that we make much more effort to deal with family breakdown, but changing the process is not going alter that situation.

Sir Paul also says:

“We now have a system that drives people to lie to the court if they are not prepared to wait for two years or longer. That is wrong.”

That must be right. He ended what I think was a very thoughtful piece with the following remark:

“An intelligent process to end unsustainable marriage is good for the reinvigoration of the most important social arrangement yet devised for mankind.”

That is a broad and Christian view of the matter, and a socially and legally informed one, and I commend it to the House. It is the reason I support the Bill.

2.30 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): This debate has seen considered and valuable contributions. There have been many points of agreement across the House—and obviously some differences.

I thank all Members who participated, starting with the hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), who is not in her place. She talked about the importance of marriage while recognising the challenges, issues and realities when people get married and things go wrong. She referred to the 50:50 rule for dividing property, about which there is some misunderstanding. As I understand it, from the many years I studied family law, the 50:50 rule applies to people with long-lasting marriages—30 or 40 years—and maybe several children. Often with short marriages, the rule does not apply. The crux of her argument, however, was that marriage is important but that things can go wrong.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about the importance of the Bill and why the law needs to change.

I thank the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who earnestly talked about the importance and stability of marriage for people and children. I know she holds these views very dearly, as do many across the country and the House. I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his many contributions in the form of interventions.

Finally, I cannot finish without mentioning the hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill), the Chair of the Justice Committee, who, with all his different hats on, gave a very considered speech about why the Bill is necessary. He made the particularly important point that many people were having to exaggerate, lie or invent fault to be able to expedite a divorce. We should not be making our citizens do these things.

In an era when we better understand the complexities of human relationships and the freedom that people deserve to decide how they live their lives, it is clear to most of us that the old and outdated divorce rules need to change. That was crystallised and highlighted by the case of *Owens v. Owens*, to which the shadow Lord Chancellor and the Chair of the Select Committee referred. Mrs Owens asked for a decree nisi, which was not granted, even though the Supreme Court accepted that the marriage had irretrievably broken down. The law said that there had to be an attribution of fault to one of the parties, so the law as it stood did not allow the marriage to be finished. Subsequently, the then president of the family division, Sir James Munby, said that this aspect of law and procedure was based on “hypocrisy and a lack of intellectual honesty”.

The Supreme Court also said that it was not for the judiciary or the courts to change the law but for Parliament. I am pleased that Parliament is debating this and that the law will be changed for the betterment of all.

As the Nuffield Foundation put it, the reliance on fault and blame as a key pillar of divorce law is “at odds with the thrust of wider reforms in the family justice system, which have focussed on reducing conflict and promoting resolution”.

We understand that 1.7 million people currently use fault to get a divorce when fault is not the reality. Given that 90% of family lawyers represented by Resolution say that the current law makes it harder to reduce conflict between ex-partners and that 69% of the public are in favour of no-fault divorce, the time is right to change this archaic rule.

I would, however, like to raise some omissions from the Bill and to hear what the Lord Chancellor has to say. Divorce procedure is just one part of the wide tapestry of our legal system. As has been raised in debate with Ministers, this tapestry is fraying due to decisions made by their party over the past decade. The reforms we have discussed today are welcome attempts to reduce unnecessary conflict and prevent needless emotional stress for divorcing couples and their children, but in other areas of justice and family policy this does not seem to be an issue of concern for the Government.

The deep cuts to legal aid mean that the legal representation required to reach the right divorce settlement will be available only to those with the funds to pay for it. A lack of legal support makes it difficult for people to understand the intricacies of important changes such

as these and therefore will reduce the positive impact of the no-fault divorce procedure, which we welcome today. Did the Lord Chancellor agree with the Law Society when it said the Government should, alongside these reforms, reintroduce legal aid for early legal advice to support divorcing couples and help them to reach the best possible settlements for themselves and their children?

Ian C. Lucas: I strongly support what my hon. Friend is saying to the Lord Chancellor. One of the major concerns I hear in my constituency surgeries is about individuals seeking advice concerning contact with children and matrimonial proceedings. It is a very emotive subject, as we heard earlier in the debate, and needs to be addressed.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend for that helpful intervention. I hope the Lord Chancellor was listening to that and to everything else we are saying on the Opposition Benches.

More could be done in the Bill to support the most-at-risk people seeking a divorce. The Bill does not remove the bar on petitioning for divorce in the first year of marriage, despite charities and campaigners pointing to the impact this will have on victims of domestic abuse. We know that big life events such as marriage or pregnancy are hotspots for abuse and controlling behaviour to begin or increase. That first year of marriage is for some not a honeymoon period but a nightmare. It is clear that in 2019 we should not be trapping people in potentially dangerous situations because of an outdated law that does not give people the agency to get themselves out. Can the Lord Chancellor explain the rationale for this omission?

Overall, we welcome the reform, but we urge the Government to put this progressive shift into the context of the wider changes required to our justice system. There is so much more to do to ensure that anyone going through a tough time, such as a divorce or other conflict, has a positive and fair experience while seeking justice. I hope that the Minister, when he responds, will deal with some of the questions we have raised. That said, this is a very welcome Bill, which is why the Opposition support it.

2.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Paul Maynard): I am greatly encouraged by the quality of the debate that we have had today and by the broad support that the Bill has received from Members on both sides of the House. I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and for Solihull (Julian Knight), the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for their support.

The Bill is intended to help to heal family relationships when division has become unavoidable. No one, of course, seeks such an outcome. Few stand at the altar, or before a registrar, contemplating an ending rather than a beginning—“till death do us part” remains the golden thread of marital aspirations—but such is the flawed and fragile nature of human relationships that it can never be avoided altogether.

I know that all Members have families’ interests at heart. I know, too, that we share a belief in the vital importance of the commitment that marriage and civil partnerships bring, not only to couples and their families

[*Paul Maynard*]

but to the wider wellbeing of our society. However, I am keenly aware that we arrive at that belief on the basis of different views and experiences.

I recognise that some Members have misgivings about the Bill. I should confess, as a Catholic myself, that when the Secretary of State presented me with it six weeks ago, I took rather a large gulp. What could I, a good Catholic boy, do with a divorce reform Bill? But the more I studied the Bill and looked at it carefully, the more I saw a civil and human measure that sought to lessen acrimony and create space for reflection. The misgivings that people have, however, are no less a part of the debate, and I am grateful to the Members who have voiced their concern as well as those who have expressed their support.

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Paul Maynard: I will happily do so, briefly.

Karl Turner: I am very grateful to the Minister, not least because I have only just come into the Chamber.

I congratulate the Government on introducing this incredibly important Bill. I also pay tribute to Philip Marshall QC, my colleague at the Bar, who has campaigned on the issue of no-fault divorce for many years. Does the Minister agree, however, that we must not only pass this important Bill, but reintroduce legal aid so that couples who are considering divorce can be advised by solicitors at an early stage? That saves a lot of money in the long run, and it is much better for the entire family.

Paul Maynard: I may well deal with that point briefly later in my speech.

It is worth pointing out that the breakdown of a marriage and the legal process of divorce that comes after it are two very different things. There was a time when the only legal exit from a marriage demanded an act of adultery, but that never stood in the way of anyone walking out on anyone else, and the law as it stands today does not prevent it either. There are general protections for respondents and vulnerable parties in any proceedings, and those will remain. We are also extending to all respondents the ability to apply for the final order to be delayed while the court considers their financial position following divorce.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) raised a number of important points. I am not unsympathetic to her wider agenda on support for families, and I look forward to meeting her and, indeed, Lord Farmer in the coming weeks to discuss their manifesto for families. She will be aware of our reducing parental conflict programme, to which £39 million has been allocated, our troubled families programme, and many other initiatives across government. I take on board her point that we need to do far more to support relationships further upstream, because we do not wish to reach a point at which relationships fall apart unnecessarily. I also take the point made by many Members on both sides of the House about the need to reform the finances of divorce, but I consider that to be a much greater issue than can be contained in this Bill. It is highly complex, and there is, as yet, no consensus. However, we recognise that it is an issue that will need to be discussed at some point.

The hon. Member for Bath rightly mentioned adverse childhood experiences. What she said went to the nub of why I believe the Bill to be a humane measure. At the end of the day, children often bear the brunt of the unpleasantness that divorce can cause, and we do not wish to add to that unpleasantness by ensuring that the divorce process is dragged out or becomes more acrimonious than it needs to be.

Many Members have expressed concern about so-called unilateral divorce. We should bear in mind that as marriage is a voluntary union of two people, the moment one person decides that the marriage is over, it is indeed over. The current divorce laws do not prevent unilateral divorce. Only about 2% of divorces are contested, many owing to the mistaken belief that attributing fault can somehow prevent the divorce from occurring. Indeed, when a divorce is contested, the only reasonable option is to prove that there was some flaw in the validity of the marriage originally. It is important to bear in mind what the law actually does, rather than what we might seek to believe that it can do.

I hear the points made by the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and others about legal aid. Legal aid remains available to those who need it, such as victims of domestic abuse. It also remains available for mediation when couples are in dispute about finances or child arrangements, which provides a non-litigious route to resolving issues and helping families to move forward constructively. I also hear the point about the bar on the dissolution of marriages in the first year. The remedy for domestic abuse remains a range of proactive orders that the court can make, including non-molestation and occupation orders. We hope that those will include the domestic abuse protection orders referred to in our draft Domestic Abuse Bill.

We have heard from many stakeholders—a wide range of third parties—who take an interest in these issues and who support the measures that the Government are taking, including, as was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst, the chair of the Marriage Foundation, Sir Paul Coleridge.

The Bill will not, in my view, make divorce more common. It will not make divorce any easier, and it will certainly not make divorce any quicker: the 26-week period will remain in place. However, it may make divorce less acrimonious, and for that reason alone I think it is a worthwhile Bill on which to embark. Divorce and dissolution will happen regardless of how the legal processes effecting them operate, because the irretrievable breakdown of some marriages and civil partnerships is, unfortunately, inevitable. The Bill deals with that reality with the minimum of acrimony by creating the conditions that will allow people to move forward and agree arrangements for the future in an orderly and constructive way, and for that reason I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

DIVORCE, DISSOLUTION AND SEPARATION BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 4 July 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading

(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Question agreed to.

DIVORCE, DISSOLUTION AND SEPARATION BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Divorce, Dissolution and Separation Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Lord Chancellor or the Secretary of State.—(*Rebecca Harris.*)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

VALUE ADDED TAX

That the Value Added Tax (Reduced Rate) (Energy-Saving Materials) Order 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 958), dated 21 May 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 21 May, be approved.—
(*Rebecca Harris.*)

The House divided: Ayes 247, Noes 209.

Division No. 424]

[2.48 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Brokenshire, rh James
Afolami, Bim	Bruce, Fiona
Afriyie, Adam	Buckland, Robert
Aldous, Peter	Burns, Conor
Amess, Sir David	Burt, rh Alistair
Andrew, Stuart	Cairns, rh Alun
Argar, Edward	Cartledge, James
Atkins, Victoria	Cash, Sir William
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi	Caulfield, Maria
Barclay, rh Stephen	Chalk, Alex
Baron, Mr John	Chishti, Rehman
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Churchill, Jo
Benyon, rh Richard	Clark, Colin
Berry, Jake	Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Blackman, Bob	Clarke, Mr Simon
Bone, Mr Peter	Cleverly, James
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Bowie, Andrew	Costa, Alberto
Bradley, Ben	Courts, Robert
Brereton, Jack	Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Bridgen, Andrew	Crabb, rh Stephen
Brine, Steve	Crouch, Tracey

Davies, Glyn	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Davies, Mims	Jenkyns, Andrea
Davies, Philip	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Davis, rh Mr David	Johnson, Gareth
Dinenage, Caroline	Jones, Andrew
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan	Jones, rh Mr David
Docherty, Leo	Jones, Mr Marcus
Dodds, rh Nigel	Kawczynski, Daniel
Donelan, Michelle	Keegan, Gillian
Dowden, Oliver	Kennedy, Seema
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Kerr, Stephen
Drax, Richard	Knight, rh Sir Greg
Duguid, David	Knight, Julian
Duncan, rh Sir Alan	Kwarteng, Kwasi
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Lamont, John
Dunne, rh Mr Philip	Leadsom, rh Andrea
Ellis, Michael	Lee, Dr Phillip
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias	Lefroy, Jeremy
Elphicke, Charlie	Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Evennett, rh Sir David	Lewer, Andrew
Fabricant, Michael	Lewis, rh Brandon
Ford, Vicky	Lidington, rh Mr David
Foster, Kevin	Lopez, Julia
Frazer, Lucy	Lopresti, Jack
Freeman, George	Loughton, Tim
Freer, Mike	Maclean, Rachel
Fysh, Mr Marcus	Main, Mrs Anne
Garnier, Mark	Mak, Alan
Gauke, rh Mr David	Mann, Scott
Ghani, Ms Nusrat	Masterton, Paul
Gibb, rh Nick	Maynard, Paul
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl	McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
Girvan, Paul	McPartland, Stephen
Glen, John	McVey, rh Ms Esther
Goldsmith, Zac	Menzies, Mark
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert	Merriman, Huw
Gove, rh Michael	Metcalfe, Stephen
Graham, Luke	Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Graham, Richard	Milling, Amanda
Grant, Bill	Mills, Nigel
Gray, James	Milton, rh Anne
Green, Chris	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Green, rh Damian	Mordaunt, rh Penny
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Morgan, rh Nicky
Griffiths, Andrew	Morris, Anne Marie
Gyimah, Mr Sam	Morris, James
Halfon, rh Robert	Morton, Wendy
Hall, Luke	Mundell, rh David
Hammond, rh Mr Philip	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Hammond, Stephen	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Hancock, rh Matt	Neill, Robert
Hands, rh Greg	Newton, Sarah
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Nokes, rh Caroline
Harrington, Richard	Norman, Jesse
Harris, Rebecca	O'Brien, Neil
Harrison, Trudy	Offord, Dr Matthew
Hayes, rh Sir John	Opperman, Guy
Heald, rh Sir Oliver	Paisley, Ian
Heappey, James	Parish, Neil
Heaton-Harris, Chris	Patel, rh Priti
Heaton-Jones, Peter	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Henderson, Gordon	Penning, rh Sir Mike
Hinds, rh Damian	Penrose, John
Hoare, Simon	Percy, Andrew
Hollingbery, George	Philp, Chris
Hollinrake, Kevin	Pincher, rh Christopher
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Poulter, Dr Dan
Huddleston, Nigel	Prentis, Victoria
Hughes, Eddie	Prisk, Mr Mark
Hurd, rh Mr Nick	Pursglove, Tom
James, Margot	Quin, Jeremy
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Quince, Will

Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Ross, Douglas
 Rowley, Lee
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Sandbach, Antoinette
 Scully, Paul
 Seely, Mr Bob
 Selous, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe (*Proxy vote cast by Jo Churchill*)
 Smith, rh Julian
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, rh Rory
 Streeter, Sir Gary
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian

Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Swire, rh Sir Hugo
 Syms, Sir Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Thomson, Ross
 Throup, Maggie
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, rh Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Watling, Giles
 Wheeler, Mrs Heather
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Matt Warman and
 Mr Alister Jack**

NOES

Allen, Heidi
 Amesbury, Mike
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Ashworth, Jonathan
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Barron, rh Sir Kevin
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Gavin Shuker*)
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blackford, rh Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Brabin, Tracy
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, Lyn
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Buck, Ms Karen
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Butler, Dawn
 Cable, rh Sir Vince
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Carden, Dan
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chapman, Jenny
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Cherry, Joanna
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, Julie

Cooper, Rosie
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cryer, John
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Daby, Janet
 Davies, Geraint
 Davies, Philip
 Day, Martyn
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Drew, Dr David
 Dromey, Jack
 Duffield, Rosie
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Eagle, Maria
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Elliott, Julie
 Elmore, Chris
 Esterson, Bill
 Farron, Tim
 Fellows, Marion
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Forbes, Lisa
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Furniss, Gill
 Gaffney, Hugh
 Gapes, Mike

Gardiner, Barry
 George, Ruth
 Gibson, Patricia
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Glendon, Mary
 Godsiff, Mr Roger
 Grady, Patrick
 Grant, Peter
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Grogan, John
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hanson, rh David
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hermon, Lady
 Hill, Mike
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hollern, Kate
 Hosie, Stewart
 Howarth, rh Sir George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham P.
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, rh Mr Kevan
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Laird, Lesley
 Law, Chris
 Lee, Karen
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lloyd, Tony
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Marsden, Gordon
 Martin, Sandy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Matheson, Christian
 McCabe, Steve
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McMahan, Jim
 Mearns, Ian
 Monaghan, Carol
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Newlands, Gavin

Norris, Alex
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Owen, Albert
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillipson, Bridget
 Pidcock, Laura
 Pollard, Luke
 Pound, Stephen
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Pat McFadden*)
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Rodda, Matt
 Rowley, Danielle
 Ruane, Chris
 Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sherriff, Paula
 Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip (*Proxy vote cast by Vicky Foxcroft*)
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Smeeth, Ruth
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Eleanor
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spellar, rh John
 Starmer, rh Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Stone, Jamie
 Streeting, Wes
 Sweeney, Mr Paul
 Tami, rh Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Trickett, Jon
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Stephen
 Twist, Liz
 Umunna, Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walker, Thelma
 Western, Matt
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Dr Paul
 Wishart, Pete
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Wragg, Mr William
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Noes:
 Thangam Debonnaire and
 Jeff Smith**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Petition

Closure of Heywood Crown Post Office

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) is very consumed by the graphic image on her iPad, but the more immediate matter is that of her petition.

3.3 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I do apologise, Mr Speaker. I was distracted.

I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Heywood and Middleton. The petition notes the vital services that Crown post offices provide to their communities, particularly in towns such as ours with only one surviving bank branch and where the post office provides vital access to financial services.

The Post Office proposes to move Heywood post office from its current location and to franchise the service to an as-yet unopened retail unit in a currently vacant shop in the town, leading to the fears that, should the new shop fail, the post office branch will also be lost. This petition, which has received 1,450 signatures, expresses concern that this move will adversely affect jobs, quality of service and accessibility, and will have a negative impact on Heywood town centre.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Heywood and Middleton,

Declares that Crown Post Offices provide a vital service to their communities; further that Post Office Limited propose to close Heywood Post Office and to franchise the service to a local retailer; further that there is concern that this will adversely affect jobs, quality of service, and accessibility, and have a negative impact on Heywood town centre; and further that a local paper petition and online petition on this matter has received signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and Post Office Limited to keep Heywood Post Office open at its current location.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002479]

Parental Involvement in Teaching: Equality Act

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

3.5 pm

Mr Roger Godsiff (Birmingham, Hall Green) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the opportunity to raise the important issue of parental involvement in primary school pupils learning about the Equality Act, which was passed in 2010. The Act, which I welcomed, supported and voted for, has nine protected characteristics: age; disability; gender assignment; marriage and civil partnerships; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation. Accompanying the words of the Act is guidance, and the “Sex and Relationship Education Guidance 2000” is also referred to and relevant. In particular, paragraph 1.13 states:

“In the early primary school years, education about relationships needs to focus on friendship, bullying and the building of self-esteem.”

Paragraph 1.31 further states:

“Sexual orientation and what is taught in schools is an area of concern for some parents. Schools that liaise closely with parents when developing their sex and relationship education policy and programme should be able to reassure parents of the content of the programme and the context in which it will be presented.”

The Children and Social Work Act 2017, which I supported and voted for, puts relationships and sex education on a statutory footing and requires all primary schools to teach age-appropriate relationship education.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I recently read a post that said:

“It’s not about homosexuality, heterosexuality or transsexuality—stop promoting sexuality to our children full stop. Let kids be kids.”

We need to protect the innocence of our children at all costs, and I believe that this is not only a parent’s right but their duty and their job. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that to prevent that by enforcing teaching against the will of a parent is not acceptable in any way, shape or form?

Mr Godsiff: I will deal with that later.

The relationships and sex education set out in the Children and Social Work Act does not come in until September 2020, although primary schools can introduce it a year earlier. There was also draft guidance on how the Act should be implemented, and I supported and voted for the statutory instrument associated with that guidance. This legislation builds on the provisions of the Equality Act and, although it has relevance, as I shall explain later, it is the Equality Act and the nine protected characteristics that I shall be talking about today, not least because that is quoted by the headteacher of the school in my constituency where the controversy has arisen.

The Equality Act does not require primary schools to actively teach the nine characteristics. According to the guidance accompanying the Act,

“schools are free to include a full range of issues, ideas and materials in their syllabus, and to expose pupils to thoughts and ideas of all kinds, however challenging or controversial, without fear of legal challenge based on a protected characteristic.”

[Mr Godsiff]

I support and welcome the guidance, but therein lies a problem. In Birmingham, there are 258 primary schools. Thirty-nine are in my constituency. Some are local authority-maintained, others are part of academy chains, but that is pretty irrelevant in the context of this debate. In many of the 256—not 258—schools, headteachers introduce pupils to what is in the Equality Act in ways that they believe meet the requirements of the guidance. Recognising that some of the nine characteristics may pose challenges for communities who have more conservative social attitudes, and taking into account the demographic composition of their own school, they have chosen to engage with their parents to explain the nine characteristics. They hold workshops about the individual characteristics and ongoing consultations with parents, showing them the type of materials that the school proposes to use, and they engage with parents about what age is most appropriate for the various characteristics to be introduced to pupils.

That seems eminently sensible to me, and it seems to be in line with references in the Children and Social Work Act and the draft guidance, which refers to “age appropriateness” in the context of religious background and the need for ongoing consultations. I unreservedly support and applaud those 256 headteachers, and parents are overwhelmingly supportive because there has been no appreciable backlash by parents at those schools.

At two schools, however, there has been a major reaction among parents that has become increasingly bitter and polarised. One of the schools is in my constituency, and the other is in an adjoining constituency represented by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood).

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): What does the hon. Gentleman think has caused the crisis at this moment, given what he said about other schools where this has not been an issue? I would suggest that it is due to at least two individuals of whom I am aware, who have been whipping this up, creating a myth and creating fear. This issue has never been raised by any of my schools or constituents. I represent a diverse constituency, as he does, yet both the individuals involved in the Birmingham process have recently arrived in Cardiff, and I suddenly began to receive emails referring to the English education system, rather than the Welsh. Does he think that that is a coincidence, and why it has become an issue now, but not in areas in the rest of the country that are equally diverse?

Mr Godsiff: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I cannot give him an answer because I can only refer to what is happening in Birmingham. I shall continue to refer to that.

In a Westminster Hall debate on 25 February, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood referred to the fact that parents were complaining that there had been no consultation whatever about how the nine protected characteristics were being imparted to children and that children, some as young as four or five, were telling parents about what they allegedly had been taught in lessons. That caused the parents considerable concern. At the school in my constituency, a similar situation occurred. There was no consultation with

parents. The headteacher made it plain that no consultation was going to take place and no collective meetings with parents were held. She said that she or her deputy would meet individual parents on a “one-to-one” basis to listen to their concerns, but when such meetings took place the same answer was always given—namely, that the school was only carrying out the Equality Act.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: I have already given way on a couple of occasions. [Interruption.] Well, the hon. Member will have plenty of time to make a speech, because this debate could go on until 7 o'clock.

Understandably, some parents were unhappy with the response and felt that the school had no regard for their concerns.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: I have made it clear that I am not giving way.

The parents therefore had their own meeting and, after asking the brother of one parent who is in the property business and is well educated and articulate, to be the co-ordinator, they began their protests, on which I will touch in a minute. The common theme that links these two schools is that parents at both schools were neither consulted nor involved in how the nine protected characteristics were to be imparted to children. Parents were excluded entirely from the process, although the Equality Act is not an exam subject, for example, like English or mathematics.

All schools call regular meetings of parents when they want to inform them about important issues. It is part and parcel of school life for regular meetings to take place with parents, but no meetings with parents were held at the two schools.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Will he give way?

Mr Godsiff: I will not.

The question that those who have sought to characterise the disputes at both schools as a clash of cultures should be asking is, what have the headteachers and their staff at 256 primary schools got right with the support of their parents, while in two schools it seems to have gone very wrong? I turn briefly to the protests outside the school in my constituency.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Godsiff: No, I will not.

The school is in an area with a very large Muslim population. Nearly all the children who attend are from Muslim families. When the protests began outside the school in my constituency I did not take sides or make public comment. I took the view that parents of young children do not protest against their child's school unless they have some grievance. Parents protest against many things, including the Government and the local council, but to protest against their child's school is rare, and there has to be some particular reason for it.

I went and saw the headteacher. I asked questions and put suggestions to her. I have deliberately not put her responses in the public domain, because I believe that if I had done so it would have inflamed the situation, but I did tell the leader of the council what they were. Three officials from the Department for Education were present, and they took detailed notes, which presumably were conveyed to the Minister. I have known the headteacher for a number of years, and I respect her academic achievements at the school, which follow the excellent work initiated by the previous head, Anne Bufton, at the school. Before leaving the meeting with the headteacher, I did say that if she or her staff felt threatened by the protests outside the school then she should apply for a restraint injunction to get them moved elsewhere, and I explained to her the procedure for doing that. No such injunction was sought until more than a month later.

I then invited, through my Muslim assistant, the leaders of the protest to come and see me at my house. I was shown copies of letters written to the headteacher expressing their concerns, which were not replied to. I saw statements from parents saying that the headteacher would not have a parents meeting, but would talk to parents only on a one-to-one basis. I saw statements saying that, when such meetings took place, the individual parents were told that what the school was doing was the Equality Act. I saw letters and statements that, time and again, emphasised that the protesters—mostly young mothers—were not seeking to undermine the Equality Act, not least because it protected Muslims from Islamophobic criticism, and that all they were asking for was meaningful consultation about what was the appropriate age for the nine protected characteristics to be introduced to their children. They told me that they had ongoing contact with the appropriate police superintendent every day a protest was organised. They told him when the protest would start and finish, and they always asked for the police to be present to ensure that no laws were broken by the demonstrators.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I thank hon. Friend so much for giving way. I spent a couple of hours with the headteachers of the schools. Does he agree, while he is talking about the demonstrations, that the probable reason why the headteacher did not have a public meeting was that, in those public arenas she has been called a paedophile and worse?

Mr Godsiff: There are 256 primary schools throughout Birmingham, as I said, where meetings take place all the time between parents and teachers. I do not accept the argument that there could not be parents meetings at the other two schools in Birmingham. If the headteacher or any other teachers felt that such a meeting could develop an unpleasant atmosphere, all they had to do was ask the police to be present. They would gladly have been present. Otherwise, they could have asked for local councillors and the MPs to be present, but no such things happened.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: I have given way a lot, but I will in a moment.

After each demonstration, the parents had email correspondence with the police superintendent to seek written confirmation that the police were satisfied with the way the protest had been conducted and they asked each time whether any arrests had taken place or cautions been issued. I have seen copies of the email correspondence and confirmation by the police superintendent—whom I have known and dealt with for many years—that no arrests were made or cautions given. I make the point again that, during the time the demonstrations have taken place, no arrests have been made because, according to the police, no laws have been broken.

I was finally, when I met with protesters at my house, shown a petition signed by 229 parents expressing no confidence in the headteacher. I subsequently spoke to the police superintendent, whom I had spoken to regularly throughout the protests. After listening to the different accounts of the headteacher, the parents who were protesting and the police, I came to the conclusion that the parents who were protesting had some valid reasons for doing so, as the headteacher seemed totally unwilling to have meetings with the parents to address their concerns and to seek a compromise to resolve the conflict.

Preet Kaur Gill: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: I have given way on many occasions.

I told the protesters this and I also told them that they had made their point and that the protests should end. I reiterated this when they came to see me at my surgery, which was filmed on phone camera and put into the public domain in an abridged version. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I absolutely understand the strong feelings that exist on this subject, but there is no way—I say this as much for public interest as for any other reason—that this debate will be curtailed. It can run until 7 o'clock, so any right hon. or hon. Member who wishes to catch my eye has an extremely good chance of doing so. The hon. Gentleman has the Floor now, and whatever hon. Members think about his decision to give way or not, he has a right to be heard and he will be heard.

Mr Godsiff: I am obliged to you, Mr Speaker.

I have to say that the breakdown in trust between the headteacher and the parents has not been helped by certain tweets that the headteacher has put out. She is, of course, perfectly entitled to tweet what she wants to, as is everybody else, but to call parents who are participating in highly organised police-supervised protests a “mob” which needs to be “sorted” and accuses Muslim parents—mostly young women—of “homophobic hatred” and to say that

“if we allow parents to think consult means demand resignations if we don't get our way”

is not exactly helpful in reducing tension because it is immediately recycled on multiple social media sites, which builds up a frenzy of hatred against parents. As I have said, they are mostly young mothers who have done nothing wrong. They are good mothers who want to express concern about what their children are telling them.

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend has referenced concerns on numerous occasions, but he has not been able to articulate them. Having seen the literature, I am not sure what he and the parents are referencing.

Mr Godsiff: I do not have children attending schools in Birmingham. My children are grown up, and I have a grandchild who is not in Birmingham. It is not for me to pass judgment on the concerns of parents.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Godsiff: I will not give way anymore.

If parents say they have concerns, and if they have sought to raise those concerns with the headteacher and have not been allowed to do so, I believe it is incumbent on a Member of Parliament to articulate those concerns. That does not mean to pass judgment, but if they have concerns, they are entitled to have them addressed. So far as the parents at these two schools are concerned, there has been no engagement and no meetings, whereas 256 other schools in Birmingham are doing things differently.

What is this “homophobic hatred” that these parents are supposed to be spreading? That is massively serious. Let us look at some of the police witness statements. As I have said, the police were at every protest. These statements are not hearsay or recycled versions that have been fed to social media to feed the frenzy; they are legal daily reports by police officers who were present. They say the chants were repeated over and over again, and what were those chants? “Our children, our choice.” “Listen to parents.” “Let kids be kids.” “We are not homophobic.” “Parent governor step down.” “Headteacher step down”. That is not nice for the headteacher or the parent governor, but I do not accept that as being homophobic.

Lilian Greenwood: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Godsiff: No.

Lilian Greenwood: This is on a point of information.

Mr Godsiff: No, I have given way on a lot of things.

Furthermore, the police who were present wore body cameras and were asked by the organisers of the protest to check whether any placards contravened the law. I understand that only one placard was deemed inappropriate at an early protest, and the people carrying the banner were told not to bring it again.

I make these points because I believe the parents have not had a fair chance to put their side of the dispute. They have been branded professional agitators, accused by a councillor of not having children at the school, called a “mob” and told that they are spewing out homophobic hatred. These mothers have been smeared, and the fact that the local Member of Parliament, having weighed up the evidence and listened to all sides of the argument, came to the conclusion that the people protesting had just reason to complain and protest merely added a target for the witch hunters and increased the lust for a sacrifice, irrespective of the facts.

I return to a couple of specific questions, which I supplied to the Minister before the debate. I ask these questions because I suspect many primary school headteachers watching this debate, like their colleagues in Birmingham, want to know whether they are inadvertently contravening the law in how they impart the nine protected characteristics of the Equality Act to their pupils.

As I have said, 256 of 258 primary schools in Birmingham are, in different ways, ensuring that their pupils know when they transfer to secondary school

that any form of discrimination, victimisation, prejudice or bullying of other people who fall within the nine protected characteristics is unlawful. They do this by engaging with parents to explain the nine characteristics, by having workshops about the individual characteristics, by having ongoing consultations with the parents and showing them the type of material they propose to use, and by engaging with parents about what age is most appropriate for the various characteristics.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Have you read the material?

Mr Godsiff: I will come to that point in a minute.

The parents want clarification. First, they want to know whether it is permissible for headteachers to partner with parents to decide how the nine protected characteristics are imparted to pupils, bearing in mind that parents cannot have any veto over which characteristics are taught. Secondly, they would like to know whether the nine protected characteristics have to be taught all together, or whether they can be spread out and imparted to pupils throughout their time in primary school, taking into account at what age the head and/or parents consider it most age-appropriate for each protected characteristic to be imparted to the children.

I ask those questions because many primary heads are looking at what has happened at the two schools where controversy has arisen and do not want to be accused of discrimination, which is of course illegal, in the way they deal with the Equality Act and the nine protected characteristics. I would be grateful for clarity from the Minister, because this will affect the relationships education provision that comes in in 2020 and that can be introduced in September 2019, which is much more specific about the terms “consultation” and “age appropriateness”.

I have no opinion on the ages at which primary school children should be introduced to the provisions of the nine protected characteristics. For example, I attended a recent meeting held by the headteachers’ union here in the Commons, in Committee Room 9. A headteacher—he may have been a deputy head—from Manchester argued forcefully that the whole “age appropriate” concept should be scrapped completely and that children aged two should be introduced to the provisions of the protected characteristics. If the parents of the children involved are happy with that, who am I to say it should not happen? But parents, who in international law have the prime responsibility for the upbringing of their children, have to be partners with schools in the making of such decisions.

Likewise, I have no prescribed views about what teaching materials should be used. I believe that schools and parents should make the decision after proper consultation, which is what is currently happening in most schools. In respect of the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) from a sedentary position earlier, yes, I have now read most of the books that my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) has given to me. Some of them are very good—“The Little Mermaid” is particularly good, and I have just got a copy for my grandchild—but my Muslim constituents would like to talk through some of the other books with the school to understand what the concepts are. They cannot talk it through with the school if the school will not have consultation.

I regret the controversies that have arisen around the two schools in Birmingham. I believe they could have been avoided if the schools had taught the provisions of the Equality Act in different ways and taken the parents' concerns into account. For my part, I apologise unreservedly for any offence caused to any person of whatever sexual orientation by anything I have said or written. In particular, I apologise unreservedly to members of the LGBT community in Birmingham and throughout the country for anything I may have said or written that has caused offence to them. I assure you, Mr Speaker, that it most certainly was not intended.

3.40 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I had not intended to speak, but decided to do so in the light of what I have heard today. Let me first say that I come from an Irish Catholic background, so I know from experience what cultural conservatism can be like. I know some of the terrible things that happened in the Irish Catholic culture, going back over many years—at its most obscene, the Magdalene laundries. But ultimately that changed because brave Catholics challenged their own culture. Ireland is now a tolerant country with a gay Prime Minister; that would have been thought unachievable and impossible in decades gone by.

With regards to what has been happening in Birmingham, I am the first to respect cultures, including cultural conservatism. I believe that there should be engagement without hesitation, but I do not accept what has been said today—that there has been no engagement by the head, Sarah Hewitt-Clarkson, with parents. I think there has been engagement, but I also think we need to distinguish between two things: on the one hand, there are those who feel uneasy; but on the other hand, there are those who have been deliberately stirring this up.

This is not just happening in Birmingham. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) referred to what is happening in Cardiff, and we are seeing a network develop in a number of cities around the country. To be frank, that network is absolutely wrong because, as a very good Muslim friend and constituent of mine said, “Jack, if we go down the path of dividing and demonising, or in any way suggesting that we would ever do that, our country and our city are a poorer country and city.” I never want to see the day when we in any way feed the view that there is something wrong about two men living together or two women living together.

I remember a man who came out to me in the old Transport and General Workers Union many years ago. He was desperate, in tears and afraid to speak out. But now Birmingham is the city of pride—pride with a small p and Pride with a big P. We have tens of thousands marching in Birmingham, celebrating our diversity: our rich cultural diversity, our rich ethnic diversity and our diversity in terms of sexual preference. Long may that always be the case.

I stress again that I absolutely understand that one has to engage, listen and explain, but if there are forces on the march the kind of which we thought were history in our country, we have to say, “No, you're wrong.”

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I hope it is reassuring to colleagues to know that you will all get in; don't worry.

3.43 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Teaching about LGBT existence and relationships, and showing respect and legitimacy to all regardless of their sexual orientation, is something that has not been a feature of our school system for very long. That is because of the odious and appalling effects of section 28, which was passed in the 1980s in a circumstance that was very similar to some of the scare stories that we are hearing about the possible dire effects of simply teaching relationship and sex education in schools—something that we should have been doing generations ago. If we had done it generations ago, there would have been an awful lot more happy and well-adjusted people than those who have been monstered in the way they have for the way that they are in a system that was disfigured by the effects of section 28. Many years later, we are finally making progress on LGBT rights in law and reaching fantastic levels of formal equality in our law. That is one of the most important social reforms that the previous Labour Government were responsible for, and it has been continued, to their credit, by Administrations subsequently. I know of the Minister's own personal commitment to this agenda.

Yet here we are in the middle of a similar kind of moral scare that is being whipped up by people who have a different agenda from the wellbeing of children and their adjustment to the facts and experience of 21st-century life in the UK. We have seen it exposed on television and in some of the closed Facebook groups of the individuals involved that are making claims about the sexual orientation of the teachers at this school, using language that I would not use in this Chamber. We have seen it in the mob reactions outside the school. It is not appropriate, however we do these things, that young primary school pupils should have to run a gauntlet of screaming demonstrators simply to get to school, with that noisy, vociferous, aggressive kind of shouting and chanting. That will be traumatic for any kind of young primary school pupil, and we should not be subjecting them to it. To be honest, no parents who believe that they are acting in the best interests of their children should be making them run such a gauntlet.

We know—I exempt my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) from this, although I wish he had let me ask him a question—that the motivations of some of those involved in this are reactionary. They are returners to an era where LGBT people should get back in the closet and hide and be ashamed of the way they are. We are not going to get back in the closet, or hide, or be ashamed of the way we are. Nor are we going to allow a generation of pupils who are now in school to go through what pupils in the '80s had to go through because this Chamber let them down.

Nor are we going to allow this to happen in the name of religion. I am a humanist, and married to a Catholic. She does much work with LGBT religious organisations to try to put together across religions coalitions of moderate, decent, sensible religious people who recognise the right of LGBT people to exist, to have access to respect and dignity, and to have their rights in law. We must not put together this view that if somebody has a religious objection, then somehow there can be no debate about it from then on in. There are multiple

[Ms Angela Eagle]

views in religions about the legitimacy of LGBT rights. It is only on the far extremist fundamentalist fringes that we get the kind of hostility that is being shown on some of the Facebook groups of these campaigners. I would like to know a lot more about the network that is behind this, because it is a deliberate, reactionary attempt to take back progressive advance and decency for children.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; she is speaking incredibly movingly. As somebody who lives closer, I think, than anybody else to the schools particularly in question and lives in the community amongst the people who go to that school, I want it to be said on the record that she is absolutely right in what she says about this being on the fringes, because I do not recognise the Muslim community that I live amongst as being part of that mob.

Ms Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend. She has a great deal of experience in this, not least because she lives amongst the community that is being portrayed in such a way.

We must not give in to this kind of organised campaign, which is effectively being organised from the outside. The Equality Act—which was passed in 2010, so has been on the statute book for nine years—actually says that schools have a duty not to discriminate against LGBT people. That includes discrimination against pupils who are LGBT—to be fair, that would probably not be very apparent at primary school level—pupils who are perceived to be LGBT, and pupils with LGBT parents, carers and family members. These are the diverse parents that we have in our communities now, and the children that they send to school, or the potentially LGBT children in school, do not deserve to be treated with anything other than equality and respect. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] All that is meant by the teaching on relationship and sex education is that this diversity needs to be represented. It is not propagandising and it is not trying to “turn people gay”, which I have heard mentioned—I am not sure it is possible to turn people gay; there certainly would be no gay people if you had to be taught about being gay to be gay. [Laughter.] What we are talking about is respect, their rights, their right to be equally welcome in school, not to be bullied or treated as if they are lesser, not to be made to feel that somehow there is something wrong with them, not to feel suicidal, not to be called “faggot” or “lezzer” in school and not to be humiliated. That is what we are talking about when it comes to relationship and sex education—plain, simple decency.

3.52 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour and a privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who made a very personal and passionate speech with which I wholeheartedly agree.

I was sorry that we even had to come here today to take part in this debate. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff). I listened to his apology. I am always more than ready to listen to an apology, but much of his speech contradicted that, and indeed contradicted what he had said on that recording, which I have viewed.

I am glad that my hon. Friend has now read the books—at least some of them—and that my office was able to help with that. I find it unfortunate that he made comments and waded into this debate without having looked at the books, as they are at the heart of the issue. I have looked at the books; I have looked at the material that causes so much alleged offence, but there is nothing that I think could cause offence. In fact, along with many other inclusive educational and teaching materials and books, they teach about all the range of difference that we have in our lives, and they certainly do not get into the details of sex or anything biological; we are talking about things that are age-appropriate, that are directed at younger children. It is about understanding the world around them—that there may be children in their class who are Muslim or Jewish or black or white or a woman or a man or gay or lesbian or trans. This is the world we live in. This is the reality we live in. This is the country we live in.

I live in just as diverse a community as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green. I am pleased to say that at the weekend I went to the Grangetown festival in my community, and was able to visit the Pride Cymru stall, right in the heart of one of my largest Muslim communities; and there, mixing in that community, were the LGBT community different churches, different mosques, different Hindu temples, and different community organisations. They were all just getting on with their lives and making a difference to their community, supporting young people and running diversionary activities for those who might be caught up in knife crime, or other difficulties, in the community, and supporting each other, and working together as a community. They were not interested in dividing each other over the nature of their sexuality, their sex, their race or their religion; they were all working and living together, so there is a different way we can live.

I have watched the scenes in Birmingham with horror. I believe that people have been whipped up into a sense of true moral panic about some problem that does not actually exist. It has become extremely unpleasant and extremely divisive, as we have seen, and that is spreading, as has been said, to other parts of the UK.

I want to draw the hon. Gentleman’s attention, and that of the House, to some of those who have been involved in instigating some of the language, protests and division we have seen. At least two of them have come down to Cardiff recently, one of whom, thankfully, was spotted and a talk was cancelled. A woman called Dr Godfrey-Faussett—in fact, she is being investigated by the British Psychological Society for her comments—said in a YouTube clip last year that there was a

“totalitarian endeavour to indoctrinate our children in sexual ideologies.”

She runs the so-called Stop RSE campaign, and has talked about a “war on morality”.

Another group is the so-called Islamic RSE, run by a gentleman called Ustadh Torofdar. I have seen for myself the guide—the handy guide—that can be handed to parents on how they should in effect infiltrate governing bodies or parent teacher associations, and on how they should influence activities in their schools by alleging a whole set of things that are going on in their schools—of course, no evidence is presented—and suggesting that parents may want to get involved and raise these concerns. It gives form letters to be sent to MPs, the media and

schools, with all sorts of wild and fanciful allegations about somehow trying to corrupt young people. I will not read out the letter: I have got it, but some parts of it I just find so offensive.

I had never received a letter of this nature in my constituency ever—I have been an openly gay MP for six and a half years in an extremely diverse constituency—or any of these things until the last few months. They are originating from these groups, which are collaborating. As has been said by my hon. Friends from Birmingham, they often involve individuals who do not even have children at these schools. This is the very nature of a moral panic, and it is a very good example of one. I think we need to look at what is really going on here, rather than any actual perceived problem or issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey spoke about the legacy of section 28. I grew up in a school in south Wales, and I certainly was not out about my sexuality at the time. Like me, many LGBT people struggle with these issues for their whole life, and it can affect when they come out, how they come out and to whom they come out, as well as all sorts of other things in their life. I do not want young people living today to go through these experiences—it is just simply horrific—but I know that things can change. Last year, I went back to a Pride parade in the town where I went to school, and that would simply have been unthinkable when I was at school 25 years ago, when I saw lesbian friends of mine being called “dirty lezzers” and everything else, with all sorts of homophobic abuse going on.

That relates to a time and a place, and to a set of attitudes and a set of laws, that I thought we had got well beyond, and I am sorry to see chinks occurring in different places. We have to remember that this is in the context of a wider debate, with deeply concerning comments being made, including, I am sorry to say, by some of the candidates for the Conservative leadership and, indeed, by newly elected MEP Ann Widdecombe. These are really horrific things that, quite frankly, should be from a bygone age. We have made such progress in this House on so many issues, such as marriage equality or the way we conduct ourselves here. Of course, we are the most LGBT diverse Parliament in the world, and we should be celebrating that. I very much hope that it is setting an example to young people in our country that they can be who they are, because God made them, too, just like everybody else.

We have to think about the other side of this. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green voiced concerns about the rights of parents and the rights of certain conservative religious communities, but there is no hierarchy in equality. All the protected characteristics are there alongside one another for a reason, and we should be promoting all of them, not just one, or selectively, or in certain circumstances, or only because it might not offend one constituent group or another. We have to remember that at the heart of this is the wellbeing and safeguarding of young people, including young people in the very schools the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): In 2001, in Holy Cross church in the Ardoyne district of north Belfast, there was a concentrated campaign not only against Father Aidan Troy, the priest there, but against that community. Recently, I met two girls who had been primary school pupils at the time, and they are still,

18 years later, suffering the trauma of that experience. Even if we can put aside for one moment the substantive argument, does my hon. Friend not agree that it is simply impossible and unconscionable that we allow primary school children to be subjected to this sort of concentrated mob abuse? That cannot be allowed, surely.

Stephen Doughty: I wholeheartedly agree. It beggars belief that we may be creating situations that will continue to affect that cohort of children, not just at the schools we have been discussing, but plenty of others. The reason the wider LGBT community is so concerned is the signals that are sent when they see Members of Parliament and a teacher being subjected to abuse, when they see mobs outside schools and when they see the types of poster that have been displayed. It makes people feel that perhaps they cannot be who they want to be and live as they want. For young people in particular, that is a massive issue.

In this country, Stonewall was largely founded on the issue of section 28, and we will celebrate the 30-year anniversary at Pride this year. I am proud that one of the founders of Stonewall, Lisa Power, lives in my constituency and is a good friend of mine. I am deeply concerned when I look at the statistics that Stonewall has shared about mental health and the issues young people face: 84% of trans young people have deliberately harmed themselves; the figure for the LGBT community is 61%. Two in five LGBT pupils are never taught anything about LGBT issues and half of LGBT pupils in schools say there is no adult they can talk to about issues affecting them. That litany of self-harm, depression and, in the most extreme circumstances, taking one's own life should be the concern of anyone in this country who cares about the wellbeing and safety of our young people.

Rather than focusing on some mythological and non-existent situation, we should be focusing on the actual issues that affect young people, because there will be LGBT Muslims and LGBT non-Muslims in those schools: there will be, because they are in our society. One of the saddest things is that every time I speak on these issues, I get emails, phone calls and messages, particularly from gay Muslim men, who tell me about horrific experiences they had growing up. I do not want anyone to go through that, and that is why I think it is absolutely right that the Government introduced the changes in the law, absolutely right that they carried them through as they did, and absolutely right that this House overwhelmingly voted for them.

We heard a lot of legal references from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, but little mention of the fact that this House—this sovereign Parliament—passed law stating that there should be LGBT-inclusive education in this country. That is what matters. It is the law. People are of course entirely free to believe and understand their scriptures and religions in any way they choose in their own private life. I might fundamentally disagree with them—I have had many scriptural arguments with fellow Christians who do not agree with my views on human sexuality—but in this country our state sets the law and the guidance. As you will remember, Mr Speaker, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) engaged in sometimes impassioned debates on equal marriage. As a gay Christian and one who believes fervently in my understanding of my own faith,

[Stephen Doughty]

it is for me to argue with God and with fellow Christians, but the law of this land should protect all and it should protect all characteristics equally, not one over another at certain times, when certain people do not like it and a moral panic is whipped up by those from outside.

I hope that we can move on. That are many parts of this country with equally diverse religious communities and diverse understandings of life and how we should all live together. I want a country where we all live together in harmony, peace and respect for one another, not one where children and teachers are subjected to horrific protests outside their schools, and where some of the basic principles that this House has established over many years are questioned.

4.5 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am pleased to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I rise to put one point to the Minister.

I welcome the fact that we are having this debate and I share my hon. Friend's dismay at the scenes in Birmingham, but it is right that we talk about this issue and discuss the concerns that have been raised. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) is right to remind us that religion or belief is among the protected characteristics identified in the Equality Act 2010.

In the debate on the regulations on 20 March, I raised concerns that were being voiced, particularly by representatives of the Orthodox Jewish community. I chair the all-party group on faith and society. After the debate, I asked the Minister whether he would ensure that officials from his Department and from Ofsted attended a meeting to discuss the implementation of the regulations with representatives of a wide range of faith groups. I am very grateful to him for arranging that: the representatives came and the meeting took place.

One idea that emerged from the meeting, mentioned in a letter I copied to him, is a requirement to subject local plans for implementing the regulations in each area to consultation with the local standing advisory committee on religious education—the SACRE. I recognise that in some areas there may well be a question about the capacity of the committees to undertake such a consultation. In other areas, however, they are certainly well up for doing it. The SACRE is in most areas, I think, quite a wide and representative body that is currently focused purely on religious education. The suggestion that emerged was that its remit might be extended to take in local plans for implementing the relationships and sex education statutory instrument. I wonder whether the Minister will be able today, or separately, to respond to that specific idea, which came out of the meeting he very helpfully supported after that debate in the House.

4.7 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I represent a constituency where education is completely devolved, but I wish to enter into reflective mode for Members. I grew up in the west of Scotland in a Catholic/Presbyterian Irish Catholic household. Like many other Members with similar backgrounds, I attended a state denominational school at both primary and

secondary levels. I went to a school where being heterosexual was the only way you were allowed to be. No other opportunity was permitted, so the very idea that there is any question that people are going to be “forced to be gay” does not reflect the reality of those who lived in a situation where we were told we could be nothing but straight. That is an historic reality. However, reflecting on history, times do change.

Unlike many Members on the main Opposition Benches, I represent a constituency that is profoundly un-diverse. It is profoundly white. It is also profoundly Christian: half and half between the Roman Catholic faith and the national Presbyterian Church of Scotland. We know, and I am sure many Members will know, what religious intolerance can breed. It is called the Reformation. It reminds us of the role of religion, and the separation of religion and the law. Only last year in Scotland, we celebrated 100 years of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918—the Catholic Education Act. I admit that I have only recently returned to the faith of my ancestors. I am a person of dubious faith, and anyone who says that they are fundamental in their beliefs—no matter how or who they worship—seriously needs to look at themselves and give themselves a good talking to because, without doubt, there can be no question but that you cannot fully understand the diversity of humanity around you, and especially parliamentarians who seek to understand the people they represent. I say to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) that I hope that they also reflect on the young gay men and women entering that school today, the ones who may vote for them or who may not vote for them, and how they understand this debate.

There is also the role of parents. I was brought up by a single parent. Did he make me gay? I do not think so. Did he make me like whisky? I think he did. He also made me question—

Stephen Pound: Did he support Celtic?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Well, I will leave that one. He also made me question how we defend the rights of those who are minorities—he always did. I want to reflect on my personal experience. The only reason I wanted to speak today was that I, as a Scottish constituency MP, can add something to this debate—we have heard from hon. Members from Wales who are concerned about the targeting of certain emails, and I heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) that she has received emails about this debate and how it reflects on the Scottish education system. In Scotland, we have the Scottish Government's LGBTI Inclusive Education Working Group. It should be noted that the Roman Catholic Bishops Conference of Scotland is clear that it could never again see a situation in which a pupil leaves his school in Scotland having had prejudice-based bullying, and it fully signed up to the Scottish Government's Inclusive Education Working Group.

If anything is to be gained from this debate, we need to reflect on the lived experience of young gay men and women entering your schools. Their parents may not like the fact that they will grow up to be gay. That is a reality. We cannot detract from it, whether they live hiding in a closet or openly as young Christian gay people or young Muslim gay people—or Hindu, Jew or secular. We cannot enable them to go back into the closet knowing that we believe, as elected representatives,

that they should not have a place in the education system. We are not enforcing gayness on folk. That is a ridiculous proposition. We live in a majority heterosexual normative world. That is the reality. What we are saying to these young men and women is that we do not want them to be bullied, be prejudiced, to self-harm, to take their lives, to go into lives filled with alcohol and drugs, or to kill themselves. That is what we do not want and, if anything, we should offer them a listening ear today and not a judging one.

4.12 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I was always taught as a child, by my parents and at all the schools that I went to, not to judge somebody according to the colour of their skin, what school they went to, what accent they spoke with, whether they were a man or woman, whether they were rich or poor, or, for that matter, whether they were straight or gay. I was taught simply to judge them according to the strength of their character, which would be evinced not by the words that they used, but the things that they did in their life. I approach this debate presuming that that is what all education should be. It should be about teaching people to judge people according to the strength of their character, what they stand for and what they do with their lives, and not some part of their personality, which is almost certainly indelible and which was not acquired by—I don't know—watching Graham Norton, passing through the aftershave department, or whatever prejudice people may have about how people come to be gay.

I have never wanted a tolerant society; I hate the idea of being tolerated. It feels like people are saying, "Oh yes, all right, if you have to—if you really have to—you can live with somebody else and love them." I have always wanted a world and a society that was based on respect. My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is absolutely right to say that when all of us in this Chamber were growing up—a lot of people are a lot younger than me, including you, Mr Speaker—it was not a world of respect for people's different sexualities. It was a world where people would shout "Faggot", "Queer", "Shirt-raiser", "Bender", and all these kinds of things at you.

What was particularly difficult was that you brought it into yourself—you sort of believed it—and it took a terrible struggle for many people to be able to tell another single human being. You might be thinking this other person might be gay and that they might have feelings for you, and then you suddenly find oh, my God, no, you've completely and utterly got it wrong, and then you end up being beaten up. Or it might be because you are terrified of what your parents might think. When I told my mother, she said she should always have known because I walked oddly. *[Laughter.]* You'll all check later, won't you? She didn't mean it in a mean way at all; it was just the reactions people had in a different era.

I want to talk about why I am so proud of being a member of the Labour party—this is not a criticism of people who are not members of the Labour party. There was a man, Edward Carpenter, who campaigned for homosexual freedom in a generation when you got sent to prison and given seven years with hard labour for homosexuality. On his 80th birthday, every member of the Labour Cabinet in the 1920s sent him a birthday

card. I feel proud of being part of a Labour movement that has always wanted to do right by people who are gay.

There is a little story of a young man in the 1920s from the Rhondda. He worked on the railways. His name was Thomas. I don't know his surname. He was arrested in London and taken to court for soliciting—"importuning" was the word that was used at the time. There did not have to be any proof of anybody having touched anybody. The only proof that he might have been homosexual and committed an offence was that he had a powder puff in his pocket. He said it was his mother's, but the police did not believe him, and he was carted off and charged and he went to the magistrates court. Again what I am proud of is that the local MP for the Rhondda stood character witnesses for him. This was in the 1920s.

I take enormous pride in the fact that we have tried as a movement to build through the years that sense of respect and eventually were able to change the law in many different ways. We brought in civil partnerships. Many young people who were gay throughout the 20th century thought they would never be able to live with another person, let alone be able to publicly acknowledge that they were entering into a union for life. The Conservative party then had the opportunity to bring in equal marriage as well, which is a matter of enormous pride for the whole of this Parliament. There are very few people now in this Parliament who oppose any of those measures, or adoption for gay couples or individual gays. If we go to a secondary school these days, we will see kids who are openly gay at school, and it is not a problem. Some will be camp; some will not be camp—it is not a problem. That is a source of immense joy.

But I have an immense fear, too, and this is why today's debate really matters. I want to say in generosity, I hope, to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) that the reason this debate hurts so many of us is that we had hoped we had made progress that would never be pushed back. We have only to look at Berlin in the 1930s. It was the most liberal place in the world for gay men, and then people were sent to the concentration camps, and thousands of them died in the late 1930s and 1940s. Some of us fear that all this could be rolled back. We will fight—not physically, of course; we will do it probably with drag queens and feather boas, and all the stereotypes you can gather—and with rugby players and football players one day, please God. We will fight to make sure this is not rolled back.

Part of the fight is, of course, with religion. I say this as somebody who was ordained a priest. I hope that the former Bishop of Oxford, Richard Harries, now a Member of the other place, will forgive me if I remind him that two weeks after he ordained me, which involved the laying on of hands, he was asked by a newspaper what he thought about homosexuality in the Church. He said that he had never laid hands on a homosexual, and I just had to say to him, "Well, you did—the very first one you ordained, in fact." He is now a magnificent man: he came to my civil partnership, and I have deep affection for him.

We have had this battle in the Church of England, and it is an ongoing battle in the Catholic Church. I think that there are many more open minds than there

[Chris Bryant]

were 15 or 20 years ago. The Pope himself has a more liberal mind on these issues, and he would be furious at the idea that Catholicism, and the name of Christ, could ever be invoked to lead to bullying or to people not valuing themselves because of their sexuality.

Incidentally, just as people cannot “catch” homosexuality, I do not think they can be cured of it. [Laughter.] I know that we smile and laugh at that, but terrible pain has been brought to so many individuals by the whole gay conversation therapy theory, and I truly hope that it will never be a thing of the future.

I know that this is a difficult issue for many who are Muslim. As it happens, my constituency is not diverse at all; it is more like the constituency of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: West Dunbartonshire.

Chris Bryant: I mean the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). I am sure that there is no segregation between the two.

In fact, despite my having been ordained, my constituency is, according to the last census, the second least religious constituency in the country, but there are people of faith among my constituents. I often speak to them, and I think that, in the main, they have found a profound generosity in recent years, but this is still a difficult issue for many Muslims. There are those who struggle to find new, liberal ways of expressing Islam in a modern world. Many Catholic Members of both this House and the other place have often voted for equality although their Church has voted in a different way, so my biggest hope is that Islam will find a way of reconciling itself with the modern era—with the things that we know, which, I would argue, our God has taught us to understand in the last 100 or 200 years about ourselves, about humanity and about human sexuality.

I hope that Muslims will be campaigning outside all those schools to make sure that every child knows that sometimes there are two daddies and sometimes there are two mummies. They may not be your parents, but they may be the parents of someone else in the family or someone else in the school, and you should not spit at them, and you should not denigrate them, and you should not laugh at them, and you should not call them names, and you should not bully them.

In the end—and here I use a religious term again—equality is a seamless garment. The tunic worn by Christ on the cross was a seamless garment, which is why the soldiers could not tear it apart when He was taken down from the cross. The equality that we demand for people regardless of their religion, or their political allegiance, or the colour of their skin, or their gender must also apply in equal measure—in full and equal measure—to our sexuality.

4.23 pm

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow so many moving and powerful speeches. I did not come to the Chamber intending to make a speech; I had hoped to ask my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) a couple of questions, but having heard what he said, I was moved to rise to make just a few points.

My hon. Friend sought to characterise what has been happening outside Anderton Park school as an issue of consultation. I have to say, on the basis of what I have seen, that the message that comes across from those protests is not principally about consultation. Yes, the issue of consultation is in there, but the protests are actually about an objection in principle to LGBT-inclusive education. If that is not the case, how else can we read a placard that says, “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”? What is that if not an objection in principle to LGBT-inclusive education?

However, it is not just the fact that those views are being expressed, but the aggression with which they have been expressed, that has upset and profoundly offended so many people of, I believe, all races and all religions in Birmingham. The level of abuse that the headteacher has suffered—the things that have been said through megaphones not just at Anderton Park but before that at Parkfield school—is utterly outrageous, and I think we have a responsibility in this place to stand up and say that that is simply not on.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Hall Green has said that if he has upset or offended anyone then he apologises, and I am grateful he has said that and welcome that, but I do hope he will reflect on whether when on camera he turns to one of the leaders of those protests—a man who does not even have a child at that school—and says, “You are right; no more nor less, you are right,” those words were wisely chosen, because I do not believe that the message that that gentleman has given is right.

Dialogue between parents and schools is obviously a good thing in any part of the curriculum, but there are also some principles at stake here and they deserve repeating. Sometimes this issue is talked about as if it is about sex education, but it is not; it is not about sexualisation at all. It is about relationships education, and to me there is one word and theme that has come up several times in this debate so far and that is absolutely central to all relationships education, and that is the importance of respect. I am sorry, but I disagree with my hon. Friend: I do not think that there is any age-appropriate threshold for respect. I believe that from the word go children should be taught to respect other people, whoever they are and whatever they are. I do not believe we would be right in adopting a curriculum or an approach which implies to young people that if they go to school with a friend who has two daddies or two mummies, instead of one daddy and one mummy, somehow he or she or his or her parents are less deserving of respect than the other child’s parents.

I just think that that is a principle which should be taught from the word go. We should have no problem in upholding that principle. It is a principle on which I will not compromise, and it is the reason why, I am afraid, on this issue I am on the other side of the fence from my hon. Friend.

4.27 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I grew up in a relatively white, and middle-class we could say, suburb of Brighton: a town called Lewes. The people of Lewes will hate me calling it a suburb of Brighton, but it is. And I could have lived my life as a child never really interacting with people of different faiths, and never really interacting with and learning

about different kinds of family units. I grew up in a family of a mum and a dad who were married before I was born and who remain married now, but the reason why I understand that there are different family units and people of different religions is that from the very get-go at school we read books and were told stories about different families. When the school was going to introduce a book about a child who was perhaps Muslim, it did not call an all-parents meeting to consult and say, "We're going to be introducing a book which will introduce a character this semester or term who might not quite look like the kind of characters that you see every day in Lewes." No, the school got on with it, and parents accepted it because leadership was shown not just by schools but by many people in the community making it clear that that was the right thing to do.

These are often rather mundane books. Many of these stories and educational methods are pretty mundane and may be about a mermaid or two penguins, or whatever the particular story is about; they are not actually that exciting. When they are being introduced, do I expect the headteacher to have to call an all-parents assembly to consult on that particular fiction book that is going to be introduced, and which is at the right reading level and of course is generally appropriate for those children? No, I do not. Actually, I think it is rather dangerous to expect teachers to have to teach on that basis. It would be ridiculous if they had to call an all-school assembly every time they wanted to introduce something new in biology, for example, or if they were going to teach arithmetic this month rather than just equations.

The approach that we need to adopt in treating this issue is one of talking about all the different ways the world works through storytelling and narrative telling. This is not about telling individuals what goes in and what goes out; it is about talking about what love means. That is also important for keeping our children safe. If we do not teach children the basic facts about what appropriate relationships are, what friendships mean by comparison with loving relationships, or how relationships between adults differ from relationships between children, we allow them to be vulnerable to predators, either at that young age or later on in life.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making a really excellent speech. My daughter has just come back from school—the Scottish schools finish up pretty soon—with a whole bundle of things that she has learned in primary 1. A lot of that is about relationships and it is pretty basic stuff. Does he agree that if some children in a class are not taught the same things as all the others, they will find out about them from the other children in the class anyway? They might as well all get the same information and a good, responsible education from their teachers.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Quite! We all know how the game of Chinese whispers works, and the danger is that if children learn things second hand, the message will have been garbled or lost by the time it reaches the third child down. If we are going to teach our children about these ideas of respect and if we are going to keep them safe, we need to do that in a whole way.

I was taught by my parents that of course it did not matter who you fell in love with. I can remember as a child hearing nursery rhymes about falling in love with

different groups of people. That is the kind of family I grew up in, and I feel very proud to have had parents who introduced those concepts. My sister is a happily married heterosexual, and she had those songs sung to her as well when she was young. They did not make me gay, but they made me feel comfortable with who I was. Let us be honest, however. Parents are loving, but there is no qualification to be a parent. There are some good parents and some bad parents. My mother is a linguist and an English teacher, but she knows absolutely nothing about physics or maths—she dropped out of science at GCSE—and if I had been taught science by my mother, I would not have been able to go on to do my physics and chemistry A-levels, as I did. We understand that parents are the primary lovers of their children, but they are not always the best people to give them a holistic, rounded education, because they have not experienced all the different elements and aspects of the world.

People in positions of responsibility, whether they are teachers or Members of Parliament, have a responsibility in these debates to show leadership. It was the Labour Government between 1997 and 2010 who showed leadership. If we had followed the mob and listened to what the opinion polls were saying at the time, it is unlikely that we would have made much progress at all on LGBT rights. We would not have made progress on abolishing section 28, for example, because Brian Souter was busy ploughing money in to garner public opinion in one way. We as politicians have to recognise that public opinion can be whipped up by dangerous forces, and we have a moral responsibility to sometimes make a judgment, not on whether there has been consultation—that was a totally vacuous argument that had no content to it—but on the content of the objections, to analyse and review them. That is something that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) has failed to do in this debate even once. Not once did he articulate the problems with the content of the curriculum.

Lilian Greenwood: Like many Members in this debate, my hon. Friend is making a powerful and moving speech. Does he share my concern that although lots of parents are perfectly satisfied with what is being taught in schools and perfectly happy that their children are being taught about respect and about different families, the kind of protests we have seen could result in those parents feeling unable to express that view because they feel intimidated and unable to stand up for the things that they would like their children to be taught about and that children themselves want to be taught?

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I totally agree. It is even more important that a Member of Parliament, and I would not want to tell anyone how to do their job, should not go and plonk themselves down on one side of the debate without analysing—my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) gave resources to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green—the content of what is being discussed. It is extremely dangerous not to show that leadership, and that is why the debate was wrong from the beginning. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green has been deeply wrong in how he has handled the issue. Pandering to the mob is never right. It is always easy for an MP to do, but we go in the wrong direction if we do it.

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

Let us remember that one of the things that instigated section 28 was the book “Jenny lives with Eric and Martin”. It is a pretty mundane and boring book: Jenny goes and has an ice cream; Jenny has a book read to her by one of her fathers. It is hardly high literature. There was a backlash, against a backdrop of rising right-wing tension—[*Interruption.*] I thought you said something, Mr Speaker. Of course, that led to the introduction of section 28. I do not think that we are on the verge of section 28 being introduced again, but we must be vigilant about bringing people along on that journey.

I shall conclude with two points. First, there is a place for parents on that journey, not to consult them on whether something should be included in the curriculum or not but, to some extent, to make up for the fact that we had section 28 for so long. Many parents failed to receive that level of education and understanding. There is a purpose in reaching out to the community.

Secondly, before I became an MP, I wrote an education resource for the Council of Europe on how we talked to educated children under 10 about sexuality and different families. The Council of Europe hardly draws its members from purely progressive countries—it includes Russia, Turkey and Poland—and the resource was accessible in all those countries. I am proud of that resource, which a team helped to write. People in the Council of Europe, including British Ministers, helped to lead a debate at that level to change attitudes and run campaigns to change minds and educate people.

We have not really received an apology. What we heard was a defence of the position taken by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, with a little apology at the end. I wish that he had just been honest about having real problems with the content of the teaching or said that he had not decided to take one side or the other. What we now have is a very disappointing outcome.

4.38 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): This has been an extraordinary Adjournment debate and, Mr Speaker, worth your waiting 10 years in the Chair to hear, I would argue.

There were powerful speeches by the hon. Members for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), with a powerful and moving speech by the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who was right that we were not going to allow another generation of children to go through what previous generations endured. As the hon. Member for Rhondda said, what is wanted is not to be tolerated but to be respected or, as the hon. Member for Wallasey said, plain, simple decency.

There were well argued and persuasive speeches by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Richard Burden), the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). I listened carefully to the speech by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff), who opened the debate.

This Government agree that parents, as the primary educators of their children, should be involved in their child’s education in schools. The Government trust

schools to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum that will prepare pupils for life in modern Britain, and we firmly believe that proper dialogue between schools and parents supports mutual understanding and ultimately benefits the progress of pupils. Schools should in particular consider whether aspects of their curriculum may be sensitive to the parents of their particular cohort and, if so, should ensure that they have properly engaged them on this content. But we must also remember that schools have been given the responsibility to educate, and ultimately it is for schools to decide what is taught, and how.

Equality for all is written into our laws. The Equality Act 2010 provides a legal framework to protect the rights of individuals and advance equality of opportunity for all. It provides Britain with a discrimination law that protects individuals from unfair treatment and promotes a fair and more equal society. Schools are required to comply with the relevant requirements of the Equality Act. Chapter 1 of part 6 of the Act applies to schools. As an example, part 6 of the Act makes it unlawful for a school to discriminate against, harass or victimise a pupil or potential pupil in relation to admissions or in how the school is run. The content of the school curriculum is exempt from the duties imposed on schools by part 6 of the Equality Act. Excluding the content of the curriculum ensures, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green pointed out, that schools are free to include a full range of issues, ideas and materials in their syllabus and to expose pupils to thoughts and ideas of all kinds, however challenging or controversial, without fear of legal challenge based on a protected characteristic.

Schools are, however, subject to the public sector equality duty in section 149 of the Act, which means that in discharging their functions they must have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act, and have due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. Relevant protected characteristics are age; disability; gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

We know that many schools choose to teach pupils about the Equality Act and the protected characteristics in the context of duties on schools, such as the requirements to promote fundamental British values and the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of their pupils. Schools are perfectly entitled to teach about the Equality Act in this context, and the Department thinks it is right that pupils leave school with a proper understanding of the importance of equality and of respecting difference. To answer the question on age appropriateness asked by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, schools that choose to teach about the Equality Act and protected characteristics should of course consider the age appropriateness of all elements of this and plan their curriculum accordingly.

That crucial need to respect difference would of course be a simple expectation of members of our society were all differences easily compatible. The true test of the concept of respect for difference lies in cases where our differences may appear to bring us in direct conflict with others. The fundamental expectation that we respect other people is therefore at times hard to achieve and all the more crucial for it. This has been seen in action in recent months, as some differences have seemed to

divide us. We have seen protests from parents relating to the teaching of equality in our schools, with a particular focus on teaching lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender content. The media would like to portray this as religion versus LGBT. I do not doubt that some people on both sides of the debate, without links to the schools involved, are exploiting the situation due to their own lack of tolerance for the other side, but I truly believe that, for the majority, there is a real respect for their fellow citizens who are different from them.

Central to this debate are deeply held views on what is right to teach children about LGBT people and relationships at different ages.

Ms Angela Eagle: Is the Minister as worried as I am about the emerging evidence of an organised campaign to disrupt the introduction of RSE in schools, which is now spreading from Birmingham to other places? Will he reassure us that his Department will crack down on those attempts with the utmost determination?

Nick Gibb: This Government, supported by Members on both sides of the House, introduced the regulations making RSE compulsory in schools—an amendment to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced that requirement.

Today, we are publishing the final version of the guidance, which was put out for consultation. We are determined to press ahead with this policy, which has been carefully crafted with help from across the House. Individual Members helped us to devise and write the policy; Ian Bauckham, an experienced headteacher from Kent, helped us to draft the guidance; and, of course, officials from the Department for Education worked extremely hard in crafting the guidance. We will, of course, press ahead with the policy.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I apologise for not being here for the earlier part of the debate, but I am pleased to have arrived in time to hear the hon. Members for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who encouraged me to stay to the end.

I have a specific follow-up question on the point raised by the hon. Member for Wallasey. What, precisely, are the Government able to do to counter what appears to be an organised campaign? For instance, can the Minister provide materials to Members of Parliament, such as me, who are now getting representations on this issue from, in my case, a local mosque?

Nick Gibb: We will certainly be providing materials to schools, together with the guidance published today, on how to consult and engage with parents on this issue. At Education questions yesterday, the Secretary of State made clear his view on the importance of teaching about LGBT issues in schools, including primary schools, and I have written articles, and so on. We will continue to make the case for the importance of RSE.

Chris Bryant *rose*—

Stephen Doughty *rose*—

Nick Gibb: I am moving slightly leftwards in giving way to the hon. Member for Rhondda.

Chris Bryant: I think we are all excited by the Minister moving slightly leftwards, and I am grateful to him. Is it not also worth pointing out the irony that many parents who are particularly concerned about their children growing up might want to know that good sex and relationships education nearly always leads to children delaying their first sexual experience, making fewer risky decisions when they do so and making more informed choices? Surely that can only be in the interests of every single child.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and he puts it better than I could. He will have seen the guidance, which was published in draft and is now in its final form, and it sets out the important aspects of all the issues he has cited and what we believe should be taught in our schools.

Stephen Doughty: I press the Minister a little further on the points raised by my hon. Friends about the organised campaign against the introduction of guidance. As I mentioned in my speech, I have seen a guide from an organisation called Islamic RSE that advises parents to get into governance bodies and tells them how to handle headteachers and how to do this and that in quite a cynical way. I have also seen a deeply misleading form letter attacking the Government's entire policy.

Does the Minister have any plans to issue guidance to schools about this orchestrated campaign and, indeed, to work with the Welsh and Scottish Governments, who will undoubtedly experience this, too? I have raised this with officials in my own city.

Nick Gibb: I am happy to work with the hon. Gentleman. Of course, we work with the devolved Administrations on this and other issues in relation to education. The guidance was carefully crafted to build the widest possible consensus for this policy, which is why it went through this House with an overwhelming majority and the other House without a Division. Those people who are opposed to it are at the other end of that consensus. I am afraid that it is unlikely that we will bring those extreme ends of the debate into that consensus, but I am very content that we have secured the support of the Catholic Church, the Church of England and organisations such as Stonewall for the guidance we have created.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I thank the Minister for describing the people who have objections as being at the real fringes. The difficulty is that if there is a requirement on headteachers to consult, and that opens the door for these fringe elements to hijack and disrupt, how should headteachers respond? Will the Department issue guidance to prevent that from happening? Will he ensure that even when consultation happens, it is not consultation with a veto by those fringe groups, but consultation to bring people along, as this is happening and it is not a question of if, when and how; this is just so that everyone can understand how. That is what we mean by consultation in this case. This is a bit unclear.

Nick Gibb: I will come to these points later in my comments, but let me say that consultation is not a vote. Ultimately, the decision about the content of the curriculum is for schools, and as I have said, we are today issuing materials, with the final version of the guidance, to schools to help them in the process of engaging with

[*Nick Gibb*]

parents. But I listened to the comments about campaigning and standing up to the campaigns against RSE, and we will consider what hon. Members have said in this debate.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Will the Minister be taking any guidance from Nazir Afzal, the former Crown prosecutor in the north-west, who I understand has been brought in to mediate over the protests outside the schools? He is a practising Muslim. He is a very sensible man; he is the chair of the governors at Hopwood Hall College in my constituency. I wonder whether the Minister will be taking any of his advice.

Nick Gibb: I will take the hon. Lady's advice, under advisement. Our senior officials are working on the ground, daily, for both schools involved in this dispute in Birmingham and with Birmingham City Council in trying to find a solution to this problem. We are working hard to try to assuage concerns, but ultimately we will be on the side of the headteacher in making these decisions, because we believe the content of the curriculum is a matter for schools.

Central to this debate are deeply held views on what is right to teach children about LGBT people and relationships at different ages—not because of bigotry or intolerance, not to push an agenda, but because they believe they know best for the children involved. This reveals the truth about equality and respect: sometimes it is hard. And when opinions differ, we should talk; dialogue is what moves us forward. That is why we are strengthening the requirements on schools to consult parents. From September 2020, all primary schools will be required to teach relationships education and all secondary schools will be required to teach relationships and sex education—RSE. We have set out in the regulations for these subjects that schools will be required to consult parents on their relationships education or RSE policies. That requirement means that the dialogue we consider so important in reducing misunderstanding and getting this teaching right will be happening in every school.

It is important to note that relationships education is not about sex, as was pointed out by the hon. Member for Rhondda. It is about learning the importance of kindness and respect for others, and providing children with the foundations to understand difference and be able to build constructive relationships with those who may appear different from them. We are encouraging as many schools as possible to start teaching the new subjects from September 2019. Whether or not schools do so, we recommend they start planning their consultation with parents now, to ensure this is done in good time and effectively. As I have said, we are publishing supporting materials to help schools to get this right.

Schools are not required to consult parents on any teaching they choose to give about the Equality Act. However, when such teaching involves young children, and when schools know that their pupils' parents have strongly held beliefs related to the content, it is absolutely right that schools engage with parents, listen to their views and reflect. To answer the question from the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green, I think it would be appropriate for a school to work with parents to determine how Equality Act teaching is delivered in the

school, if that works for them. That does not mean that headteachers should spend excessive time consulting parents or that consultation should go on in perpetuity. Schools are well practised at consulting and engaging their parent bodies on aspects of their activities, and if they have good practices in place, they can and should be used to consult parents on this topic. If schools feel that their current engagement processes are not effective, the introduction of the new subjects is a good opportunity to learn from good practice in other schools and to improve.

Consultation does not mean that parents can veto curriculum content; it means sharing a proposed approach, seeking views and using those views to inform a final decision. It is not a vote. Consultation does not mean abandoning teaching about respect for difference. I do not believe that is what parents would want and it is not what schools should feel they must do. Consultation certainly does not mean that schools should be on the receiving end of intimidating behaviour, protests or bullying. The Department has been clear that protests outside primary schools are unacceptable and should stop.

The RSE legislation is clear that it is parents whom schools must consult. We do of course encourage schools to recognise and reflect on their important foundational role in local communities. If schools consider it useful to engage members of their wider community on any of their activities, including the teaching of relationships and sex education, we would support that activity. Consultation does mean the consideration of whether the strongly held views of a school's parent body should lead it to adapt when and how it approaches certain topics with pupils. It is only right for parents to be able to share their views on how and when their child will be taught topics that are sensitive to them. Schools should consider those views and balance them with their views on the needs of pupils and the wider school community. Ultimately, it is for schools to decide their curriculum, having taken these views on board.

Stephen Timms: Does the Minister agree with the point I made earlier, which was that it could be helpful in quite a number of local areas to include the local SACRE in the discussions he is describing?

Nick Gibb: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising that issue—I was going to respond to his earlier question—and we will consider his suggestion. That is not a promise, but we will certainly consider and take seriously what he has put forward.

As the Secretary of State set out in his recent letter to the general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, schools must have the flexibility to respond to events. For example, following consultation with parents on equality teaching or relationships education, a school may decide that for its pupils it is right to introduce teaching about LGBT people and relationships in the later years of primary. That would be an entirely reasonable decision. Subsequently, however, events may mean that that decision has to change. For example, if homophobic, biphobic or transphobic bullying becomes a problem in the school, the headteacher may reasonably decide that some teaching about LGBT issues at an earlier stage is required to ensure pupils understand that such bullying is not acceptable. Alternatively, a

pupil with same-sex parents may join the school in an earlier year group. In those circumstances, it would be right for the pupil's peers to understand about families with same-sex parents—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nick Gibb: I will give way to all Members in just a moment.

As I was saying, it would be right for that pupil's peers to understand about families with same-sex parents, to ensure that the pupil feels included and that their peers understand and respect their family. We can all agree that in those circumstances, the school would be right to change its approach and to teach the issue earlier.

Lilian Greenwood: Many of my colleagues will have anticipated what I am going to ask, which is: how will schools know whether they have pupils with an uncle or aunt in a same-sex relationship, or with a friend who has same-sex parents? Surely, it is appropriate that every child, from the earliest age, should know that there are all sorts of different families—some with one parent, some with two parents, and some with two mums or two dads. The school is not going to know everybody's experiences, and everyone should know that it is right to respect difference, irrespective of where we come across it.

Nick Gibb: As I said, we consulted very widely on the content of the draft guidance and brought in experts such as Ian Bauckham—a very experienced headteacher—to help us draft that guidance. We wanted to form the widest possible consensus on landing this policy, and that is what we have achieved very successfully, and it is something that Governments of the past have not achieved. It is important that we try to get that consensus, which means leaving to schools the decision about when these issues should be taught. It is important that schools decide when it is appropriate to teach these very sensitive issues in their community, but what is clear from the guidance is that it is a requirement that children will learn and be taught about LGBT issues at some point during their school career. This is the way to ensure that the policy has the widest possible consensus—although we cannot bring into that consensus those at the polar ends of this debate.

Mr Godsiff: I thank the Minister for his measured and clear response to the questions I put to him. Although what he has said today may not be acceptable to other Members in this House, it will be hugely beneficial and helpful to the teachers in 256 schools in Birmingham who are now reassured that what they have been doing is, in fact, correct. I thank him for that.

Nick Gibb: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's intervention, but I also believe that what is being taught in the remaining two schools is lawful and correct.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Thank God for devolution! To provide clarification for some of my colleagues from English constituencies—and for my own mind—can the Minister tell us whether single parents who happen to be homosexual will now need to self-identify to members of staff from schools across the length and breadth of England to ensure that their children get access to equal, inclusive education?

Nick Gibb: No, what I am saying is that we need to leave these very sensitive decisions to the teachers on the ground and to the headteachers of the schools themselves, because they are best placed to make decisions that cannot be made at a national level and that will apply to all schools in all communities. What we are clear about is that children must be taught about LGBT relationships, and that they must be taught the relationships curriculum. No other Government have delivered such a policy. It is the right policy, but I strongly believe that it needs to have the consensus of the religious organisations, as well as Stonewall, to enable it to land effectively in our schools; and I believe that it is landing successfully in our schools.

Chris Bryant: I agree with the Minister to the extent that it should, of course, be up to the school and the teachers to make the decision about what is age-appropriate. However, he seemed to be suggesting that it was only once homophobic bullying had arisen in a school that a school would start talking about respect for gay people and that it was only once a gay couple who are parents of a child appeared in the school that this subject should be taught. I am sure that that is not what he really means. I hope he can clarify his point.

Nick Gibb: I was trying to give an example of a situation where, after consultation, a school may well want to change their policy because of events that had happened in the school. It might be that the school had, *ab initio*, decided to teach about LGBT issues at an earlier stage in the primary school curriculum. Schools are perfectly entitled to do that. If a school wanted to change its policy, it might consult parents. It would then be the policy of the school going forward, regardless of whether any of those issues arose and regardless of whether the school knew or did not know about the parental background of its pupils.

Stephen Doughty: I have to say that I share the concerns that have been expressed. If the Minister is being praised by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) on this, then I do worry about where things are headed. The problem is that if we create loopholes or opportunities for very, very radical activists—as we have seen in this case—to try to undermine headteachers, to intimidate and to undermine the overall Government guidance, then they will take those opportunities. I want to be assured that the Minister will provide full backing in ensuring that all children, regardless of their age, are getting this education—that it is not, for example, being done on the last day of year 6 or through some other way of circumventing the law, because I am sure that that is what, in some circumstances, these people will try to do.

Nick Gibb: The law is very clear: these issues have to be taught. We will support schools very strongly in delivering this curriculum. We are saying that they need to consult parents, but then, having done so, it is not, as I said, an election-style decision like voting an Act of Parliament through this House. Once the school has gone through that consultation and taken on board the views that have been expressed, it is then for it to decide, in its best judgment, what it thinks is the right material to be taught and when. We will stand by the schools that take that decision.

Ms Angela Eagle: Until we got to that passage in the Minister's speech, I thought I understood what the situation was, but he seemed to be saying that he is going to give very radicalised fundamentalist-type campaigns options to make as much fuss as possible to prevent the teaching of LGBT equality and relations until it is easier to do it. I fear that what he said a few minutes ago—I hope that he will be able to put me right on this—is almost an open invitation to these organisations that are already spreading disruption across the country to do even more of it. We cannot compromise with such organisations, and if he does not stand up to them now, he will regret it.

Nick Gibb: I think that the hon. Lady is being unjust in how she is interpreting what I have said. I made it very clear that the school should consult parents. I made it very clear that the school is not bound by a vote of those parents—that ultimately the decision on the content of the curriculum, and how and when it is taught, is a matter for the school—and that we will support the school in that decision once it has been reached. We have also made it very clear that we do not support protests outside schools that require young children to—to use her phrase—run the gauntlet of screaming and shouting protesters. We absolutely do not support those protests. We supported Birmingham City Council in taking out the injunction against those protests. I think she is being slightly unfair in the way that she has heard my speech.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I am slightly concerned that we are getting caught up in the wrong way about age-appropriateness. The Minister referred to the times when this education would be introduced, full stop—in other words, it could be brought forward or delayed. My understanding is that this education around being safe, around safeguarding of children and around what are appropriate relationships should start from the very beginning of school and go all the way through. Age-appropriateness is about what is age-appropriate at each level and how we address it at each level, not about whether it is introduced at each level. We need to be clear about this, because there was a danger that he started to sound like some of the few fanatical bigots that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr Godsiff) sided with rather than the people with progressive morals that we want to side with.

Nick Gibb: Relationships education is required to be taught from the very beginning of primary school, but of course it does have to be age-appropriate. It is about friends, and sharing, and learning about the importance of family. [*Interruption.*] No, there is no intention of delaying the introduction of relationships education. What is a matter for the school is when more sensitive issues are taught. That really is ultimately a matter for the school to decide. In doing so, it should consult parents, but that does not mean that parents have a veto on the decisions that it takes.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Will the Minister give way?

Nick Gibb: I will give way for the final time.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Can the right hon. Gentleman clarify for me what we mean, in this context, by “sensitive”? Do we mean talking about families with single parents, and so on, or are we talking about trans issues? What is “sensitive”? I am a bit confused, and I am worried that that word will be used as a hook on which to hang things that we might not want to put on it.

Nick Gibb: That, again, is a matter for the judgment of the school. The school will know its communities, and that is why we are saying—and it is a requirement—that on these issues the schools should be consulting parents. All the best schools in the country consult their parents on a wide range of issues, and they may even consult them on issues such as arithmetic. It is very important to have parental engagement with a school. I know schools that talk to parents about how reading is taught in their schools—if they are introducing a new phonics scheme, they will want to talk to parents about such issues. So I think parental engagement is important on this particular curriculum.

The Secretary of State and I are clear that we support any school that, having engaged with parents and listened to their views, takes a reasonable decision to teach their pupils about LGBT people and relationships. The guidance on relationships education and RSE makes it clear that pupils should receive LGBT-inclusive relationship and sex education during their school years. The Department strongly encourages primary schools to teach about families with same-sex parents. In most cases that will be possible and will be an important part of the education about respect for difference that is right for all pupils. I hope that in all cases, parents will have discussed these topics with their child's school and have an understanding of their approach. I hope that they will have satisfied themselves that the school is teaching the right things at the right age to complement what they teach their child on the importance of respecting other people.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Hall Green for his views on this important topic. Parents are the primary educators of their children, and on matters such as equality, respect and relationships, schools complement what the child is taught at home. It is therefore crucial that schools and parents engage in constructive dialogue to understand each other's views. Only through open communication can trust be built and maintained, and proper respect shown for difference.

Question put and agreed to.

5.12 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 25 June 2019

[IAN PAISLEY *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Living with Dementia

9.30 am

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): It is very warm in the Chamber today. Hon. Members may want to remove their jackets: please feel free to do so—I would not want anyone parboiled. Before I call Debbie Abrahams, who will move the motion in her own time, I ask Members to prepare, because of the interest in the debate, to make speeches of about five minutes. We shall keep that informal, but hopefully we will be able to get everyone in.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Mr Paisley. I thank the Backbench Business Committee, which granted the debate, and I want to recognise my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) as its co-sponsor. I also thank the Alzheimer's Society, which provides superb support to the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, and the parliamentary digital team for promoting the debate. We hope to hear the views of many people from across the country on the recommendations in the report we shall discuss.

The subject of dementia and people living with dementia is particularly close to my heart. As many Members will know, my mum was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease at 64 and I was one of her principal carers. Having had that caring experience and seen some of the issues my mum faced, I wanted to raise awareness about dementia and the many different brain diseases that cause it. As many will know, dementia is now the leading cause of death in the UK, having overtaken heart disease and cancer. It is estimated that 850,000 people in the UK have a dementia, and Alzheimer's disease is the most common. That is expected to increase to 2 million by 2050. Globally, there will be 152 million people living with dementia by 2050—a 204% increase. If there is anyone who does not now know someone with dementia, they soon will.

There is already much work under way at the UK Dementia Research Institute, where there is a search for programmes to identify people at risk of different dementia types and prevent them from contracting the disease, as well as for treatments and cures. In spite of the commitment by the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, to invest in dementia research, it still receives only one tenth of the research funding that cancer receives. However, there is also a need to invest in dementia research that could improve the lives of people affected by dementia today. I have campaigned with many others to raise the issues affecting people living with dementia, including becoming the first MP to be a Dementia Friends champion, working with Oldham Dementia Action Alliance to develop a dementia-friendly Oldham and Saddleworth, and undertaking various all-party group inquiries on how to improve the quality of life of people living with dementia.

The report from our latest inquiry, on dementia and disability, was launched last week. More than 2,500 people affected by dementia responded to our call for evidence—one of the largest responses to any all-party group inquiry. What the respondents had to say is very important. According to the Equality Act 2010 and the United Nations convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, dementia is a disability. As one family carer put it:

“If this isn't a disability then I don't know what is.”

However, the all-party group was told that society is lagging behind in that understanding and failing to uphold the legal rights of people with dementia. Evidence presented to the inquiry revealed that, across the country, the disability rights of people with dementia are not being upheld. Shockingly, 98% of the survey respondents thought that people living with dementia are treated differently from people with other health conditions or disabilities. They believe that that is due to the hidden nature of dementia, and the stigma that surrounds the condition. That is simply not good enough, and we need to do more.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining the debate, and those who supported her. I hope she will touch on the cost of care. The cost of looking after people with dementia is astronomical, as it is with care generally. I hope she will also touch on progress with dementia research.

Debbie Abrahams: I thank my hon. Friend, who anticipates me. I shall certainly talk about social care in relation to people living with dementia and their carers. My speech is focused on our inquiry report, but other hon. Members may want to touch on progress being made in research.

A central finding of the inquiry is that the public, employers, organisations, Governments and public bodies need to do more, and need to recognise the rights of people with dementia. The inquiry also revealed that a range of societal barriers prevents people with dementia from living independently. Action needs to be taken across a number of key areas to ensure that people with dementia receive the protections and safeguards provided by legislation and convention. The key areas that were identified as having a direct impact on people's daily lives include employment, social protection, which is also called social security or welfare benefits—I consider that a misnomer because most people who receive so-called welfare benefits have contributed, so they are an entitlement, not a benefit—social care, transport, housing and community life.

On employment, the importance of work in giving people a sense of purpose, self-esteem, status, companionship and income was raised. Work can also provide a routine. Without it, people can feel a loss of identity and sense of purpose. One person with young onset dementia told us:

“I applied for so many jobs and I just got rejections. I used to lecture at a university and now I can't get a job collecting trolleys. Any job is worthwhile. Not having a job destroys self-esteem.”

At the launch of the inquiry report last week we heard of a woman who had worked in a Government Department and had been diagnosed with early onset dementia. She became ill because of the condition, was then disciplined about that and, ultimately, was forced to take ill-health

[Debbie Abrahams]

redundancy. I know that the Minister will be as concerned as I am about that disgraceful position. If Departments are setting out how we should lead, we must make sure we have our own house in order.

There needs to be more awareness among both employers and employees of the employment rights of people with dementia. People need to feel empowered to tell their employers about their diagnosis and employers should feel supported in fulfilling their responsibility to make reasonable adjustments so that people with dementia can continue to make a meaningful contribution in the workplace. The Government have a hugely important role to play, by providing guidance and support for employers. The Access to Work programme could go some way to addressing the unmet needs of people with dementia in relation to employment. However, as I know the Minister recognises, that is a small pot of money, which currently supports only about 35,000 of the 4 million or so disabled people who are fit and able to work. We need to make sure that that is extended.

In relation to social protection, people raised issues about the extra costs associated with living with a disability. Access to extra financial support can provide a lifeline for people with dementia and help people to continue getting out and doing the things they enjoy. One of the key challenges for people affected by dementia is knowing what financial support is available to them. One family member told the all-party group that they felt that

“people with dementia are effectively ignored by the disability benefits system.”

People with dementia and their carers need access to more support to enable them to know what financial help they are entitled to and how to make a successful claim. The Minister knows my views on both the fit-for-work and personal independence payment assessments. Until those assessments are scrapped, people with dementia deserve to be assessed by professionals who understand the condition, and they should not have to undergo unnecessary reviews or reassessments, as currently happens.

Assessment processes need to be clear and appropriate for people with cognitive impairments. That is why we are calling for the Government to mandate the Department for Work and Pensions to convene an expert group to review access to social protection for people living with dementia and their carers, recognising their specific needs. This group must include those who are experts by virtue of their own lived experience. The Government should also mandate the DWP to exempt personal independence payment claimants below the state pension age and with a dementia diagnosis from reassessments, which are unnecessary and cause a lot of distress for people living with dementia and their families.

A further key issue was social care. The inquiry received considerable feedback about inadequate or inaccessible social care for people affected by dementia living in England. There are many ways to improve the lives of people with dementia, but it is difficult in the current context of the well-documented social care crisis across the country. It is now recognised that that social care crisis is a dementia crisis. We need to fix the broken care system, and I am proud to support the Alzheimer's Society's “Fix Dementia Care” campaign.

I know the Minister is eager to publish the Green Paper as soon as possible, and I urge the Government to recognise that.

In the context of social care reform, I will mention the Alzheimer's Society's campaign for a dementia fund. The system of dementia care in this country is in urgent need of reform and extra investment. In May, I tabled early-day motion 2360 in support of the campaign, calling for a financial injection into the social care system in the short to medium term, allowing for greater provision of safe and quality care, longer visits and savings to the NHS. My EDM now has the backing of more than 100 MPs of all parties, and I know that thousands of Alzheimer's Society campaigners have written to their own MPs as well. I would welcome a commitment from the Minister to look at the proposal, and her support in getting the Government to include a dementia fund in the forthcoming spending review, to end the unfairness for people with dementia.

Another key area is transport. Access to public transport can have a huge impact on the lives of people affected by dementia, helping to reduce loneliness and social isolation by linking someone to their community and friends, and providing links to essential services such as necessary respite care. Access to public transport is therefore critical to maintaining someone's quality of life. However, accessing transport can be very challenging for people with dementia. We heard many stories of how poor or inaccessible transport is, preventing people with dementia from participating in society, despite rights to accessible transport being enshrined in the Equality Act 2010.

Our report stresses the importance of reviewing any changes to bus and community transport services in the context of the public sector equality duty, to ensure that reasonable adjustments are made to enable people with dementia to continue to use public transport. Local authorities have a huge role to play here, and I hope that they will take steps to support people living with dementia in their communities.

On housing, the inquiry found that people with dementia are frequently being denied their right to live independently in their own homes, where they are able to make their own choices. It is important that people with dementia are supported as much as possible to stay as long as possible in their own home or to access suitable supported housing. People with dementia have the right to personal choice over where and how they live. We believe that people living with dementia must have access to adaptable housing, trained home care staff, and specialised supported housing schemes.

The final area is community life. The evidence supplied to our inquiry reaffirmed the importance of supporting people with dementia to continue to lead full and independent lives. That means creating communities where no one is excluded or has to face dementia alone. The all-party parliamentary group praised the work of the Dementia Friends programme, which helps to raise awareness of the condition and has created almost 3 million Dementia Friends in England, Wales and Northern Ireland—5,000 of them in my constituency of Oldham East and Saddleworth, a fact that I am very proud of.

A particularly relevant recommendation of the report is for Westminster to become the world's first dementia-friendly Parliament, including ensuring that

the parliamentary estate is a safe and welcoming place for people affected by dementia to work and visit. I have met a number of people today who are visiting Parliament; I hope they will be able to report positively on how they have been received today.

Our report is wide-ranging and covers a number of different issues that need to be addressed if the disability rights of people living with dementia are to be realised. Over the coming months, the all-party parliamentary group on dementia will work with the Alzheimer's Society and other partners to turn the report's recommendations into reality. That has the potential to have a huge impact on the lives of people living with dementia and their carers, and I hope that everyone in the Chamber today and beyond will offer their support.

9.44 am

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, in conjunction with the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and the Backbench Business Committee.

Hon. Members should be dismayed to learn that, according to a recent survey, 98% of the 2,521 respondents felt that those with dementia were treated differently from people with other health conditions or disabilities. Some even found that employers would not make reasonable adjustments to the workplace. Those respondents believed that they were discriminated against, facing unnecessary stigma and often negative attitudes. It is a worrying statistic given that, apparently, 850,000 people in the UK live with dementia. Indeed, 70% of care home patients live with the condition.

Media coverage of the condition tends to occur only when it befalls a prominent person in public life, when relatives have the courage to publish their experiences, as the TV presenter Sally Magnusson in Scotland did in relation to her mother, or when a member of the public sadly goes missing and the police issue an urgent appeal for help in locating them. It is important that we raise wider and more regular awareness of a condition that appears to be on the increase throughout the United Kingdom.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I apologise for being late to this debate. Last November, my father passed away. He was a sufferer from dementia and, while he got fantastic care, we found as a family that there was a lack of staff with the experience to diagnose dementia, because there are different stages and diagnoses. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one area that is forgotten about is young carers, who have to dedicate a lot of their time to looking after their parents while still keeping up their studies? We seem to forget about them.

Bill Grant: The hon. Gentleman is right that we often seem to overlook the young carers. In my family, we have experience of hosting my mother-in-law. I was very fond of her, but we had two or three months of hosting her, and despite having two daughters who are nurses, what a challenge that was in my life and that of my wife. We thought we knew about dementia, but we knew nothing about it until we walked for several months with my mother-in-law, who I was very fond of.

When I served as a councillor in South Ayrshire, one of my colleagues, Councillor Hugh Hunter, and others were active in ensuring that the needs of dementia sufferers and their carers were to the fore. In his council area, in 2016, a dementia-friendly project was launched, with the laudable aim of building a community that supports people with dementia, enabling sufferers to remain in their community for as long as practicable and reducing the stigma. Indeed, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), which borders mine, is the Carlton Hotel, one of the first in Scotland to provide a dementia-friendly bedroom. I think she and I would both agree that that is delightful, and I give credit to that hotel and others that do the same.

In 2015, the UK Government launched the Dementia 2020 challenge, a vision for dementia care, support, awareness and research, which includes awareness training for NHS and care staff. I understand research spending is around £60 million a year to 2020, but not beyond. Four years on, I wonder whether the Minister might provide us with an update and an outline of what the future might hold for those with dementia and—equally importantly, as was said earlier—their carers.

In particular, I am sure sufferers and carers would be grateful for more detail on the proposed Green Paper on a new social care policy, especially the Alzheimer's Society's desire for a dementia fund to afford financial support for the very real additional costs associated with dementia treatment and care. An update on the Accelerated Access Collaborative introduced last year, which enables patients to benefit from rapid uptake products, breakthrough medicines and technologies with the greatest potential to change lives, would also be welcome. I know an update would be gratefully received by many of my constituents and others elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

I very much welcome the fact that mental capacity legislation should enhance safeguards against deprivation of liberty and ensure that those living with dementia have a person to advocate on their behalf. However, the Government could further assist by making form filling easier and considering whether there is truly a constant need for reassessment, given that dementia is sadly a progressive condition for which there is currently no effective cure.

All our Governments and other organisations must ensure that those living with dementia are able to do so with dignity, respect and, most importantly, compassionate care, to remain safely independent for as long as is reasonably practicable. The Alzheimer's Society's mantra that everyone affected by dementia should feel part of—not apart from—society sums the situation up. It is to be commended for encouraging more than 2 million people to sign up as Dementia Friends, and its informative website is truly well worth a visit.

During Dementia Action Week last month, I belatedly became aware that some stores in Ayr—a town in my constituency—such as Specsavers, have several Dementia Friends on their teams. Hopefully this small step will be a growing trend in retail, hospitality and, equally importantly, transport throughout the UK, to extend that hand to those living with dementia who need that wee bit of extra help.

9.50 am

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), who so expertly laid out the issues. I will say a little bit about social care and then move on to research.

Some 1,179 people live with dementia in Cambridge—around 1% of the constituency population—meaning that thousands of my constituents care for or know a close friend or relative with dementia. My hon. Friend touched on some of the social care issues. It seems hard to deny that we have a crisis in social care. In March 2017, the Government said they would publish a Green Paper on ensuring that the system will be sustainable in the long term. However, two years on, and after many delays, Ministers have still not given a date for when it will be published.

I understand that 400,000 fewer older people receive publicly funded care than in 2010. With local authority budgets cut by 49.1% since 2010, including £7 billion lost from adult social care, and a further £1.3 billion to be cut in 2019-20, it is hard not to conclude that the situation for many of those living with dementia, and for their families, has been made much harsher and more difficult.

Alzheimer's Research UK has campaigned for more money to be invested into research, so that with new treatments we can really change the lives of those who have dementia. As we all know, research has revolutionised the ways we treat, cure and prevent diseases such as cancer. There is no reason why that cannot be the same for brain diseases such as dementia. New treatments would also ease pressure on our healthcare and social care services, improving lives and saving public service resources. Public donations have allowed Alzheimer's Research UK to invest £100 million over the last 20 years to drive forward its research, but that funding alone does not allow it to further explore emerging fields.

However, when we do invest in dementia research, look at what we can achieve. Alzheimer's Research UK's Drug Discovery Institute in Cambridge couples the deep disease knowledge and biology expertise of the academic community with high-quality, innovative drug discovery technologies. More than 100,000 combined hours have been committed to drug discovery by 30 new staff. The institute is currently investigating 10 new potential drug targets in its own work or through collaborations, has generated 12 new internal collaborations at the University of Cambridge and has attracted nine new partners from both the private and the academic sectors.

In addition to the institute, the Cambridge Network Centre, launched 20 years ago, has grown to include 2,200 dementia researchers across the UK. It has helped researchers to buy cutting-edge technology to carry out their research, supported grant applications and fellowship applications and enabled PhD students to buy equipment such as virtual reality technology to further their research. I suspect I am not the only one to have seen the virtual reality dementia simulation and met Helen Davies when Alzheimer's Research UK was in Parliament. I—like others, I suspect—found it extremely interesting and slightly surreal, but also very impressive at explaining the effects of the disease.

While £269 million is invested in cancer research, only £83.1 million is invested in dementia research—just 0.3% of its total cost to society. Alzheimer's Research UK is calling for the Government to increase that to just 1% of its total cost, which would unlock the resources needed to really cement the UK as the world leader in dementia research and to make real breakthroughs. I very much hope that the Minister will commit to discussing that with her colleagues in the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Treasury—even possibly one or two Conservative party leadership candidates, for whom money suddenly seems to be no object—to ensure that we make the progress that we all need.

9.54 am

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Both my grandmothers suffered with dementia, so like many here today I have seen at first hand how people slowly become a shadow of their former selves. We are all living longer than before, but with the gift of more time comes complex illness and disease. It is expected that, by 2020, more than 1 million people across the UK will have dementia, with one in five people aged over 90 suffering from it. Chichester has a significant elderly population, and we therefore have more sufferers than the national average.

We know that this area of health will only become more of an issue in the coming years, so policy around it needs to be robust, for both patients and their families. In 2015, the Challenge on Dementia 2020 was launched, setting out the vision for how dementia care support, awareness and research will be transformed by 2020. A big part of this is awareness raising, so people can spot the signs in loved ones. I and my team are registered to take part in Age UK's dementia awareness training, and I am sure that many people across the country are doing the same. More people are receiving a dementia diagnosis than ever before, helped by the fact that more than 660,000 NHS staff have received dementia training. That is important, because the earlier the diagnosis, the more time patients and their families have to prepare for what is to come.

From my own experience, I know that dementia is a very changeable disease, with good days and bad. Sometimes I would sit with my nan and she would be as sharp as a pin. Sadly, on others, she would barely recognise me. However, there are some things that can beat dementia, and in her case it was politics. I will never forget visiting my nan, Joan Roberts, after she moved out of her council house and into a local care home in Huyton. I had just finished my first election campaign, contesting St Helens South and Whiston in 2015—as a Conservative—and wanted to show her my election leaflets. At the time, she was in the advanced stages of dementia. She looked at the photos and admired the different outfits I was wearing, but all of a sudden her face went as black as thunder when she realised I was standing as a Conservative. “That is not my party,” she exclaimed. I said, “Goodness, nan; you can't remember what you had for breakfast but you still remember that you're Labour.” I went on to reassure her that we had never agreed on politics, and she seemed happy enough with that reply.

Having seen how this disease impacted my family, I think it is crucial that we bolster support for family carers. My constituent, Wendy, cares for her husband Richard and has had her life turned upside down. Her husband was her main support through life, and they used to talk about everything, but now they cannot. In contrast to much of their marriage, she now cares for him. Wendy, like many others, receives support from Sage House, our local dementia hub. The services it offers sufferers and their carers are a vital lifeline.

My family were very lucky in that regard. Coming from a large Liverpoolian family, we have a home-made support network, but not everyone is so lucky or lives close enough to each other. When my other grandmother, Jessie Gibson, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, her 11 surviving children, including my dad, drew up a 24-hour rota so that someone was always there to care for her in her home in Huyton. However, having 11 children who live within a few miles of each other is quite an unusual care option, and not one that I guess many of us have.

Sage House is an amazing local service. It is there from the earliest stages of dementia to end-of-life care. It has group sessions, which are important to people with dementia because loneliness often becomes more of an issue. Similarly, Chichester Lunch Club offers a fantastic support service that helps people to build and maintain relationships. Anyone who has loved ones with dementia will know how important it is for their wider mental health that they keep up social interaction.

Like most issues of the 21st century, there is always a technological advancement that can help. Chichester Careline is the only monitoring service in West Sussex providing telecare equipment to the most vulnerable in our society. Its services are becoming ever more invaluable, because they are often used by people in the earlier stages of dementia. People with dementia often get confused, and on occasion get lost; they sometimes wander out of their house. My nan used to go out looking for her two daughters, who she thought had not come home for the evening, even though they were in their 60s and 70s. Careline operates a "Mindme" service. That means that if a person becomes lost or disorientated, they can be located through a website, which is monitored by their family, friends and carers as well as Chichester Careline. That service is available 24/7, 365 days a year. The technology can now go further for people who are prone to wandering off. An imaginary ring fence can be installed around a location, and that sets off an alert if a user crosses it.

Dementia is an illness that has touched my family and will affect more and more families up and down the country. A key concern of mine is social care—for those with dementia and for the elderly more generally. I believe that we need a transformative adjustment in policy that genuinely offers a sustainable, integrated model of care. At this point, I urge hon. Members here today who have not already done so to join the all-party parliamentary group on social care, which I set up with the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and in which we are working to be a voice for the industry and its professionals to improve the status of that vital work, on which many people up and down the country rely. It is our great responsibility to care for those who cared for us. We need to get this right. One day, and sooner than we think, we will be the ones in need of that care.

10 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am delighted to participate in this important debate on improving the lives of people with dementia. I begin by extending my thanks to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing the debate, and by applauding the excellent work in my constituency carried out by Quarriers dementia befriending service—I met people from the service only a few weeks ago—and its wonderful volunteers, who work so hard and do so much to improve the lives of those with dementia.

I must declare an interest in the debate, as my husband's mother—my mother-in-law—is living with dementia. Watching an older person—I appreciate that we have heard about cases of younger people being diagnosed with this disease—make the descent from the person they used to be into someone who is so far removed from their former self is really distressing. My mother-in-law's name is Iris Gibson, and before the illness took hold she was the longest-serving SNP councillor on Glasgow City Council at the time; she was a woman who was a keen runner, having participated in marathons all over the world; she was a woman who was never home but was always out at meetings or events in her council ward, or representing Glasgow City Council in her role as bailie at official functions; and she was a woman who was perfectly comfortable exploring foreign lands on her own when she took time for a holiday. Over an extremely short period of time, her children and I have watched her go from being all those things to being a woman who is easily confused, who is not always able to recognise her grown-up children and who has lost all sense of herself. If she could have seen, and if she had known, how her elderly years would play out, she would have been distressed beyond measure at the prospect. Her grown-up children, twins Kenneth and Janis, find her descent into dementia very distressing to see, as might be expected. This illness is cruel beyond words, and if anything can be done to improve the lives of those who are living with the disease and the lives of their families—we cannot forget their families—we need to do all in our power to deliver that.

Iris has had to surrender her own home and lives in a care home in Largs called Haylie House. She seems happy there, but the disease has robbed her of decades of memories. She appears to have forgotten so much of her life before dementia, which was a life she lived to the full. Sadly, that story of dementia can be told by every single person who has watched a precious family member fall victim to this disease, be robbed of the recollections of a life lived to the full in glorious colour and have that replaced by blank, empty spaces, where decades have simply vanished and are beyond the grasp of the person struck by the illness.

In the UK, 850,000 people are living with dementia. By 2025, which is not far away, that figure will rise to more than 1 million, and by 2050 it will rise to more than 2 million. I am concerned about how we protect those living in our communities who have this disease—they may not even have been diagnosed. Too often, as we have discussed in this place, such individuals are seen as rich pickings by those who seek to part them from their savings. As a society, we need to put structures in place to protect them, in every way. Some financial institutions have put measures in place to protect our older, vulnerable people. I am referring to measures such as monitoring

[Patricia Gibson]

their bank accounts and having a few days buffering the removal of unusually large amounts from their account to help to safeguard them against fraud.

What is really needed, as we have discussed in this Chamber before, is a legal duty of care from the business world and from the state towards older people—especially those with dementia—who need that extra layer of protection in a world where rogues and thieves are creative and cunning and older people, even those with dementia, are isolated in their own homes without sufficient support. That protection must be put in place. In my view, it should be a legal, statutory duty for all financial institutions to deliver that protection. Those living with dementia deserve nothing less.

As our population ages and people live longer, there are huge cost and care challenges to face in terms of how we look after our older people, and especially those who live with this cruel disease. Those challenges are faced by societies right across Europe and, indeed, the world, and we must do all we can to meet them, despite the difficulties. The Scottish Government are working hard to improve dementia care and have published a three-year dementia strategy, but one challenge, to which money is perhaps not the answer, is recruiting and retaining care staff, whether the care is carried out in an older person's home or in a care home. Integration of health and social care services allows for more joined-up delivery of services, but the story cannot end there. It is the case that 43% of the Scottish Government's entire budget—43%—is spent on health. That is before one penny is spent on schools, housing, roads, local authorities or anything else. The costs of social care can only grow and will continue to be hugely challenging, and we must continue to work to meet the challenges. The Scottish Government are looking very carefully at a report from Alzheimer Scotland called "Delivering Fair Dementia Care For People With Advanced Dementia" and some of the issues that it raises about continuing to work to improve the lives of those living with this condition.

I echo many of the comments that have been made today about the need for continuing and improved research into this condition. Given the numbers affected and the cruel erosion that this illness inflicts on those struck down by it, caring for those in our society who are living with dementia will never be easy. That will always be challenging, not least because of recruitment and retention challenges. We need to recruit and retain staff to carry out the caring that is required—that is very difficult—and we will need more people to carry out those caring roles. We can all agree that our older people must have the care and support that they need throughout this shocking illness. We must not lose sight of that. Our older people with this illness need us to get this right.

10.7 am

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. Like other hon. Members, I thank the hon. Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for bringing this timely and critical debate to the Chamber. We all feel very strongly about the subject. Many hon. Members have experienced, and have spoken movingly about, the impact of dementia on their own family. I am one of those, too. I will always

remember the effect that dementia had on my grandfather in his final years. "Strict but fair" is probably the phrase used to describe that generation—my grandfather was a Royal Air Force officer and a teacher. I therefore have had personal involvement and have a personal interest in this matter, as so many do, and it is of course an emotional matter for many of us.

I am also married, as I have told the House before, to a music therapist. Many of my wife's clients live with dementia. Classically, one always thinks of such people as being over 65, but that is not always the case. Increasingly, as my wife tells me, people who are much younger are affected, and it is those people on whom I would like to focus my brief comments.

I am a Dementia Friends champion. Many hon. Members are Dementia Friends and I warmly encourage any who are not to become one because of the education that it provides. One of the key lines and key lessons that dementia friend champions ask people to take away is that not everybody who is old has dementia and not everybody who has dementia is old. Although it is rare for younger people to have dementia, it is not that rare. About 5% of people with dementia are under 65, which is about 42,000 people—a significant number. I always ask people to become Dementia Friends because of the extraordinarily positive message that comes from that programme.

We should say not that someone is suffering with dementia, but that they are living with dementia. I am glad to hear that everyone is using the correct phraseology today—I hope that I will continue to do so throughout my speech. Secondly, one can live well with dementia, and there are many things that we can do in our constituencies and public lives to ensure that everybody does so.

Young onset dementia—people under 65—is very difficult to diagnose. It is easily confused with stress or depression at that age, so the diagnosis is delayed. Even when someone is diagnosed, it is often hard to find care. Care is often fragmented and targeted at people who are over 65, which is welcome where it is but, as the Dementia Friends programme shows, it is important that care is targeted to the individual's needs.

That is why we are grateful for the Alzheimer Society's Side by Side programme. I am honoured that YoungDementia UK is based in Witney. Its director, Tessa Gutteridge, is my constituent. It is a wonderful programme that seeks to bring together appropriate care for people under 65 who are living with dementia. For example, a social event for people in their 70s or 80s is not ideal for someone in their 40s who is living with dementia. It is much better if they are with people of their own age. YoungDementia UK have joined Age UK Oxfordshire and Guideposts Trust to bring together that specialised expertise and provide appropriate care and a support service targeted towards those with young onset dementia across Oxfordshire. We would like to see that throughout the whole country, which I know the Minister will think about in due course.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth for mentioning the report we have launched. I will not go through it in detail because she has done so fully. I would like to deal with the issue of employment. Under the Equality Act 2010, dementia is a disability. That particularly impacts those 42,000 people under 65, who may well be working. Their challenge is

unique because they may themselves be carers for parents or children, they may be holding down a full-time job and they may have a mortgage to pay. It is particularly difficult. There is a stigma, as we know, around telling an employer that one is living with dementia.

There are difficulties in ensuring that the reasonable adjustments that should be made are made. That may be due to a lack of awareness of rights—perhaps employers do not realise that they should be making those reasonable adjustments. However, they may not realise what adjustments can be made. That is why I will give another unashamed plug for the Dementia Friends programme, which explains to people how it feels to live with dementia and what reasonable adjustments can be made.

The Government have an important role to play, which is dealt with in the all-party parliamentary group on dementia report. I ask the Minister to consider asking the Department for Work and Pensions to revise its guidance to employers about their responsibilities to support people who are living with dementia. It can cover reasonable adjustments, information on the Access to Work programme, and how to support employees with dementia. There is much more to do before we can call ourselves a society that is truly dementia-friendly, but I know that together we can do it.

10.13 am

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate. I support their vision to make this Parliament the first dementia-friendly Parliament in the world. My staff and I have undertaken dementia-friendly training in my constituency office. It is important for us all to try to promote a more dementia-friendly society, sector by sector, institution by institution and, as mentioned previously, shop by shop.

It is great that so many Members want to participate in the debate—it shows how active this is in our personal lives and our communities. A wide range of issues has been covered so far. We have looked at the impact on loved ones who are living with dementia and their carers, financial assistance and protection for people living with dementia, research, social care costs, dementia-friendly shops and institutions, and therapies that can help people who are living with dementia, such as music therapy. I want to touch on the role that I think mindfulness can play in helping people who are living with dementia and their carers.

I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). On Tuesday 14 May, we held a conference in the Macmillan room on mindfulness in an ageing world, including those living with Alzheimer's. We had 150 people attending, including 15 of the charities representing elderly people, including the Alzheimer's Society.

We heard from experts from around the world and the UK who have been doing research on mindfulness, ageing and Alzheimer's. Dr Antoine Lutz of the centre for medical research at the University of Lyon has won a €7 million grant for research into ageing well and Alzheimer's. We also heard from Dr Lone Fjorback from Aarhus University in Denmark, where they have a

week-long festival for mental health to look at the issues in a positive light. From the UK, we heard from Dr Trudi Eddington, who is a British research scientist at City University researching those currently suffering with dementia. We also heard from Dr Eric Loucks, the associate professor of epidemiology, and behaviour and social sciences at Brown University.

There is promising early research out there. We used to think of the brain as set at the age of 25 and declining after that age. Now they have discovered neuroplasticity: how our brain changes size, function and shape over the course of our lives. Actions we take can encourage and discourage that. I ask the Minister and her advisers to assess that research, and particularly the research from the University of Lyon, which will be published later in the summer, and to meet officers of our all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness. I also ask the all-party parliamentary group on dementia and the Alzheimer's Society to do the same. I pay tribute to that APPG and the Alzheimer's Society, and all of those who work to lessen the suffering of those living with dementia and their carers.

10.18 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Paisley, for allowing me to speak in this important debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this important debate, and commend their work on the all-party parliamentary group on dementia.

The scale of the challenge of dementia is well known, but it bears repeating. In the UK, some 850,000 people live with dementia. That is set to double by 2040. Of course, the figures do not capture the great many other people whose lives are touched by dementia, most obviously family, friends and carers. With so many people affected by dementia, we need a comprehensive and joined-up approach that supports people and their families as soon as they are diagnosed. This must involve health, social care, local government and voluntary organisations.

There is a great deal of innovation and good practice. We must do all we can to ensure that it is shared as widely as possible, which is why I entirely agree with the Alzheimer's Society that we need a national strategy on dementia. Of course, it is hugely important that the strategy is fully funded. I urge the Government to consider that in the upcoming spending review.

When thinking about a joined-up approach, we should look at the lessons from the integrated personal commissioning pilots. IPC, a partnership between the Local Government Association and NHS England, aims to integrate healthcare and education services around people rather than organisations. It focuses on an individual's needs, along with the available community and peer support, to build their confidence and skills for self-managing long-term conditions such as dementia. It seeks to offer choice and control to patients by widening access to integrated personal budgets and developing more options to help people to achieve their goals.

An important point that the Alzheimer's Society has raised is the need to ensure that people with dementia understand the information that they receive. What is told to people with dementia is not always the same as

[Judith Cummins]

what they receive and understand. Given the nature of the condition, it is vital that medical professionals and others continually ensure that people are empowered by what they are told.

That point leads me on to the need for improved education about Alzheimer's and dementia. I pay tribute to the Alzheimer's Society's Dementia Friends initiative, which has spread awareness and has seen 2.75 million people—including me and others in my office—become Dementia Friends. However, there is still poor knowledge among much of the public and some medical and care professionals about Alzheimer's, dementia and what can be done to help people with the disease.

The Department of Health and Social Care should consider implementing a dementia awareness campaign to increase understanding of the symptoms of dementia and the interventions and treatments that can slow the progress of the disease, and to support people with dementia and their carers to lead independent lives for as long as is appropriate. The Government must do more to improve standards within the social care workforce to meet the needs of people with dementia, including by funding training to tier 2 of the dementia training standards framework for everyone who works in adult social care or interacts with people with dementia.

Finally, I turn to the support that we must provide for carers. I pay heartfelt tribute to the many thousands in this country who care for people with dementia and a whole range of other conditions. Out of love, they provide selfless care and deserve our utmost respect. Much more help must be given to those who care for people living with dementia. Carers need a wide range of practical, emotional and financial support. For instance, in its recent report on dementia and disability, the APPG on dementia found that carers need more support to know exactly what financial help they are entitled to, as well as how to make a successful claim. Carers are also time-poor and have little energy and—dare I say it?—headspace left after meeting the demands of caring for someone 24/7. The agencies involved need to take a more proactive approach to ensure that carers can claim the financial help they need, because they are entitled to support for the care they give their loved ones.

As we have heard, the Government's aspiration to make the UK the best country in the world for dementia care and support is welcome, but it must be met with action and funding to make it a reality. I hope the Minister makes those commitments today.

10.22 am

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): As always, Mr Paisley, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I join colleagues in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for her leadership and for the compassion she shows in everything she does. I am a Dementia Friend because of her, having attended one of her workshops here in Westminster in 2016. I have since become a dementia champion and was asked by the Alzheimer's Society to run its workshop for Dementia Friends at the 2016 Labour party conference to 80 colleagues and members, which was quite a challenge for my first workshop. I am incredibly proud to have played a very small role in training some of the UK's 2.8 million Dementia Friends

and sending them out into their communities to make them that bit more dementia-friendly. Once again, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her role in that.

This debate gives us an opportunity to evaluate where we are against the aspirations set out in the Government's Challenge on Dementia 2020, but also to shine a spotlight on some of the good work that is being done at a grassroots level—not least in Halifax, thanks to some truly inspirational and passionate volunteers. As we have heard time and again, 850,000 people are living with dementia in the UK, a figure that is expected to double by 2040. One in 14 over-65s is living with dementia. If that is not an incentive to us all to do everything we can while we are able and empowered to do so, I do not know what is.

I recently wrote to older people in the Sowerby Bridge area of Halifax on behalf of the campaign to make Sowerby Bridge a dementia-friendly town, and invited them to a day of action to learn more and see the support available in their area. That campaign is driven by Shabir Hussain of Bluebird Care in Calderdale, who is a thoroughly committed community activist, along with Chris and June Harvey, who are truly dementia champions, and who run the wonderful Memory Lane Café for people with dementia and their carers. With their trustees and volunteers, Chris and June run pop-up cafés in churches and community centres in Sowerby Bridge and Halifax, with a dementia-friendly programme of games and crafts, information and support, cakes, music and conversation. Some 540,000 people in England alone care for those with dementia, and estimates suggest that one in three of us will be involved in caring for someone with dementia at some time in our lives, so a dementia-friendly environment that offers a thoroughly positive experience for all those involved in living well with dementia makes a massive difference to the regular attenders.

We also have a young onset dementia and Alzheimer's group, or YODA for short, which was set up by Julie Hayden and provides support for younger people with dementia and for their carers and families. As we have heard, it is often overlooked that 42,000 people of working age live with dementia. Their requirements can be quite different. People diagnosed with dementia at that time of life usually present between the ages of 30 and 65 and are most likely in work, potentially with dependent children, older parents to care for or financial commitments such as a mortgage to consider. For that group, as other hon. Members have said, living well requires a different support package from that required for over-65s.

I would be remiss not to highlight the work of Inspector Neil Taylor of West Yorkshire police, who is a dementia champion and the chair of Dementia Friendly Todmorden. He has gone over and above in promoting best practice within West Yorkshire police and his local community—all credit to him. West Yorkshire police have introduced the Herbert protocol, named after George Herbert, a veteran of the Normandy landings who lived with dementia. The police and other agencies encourage family and carers to complete a form with useful information that could be used in the event of a vulnerable person going missing. The form includes vital details such as medication required, mobile numbers and places previously located, along with a recent photograph. In the event of a loved one going missing, the form can be

handed quickly to the police to speed up the search and assist in supporting that person, who may be lost and confused when they are located. I recommend that all forces adopt such a protocol as soon as possible.

We are blessed with dedicated volunteers who have made Calderdale a better place to live with dementia, but what if Shabir, Chris and June, Julie, Neil and others like them were not there? The environment might be quite different without their leadership. How can we ensure that such work is supported and replicated elsewhere?

I give credit where it is due. David Cameron's Government launched the dementia challenge in 2012, which sought to create dementia-friendly communities, with work led by the Alzheimer's Society; drive improvements in health and care; and improve research, with a commitment that funding for dementia research be doubled to more than £66 million by 2015. Under Dementia Challenge 2020, as the programme was called when it relaunched in 2015, the Government committed to investing more than £300 million in dementia research and medical innovation.

It has been estimated that dementia costs the UK economy £23 billion a year, which is more than the costs of cancer, heart disease or stroke. With the numbers of people living with dementia expected to double by 2040, predicted costs are expected to treble alongside that increase. For anyone not yet won over by the human arguments for committing to research for dementia, the economic arguments speak for themselves.

To be fair to David Cameron, I believe that he understood the issue. I hope the Minister can assure us that she will seek to make it a continuing priority for the incoming Prime Minister. However, there are still areas in which I would like to see things standardised across the UK to support people, particularly younger people, who live with dementia, as well as their families and carers. To have a dementia diagnosis in the workplace, with dependants or financial commitments, must be incredibly daunting, but with a renewed focus on that group, and with changes to our understanding of the support that those demographics need to live well, we can make a positive difference. I thank the APPG on dementia for its report "Hidden No More: Dementia and disability", which calls, quite simply, for "equality, non-discrimination, participation and inclusion."

I wholeheartedly endorse those aims.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I thank colleagues for their immensely good self-imposed discipline, which will allow the Opposition spokespersons and the Minister 10 minutes each to speak.

10.29 am

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this crucial debate.

As has been said, the number of people suffering dementia in the UK is 850,000—I apologise, because I have already said "suffering" instead of "living with", but many people are suffering. We talk about what is being done in pockets and what is being done well, but that is not happening for all those 850,000 people. Some of them are stuck in their houses, some are tutted at by people behind them in supermarkets and some are made to feel unwelcome in certain places. Until we can say that all 850,000 of those people are living well with dementia, we have not done our jobs.

There are 90,000 people living with dementia in Scotland, and more than 3,000 of them are under 65. The impact on those people has been touched on. It is estimated that only two thirds of people with dementia have been diagnosed, and that means that we do not actually have a handle on the scale of the problem.

Alzheimer's—a term that many people use interchangeably with dementia—is the commonest form of dementia, but there is also vascular dementia; in many patients, it is mixed. A rarer form of dementia, Lewy body dementia, causes a particular type of dementia, with less memory loss but big impacts on movement. In particular, it causes hallucinations, and our police and firefighters should know about that. If they have had 50 calls from the same patient, it may be not because there is a burglar, but because that person is having hallucinations of a burglar. That is why we need to integrate all our public services, so that they learn from each other. Other conditions, such as HIV and Parkinson's, can also lead to dementia. Many people know about memory loss, but there is not so much awareness of the difficulties that dementia creates with making decisions, concentrating and spatial awareness. People with advanced dementia have real difficulty moving around in our environment, and the situation is even worse if certain parts of the brain are impacted.

Unfortunately, at the moment treatment is very limited; there have been no new drugs for dementia since 2002. The most commonly used drugs are those that stop the breakdown of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that sends messages from one brain cell to the next. Those drugs can improve concentration, but they do not work against the underlying causes of dementia, partly because we still do not understand all the underlying causes. We see the breakdown of proteins, we see bits of proteins appearing in the brain and we see brain cells getting tangled up, but what exactly is causing all that? We need to upscale research to a totally game-changing level to understand the cause so that we can try to prevent and treat dementia. In Scotland in 2013, the Scottish Dementia Research Consortium was set up as an umbrella organisation to try to bring all such projects together. As well as laboratory research into the cause and treatment of dementia, research into a human rights approach to those living with dementia is critical in improving support and care.

We are also looking at adapting our health and care systems. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) mentioned, two years ago Scotland published a national strategy for dementia, which is the country's third such strategy; the first was in 2010. This one will focus on the whole pathway, from providing post-diagnostic support right through to end of life, and including community co-ordinators.

Dementia is the disease that our generation fears. My grandmother feared tuberculosis—people did not even name it; they called it "consumption"—and the people I looked after as a surgeon feared cancer. What many of us now fear is losing oneself, as we have heard described so graphically this morning, or losing the person we have loved all our adult life.

Providing social care is critical for those living with dementia and for their families. In Scotland, we have spent more on social care, which allows us to provide free personal care. That means that if someone can be supported at home to live with independence and dignity,

[Dr Philippa Whitford]

it will not cost them or their family. Since Frank's law came into effect in Scotland just two months ago, that has also applied to those under the age of 65. The care they receive is thus related to their illness and particular needs, without a bizarre cut-off at 65 that prevents a 64-year-old from receiving the care that they require.

The problem is that we are struggling to recruit people as carers, whether in care homes or in home care. Most people want to be cared for in their own home, but it is very labour-intensive. Some aspects of the situation are being made worse by Brexit. In parts of Scotland, such as the highlands, 30% of carers are from Europe, so there will be an existential problem for care services. We also need to turn caring into a proper professional career, with training, career development and a decent salary that rewards carers for the very difficult job that they do.

It is critical that we support a person with dementia along their entire journey. All we have to do is to sit in this Chamber and imagine ourselves in that clinic, getting that diagnosis, and then going home and finding that there is nothing—no information, no support and no one to answer questions. The integration agenda, which is further down the line in Scotland, is linking things up. We have linked our NHS back into integration since devolution, but integrating healthcare and social care is a lot harder; social care is much more fragmented, because it is provided by multiple private companies.

We have multiple projects going on in Scotland that are often recognised through Scotland's dementia awards. My local health board has won one such award for its "Bridging the gap" project, which provides a dementia support adviser to liaise between hospital, community and family along the patient's journey. In Wishaw, there is a theatre buddy scheme, so that if someone with dementia requires surgery, their buddy—they could be a worker or a relative—is there at the last moment before the operation and when the patient wakes up. One project that I particularly like is the provision of assistance dogs that have been trained by prisoners in Castle Huntly, which involves a double win: the prisoners are proud that they are helping someone in the community, and those living with dementia have assistance dogs.

However, for those who are living with dementia now, the most important thing is to make them feel welcome and included in the communities that we live in. In 2016, I was lucky enough to be invited to speak at the launch of Dementia Friendly Prestwick, which is led by a very impressive team, particularly Julie and Lorna, who are leading lights within it. I had not done any of the work required to set it up; I was just asked to give a speech at the launch. However, I was inspired by that launch to set up Dementia Friendly Troon and Villages, Troon being the community that I live in.

In Prestwick, a relaxed cinema has been running for three years. There are subtitles, the cinema is free, it is not as dark as most cinemas, they serve home-baked food and they have even had a local potter make double-handed cups. The baking is all done by Berelands House, one of our local nursing homes. The cinema was a finalist in the Scottish Dementia Awards, and the sound and screen are of really high quality; I went to watch one of the movies myself. That service is provided by Friends of the Broadway, the Broadway being an old cinema in Prestwick.

In Troon, we have relaxed golf and an allotment, which is supported by other gardeners. We started by asking, "Why do we love living in Ayrshire, and how do we help people to hang on to that for as long as possible?"

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I apologise for not being here at the start of the debate; I had a meeting with the Turkish ambassador, so I just could not be here earlier. Does the hon. Lady agree that greater support should be provided for those living with dementia to enable family members and other close relatives to take care of their loved ones—that is really important—for as long as possible before putting them into care facilities?

Dr Whitford: I absolutely agree; care should be provided in the home, if at all possible. That is where we would all want to be. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) mentioned the hotel room that uses colour as well as technology to make it easier for a person with dementia to stay in it, as well as making it easier for their carer to be there.

Guided walks are provided in Troon. Troon promenade is being redesigned to make it easier to move around on, and Troon is part of Cycling Without Age, which provides cycle rides along the promenade on trishaws every Sunday afternoon. Staff at our local airport, Prestwick, have received the training to make it a dementia-friendly airport. That all depends on Alzheimer Scotland, which provides training to staff at the airport and at other, smaller businesses, such as hairdressers and cafés.

We are the ones who have to make the change. All we are asked to do is be patient, rather than tutting behind someone in a supermarket. In our area, we have managed to get two supermarkets to provide relaxed lanes where people will not be rushed, but will be invited and chatted to as they come through. Let us all be less hectic, and let us make everyone feel welcome in our communities.

10.39 am

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing today's debate and for her excellent work on the all-party parliamentary group on dementia, championing awareness of dementia and support for those affected. I also thank Members present, particularly the hon. Members for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), who have shared very personal stories about how they and their families have been affected. I pay tribute to carers, both paid and unpaid, who do so much to make life bearable for those who are suffering—I apologise for saying "suffering", but personal experience teaches me that that is the reality.

Dementia is a life-changing disability that affects millions of people in the UK. Some 850,000 people in the UK have been diagnosed with dementia, including more than 1,000 people in my constituency of Burnley. More than 24 million people have a friend or family member who lives with dementia, and that figure is increasing all the time. Alzheimer's Research UK estimates that one in three people born in the UK this year will develop dementia in later life, and as the hon. Member for Witney (Robert Courts) has reminded us, this is not just a feature of old age; people of all ages can suffer.

Dementia has a huge human cost. My grandmother suffered with dementia—she did suffer—and, regrettably, the support that was needed was not available to my family. Dementia also has a huge impact on resources: each year, the total cost of dementia to the UK is £26 billion, and that cost is expected to more than double in the next 25 years. Given the scale of the issue, it is fitting that Members from all parts of the House have raised their voices today to call for action.

Members have made it abundantly clear that action is needed in three main areas. First, prevention is crucial: *The Lancet* reports that 30% of cases of dementia could be avoided through an increased understanding of risk factors and the implementation of basic lifestyle changes. It is imperative that the Government lead on enhancing awareness among the general public, and on celebrating dementia-friendly projects and looking at other processes. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane) for reminding us of the impact that mindfulness can have on preventing the development of dementia.

In the area of research, it is clear that dementia is the poor relation; as my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) has so expertly reminded us, dementia is decades behind other conditions. Alzheimer's Research UK has asked, very reasonably, that the Government commit to investing an amount equal to just 1% of the total societal cost of dementia into research. After all, the UK has some of the best scientists in this field, although there are simply not enough of them; they are outnumbered four to one by cancer specialists. The 2015 challenge on dementia, which has been mentioned, was most welcome but does not go far enough, and I look forward to hearing how the Minister might take that forward.

While prevention measures and research to achieve early diagnosis and future treatment are still so inadequate, it is vital that those who are diagnosed with dementia are given access to a comprehensive package of support. That is not just a job for the authorities: we have heard many Members describe pockets of really good practice in their constituencies, and I pay tribute to those who are delivering on the ground. However, there is no doubt that Government cuts to social care funding amounting to £7 billion since 2010 have taken their toll—nowhere more so than in the area of social care for those who suffer with dementia.

We often hear talk of the so-called dementia penalty, which is not surprising, as those affected by dementia regularly pick up two thirds of all care costs. Dementia patients often require more specialised and more expensive care. The associated costs can be as high as £500,000, and they almost always exceed £100,000. It is clear that patients with dementia are treated differently from patients with other conditions and disabilities. The failure to fund care adequately is placing additional pressure on NHS resources: last year, there were 70,000 avoidable hospital admissions for people diagnosed with dementia. That causes unnecessary suffering for patients and their families and is hugely wasteful of NHS resources.

What can be done to right this wrong? The recommendations of the all-party group on dementia could be implemented without delay. Dementia must be fully recognised as a disability, with sufferers afforded the same rights, protections and dignities as any other disabled person. Local authorities and health providers

need to collaborate to offer a package of support that is both comprehensive and accessible; as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) has stressed, it is no good having help available if that help is difficult to access. The eagerly anticipated social care Green Paper must fully address the needs of those living with dementia. The UK Parliament must lead by example, becoming the first dementia-friendly Parliament and actively promoting and supporting dementia-friendly communities everywhere. All members of health and wellbeing boards should be obliged to become Dementia Friends. Most crucially, the Government's plans for the NHS and care workforce must properly reflect the needs of people with dementia.

The situation is urgent, and now is the time for the Government to listen. As part of the comprehensive spending review, the Government must introduce a dedicated £2.4 billion dementia fund to cover the additional costs of delivering dementia specialist care, and end the inequity between dementia and other diseases that currently leaves affected families facing astronomical care costs. That fund would enable timely access to an integrated package of support and help to facilitate specialist training for all care workers, equipping them to deliver high-quality dementia care.

Will the Minister commit today to addressing the long-term needs of dementia sufferers in the social care Green Paper and in the NHS and social workforce strategy? Will she commit to increasing research into the development of new treatments? Will she go beyond warm words and ensure that those with dementia are not forgotten in the comprehensive spending review? Will she support the establishment of a dedicated dementia fund to give people the support they are desperately crying out for?

10.47 am

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinéage): As ever, Mr Paisley, it is a great pleasure to serve under your stewardship. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for securing this important debate, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for supporting her in doing so, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing time for it. I also thank all the other Members who have taken part in the debate, and in some cases shared very personal journeys and stories about their family's experiences with dementia and, indeed, some interesting and inspiring best practice from their constituencies—things that other areas can learn from.

I also thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth for her personal commitment and dedication to people living with dementia, both through her work on the all-party parliamentary group on dementia and in her constituency. She is so committed to making Oldham East and Saddleworth a really dementia-friendly place to live; she sets an excellent example of what we as Members of Parliament can do in our own communities, and I welcome her vision of making Westminster the first dementia-friendly Parliament. I will do everything I can to support her in that endeavour, because I know that her passion is driven by her experience of having a close family member living with dementia.

Other Members have spoken about their own experiences, and I have also had two very close family members living with dementia: my grandmother and my uncle,

[Caroline Dinenage]

who passed away just before Christmas. I have experienced at first hand the impact that dementia has, both on the person who is living with it and those who love and care for them. Hon. Members from across the House have spoken about the importance of carers, and I have seen at first hand the impact that caring for my grandmother had on my mum—on her relationships, her professional life and her health and wellbeing. Those carers' commitment should never be taken lightly. A dementia diagnosis is more than a diagnosis for that individual: it is a diagnosis for the whole family, their loved ones, their community and their workplace.

Jim Shannon: In my constituency, 1,152 people live with dementia. As the Minister rightly said, it affects a lot of families as well as the wider family circle. Has she given any consideration to respite care for those families to give them a break from the physical, emotional and mental pressure that they are under?

Caroline Dinenage: Respite care was one of the themes of the carers action plan that we published last year. SCIE is putting together guidance for local authorities on how they can best provide that crucial respite moment for those brilliant carers. [Interruption.]

A diagnosis is very much for an individual, but also for their families and loved ones and for their communities and workplaces. When those come together, it is possible to live well with dementia, as my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts) said. Such personal experiences make me passionate about my responsibilities as a Minister. The hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) challenged me to continue to push the Government to keep dementia as a priority, and I always will. I am proud of the Government's commitment to deliver on the dementia challenge 2020 in full to make this the best country in the world to live for anyone with a dementia diagnosis.

The challenge aims to transform the lives of people with dementia, as well as their carers and their families, through better awareness, care and research. We have made significant progress as part of the challenge, but we know, as we have heard today, that there is still much more to do. We have already started our work on our strategy for the period beyond 2020. This is not something that finishes in 2020. It is simply the start of the next phase and we will publish our thoughts on it early next year.

One of the key successes of the challenge has been improved diagnosis. We are meeting our ambition, and today two thirds of people living with dementia receive a diagnosis, but we clearly still have some way to go. Of course, not everybody wants a diagnosis, but we know that a timely diagnosis enables a person with dementia to access the advice, information, care and support that can help them to live well with the condition and remain independent for as long as possible.

We are focusing on reducing the variation in local dementia diagnosis rates. There is a real geographical variation, and targeted support to identify and engage the areas most in need of assistance will really help. Reducing the gap in diagnosis rates will ensure that people with dementia have consistent access to a diagnosis wherever they are in the country. We also know that receiving good quality care improves the lives of people

with dementia. Equipping our health and social care workforce with the skills that they need is therefore crucial to the quality of care for those living with dementia.

Since 2012—the hon. Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) mentioned this—1 million episodes of the tier 1 dementia awareness training have been completed by NHS staff, and more than 1 million care workers completed the care certificate, or common induction standards. We continue to work to meet our commitment that staff have the training appropriate to their role. We want to see more people doing the tier 2 training, which is much more robust, so we are exploring options to see how we can increase take-up for anyone who needs it.

Dr Whitford: Is there an audit of hospital environments? Just before I left to come here, my hospital was redesigned using coloured zones and imagery to help people with early dementia move around the hospital independently. Are there similar projects elsewhere?

Caroline Dinenage: That is an interesting question. I do not know the answer, but I would be keen to look into it to find out. We are looking to explore ways to encourage the take-up of tier 2 dementia training. I recently co-signed a letter to health and care organisations with the chief executives of Skills for Care and Health Education England to highlight the importance of dementia training and education, which is a really important part of our discussions.

We are also meeting our commitment on Government funding for dementia research of £60 million or more each year, to reach at least £300 million invested over the five years up to 2020. The figure is actually more than £60 million this year—it is £83.5 million. In addition, we have the UK Dementia Research Institute, which is funded to the tune of £290 million: £190 million from Government and £50 million each from the Alzheimer's Society and Alzheimer's Research UK.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for giving way and apologise for the earlier interruption; I am glad it did not put her off her stride.

Much of what we have discussed today—the issues around this illness—are devolved to Scotland, but I want to press her on an issue that is not devolved: legal protection for older people with dementia. What measures can be put in place for financial institutions to have a legal duty of care to look after those people? In the debate we have focused on the practicalities of care, which is important, but we have to think about how we protect people in law in financial terms.

Caroline Dinenage: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I am sure the slight disturbance caused by her mobile created a welcome distraction for everybody from my speech. I took note of what she said in her speech and she makes an excellent point about protections.

To go back to research funding, the incredible dementia discovery fund, which other Members have mentioned, was launched by David Cameron in 2015. It is the world's largest venture fund aimed at a single disease area that looks to develop novel pre-clinical therapies. Our continued commitment to support research has also seen increasing numbers of people involved in the joint dementia research programme, with 20,000 people

taking part in dementia research studies. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Vale of Clwyd (Chris Ruane), I am happy to meet and discuss any other research that comes forward.

Ahead of developing new treatments, we need to be able to support people to live well with dementia in their communities. The Dementia Friends programme, which a lot of people have mentioned—I am also a Dementia Friends champion—is a great example of increasing public awareness. Through the dementia-friendly communities programme—365 so far this year in England—we are making society more inclusive. We are supporting the National Dementia Action Alliance's work to promote dementia-friendly hospitals across England through its charter to improve the care that people receive.

My hon. Friend the Member for Witney asked me about writing to the Department for Work and Pensions about improving its guidance to employers, which I will commit to do. We know that careful reforms are required to ensure that the social care system is prepared for the challenges of an ageing society, including for those with dementia. Many Members, including the hon. Member for Cambridge, mentioned adult social care funding. Many Members also talked about cuts to local authorities, but over the past year we have given councils access to an additional £10 billion: an 8% real-terms increase.

However, the fact that we are still talking about the social care system being on the point of crisis, at a tipping point or under huge pressure, shows the scale of the problem. That is why we have committed to publishing the adult social care Green Paper at the earliest opportunity. I share everybody's frustration about the delays, but it will set out ideas for an element of risk pooling to save individuals from catastrophic costs, which some have spoken about today. We are committed to ensuring that everybody has access to the care and support they need. More short-term social care funding will be agreed alongside the rest of the local government settlement in the forthcoming spending review.

The NHS long-term plan sets out a 10-year strategy, outlining how the NHS will spend the £33.9 billion cash terms annual increase that will go into the NHS budget.

We now know that around a third of dementia cases are preventable. Since 2018, every person attending an NHS health check in England—the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) mentioned prevention—receives information about how to reduce the risk of developing dementia. It includes advice on smoking, safe levels of alcohol and being physically active. Between 2013 and 2018, nearly 7 million people attended health checks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan) mentioned Careline in her constituency. There are lots of innovative ways that technology can improve the lives of people with dementia. Jelly Drops are an ingenious way to tackle dehydration using sweet-like capsules. My local county council in Hampshire uses existing technology such as Amazon and wearable technology to help people maintain their independence, stay safe and combat isolation. All those achievements, brought together in the dementia challenge 2020, help to improve the lives of people with dementia, but we know that more needs to be done. We are committed to continuing to improve the lives of people with dementia, and of their families and carers.

Ian Paisley (in the Chair): I call Debbie Abrahams to wind up.

10.59 am

Debbie Abrahams: I thank everybody for their excellent contributions to a really important debate. I particularly thank those who shared their personal stories. Such empathy makes a difference to people who have dementia and to their carers, and I thank Members for that. There were examples of excellent practice. In different parts of the country, excellent work is going on, and we need to make sure that it goes beyond Members' own constituencies. The key thing is national leadership. I know the Minister is committed. On the areas around housing, transport and social protection, which are not necessarily in her brief, I would be grateful if she made sure her colleagues are aware of the recommendations.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Gambling Levy: Online Gambling and Greyhound Racing

11 am

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the gambling levy from online gambling and racing greyhounds.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Paisley, and to lead this debate. In 2016, as Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, I led an inquiry into greyhound welfare. At the time, we found that there was a distinct lack of data, the regulation was not strong enough, the inspection regimes were insufficient, and there was poor welfare in parts of the greyhound racing industry. We recommended improvements in each of those areas, but funding continues to hold the key to lasting improvements.

I compliment the industry on going forward in many ways. Today's debate is not about finding fault with the industry; it is about concentrating on the betting industry and the £2,500 million a year that is bet on greyhound racing, and ensuring that enough of that gets to animal welfare charities and the industry in order to make the life of retired greyhounds so much better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My grandfather kept greyhounds, so there is a particular interest in them in my family. I agree that these dogs are not simply assets; they are living and breathing, and deserve a minimum of care. A small statutory levy may well bring about that standard of care. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that a 1% levy will not break the bank for the bookies, but will help a poor animal to avoid a broken leg from inadequate nutrition and the strenuous nature of the races it is involved in?

Neil Parish: My hon. Friend—I believe him to be my hon. Friend—raises a very good point. Not only would 1% not break the bank for the betting industry, but without greyhound racing the gambling industry would lose £2,500 million a year. I will be quite blunt: I think it is criminal that the industry does not pay 1% or more—1.5% or even 2% if necessary. There is no point in imposing a levy for the sheer sake of it, but we have to remember that back in 2008-09 we were on some £14 million. Since then, the amount has probably halved. We are building it back up to £10 million now, but I would like to see around £20 million going towards rehoming greyhounds.

The public demand good welfare—it is also in the interests of the industry—and for the betting industry to deliver that money. Otherwise, there will be huge pressure not to have greyhound racing at all. That is the point I stress. The amount of welfare funding at the moment is a voluntary 0.6%. I will talk about the good companies that come up with that. Previously, too few betting companies have coughed up the cash, and there are still a few more to go—especially online betting companies based overseas.

I congratulate the Minister, and her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch), on getting the bookies around the table, and on getting them to contribute to the British Greyhound Racing Fund, which was set up to protect greyhound welfare. I also congratulate the betting

companies themselves—Betfair, Betfred, Sky Bet and William Hill—that have committed to meet the 0.6% target in January in this year, raising a projected £3 million a year. That will take the total amount raised up from £7 million to £10 million.

However, too many companies still do not contribute. Many independent bookmakers, and a growing overseas betting presence, do not pay their fair share. Not only is it wrong from the point of view of the greyhounds' welfare, but it is wrong for the rest of the betting industry, because if some companies are making that donation so should they all. Bookmakers profiting from greyhound racing have a responsibility to support it, whether they trade on the high street or online. Of course, high street bookmakers have contributed and still do.

When we consider that £2,500 million is staked annually on live greyhound racing in the UK, the welfare conditions of some of those animals remain shocking. They are improving, but with more money they could be much better. Greyhounds bred for racing are animals, not assets. They are gentle, athletic breeds. They feel pain, whether due to damaged limbs or dental problems, and they need love like any other dog. We must ensure that all kennels are up to scratch.

I thank the Greyhound Board of Great Britain for all the work that it does inspecting and helping to raise standards, and I thank the Kennel Club, the Greyhound Trust and other welfare charities for the great work that they do in rehoming greyhounds. An increase in cash for the British Greyhound Racing Fund would make a great difference to greyhound welfare. Even the commitment made in January for the betting companies to reach 0.6% merely reverses a decade-long trend of drastically declining income from the voluntary levy paid by bookmakers.

Income for the British Greyhound Racing Fund has fallen by half in the last 10 years, from £14 million in 2008-09 to just £7 million last year. While online betting continues to thrive, retail betting is suffering. Some 60% of BGRF funding currently comes from retail betting, but the introduction of the £2 maximum stake for fixed odds betting terminals which, by the way, I am very much in favour of, will result in a decline in the amount of money received. That is why we need to increase the percentage of the levy.

A statutory levy that targets greyhound betting equally, levied on all bets placed on UK greyhound racing, will be fair on betting companies and on greyhounds. A strong greyhound welfare system requires strong long-term financing. Take horse-racing as an example. The horse-racing betting levy covers the gross profits of all gambling operators offering bets on horse-racing in Great Britain. Last year alone, the 10% statutory levy on profits generated around £100 million to support infrastructure improvements, a reduction in injuries, better data and higher prize money.

A similar statutory levy on greyhound racing, but based on 1% of gross turnover, would generate £11.6 million for greyhound welfare. A levy of 1.5% would generate £17.5 million. That is where I would like it to be at the very least, because I do not believe that it would affect the industry very much at all. In fact, it would make for a stronger industry. Immediately, the money would provide a more stable income stream for animal welfare activists and charities that improve kennelling standards,

pay for veterinary bills and rehome greyhounds. It would also create an even playing field between contributing bookies.

As the sixth most-watched sport in Britain, the welfare and care of all racing greyhounds, from registration to retirement, must be a fundamental part of its successful future. Last year, 4,963 injuries were sustained by dogs in the greyhound racing industry. We welcome the industry giving those figures, because that was something that we put in our report. Almost 1,000 died or were euthanised. I do not want greyhounds to be euthanised because it is not economic to keep them going. That simply should not happen. Enough money should come from the betting industry to rehabilitate those dogs and get them rehomed.

A campaign is under way to ban greyhound racing altogether. I believe a statutory levy will better protect welfare and the industry in the long run. The industry should embrace that—if it does not, greyhound racing will be under pressure in future. It is wrong of the companies not to embrace the levy and pay more. I congratulate the Minister and the gaming companies that have contributed a voluntary levy on their hard work, but I urge her to do more and greater things to get more money out of the gaming industry.

After Brexit, the Government should come forward at the earliest opportunity with primary legislation to introduce a statutory levy, to equalise welfare contributions and protect greyhound racing. Believe it or not, the statutory levy on horse-racing was introduced before we joined the EU, and it is quite difficult to introduce a levy under EU law. As we leave the EU, we can put a statutory levy on online gambling and racing greyhounds. I would very much welcome that, because putting it in place would bring into line a lot of the gambling companies that are not paying at the moment. We in this House, and people across the country, all want our greyhounds to have a good retirement. Let us ensure that those that can be rehabilitated after racing have a good life. We can then have a good industry that is well run with good welfare conditions that are well funded by the gaming industry.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) on securing this debate and on giving us a chance to speak about the breadth of areas he mentioned. It is absolutely right that we do so, because greyhound racing employs over 7,000 people in the UK, with over 2 million people attending races each year. It contributes an estimated £55 million to the Exchequer.

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the Department's positive work, including by my predecessor and my officials, to ensure that we have supported greyhound racing, that we increase bookmaker contributions and, vitally, that the welfare of our greyhounds is protected and indeed improved. We recognise the challenges that the sport has faced over the past few years. There has been a decline in racecourse attendance, and betting has progressively moved online, resulting in a drop in contributions from gambling operators to the British Greyhound Racing Fund.

The hon. Gentleman's words are gratefully received, and in January we announced progress on additional voluntary funding—a commitment to the welfare of

greyhounds. It is worth an estimated additional £3 million this year, increasing the expected income to around £10 million annually. This commitment will significantly improve the welfare of thousands of greyhounds, both on and off the track, and it will further support retired or injured greyhounds, ensuring they can enjoy a full and active life—as we heard—both inside the sport and in retirement. Although we recognise that it is a positive step in securing additional contributions from the five largest online betting operators, I am aware—the hon. Gentleman has also made the point—that we want more money for welfare. I therefore urge bookmakers that have not signed up to the agreement to do so to meet their welfare obligations to the sport and the animals.

Neil Parish: The most difficult part is that, to a degree, we can name and shame companies that are not contributing, but those that are offshore and well away from the UK probably do not worry too much about their reputation. How do we get at them to ensure they contribute? More people are moving to offshore online betting.

Mims Davies: On welfare and levies on gambling, my Department has to ensure that bookmakers are at the table. Where profits are in this country, we should seek to ensure that they go back for the good of the sport or to support other areas where there are vulnerabilities. I take his point and will write to him.

The Department has a responsibility to ensure that all bookmakers meet their obligation. I will be meeting the Remote Gambling Association next month, when this will be on our agenda. I also recently met the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley), who has responsibility for animal welfare, to discuss our respective Departments' funding and welfare concerns, and to ensure that it continues to be an important issue across Government. I also met the Greyhound Board of Great Britain, alongside the RSPCA and the Dogs Trust, to discuss everything the industry has to think about on greyhound welfare. I have made it clear that welfare should be at the heart of the sport, as my hon. Friend said, and that standards should be as good as they can be, so that the sport will remain an attractive spectacle and continue to thrive by having people enjoy it. I will continue that work with Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, so that industry representatives and everyone involved ensure that greyhound welfare is absolutely safeguarded. Any greyhound put to sleep due to medical treatment being too expensive or a poor prognosis is one too many, and we must stop it.

The publication of GBGB's "Greyhound Commitment" is welcome and marks a sea change for the greyhound racing industry. It is driving up welfare commitments and standards, which is what we want, and has led to an increase in voluntary funding. Alongside the publication of the injury and retirement figures in 2018, the "Greyhound Commitment" makes it clear that we are making progress on this journey. It also shows that there is much more to do, and I want to ensure that we continue our commitment to drive these changes.

Over the next three years, GBGB has committed to halving the number of greyhounds that are regrettably put to sleep due to their not having a home or for economic reasons. The ultimate aim is to bring the

[*Mims Davies*]

figure down to zero within five years, which is absolutely right and an expectation that I thoroughly support. Hon. Members all want greyhounds to find new homes and enjoy a healthy retirement when they leave the sport. There are positive signs of the industry stepping up to the challenge that my hon. Friend laid down in the 2016 Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report on greyhound racing, to build capacity and strengthen welfare in the system rather than just waiting for legislation and indeed enforcement.

On the voluntary commitment, bookmakers and the industry can play an important part in ensuring that there is enough funding for the greyhounds and integrity in the sport. Of course, this is only one source of income for the sport. More than half of the industry's income, totalling around £119 million, comes from existing commercial agreements and racegoers. It is important that the industry looks at ways of increasing commercial income, so that more support can be used to benefit welfare and raise standards. As my hon. Friend said, we cannot do that without greyhounds being at the heart of the matter. Putting the welfare of animals at the heart of the sport, and supporting that with funds from existing commercial income, can only sustain and support the industry further. Greyhound welfare is an objective that we must all share to guarantee the long-term future of the sport.

Online betting on greyhound racing has increased in recent years, and the industry should continue to seek opportunities to generate more commercial revenue through online streaming and media platforms. That is another avenue through which we can support the industry directly.

The Government do not currently plan to introduce a statutory levy. My hon. Friend mentioned that state aid is one reason why a levy is problematic. Things may change post-Brexit, but we expect progress even without introducing a levy.

Neil Parish *rose—*

Mims Davies: I can see what is coming.

Neil Parish: I accept what the Minister says, but I am a great believer in needing quite a big stick to bring people into line now and again. I would have thought

that the idea of bringing in a levy in future would concentrate minds in the industry. If it delivered the 1% to 1.5%, we would perhaps not need the statutory levy, but sometimes the stick needs to be available.

Mims Davies: My hon. Friend tempts me. I have never said, for any other aspect of gambling, that levies are off the table. At this point, the Government do not currently have plans to introduce a levy but, as I said, that does not stop us from working with all available tools to ensure that the sport has a successful future.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport has committed to securing new funding from online operators, which was worth around £3 million to the sport in January of this year. As I said, that raises the total income to around £10 million annually, which ensures that we can work with GBGB on its long-term strategy for welfare, and shows the cross-Government commitment to doing what we can with the tools that are currently on the table to ensure that the industry is up to scratch. I take this opportunity to remind all operators to ensure that they are contributing and that we maximise commercial income from the sport so that we can deliver on our welfare commitments.

I thank my hon. Friend for raising the issue of the welfare of greyhounds. We need to make sure that we have a stronger industry in which the greyhound is at the heart of the sport. As we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), there is a passion for making sure that that is the case. I remain confident about the new funding commitment announced in January. We will help the sport to ensure that welfare standards are met and maintained.

Like my hon. Friend, I urge all non-paying bookmakers to contribute to the fund so that we can sustain the sport's future. I commit to working with DEFRA and with bookmakers to make welfare the priority, and to keeping everything under review, making clear that bookmakers should continue to meet their obligations to the sport. I have been delighted to speak about the progress that we have made so far this year. We will always keep everything under review.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

Child Imprisonment

[STEWART HOSIE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered abolishing child imprisonment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie.

For decades, what has been happening to the forgotten children imprisoned across England and Wales is state-supported and state-sanctioned child abuse. Worse still, those in this place who have the power to stop it have not done so.

At present, 727 children are in prison: 81% in youth offenders institutions and 19% in secure training centres. The lives of many of those children before prison were marked by significant harm and suffering. Up to 92% of children in custody have suffered prior physical or sexual abuse, or neglect, and nearly half have been in the care system. Children in custody are three times more likely than their peers to have suffered the death of a parent or sibling, and three times more likely to have unmet mental health needs. A quarter of them identify themselves as disabled, with one in five having special educational needs. Children who identify as black, Asian or minority ethnic are disproportionately overrepresented. When there is a reduction in the size of the overall youth custody system but a rise in the number of BAME people represented in it, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) put it well when he said that there is discriminatory practice and institutional racism in the prison system and that something is just not working.

Children in such institutions have significant needs, which would be better met in a nurturing, specialised and therapeutic system modelled on the secure children's homes ethos in which child welfare is the overriding concern, as recommended by the End Child Imprisonment coalition. At present, 65% of children go on to reoffend within a year of release. A child-focused environment, with an end to the slash and burn of austerity stripping away support and mental health services, is likely not only to reduce reoffending but to stop reoffending in the first place.

In 2016, the Government committed to closing youth offenders institutions and secure training centres for good. They know that the findings of the Youth Custody Improvement Board, the Youth Justice Board and Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons—that those institutions are not fit for purpose and not safe for children or young people—were right.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. Successive reports and inquiries have found that children's prisons are unsafe and unable to meet even basic needs. The Howard League for Penal Reform reported that a child in Feltham spent 23.5 hours a day in a cell for 55 days in a row. Does she agree that we need to invest urgently in children's centres so that children are not kept in such awful conditions?

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She cites one of the examples that I will consider.

Three years after that 2016 announcement, those institutions remain. Only this year, the chair of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse stated that she was

“deeply disturbed by the continuing problem of child sexual abuse in these institutions over the last decade.”

Report after report shows that life for children in prison consists of systematic denial of basic physical needs such as nutritious food, fresh air, exercise, and warm and comfortable shelter. Children live in environments permeated with violence, uncertainty and fear, where meaningful adult contact and education are limited or non-existent.

Adults living in such an environment would struggle. For any child, living with those heightened levels of anxiety and fear, with no trusted adult to confide in or to seek help from, will surely result in trauma and mental health difficulties. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that incidents of self-harm increased by 159% between 2014 and 2017, or that the Royal College of Psychiatrists reported that up to three quarters of doctors specialising in mental health in prisons do not think that it is possible for them to provide adequate care because of the conditions in which they are working.

When children react negatively to such an environment, they are punished with segregation—solitary confinement, which the United Nations defines as being locked indoors for 22 hours per day—or pain-inducing restraint. Recently, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) led a debate on youth solitary confinement in which the Minister, as he may recall, said that

“children are never, and should never be, subject to solitary confinement in the UK.”—[*Official Report*, 2 April 2019; Vol. 657, c. 339WH.]

Instead, he said, they are “segregated” or “removed from association”.

Such statements are repeated in ongoing and lengthy correspondence that I have had with various Ministers from the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education. As they tie themselves into semantic knots, the repetition of statements to the effect that solitary confinement is not used is simply at odds with the facts. In 2017, the Howard League advocated on behalf of that young boy who had spent 23.5 hours per day in his cell for 55 days in a row. Last year, an investigation by the “Victoria Derbyshire” show found that in the previous year, at least 40 children had been held in their cells for at least 22 hours per day.

Just this week, the children's rights charity Article 39 informed me about two boys, one aged 15 and one 17. They both have serious mental health issues. They are waiting for medical care and are stuck in solitary confinement for between 22 and 23 hours per day. As they are confined to their cells, prison officers observe them in shifts through a perspex door. When the boys are allowed out of their cells, they are not permitted meaningful contact with their peers. Planned health appointments are missed due to staff shortages and doctors who do visit them can talk to and observe them only through a hatch. Reportedly, that level of confinement would be enough to induce a mental breakdown and possibly psychotic mental states. Article 39 told me about another young boy who was subject to solitary confinement. He was acutely psychotic and in need of urgent in-patient care and treatment, but he sat in his

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

cell for more than four weeks until a suitable hospital placement was secured and he was transferred out of prison.

This year, the Joint Committee on Human Rights published a report stating that

“pain inducing techniques and solitary confinement...are...not compliant with human rights standards”.

The Committee called for such techniques to be banned. The report also states:

“Data...shows that children are restrained too often, with...thousands of unjustified restraints each year, and that separation is also used too often”,

adding that staff are too quick to use restraint or separation.

The permitted use of pain-inducing restraint is beyond comprehension. Prisons are the only institutions in which staff are trained and permitted to inflict pain deliberately on children. Adult staff are given a green light to cause significant harm to a child in their care. If a parent, foster carer or anyone else behaved in that manner, they would be deemed to be breaking the law and would be dealt with appropriately. In the stark and unforgiving world of children's prisons, however, apparently it is okay for adults to cause significant harm to vulnerable and frightened children. In the past, I have worked with incredibly distressed and—some would say—violent children who have lashed out. I know that is difficult, but staff in those institutions are put in impossible situations. Their training and the option that they are given is always about restraint. Better training and support are needed for those staff as a matter of urgency.

The techniques referred to as minimising and managing physical restraint are put into four categories: low, medium, high level and pain inducing. The exact details of those techniques are kept hidden from the public, as the Government state that they reflect those used in adult prisons. We do know that sometimes children are kept in holds on the floor for more than 15 minutes, on their front or back. There are reports of children losing consciousness, with blue lips, fingernails and earlobes, having difficulty breathing and vomiting. One boy's wrist was described as “snapping like a pencil.” Despite the screams, the restraint continued.

Data for the last year from the Ministry shows that medical attention was required in 668 use-of-force incidents. Of those, 30 were so serious that the young people had to be admitted to hospital. In the past, some incidents have even resulted in death, either directly or afterwards when children, unable to take any more, have taken their own lives. I know the Minister will be familiar with the cases of Gareth Myatt and Adam Rickwood. Their deaths led to MMR, which we know is comparable to restraint used in adult prisons but, as I said, we cannot see. We do not really know the true extent of the pain being inflicted on those children.

The children who have been significantly harmed and are no longer with us deserve to have their stories told. Their lives mattered. For children who are in prison now and future generations, a whole new approach is needed. I respectfully say to the Minister that secure schools are not the answer. After all, 20 years ago that was what secure training centres were supposed to be but, as today's debate shows, they have evolved into

something far uglier than their remit of excellence in care and education. Furthermore, having Medway as the experimental site for this new model is not only grossly misguided, but smacks of a lack of understanding of how culture, custom and practice infect an institution and never leave. Rebranding while the centre is still classed as requiring improvement for child safety will not lead to the improvements for which the Minister hopes.

The campaign to end child imprisonment, of which I am sure the Minister is aware, is formed by a coalition of groups with a deep understanding of children's prisons, child development and children's rights. Those groups are campaigning not just for the closure of those prisons and a more child-welfare-based model, but for a move from responsibility for children's detention towards children's services. They want a change in the law so that deprivation of liberty is always an absolute last resort, and to remove punishment and deterrence as reasons for imprisoning children. I would like the Minister to respond to the campaign's asks, and to outline the Ministry's timetable for phasing out those institutions. I would appreciate it if he could tell us when we can expect the findings and recommendations of the review of pain-inducing techniques that began more than a year ago.

We are debating the harrowing and frightening lives that some children have to endure day in, day out. Those are children for whom the state has sole responsibility. I urge the Minister to take serious action: abolish child prisons before more harm is done. It is not only his professional duty but his moral duty to do so.

2.43 pm

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) on securing this debate and on the conviction and professional knowledge she brought to bear on it.

I am afraid I do not have much knowledge of the prison estate; I am speaking for the specific reason that shortly after I become an MP, around the turn of the century, there was an upsurge of interest in precisely this problem and a great flurry of official and ministerial attention. As far as I can see, absolutely nothing was learnt from that time. The events centred on Feltham young offenders institution, which is close to my constituency. There were disturbances; there was a suicide caused by racially aggravated bullying, and many of the things we just heard about were reported in the press. I went there several times with other MPs, and there was an investigation and a report.

Seemingly, the problems had been solved, because the Government at the time and the prison authorities put in more staff; overcrowding among 16 to 18-year-olds was greatly reduced and we were told that the problem had gone away. But it is clear from reports from the same institution and others that many of those problems are still with us in exactly the same form or are considerably worse. It is worth rehearsing some of the main findings from that time, many of which seem highly relevant today. I want to test the Minister's institutional memory, to know whether he is even aware that we are going round the same cycle as before.

One of the first major conclusions was the neglect of mental health. We heard from the hon. Lady how the dissatisfaction of professionals and the Royal College of Psychiatrists is a problem, as it was then. A second problem was the complete lack, or very flimsy provision,

of education facilities, partly because prisoners were being constantly recycled through the prison estate—they had very short stays and there was no time to acquire qualifications. Those who were doing vocational training in workshops were denied access to equipment because of the fear of harm and self-harm. As a result, most young people were going out on to the streets functionally illiterate and without any practical qualifications, perpetuating their problems.

The third problem, which I think is exactly the same today, was a phase of extreme overcrowding. Professional staff were not there for a very long period and, as a consequence, young prisoners were “banged up” for 23 hours a day. They were also put together in very unsuitable pairings; I went into a cell where a young offender who was there because he had been found using cannabis during his first experience of it was put with a very violent rapist, and was clearly traumatised by the contact with his cellmate. It was patently obvious even to a visitor that it was inappropriate. It perpetuated the problem to have remand prisoners and sentenced prisoners mingling together and learning from each other in a bad way.

The situation then, which I think is now significantly worse, was that there was a disproportionate number of BAME prisoners—then overwhelmingly black, and now black and Asian in greater numbers. I think the Asian population has been affected by extreme religious tendencies that have got into the prison system. We have all those ills, which were supposed to have been cured but appear to be back again in force. The simple question I ask is: why have the lessons not been learned? Why do we not progress from one generation to another? As was very eloquently described, the young people concerned reoffend, and their children will in turn reoffend, unless we learn the lessons of the past.

2.48 pm

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.
On resuming—*

3.3 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairpersonship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) on securing this debate.

As a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I am acutely aware of the issues the hon. Lady raised, as a result of our recent investigation into youth detention, solitary confinement and restraint. She also raised wider issues pertaining to the current provision of youth custody, including concerns about not only safety and the use of restraint and force, but segregation of children away from others, the lack of purposeful activity for children in custody, the lack of time out of their cells, the disproportionate number of black and minority ethnic children in custody—the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable) referred to that—and the distance from home at which children are sometimes held.

Social work statistics in Scotland in 2017-18 showed an increase of 89% in the average number of residents from outwith Scotland in secure accommodation. That is a form of restriction of liberty, because placing children so far from their family reduces family contact and is clearly detrimental to their wellbeing. I very

much endorse the call by the hon. Member for South Shields for children to be placed as close as possible to where they come from.

I have been assisted in preparing for this debate by a helpful briefing from the Howard League for Penal Reform, which historically has had a great deal of involvement in this matter. It was very useful to hear from the right hon. Member for Twickenham how far back these problems go, and how very often the attempts at reform have failed, so that we face the same problems today as we did 10, 20 or more years ago. The Howard League has highlighted the number of children from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds who have histories of care and high levels of health problems. We have children with disabilities held in the sorts of conditions that I have described, and it is simply not acceptable.

It is particularly depressing that the 2017 report by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) found that more than 40% of children in prison in England and Wales were from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and that, despite the concerns he raised, that figure has now risen to 51%. That is something that we should all be ashamed of.

As I said, the Joint Committee on Human Rights carried out an investigation into youth detention, solitary confinement and restraint. I will say a little bit about our findings in a moment, but most important for the purposes of this debate is our overall finding that the UK Government must increase its

“efforts to coordinate and reconfigure resources, to ensure that there are enough specialised placements...so that each child can be placed in the most appropriate setting and as near as possible to home.”

We were really advocating for recognition of the fact that these offenders are children, and for a more holistic approach. That is what we have attempted in Scotland, as I will come on to in a moment, and with some success—although I will not pretend that some of the problems we are talking about today do not also occur within the Scottish system.

The focus of the report by the Joint Committee on Human Rights was on solitary confinement and restraint. I must confess that we were greatly assisted by evidence from the Minister responding to today’s debate, who was admirably frank about matters, but some serious questions remain to be answered. Our report found

“substantial medical evidence”

of the significant

“physical and psychological impacts of restraint, particularly when used upon children.”

We were quite clear in our findings that restraint harms children, but it also harms the staff who are trained to inflict it; it undermines rehabilitation, which is the objective of detention; and it contributes to a vicious circle of problems that figure in continued offending by such children.

The Committee found that

“rates of restraint of children...are unacceptably high,”

and that those children’s rights were being routinely breached. We were very clear that the deliberate infliction of pain is

“unacceptable under any circumstances under rights legislation”.

We also stated:

“The use of restraint for maintaining ‘good order and discipline’ must be prohibited in all but the most exceptional of circumstances.”

[Joanna Cherry]

We recognised that sometimes the behaviour even of children can be extremely challenging for staff, and we recognised the right of staff to act in self-defence when necessary, but we were quite clear that the deliberate infliction of pain on children was unacceptable.

In its report, the Joint Committee also looked at solitary confinement and made it clear that

“the use of separation from human contact is harmful to children if used for more than a few hours at a time and, beyond that,”—
as the hon. Member for South Shields said—

“it can amount to inhuman or degrading treatment that is a breach of children’s rights.”

The evidence we heard showed that incidents of separation—separating a child out from other children where there has been trouble or difficulty—can “drift” so that they end up in what amounts to solitary confinement, which can, in practice, be prolonged.

We were using the term “solitary confinement” to refer to

“isolation from normal human contact”

exceeding 22 hours per day, and “prolonged solitary confinement” where it lasts for more than 15 days.

We noted that many commentators, including all the witnesses that gave us evidence on the issue, disagreed with the Government’s assertion that solitary confinement is not used for children. We agreed with the Government that the guidelines do not permit solitary confinement, but we stated that although Ministers should not allow children to be intentionally placed in solitary confinement, that was, in effect, what was happening: incidents of separating a child out can drift and become severe isolation amounting to solitary confinement. In fairness to the Government, we said that the breach of children’s rights was not a policy decision of the Government, but it was within the Government’s power to prevent it by having closer oversight.

We made various calls, of which the Minister is well aware, on the Government to take immediate steps to ensure that the separation of children from human contact never becomes solitary confinement, and that every decision or review of a decision to extend a period of separation beyond 72 hours should be reported to the Minister, who should lay such information before each House. That might seem an extreme recommendation, but it was in recognition of the fact that we are talking about children and the long-lasting damage that can be done if they are placed in solitary confinement.

Depriving a child of their liberty is one of the most serious actions that the state can take. It must always be used as a last resort, and for the shortest possible time. As I have said, my colleagues in the Scottish Government are committed to reducing the number of young people in custody, and they have had some success in doing so. In Scotland, there has been progress on this issue over a long period of time. In the 1960s, after the Kilbrandon report, Scotland moved to a holistic system of justice for children, and the children’s hearing system was set up for all children under 16. The key difference was a move from an adversarial system to an inquisitorial approach, whereby children’s offending is dealt with by a lay panel, with the idea that we should look to the causes of children’s offending rather than subjecting them to the same criminal justice process as adults.

Many years later, the Taylor report made a recommendation for similar reforms to process in England and Wales. It recommended that all children who plead guilty should be diverted from court to a panel that would investigate

“the causes of the child’s behaviour, including any health, welfare and education issues, and put in place a rigorous Plan that will tackle the factors associated with the offending and give victims and communities assurance that the behaviour is being addressed.”

It is a matter of regret that that recommendation has not been taken up by the United Kingdom Government. Ministers in the Home Office and Ministry of Justice have frequently said that there are aspects of criminal justice policy in Scotland that are useful for the Government of England and Wales to look at in relation to good practice. If we go back to the process by which we deal with children who offend, it might be possible to reduce the number of children who need to be held in a secure setting and therefore reduce the sorts of problems that we are discussing. I ask the Minister to address that issue as well as the questions that have been specifically addressed to him by the hon. Member for South Shields.

Will the Minister explain to us why the Government are prepared to look at only some parts of the Taylor report, and why the UK Government are not looking at a system for England and Wales similar to Scotland’s children’s panel? I also want an assurance from the Minister that the Government—not just him—will take very seriously the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I am sure, given his evidence to the Committee, that such an assurance will be forthcoming. The recommendations were agreed unanimously among Members of both Houses, across all parties, and focused on restraint and solitary confinement.

3.14 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for securing this important debate. She is a passionate campaigner for the rights and fair treatment of children, and the serious and substantial work she does is a credit to her. She made a brilliant speech and, along with the spokesperson for the Scottish National party, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), covered most of the pertinent points, including on solitary confinement and segregation, which was the subject of a lengthy debate in this place not long ago. I will come to that later in my speech.

Another pertinent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West was on the blurring of the lines. The Government are adamant that no child is subject to solitary confinement, but the line between segregation and solitary confinement is blurred. Although the Minister’s intentions are not to be doubted, we need further clarification. The other pertinent point made by all who have spoken was on the sheer disproportionality in BAME representation in our youth estate: more than 50% is the current figure, which is shocking and cause for concern.

It is widely recognised by innumerable studies, reports and testimonies that child and young offenders are some of the most troubled and challenged groups of people in our society. Although they face many of the

same issues that all young people do, they also face challenges and have needs of a far more extreme and pressing nature, and their experiences are far from typical of those faced by other children. When compared with the general population and their peers, children in custody are far more likely to experience mental health issues. Figures published by the prisons inspectorate and information collated by the MOJ both state that around 1 in 3 children in custody suffered from emotional or mental health issues. That is worrying enough on its own but, from what we know about mental health issues in the adult estate and wider society, the figure is expected to be much larger in reality. In many cases, mental health issues are aggravated by substance misuse, with nearly half of children assessed as having a substance misuse issue on entering custody—that figure too will no doubt be higher in reality.

Children who have spent time in care, with all the emotional distress, the huge disruptions to their lives and schooling, and likely prior abuse and trauma that life in care brings, are also much more likely to end up involved in criminal activity, and they are disproportionately represented to a significant degree in custody as a result. Less than one in every 100 children in England are in care, but they account for around two in every five children held in secure training centres and young offender institutions.

The Government's review of youth custody—the Taylor review, to which hon. Members have referred—found that around nine in 10 children held in custody had been excluded from school at some point. Forty per cent. of the under-18s surveyed reported that they had not been to school since they were 14 years old. Many young people in custody are also further hampered by a range of additional mental health challenges that affect their education and learning, with 30% of 10 to 17-year olds suffering from ADHD, more than 50% from dyslexia, and 20% from another learning disability. It is therefore no surprise that their educational attainment is much lower than the national average. The Taylor review further points out that half of 15 to 17-year-olds entering young offender institutions have the literacy or numeracy levels expected of a seven to 11-year-old.

Such a cocktail of challenges and disadvantages are at the core of the drivers of offending for many children and young people. However, despite the challenges, the youth custodial system is fit to neither hold them nor care for them. It is plagued by serious problems that the Opposition have repeatedly warned of, and it is incapable of both ensuring the safety of vulnerable young people and effectively rehabilitating them for life after their release.

We agree that all children should be safe, including those in custody, but on this Government's watch we have witnessed a marked increase in violence. The Taylor review points out that the number of assaults each month per 100 young people in custody rose dramatically from nine in 2009-10 to 16.2 in 2014-15. Indeed, so bad is the level of violence that the chief inspector of prisons not only described worrying rates of violence and a staggering decline in safety in the youth custodial estate in his 2017 and 2018 annual reports, but was forced to declare that no young offender institution or secure training centre is safe to hold children and young people.

Just today the inspectorate published a report into Her Majesty's Young Offender Institution Werrington that found that violence remains far too high. That follows a report into the notorious Feltham prison, referred to by a number of Members, which also saw a significant increase in violence. The Government like to praise the reduction in the number of children and young people in custody yet, as a result of their cuts to staff and budgets, those still imprisoned are in much greater danger. They have, like with the adult estate, pushed the youth custodial estate into a spiral of violence, where neither children nor staff are safe.

Children and young people imprisoned in the youth estate are also significantly more likely to carry out acts of self-harm as the vital support once available to vulnerable individuals is eroded and becomes yet another victim of cuts. Self-harm rates in youth custody have soared in a matter of just a few years, almost doubling from 5.1 incidents per 100 children in the year to March 2012 to nine incidents per 100 children in the year to March 2017.

Earlier this month, we saw that the rate of self-harm had doubled at Feltham, some cases of which were extremely serious and involved ligatures or significant cuts. The chief inspector of prisons warned that the "care for children in crisis was inconsistent"

and that there was no action plan to address the rise in incidents. That is not helped by the fact that more than one in five children feel that it is easy to get illegal drugs into their young offender institution that are proven to aggravate mental health conditions and contribute to rates of self-harm. Nor is it helped by the excessive lock-up of children and young people inside their cells for much of the day—they are often allowed out for as little as 30 minutes for showers, telephone calls and exercise outside.

Thirteen years on from the independent Carlile inquiry into the use of restraint and solitary confinement, children and young people are still being subjected to those degrading and downright dangerous conditions. The internationally recognised Mandela rules state that solitary confinement—I make the point again that the Government call it segregation, and perhaps the Minister in responding could be clearer on what he sees as not the textbook differences but the practical differences between the two—has a devastating effect on physical and mental health, particularly among groups with mental health issues. Despite that, and even its acceptance in the Prison Service rules, in October last year the Children's Commissioner found that the number of episodes of segregation in youth custody in England and Wales has increased in the past four years, even as the overall number of children detained has fallen.

Her Majesty's inspectorate of prisons has also raised worrying concerns that the use of force in the youth estate remains too high, with disproportionate force employed against children. So widespread is the use of force and restraint that the UN Committee against Torture took the step of asking the Government to ban all forms of restraint that inflict deliberate pain on children. Perhaps the Minister could enlighten us on the Government's response.

Finally, to a topical issue—the failures in the youth justice system and youth custodial estate are having a particular impact on BAME children. The failure to

[*Imran Hussain*]

tackle needs, the drivers of offending and deep mistrust of the justice system among young people—particularly BAME children—are entrenching disproportionality in the system. Two years ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) published his landmark review on the treatment and outcome of those from a BAME background in the justice system. He found that, within the youth justice system, the proportion of those from BAME backgrounds rose from 25% to 41% in the decade from 2006 to 2016. That is a worrying American level of disproportionality that, as he says, leaves the UK sitting at

“the extreme end of the developed world in relation to disproportionality.”

We have heard today that the figure now is higher than 41%. That disproportionality should worry us all, particularly as a greater number of BAME children in the youth justice system live in poor housing, are disengaged from education and are more likely to suffer from mental health issues than their non-BAME counterparts.

The evidence we have heard is clear: the youth custodial estate is in dire crisis, the victim of years of underfunding and neglect by the Government. The Minister faces serious questions over the failure of the youth estate and the Ministry of Justice to keep children safe, treat them humanely, and properly prepare them for release. He must answer our questions and answer for the Government’s failure. He must also set out, as a matter of urgency, a plan to ensure that all children in the youth custodial estate are safe from violence and self-harm; a commitment to end the use of painful restraint techniques and solitary confinement; an explanation of the difference as he sees it between solitary confinement and segregation; and what the Government will do to reduce the unwarranted disproportionality of outcomes for BAME children. We have heard much about that in the last two years, but we have seen little in practice.

3.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I thank the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for securing a debate on this important subject. I know of her commitment to pursuing the subject and ensuring that it continues to be spoken about in this House, and rightly so.

Depriving a child of their liberty is an action that should be undertaken only as a last resort. It is not a responsibility that any state ever takes lightly. All parties would accept their responsibility for our youth justice system and this area, having served in government. I draw a slight distinction for the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), although one place I hope to visit—I am always happy to learn from the Scottish experience where possible—is HMYOI Polmont, which would be interesting as a comparator for how the English and Welsh system operates.

I am deeply committed to improving outcomes for children who offend. As all speakers have set out, children who enter the youth justice system are some of the most vulnerable in our society and are disproportionately represented in other at-risk groups with multiple and complex needs. It will not surprise my shadow, the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), to know

that I take issue with a number of his points, but I share his view. He set out eloquently the characteristics and context for that cohort of young people who end up in custody. For instance, of 555 children surveyed in YOIs in 2017-18, 16% considered themselves to have a disability, 30% reported emotional or mental health problems, and 45% had been, at some point, in local authority care. It is a key priority for me and this Government to ensure that such children receive the support and interventions they need to fulfil their potential and live a crime-free and constructive life.

The principal aim of our youth justice system, and indeed our justice system, must be to protect society. I argue that we do that most effectively by breaking the cycle of reoffending and enabling effective rehabilitation. To deliver a youth justice system that understands and addresses the underlying causes of offending—a range of bases and other factors, and past trauma buried somewhere in that young person, which the shadow Minister was right to allude to—must be key. We can then ensure that every child has the opportunity to turn their life around and move on from their previous offending behaviour.

I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable). It is always a pleasure to hear the leader of the Liberal Democrats speak in Westminster Hall, and although I am not sure that my institutional memory is as long as his, he rightly highlighted the context and stated where we have come from. Colleagues who are Members of the House for long enough so often see the same initiatives and ideas come round for a second time—I am not suggesting that the right hon. Gentleman has been here for that long, but he makes a valid point.

We have seen considerable successes in the youth justice system over the past decade and, as has been said, there has been a reduction of nearly 90% in children entering the system for the first time, from just under 100,000 in 2007-08 to around 14,400 in 2017-18. The total number of children receiving a caution or sentence has decreased by 82% from around 146,500 in 2007-08, to around 26,700 in 2017-18. Importantly, we have seen an unprecedented reduction in the number of children in custody, which has reduced by nearly 70% from a monthly average of around 2,900 in 2007-08, to just under 900—it is often lower—in 2017-18.

I will return to those statistics, but one issue raised by a number of right hon. and hon. Members was disproportionality. The justice system must uphold the principles of equality and fairness for all, and in 2017-18 BAME children made up 45% of the youth custody population on average. I am committed to reducing disproportionate outcomes for BAME children in the system, and I share the concerns voiced by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) in his 2017 report. Since my appointment almost exactly a year ago, I have worked closely with him. He has been constructive and has welcomed the significant progress in implementing his reforms. It will not surprise hon. Members, however, to hear that he is always clear that he thinks we need to do more and do it faster, but I put on record my gratitude to him for his engagement.

We recognise the need for systemic change, and the principle underpinning that approach is the “explain or change” system. On occasions, there may be a rational and reasonable explanation for something, and we can

furnish that where appropriate. If we cannot explain, we should look to make changes that address disproportionate outcomes for BAME children in the justice system. The shadow Minister may be aware that I met his colleague, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), to discuss that and the work being done on it, and I am grateful to her for the constructive nature of those discussions.

When a crime has been committed, we have a duty to consider the needs and background of the perpetrator, but also those of the victim and wider community. As such, it is right that courts have the powers they need to sentence children appropriately. With the exception of the hon. Member for South Shields, I note that no one called for the abolition of imprisonment in this context, and I will come on to speak about what should be defined as an appropriate custodial setting. As is her wont as Queen's Counsel, the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West chose her words exceptionally carefully when referring to custodial settings, and it is an important point.

Joanna Cherry: Does the Minister think that it would be beneficial for the system in England and Wales to follow the lead of Scotland in limiting and doing away with short-term sentences as far as possible? That has worked for adults across the system in Scotland, and reduced reoffending. I know it has been looked at by the Government, but does the Minister accept it is a good idea?

Edward Argar: The hon. and learned Lady gently tempts me. She will be aware of the clear statement that I, the Secretary of State and others have made about the effectiveness or otherwise of short sentences. I have often said that a short sentence can be long enough to disrupt family life, education, relationships and home, but too short for any meaningful attempt to grapple with the underlying problems and needs of an offender. There is a particular challenge for young people under 18, because there is already a significant presumption against custody, which must be a last resort.

The offences that attract a custodial sentence—I leave this as a reflection on the nature of the cohort of young people who are in prison—include the possession of an article with a blade or point, common assault and battery, possession of other weapons, robbery, burglary in a dwelling, assault, and actual bodily harm. Those offenders make up the bulk of those sentenced to custody, including with short sentences, and I think that many in this House and beyond would still consider such offences very serious. The hon. and learned Lady will be aware that the Secretary of State set out his intention to bring forward proposals for discussion and consultation on how we approach short sentences, and I suspect that if she is patient, she may see that develop further in the coming weeks.

Joanna Cherry: Is the Minister aware of the success of the violence reduction unit in Scotland, and the diversionary schemes that take a holistic approach to knife crime? Those have succeeded in hugely reducing knife crime in Scotland, particularly among young men, not by locking them away but by taking a holistic approach to the problem. Surely that approach should also be followed south of the border.

Edward Argar: I enjoy taking interventions from the hon. and learned Lady, and although I am always somewhat nervous about what may be coming in my direction, she was kind in that last intervention. She rightly highlights the experience in Scotland. We are aware of that, and I take a close interest in it. The debate on the efficacy and future of short sentences is alive, and I am sure that she and other hon. Members will participate in it.

The youth justice system offers courts and other decision makers a range of flexible sentences that can be used to address a child's behaviour and offending. Those range from informal diversions to cautions, community sentences and custody for the most serious offences. The Government believe that there will always be some children for whom custody may be the appropriate and necessary sentence, but we are equally clear that it should always be a last resort, and for a period of time in line with the seriousness of the offence.

In 2018, 26 sentences were given to children for murder—by “children”, I mean those under 18 who fall into the care of the youth justice system, for which I am responsible—and 44 for wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm. In 2017-18, 32% of custodial sentences given to children were for violence against the person and possession of weapons—that goes back to the offences I mentioned earlier. Notwithstanding the point made by the hon. and learned Lady, we believe that those offences involve significant public protection concerns that must also be carefully considered in any future approach.

The age of criminal responsibility in England and Wales is 10. Custodial sentences are available for children from that age, although their use is restricted, and the courts have a statutory duty to consider a child's welfare during sentencing. Children under 12 will only ever receive a custodial sentence for the most serious offences where neither a community sentence or fine can be justified. Furthermore, we recognise that needs can differ among different age groups, and the sentencing guidelines reflect that. For example, detention and training orders are not available for under-12s, and can only be given to children aged 12 to 14 if they are considered to be persistent offenders. Returning to the definition of “child”, about 95% of those who receive a custodial sentence are 16 and 17-year-olds.¹ That is still a small number. I take the underlying point that the hon. Member for South Shields is making, but we should be clear about the age that is predominantly reflected in those who receive custodial sentences.

It is also clear that custody is used sparingly. Although proportions of sentence types have remained stable, the overall numbers are much lower than they were 10 years ago. For example, in 2017-18, just under 1,600 immediate custodial sentences were given to children, in comparison with about 15,500 community sentences. The proportions were 7% and 68%. In 2007-08, there were nearly 5,800 immediate custodial sentences, but the proportions were 6% and 68%, so they have been relatively consistent.

I am clear that custody needs to be in the right environment to rehabilitate children, which goes to the shadow Minister's point. I have never shied away from the fact that, as I said in my evidence to the Joint Committee on Human Rights, in many cases we are not delivering the best outcomes for children. That is why

1. [Official Report, 11 July 2019, Vol. 663, c. 3MC.]

[Edward Argar]

we are committed to reforming youth custody and ensuring it is a place of safety and learning that is able to rehabilitate the young people who need to be there.

As the hon. Lady and the shadow Minister said, HMIP inspections of YOIs have identified safety and purposeful activity as key areas for improvement. The shadow Minister referred to what the chief inspector of prisons said in 2017-18. He is a decent chap, and I know that he would want to be clear for the record that the Chief Inspector of Prisons subsequently moved away from that and does not maintain that there are no safe institutions. However, he was right to highlight what was said at the time. We have taken several steps to address these issues and in 2017, following that, we began a comprehensive reform programme to ensure that the services provided in custody are aligned with the increasingly complex needs of the children in our care.

Since 2017, the number of operational frontline staff in the YCS has increased by almost 40%. We have recruited more psychologists, healthcare staff and frontline officers, who are being appropriately trained in mental health and trauma-informed approaches. Earlier this year, the YCS began implementing a new evidence-based behaviour management strategy and integrated care framework, and we have built two new enhanced support units for those with the most challenging needs. We are also working with education providers and devolving additional funding to commission more educational, vocational and enrichment activities.

The ability to work with children displaying complex needs requires a very specific, very important set of skills. We are therefore also investing to improve the quality of our staff training. We have introduced a new youth justice specialist role tied to a foundation degree in youth justice to teach the latest in effective practice in youth work and rehabilitation. More than 400 staff have enrolled so far, and we are aiming for every prison officer in the YCS to have undertaken that training by 2023.

There will always be a need for a degree of security and a form of custodial setting. Alongside improving the existing estate, we are changing the fundamental approach. Last year, we announced the creation of the country's first secure school, to be developed in Medway in Kent, which the hon. Member for South Shields referred to. I have huge respect for her, but respectfully disagree. I believe that secure schools are the right way to proceed to ensure we move away from the concept of a prison with education to that of a school—an educational setting—with a degree of security. I believe that that strikes the right balance.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Does the Minister appreciate that that is what secure training centres were intended to be at their inception almost 20 years ago, and that it has not worked? The Government are going down the same track with the secure schools model.

Edward Argar: I would argue that secure schools are not a rerun of secure training centres. The Government recognise that there is a need for a secure custodial setting as part of the youth justice system, but we believe that education should be to the fore. The hon. Lady will have seen that, unlike for secure training

centres, we are looking to education providers, rather than to established organisations dealing with custody and security, to run secure schools. We are very clear that, with the investment we are proposing, we can redesign and improve the Medway facility, achieving value for money for the taxpayer and adopting a different culture and approach in that setting.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I am conscious that the Minister is coming to the end of his comments. One of the key questions I asked was this: what is the timetable for phasing out YOIs and secure training centres, as the Government promised in 2016?

Edward Argar: We have made it clear that we will open Medway as the first secure school, with a second one to follow. However, we wish to assess at each stage how well the system is working, how effective it is, and whether any improvements are needed along the way, so it would be wrong to set a date for a full and complete replacement and roll-out. The hon. Lady would not expect me to do that without testing the new model to ensure it adapts to reflect the experience, as it is completely different from the secure training centres. As I said earlier, all Governments must accept their share of responsibility for the system today. In a moment, I will address the questions that the shadow Minister asked.

We will give the leaders of secure schools freedom and autonomy, similar to the freedom enjoyed by headteachers, to create relationships, care and practice centred around the needs of the children. This new model of youth custody draws on the ethos and practice of schools, with the structure and support of the secure children's home model. I look forward to announcing the provider of the first one at Medway very shortly.

Despite the successes, children leaving custody are the most likely to reoffend in the whole criminal justice system. Reoffending rates are far too high for children sentenced to custody for six months or less. That relates to the points made by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West. We believe that short periods in custody can have a negative impact on a child's rehabilitation. It can disrupt family relationships which, as the second Farmer review showed, can be fundamental to supporting rehabilitation and reducing future offending.

The Secretary of State for Justice set out in oral questions earlier this month the persuasive evidence that short custodial sentences do not work, and that community sentences can be more effective in reducing reoffending and keeping the public safe. I know that Members of all parties share that view, and I hope we will continue to see progress.

Let me turn to some of the questions that hon. Members asked. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West talked about the need for young people entering custody to be placed as near to their home as possible. She is right that, occasionally, there are needs that mean that that cannot happen. In cases where there has been gang-related violence or serious youth violence, there may be a genuine need to separate some young people in the custodial estate. She is right that that goes to the heart of maintaining family and other relationships.

It is always a pleasure to be cross-examined by the hon. and learned Lady and, indeed, by the whole of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. I have read its

report carefully, and I will be responding to it on behalf of Her Majesty's Government very shortly. I can speak only for this Government. I do not know whether I will still be a Minister in five weeks' time, but I can speak as one today. We will be responding very shortly.

The hon. and learned Lady mentioned the Taylor review recommendation about children's panels. That is certainly an interesting idea. The principles underpinning it—understanding and addressing the root causes of offending—are absolutely valid and the right ones to look at in the context of the youth justice system. However, to implement the idea exactly as suggested would, to my mind, represent a significant change to the approach in this country, which still puts a judge, or a sentencer, at the heart of sentencing. As she will have seen from our response, we did not accept that recommendation, because we recognised the broader impact it would have on how our justice system operates.

The shadow Minister, and possibly also the hon. Member for South Shields, mentioned doctors' access to patients. Doctors can always access patients directly where there is a medical need and the doctor makes that medical judgment.

The hon. Lady and the shadow Minister mentioned restraint. The training around restraint is very clear: it points to de-escalation, and the non-use of restraint is the priority. The training is there to provide officers with the skills to use. On pain-inducing techniques and restraint more broadly, as both hon. Members alluded to, the Taylor review has been under way for a while. One hon. Member—I think it was the shadow Minister, but it may have been the hon. Lady—asked when we can expect that review to be published. I will not comment before it is published, but we have said that we anticipate it will be published by the summer. I look forward to being able to do that and respond in due course, if I am still in this post.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The Minister is being generous with his time. He seemed to indicate that pain-inducing restraint was used only for de-escalation. He will have heard from my opening comments that there is testimony from children saying quite the opposite. This is causing children pain. Has he seen the MMPR? Is he confident that it is not causing children harm? Would he want it used on any of the children he knows?

Edward Argar: The point I was making—forgive me if I was unclear—is that the training given to officers emphasises de-escalation as the key and the first step to be taken. It is only when there is no alternative that there is escalating use of different techniques. However, the hon. Lady made her point very clearly. As I said, I will wait until I have seen the Taylor review and we are able to publish it. I suspect that this issue will return to the Chamber in some form at that point.

A number of right hon. and hon. Members, particularly the shadow Minister, raised removal from association. We are clear that that would not be defined as isolation, not least because there is meaningful human contact with officers, medical professionals and, indeed, education professionals, who throughout any period of removal from association bring learning activities to an individual's cell and work with them. There is no removal of meaningful human contact for the entirety of that period. There is human contact, but the shadow Minister is right that

there is a definitional point to be considered. We discussed legal definitions and their different interpretations at length in the Joint Committee on Human Rights. He understandably elevated his point by saying that although we can argue about definitions, he has concerns about numbers and the operation of removal from association.

The shadow Minister also mentioned the assault rate, the segregation rate and a whole range of other factors. I urge a degree of caution with respect to statistics expressed as numbers per 100. I mentioned in my testimony to the Joint Committee that, as the numbers go down, it is largely only those who have committed very serious, often violent offences who are sentenced to custody. They are a very concentrated cohort. As the shadow Minister alluded to, they are challenging and challenged individuals in terms of their backgrounds and experiences, but they are a much more concentrated group who are much more prone to violent offences than previously. That is a challenge. It does not necessarily negate his point, but I wanted to put a bit of context around the statistics and how they are interpreted.

The shadow Minister mentioned budgets and funding. He is a fair and decent man, so I know he would recognise the role played in the financial situation by the previous Labour Government's mismanagement of the national finances.

This has been a very important debate. We need to think differently about how we deal with children who offend. We must ensure that we place at the heart of the system the need to break the cycle of reoffending before those young people become adults, and we must understand the trauma they have often experienced, which may well be a driving factor in their offending behaviour. The courts should have available to them a wide range of sentencing options for all those who are at the age of criminal responsibility, to ensure that we adequately address children's offending behaviour. Sometimes, as a last resort, that may warrant a custodial sentence.

I am clear that the term "under 18" encompasses children at many different stages of development, so a different type of sentence, cognisant of the individual circumstances of the person, will be necessary in each case. However, I am also clear that custody should be available as a sentencing option in only the most serious cases. The youth secure estate requires real reform to ensure that custody, where it is used, is used effectively. I will bear very much in mind the comment by the right hon. Member for Twickenham about remembering my history and where we have been before in seeking to ensure that any future change is meaningful and achieves the results we would all wish for.

Let me conclude by thanking you, Mr Hosie, for your chairmanship. I thank all those who contributed, and I thank the hon. Member for South Shields for bringing this important debate to the Chamber.

3.57 pm

Mrs Lewell-Buck: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who took part in the debate. In the early stages of the Minister's response, he seemed to suggest that I did not feel there should be consequences for crimes committed. Let me clarify that that is not my position at all. He seemed either not to have heard me or to have misunderstood the points I was making. Just to clarify, I advocated abolishing child imprisonment

[Mrs Lewell-Buck]

and putting in its place secure children's homes, because that option is in keeping with all the knowledge and understanding we now have about children's development.

It is disappointing that the Minister's views on restraint and solitary confinement differ so vastly and wildly from the testimonies of children themselves and of those who work in this environment day in, day out. It is safe to say that I am happy that this House has considered abolishing child imprisonment, but I am not happy that we are not moving forward with it. It is something I shall be revisiting with the Minister imminently.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered abolishing child imprisonment.

Beer Duty Rates

[MR PHILIP HOLLOBONE *in the Chair*]

3.58 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now move on to an important debate about differential rates of beer duty. Because of the suspension of the earlier debate for 15 minutes, this debate can run until 4.45 pm. I call Giles Watling to move the motion.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered differential rates of beer duty.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to raise, again, the importance of beer duty, and pleased to represent all the constituents who have contacted me to ask that we cut beer duty. It is a campaign I am delighted to support. Although I am certainly a keen supporter, I do not believe that an across-the-board cut in beer duty is the best option, as I shall argue in this speech. That is where a differential rate of beer duty is to be much desired. Simply put, it would differentiate between the duty rates for on-trade sales of beer in pubs and the rates for off-trade sales. I am keen for that proposal to be implemented, so I have written to the Chancellor to seek his support—as the Minister will know, having responded to my letter of 23 April. That was my second letter to the Treasury on the intriguing proposal, in which I carefully responded to the points that the Minister had raised in his reply to my first letter in November 2018.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I point out that my hon. Friend wrote to my predecessor, and it was my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride), who responded to him, rather than the present incumbent of this illustrious slot.

Giles Watling: I thank the Minister for pointing that out. I am well aware that it was his predecessor; it was the Minister incumbent at the time.

I sent a long and detailed reply to the letter, but the response was almost word for word the same as the first. Four words at the start of one sentence had been removed, and one word and one number—the date—had been changed. I am sure that that was just an oversight in the machinery of the Government; I hope it is not an indication of how much the Treasury wants to debate the matter. We must do more to protect our pubs.

The Minister will tell me that the Government have supported pubs in many ways, notably through the beer duty freeze, which means that beer duty is 18% lower than it was in 2012—hurrah! No doubt that is an impressive achievement, but if we have done so much, why have 11,000 pubs closed in the last decade and why does one pub still close every 12 hours?

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a passionate speech. The Government have delivered not just a duty freeze for our pubs, but three duty cuts followed by a number of duty freezes. The Government have taken positive action to support our pubs.

Giles Watling: I celebrate that positive action; it is great that the duty is 18% lower than in 2012.

The Alcohol Health Alliance concludes that previous across-the-board cuts in beer duty have helped supermarkets to continue to undermine on-trade sales, while failing to slow the rate of pub closures. Despite the Government's valiant efforts, therefore, the important contributions that our pubs make to the economy and to community life by providing a place to socialise and encouraging responsible drinking remain at risk.

Most concerningly, analysis shows that it is small independent pubs that are disappearing as the big pub chains consolidate their businesses around larger bars, usually in town centres. Eventually, that will allow those big pub chains to monopolise the on-trade marketplace. That will give them a stranglehold over pricing and is unlikely to result in a cheaper pint for the consumer.

Moreover, the closure of any pub, especially a small community asset, endangers work on loneliness and social cohesion. Researchers have found that people who have a local pub are happier, have more friends and feel more engaged with their local communities, but closures are depriving some people of those benefits. That can be particularly acute in rural areas. The pub is a famous and traditional part of the British way of life. It is an essential part of the community. It deals with loneliness and is a form of social care. The traditional landlord knows his clientele. He knows who needs help, who is in trouble and what resources are available, and he is a friendly ear.

As a touring actor many years ago, I stayed in a small village on the outskirts of Stratford-upon-Avon that had a pub, a church and a community centre, and a pub landlord, a vicar and a policeman. Twenty years later, I went back and those three pillars of the community had gone, along with the pub. It was a sad reflection of that wonderful little community that I knew so well, where people talked over the garden fence, talked to one another in the pub, looked after each other and looked out for one another. Instead, the people of that little local community had disappeared into their silos. They went to the local town to work as commuters and came back to their houses to drink cheap supermarket booze in front of their widescreen televisions. The community had broken down. The loss of that community is a great shame, and I want to prevent that from happening elsewhere. We must do all we can to prevent the closure of any pub.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I worked in the pub trade for 10 years. One of my first and most enjoyable jobs was working at the Windmill Tavern and the Gates Bar in my constituency. That was a long time ago, but those pubs survive. Sadly, I know a lot of landlords who knew then, and know now, that business rates and the price of a pint are far too high. We are losing places to socialise and we are losing communities. Communities need pubs, so I strongly support the hon. Gentleman.

Giles Watling: I ran a pub with my wife—the Kings Head on Kings Head Hill, Chingford—in one of those moments when my acting career was not going too well.

Pubs are also positive for our high streets. They attract visitors, so closures are counterproductive to the Government's efforts to revitalise our urban centres. Let

us not forget the general economic impact of the beer and pub industries, which contribute £23 billion to GDP every year and support more than 900,000 jobs. Crucially, 44% of those jobs are held by 16 to 24-year-olds.

All that is at risk, however, because of beer duty rates. Even after the Government's reductions, we still have one of the highest rates in Europe and pay 40% of all beer duty in the EU while consuming only 12% of the beer—despite my best efforts. That has contributed to the fact that, according to the Campaign for Real Ale, 56% of drinkers believe that the price of a pint of beer in a pub has become unaffordable.

Drinkaware notes the shifting preference of the consumer, who now purchases alcohol in the off-trade marketplace to consume at home, as per my example of the little village near Stratford-upon-Avon. When people can buy a pint of beer for less than £1 in some supermarkets, it is hardly surprising that many choose that option, especially when pubs simply cannot get near those rock-bottom prices. I believe that the average pint of beer is between £3.50 and £4, which is three or four times the amount.

The data supports that shifting preference and demonstrates that while high rates of beer duty have been pricing people out of drinking in pubs, off-trade sales have been thriving. Figures from the British Beer and Pub Association show that since 2000, on-trade consumption has fallen by a massive 47.2%, but off-trade consumption has risen by 29.3%. That is clearly inequitable and stems from the disparity in cost between the two. The Government's across-the-board beer duty reductions have not addressed that disparity, given that they also benefit off-trade sales. Because pub closures largely derive from the surge in the sale of cheap alcohol, the disparity needs to be addressed.

An underlying potential public health concern could result from inaction, because people who drink at home without a responsible landlord to keep an eye on them are at risk of alcohol abuse. Today, the number of hospital admissions related to alcohol remains high at one million annually, and that places a strain on our precious resources. Most worryingly, the number of admissions has risen as a pint has become more expensive. Even if there is not a direct correlation, 73% of publicans think that increasing the price of off-trade alcohol is crucial to tackling alcohol problems.

We can do that with a differential rate of beer duty that skews the odds back in our pubs' favour by cutting the on-trade beer duty rate to benefit those sales over off-trade sales. The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury said recently:

“I can see the strong argument for that, but it is unfortunately not possible under EU law. Duty is levied on production, not on the place of consumption. However, we might be able to turn to that should we have sufficient flexibility.”—[*Official Report*, 28 March 2019; Vol. 657, c. 635.]

We are shortly going to get that flexibility, and there must be a technological mechanism that we can use to track the destination of beer products when they leave the producer, and then add the tax accordingly. Such an approach would mean cutting the on-trade duty rate, before adding a stipend for beer products destined for the off-trade marketplace. It would also mean that the cut for on-trade sales would offset the increase in off-trade duty. I accept that such a change could impact all off-trade retailers, and therefore any such adjustment

[Giles Watling]

should be narrowed to large retailers only. For large retailers, sales of beer form only part of their turnover, whereas for small off-trade retailers, alcohol sales can be everything. That important point must be considered during any discussion of the proposal so that we do not damage our very valuable small businesses.

We must differentiate and cut beer duty for on-trade sales, because doing so will truly benefit our pubs. However, although I might be considered an expert on beer, I am not an expert on tax law. I hope that we can have a pledge from the Minister today that the Treasury will investigate this matter, so we can see whether such differential rates could hypothetically be used to support our pubs when we leave the EU. Moreover, when we investigate, we must find a way to ensure that producers pass on savings to the consumer. Many in the industry allege that previous savings have been retained by brewers, and that undermines efforts to save our pubs.

If I have convinced the Minister that there is still a strong argument for differential rates of beer duty—I am sure I have—I hope that one day he will join me for a drink in my local in Frinton to celebrate the introduction of this important change.

Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. Does the hon. Member for Burton have the permission both of the mover of the motion and of the Minister to contribute to the debate?

4.11 pm

Andrew Griffiths: Yes, I do. Thank you, Mr Hollobone, for allowing me to take part in this debate at the very last minute. I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) on his tour de force in defence of the great British beer industry and on the importance of the British pint. I only wish there were more Members of Parliament who spoke with such passion about what is a great British industry. Although the Americans or the Germans or the Belgians might claim it, I have no doubt that we produce the best beer in the world here in Britain and we should support the industry.

I will reiterate a few of the points that my hon. Friend made so well. First, there are the costs incurred in the on-trade and the off-trade. It is more cost-effective and cost-efficient to sell trays of lager or six-packs of beer from a supermarket, for them to go down the aisle, be beeped through by the assistant in the supermarket of one's choice and for someone to take them home. There is clearly a much higher cost involved in delivering a wonderful pint of British cask ale. For a start, there is a great deal more work in keeping it, and there is the customer service that is needed in its delivery. There is a lot more science and work in delivering great customer service and a great pint of beer than one may imagine, and that costs the publican. It also, of course, provides excellent jobs, with good training, in the pub industry, which we should support and encourage.

Giles Watling: My hon. Friend will appreciate that there is a great artisan skill in looking after beers, such as knowing how to tap and spile, when to leave the beer waiting, and serving it when it is just right.

Andrew Griffiths: My father said that there was no such thing as bad beer. My hon. Friend is articulating that there is—there is a skill; it is a profession. One of the things we have lost over many years is the landlord as a profession, but with the rise of cask ale, it is beginning to come back. The landlord was well respected in our communities. He was a pillar of the community. He knew his job and he knew his cellar. The more we can support the great British pub, the more those skills can be retained and will flourish.

Secondly, on public safety, we all suffer on our high streets occasionally from what we call preloading or binge drinking, particularly among younger people who might buy some alcohol from the supermarket, or who may get it from their parents or whatever, who then go and drink in the park or in the town centre. There is a cost involved for the police and the wider community in managing that, but there is no cost to the supermarket. However, publicans are required to keep their house in order. They are required to have door staff who treat people with respect and with care, and who make sure that the licensed premises is safe and that people who turn up who may have had too much to drink are refused so that everybody else in the establishment is kept safe. None of those costs are on a supermarket, but they are on the British landlord. It is important to recognise that and to represent it in the taxation regime.

There is also the extra cost of delivering cask ale or draught ale. This may be one way in which the Minister can think about being creative when he looks at a replacement for EU duty on alcohol as we come out of the European Union. The duty is on production and it may be difficult to differentiate the duty on a bottle of beer sold from a supermarket and the beer sold in a pub, but we could differentiate a bottle of beer sold in a supermarket and a pint of draught ale, because it is in a different container and is served in a different way. That may be one clever way—I know the Minister is extremely clever—in which he can crack this nut of supporting our pubs, which offer an asset to the community, keep us safe and are the great introduction to responsible drinking. I am sure hon. Members remember when someone went down to the pub where the landlord would keep an eye on them; he knows the family; if someone gets into trouble, he says, “You’ve had a few too many—go home.” We risk losing that if we lose the great British pub.

Hugh Gaffney: I am a non-alcoholic. I do not drink. I have done the pub trade for 10 years and I have never drunk. I enjoy the social side of going to a pub and meeting people. Where publicans are really struggling now is with business rates. Pubs are community hubs, and we really need to look at business rates.

Andrew Griffiths: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more. As the ex-chairman of the all-party parliamentary beer group, I decided to challenge myself to have 12 months off alcohol. That runs out in July. I have been alcohol-free for 12 months, but that does not mean that I do not continue to support the British brewing industry and the British pub. It is absolutely at the centre of our community. The hon. Gentleman is exactly right.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned business rates and it is absolutely right that pubs are treated in a unique way on business rates. I use an old phrase: we have an

analogue taxation system in a digital world. I am not saying that Amazon will be delivering my pint of cask ale to me via Amazon Prime, but businesses more generally, particularly small businesses, are having to compete with sales on the internet and the brave new world of retailing. I am absolutely sure that doing something about business rates will help our high streets.

I have one other matter to take up with the Minister, which I hope he will find interesting. One of the objectives behind all Government policy is responsible drinking. We want people to enjoy a pint of great British beer, but we want them to do it responsibly. A great thing we have seen because of responsible actions by brewers is a reduction in the alcohol by volume in drinks, and in beer in particular. Beer is a particularly good way for us to take units out of consumption, because of its high volume and relatively low strength.

The Government introduced a lower rate of duty on beer less than 2.8% ABV. Brewers have done a really good job and have tried to embrace that, but it is difficult for a brewer to produce a tasty beer at less than 2.8%. It is the alcohol that gives it the bite, but it is also the alcohol that helps to preserve it and keep it drinkable in the pipes for longer. With the best of intentions, landlords wanted to provide a lower-alcohol beer on cask, but they could not because it was not economically viable because the beer went off. It was 2.8% because of the EU directive, which prevented us from doing anything else. As we Brexit and come out of the European Union, we have the opportunity of a differential rate—maybe 3% or 3.5%—at which brewers could produce a great, tasty beer while taking units out of consumption. For those of us who enjoy a pint, but not a stronger pint, all those things would work well together.

I thank you very much for allowing me to take part in the debate, Mr Hollobone. In conclusion, I am absolutely heartened to hear that we have such beer champions. As the MP representing the heart of British brewing—Burton upon Trent, with its history and future in brewing—I hope the Minister will think about using Brexit to deliver cheaper beer for Britons across the country as we leave the European Union.

4.20 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman):

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This is an important topic, as hon. Members from across the House have rightly said, which commands widespread interest across not merely the House but the country. In that context, if I may make a small but telling party political point, I wish that the Opposition had been able to field a spokesman to express their view on the matter.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The Opposition are not required to field a spokesman for a half-hour Westminster Hall debate.

Jesse Norman: On a point of order, Mr Hollobone. Does that also apply when a debate has been extended beyond half an hour to 45 minutes, as in this case?

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): That is correct. The Minister is enjoying the benefit of 15 minutes injury time owing to the previous debate not having completed its full passage.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the previous speakers for giving me that opportunity. I intend to take full advantage of it. I stand corrected on the point about the Opposition, for which I am grateful.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton (Giles Watling) not merely for his ingenuity and brilliance in securing the debate and raising this topic, but for the vigour and energy that he has shown in pressing this issue over the several years he has been in the House. In doing so, although he may not realise it, he takes up a beacon that was held for many years in this House by my great friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths), who I am delighted had the chance to speak. I have no doubt that, in due course, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) will himself carry that beacon, or if not, will play an important role in making this argument, because it is an important one to advance. I thank all Members who have spoken for their contributions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton rightly said, and as colleagues from across the House know, beer and breweries are an important part of our national life, and the same is of course true for that essential accompaniment, the great British pub. As a Herefordshire man, I ought to point out that pubs do not merely serve beer. In my constituency we have Bulmers, while in Herefordshire we have Westons, Tom Oliver and Denis Gwatkin; we have a host of fantastic cider producers. Tragically, they are not the subject of this discussion; our attention must focus exclusively on beer and the beer duty. However, they contribute to the important presence of pubs in our national life.

Giles Watling: Might it not be worth consulting and finding out whether some sort of reduction in cider duty might also help to preserve the pub in the future?

Jesse Norman: That will certainly be of great interest to my constituents, both as consumers and producers. As my hon. Friend knows, there has been a tremendous reinvigoration of the brewing industry over the last nine years. The number of brewers has this year risen dramatically to more than 2,200. The rise of craft beer has seen breweries grow and flourish in every part of this country, including microbreweries, and exports have reached more than £500 million a year.

Again, it would be wrong of me not to mention a personal interest in this context. Certainly, my county of Herefordshire is as amply endowed with fabulous breweries and pubs as any part of the country. It would be wrong not to mention Wye Valley Brewery, Golden Valley Brewery and Hereford Brewery—I have pulled a pint of its Hereford Best in the Strangers Bar. Notable pubs in Hereford are the Barrels, where I held an informal surgery last Friday afternoon for a considerable period; the Volunteer Inn, known as the Volly; the Lichfield Vaults, known as the Lich; the Grapes; and the Britannia. However, I also pay attention to the specialists that have come into the market in my constituency over the last few years, which picks out this wider process of economic and social change, including Beer in Hand and the Hereford Beer House—part of a panoply of pubs across the entire county, including the King's Head Hotel, the Man of Ross, the Mill Race in Ross and many other fine houses.

[Jesse Norman]

It would also be wrong of me not to touch on the excellent work in the community of the local Campaign for Real Ale team, with my support, in saving, for the second time, the Broadleys pub in south Hereford from being turned into a Co-op. It sheds a very bad light on the Co-op, which is in many ways a fine institution that I otherwise rather admire, even if I did have the crystal Methodist in front of me at one point when I was on the Treasury Committee, if hon. Members remember him. It should not sponsor the closure of pubs in order to open new Co-ops merely a few hundred yards away from ones that already exist. I single it out personally, not as a matter of Government policy, for its misbehaviour in that regard.

Andrew Griffiths: I agree with my hon. Friend, because I have seen that in action. Does he agree that one great way to support the great British pub is by doing something on beer duty? Seven out of 10 alcoholic drinks purchased in a pub are beer, so if we want to help pubs, doing something specifically on beer is the way to do it.

Jesse Norman: I will come on to a point my hon. Friend raised, and with great eloquence, on the vigorous role that the Government have taken in cutting beer duty and supporting the industry. However, I point out that this great change over the last few years has not been the result merely of enlightened tax policy but of an outbreak of entrepreneurialism and energy in the sector as a whole. It is important to realise that the Government cannot reverse the laws of economic gravity or changing tastes and habits, but they can help at the margin, and have tried to.

As my hon. Friend will know, in 2013 the Government took the decision to end the beer duty escalator. Since then, they have cut or frozen beer duty several times, including at the last Budget, with the effect that a typical pint of beer is 14p cheaper than it would otherwise be. The Government will of course continue to look for ways to support the brewing industry, and I absolutely look forward to further engagement with my hon. Friends and Members from across the House.

However, it is important to try to strike a responsible and sustainable balance with wider public spending commitments. It is worth noting that the Exchequer has forgone more than £5.2 billion in revenue due to cuts and freezes to all alcohol duties since 2013. That is £5 billion that has to be made up by taxpayers by other means if we are to be able to spend as we would wish on our public services. [Interruption.] Hon. Members who have recently arrived for the next debate will not be aware that we have a few more minutes, because of the kind courtesy of the Chair, and can run the debate until 4.45 pm.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clacton is absolutely right to emphasise the social importance of pubs, which are central places in the community. They are mixing places and meeting places for people from every walk of life. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton also made the point that pubs are a place of supervised, safe drinking, where publicans—male or female—know their customers, pulling pints and pulling people together in a social environment. That of course raises the stakes from a Government standpoint.

When considering whether to introduce differential beer duty, we and Governments before us have had to acknowledge that the UK is currently bound by EU laws that harmonise excise duties applicable to alcohol products. We can only introduce reliefs or different rates of duty for beer that are compatible with the EU directive on alcohol excise duty structures. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton made the point that, once the UK has left the EU, the Government and Parliament will no longer be bound by this directive, so there should be much greater opportunity to explore creative proposals to redress that balance. But until then, there are limits laid down in statute as to what can be introduced. However, even within that context—this point has been touched on—we have been able to make progress and exploit some existing differentials, which have benefited pubs and breweries. Those include the small brewers relief, which allows the smallest breweries to receive up to 50% off their duty bill in the start-up and growth phase. As hon. Members will know, the Treasury announced a review of that relief in the Budget. My officials are now working to take the results of the survey further to address the issues raised, and the Government hope to make further announcements in due course.

Of course, as I have said, we also recognise the importance of responsible drinking. That is why there are already differential rates of duty on lower-strength and alcohol-free beers. On beers of less than 1.2% ABV, no duty is paid at all, and on beers between 1.2% and 2.8%, the reduced rate is less than half the standard beer duty rate. My hon. Friend the Member for Burton is absolutely right. It is hard to produce a beer of, I would say, less than 2.3% that maintains its taste, but at between 2.3% and 2.8%, one can have a delicious pint and benefit from the duty differential. Conversely, higher-strength beers over 7.5% ABV pay a higher duty rate of roughly 30% more, in part to send a fiscal signal about the importance of responsible drinking.

Andrew Griffiths: The Minister is absolutely right in what he says about lower-strength beers and the potential that that has, but may I share with him what brewers across the country have said to me? If they got the opportunity, through the duty regime, to promote beers at 3% or up to 3.5%, they would do that wholeheartedly. That would not only create a new category, but help to take alcohol units out and therefore help responsible drinking at the same time.

Jesse Norman: I am grateful for that intervention. There may be scope to contemplate an uplift in relation to the higher level of lower-strength beer. It would be interesting to discuss that further.

Let me turn to some of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton raised. I intervened only to provide the point of information to him, because of course I did not see the correspondence that he had received and therefore could not respond to it in those terms. I apologise if he was disappointed by the response that was given. It is always the Treasury's policy to try to give informative and full as well as, of course, accurate responses.

Let me pick up a couple of the points that were raised in my hon. Friend's speech and that reiterate some of the wider issues. Of course, there are public health outcomes that need to be met. The closure of pubs potentially affects some of those, particularly in a world

that has seen, in this country at least, something of an epidemic of loneliness, so my hon. Friend was absolutely right to pick up on that. He is also right to say that there is evidence that responsible drinking and better public health outcomes can be due to differential rates of duty. I understand that point. It is important, though, to remind ourselves of the practical difficulties that need to be overcome. It is not merely the EU law issue. It is also important that whatever the regimen may be, it is not subject to legal challenge for breaching state aid or competition rules. And we may wish to remain aligned with the EU even post Brexit, from a competition or state aid perspective, in part to prevent mercantilism from breaking out between EU businesses and our own.

Of course, there is an issue about enforcement. Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs taxes beer at the point at which it moves into general distribution, rather than monitoring the wider beer supply chain. The concern is obviously about the potential to repackage beer that had the lower rate of duty paid on it and then to sell it and trouser the difference.

Andrew Griffiths: I absolutely understand the point that the Minister makes about the grey market and the potential for fraud; the all-party parliamentary beer group did an investigation into that. I therefore point him back to my previous remarks on draught beer. It is very easy to understand draught beer. It cannot be repackaged; it cannot be put in a different container; it is draught beer. We could have a differential on draught beer that I think would solve my hon. Friend's problem.

Jesse Norman: I am delighted to have taken that final point of information. It may be the case that when we come to reconsider it, the draught beer distinction that my hon. Friend draws gives us a workable legal and practical basis on which to proceed. My point is a much simpler one: it is important to bear in mind the potential grey market impacts, as well as the competition, state aid and legal points that I raised earlier. Having said that, I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Clacton for initiating the debate and for making a case of great passion and urgency with his usual oratorical flourish. Even if I cannot join him in his own Kings Head where he was a publican, I very much hope to be able to join him in the future at some point.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered differential rates of beer duty.

Electromagnetic Fields: Health Effects

4.35 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the health-related effects of electromagnetic fields.

I am honoured to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. This Westminster Hall debate is timely. It comes on the back of an historic decision by Glastonbury Town Council to oppose the roll-out of 5G because of a severe lack of evidence about its effect on the health of those living and working around 5G sites. In the words of Martin Pall, emeritus professor of biochemistry at Washington State University:

“Putting in tens of millions of 5G antennae without a single biological test of safety has got to be about the stupidest idea anyone has had in the history of the world.”

We saw the roll-out of 5G postponed in Brussels when Céline Fremault, Environment and Energy Minister, identified that it was not compatible with Belgian radiation safety standards; and a planned upgrade to 5G in Geneva has been stopped, through application of the precautionary principle, until independent findings on possible health damage become available.

I was approached by an old friend who is now a constituent about how a sensitivity to electromagnetic fields seriously affects her health and the way she lives her life. Annelie lives in France for part of the year and has to return to Wales as her health deteriorates while working as a university lecturer. I was intrigued by the effects and wanted to know more, so I have been in contact with a number of people who either have concerns about the health-related effects or are suffering at first hand. Following discussions with others, I was keen to secure a debate on the subject, because the Government are sweeping the health concerns under the carpet and there appears to be an absolute refusal to acknowledge that the health-related effects even exist.

Initiating a conversation about electromagnetic sensitivity has had members of my own team and family telling me that it is all made up. That in itself motivated me to keep reading and to speak to as many people as I could in Wales and beyond who were suffering. What shocked me was the number of people who have ES but are too afraid to talk publicly about their illness, because they are really wary of being humiliated and ostracised.

Electrosensitivity is the symptomatic sensitivity to electric or magnetic fields of any frequency, including radio frequency transmissions. The condition was first described in 1932. It is when a person's physiology is affected by external electromagnetic fields, giving rise to a spectrum of symptoms, which are often neurological. It is therefore an illness caused by environmental agents—essentially, an environmental toxic pollutant. The condition can arise because of continued exposure to an environment polluted by man-made EM and RF wireless signals at levels at orders of magnitude below those that produce heating effects, and it is well understood in many other countries. Symptoms include headaches, fatigue, disturbed sleep, tingling, pains in limbs, head or face, stabbing pains, brain fog and impaired cognitive function, dizziness, tinnitus, nosebleeds and palpitations. As we saw with chronic fatigue syndrome, however, there was disbelief about those presenting with symptoms of this condition. Indeed, it was construed by others, through a lack of

[*Tonia Antoniazzi*]

knowledge and difficulty in diagnosis, as a psychological illness. I believe that electrosensitivity will be recognised in years to come—sooner than that, I hope—and that the Government will have to own up to their part in it.

To be honest, this is not a subject that I ever thought I would stand here and talk about, even though as a mother, I have always been keen to charge my son's phone outside his bedroom but have never applied the same rule to myself. Parents seem to care about this in relation to their children, and we hear that masts—one was recently fitted to a school in Haringey—are no longer being put up on primary schools. There is something in this.

I also worry about the impact of social media on mental health, and about the smartphones' increasingly addictive nature, which is impacting on the lives of the youngest of children. There is some evidence about the effects of radio frequency signals on mental health and behaviour in children and young people, but those effects are not considered in current attempts to address the increase in mental health and behavioural problems in the UK. I ask the Minister to include the effects of wireless signals when considering solutions for such problems in children and young people. The recent advice from the UK chief medical officers on screen time and wellbeing in young people has ignored evidence for the adverse effects of wireless signals.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I want to ask about the wider environmental impact. My hon. Friend will know that 4G has the same carbon footprint as all of aviation, and 5G will be a lot more. What is more, we are now hearing that 5G will have a detrimental impact on insect life, which is decreasing globally at 2.5% per year. Given that insects are essential to humanity because they are required to pollinate all fruits and vegetables, does she agree that before hurtling ahead for commercial reasons, we should apply the precautionary principle until we know precisely what the impact will be on insects and our carbon footprint?

Tonia Antoniazzi: We do need to take climate change and insect life into consideration when we discuss the impact of electromagnetic fields.

As MPs, we have a duty of care to our constituents. There is no escaping the fact that when MPs, schools, local authorities and others ask questions about the safety of new technologies, Government's give a standard reply. People who question the health-related effects of electromagnetic fields come up against a brick wall, and today I want to break through that brick wall and ask the Minister several questions. I like to think that the smart way to move forward is to consider safety and sustainability when developing products.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Many years ago, the Trade and Industry Committee investigated the matter with all sorts of experts, but nobody could come to a conclusion. That is not to say that my hon. Friend is wrong, but it was looked at about 20 years ago. Is there any evidence that electromagnetic fields can affect the behaviour of animals?

Tonia Antoniazzi: There is evidence about the effects on animals. I cannot quote from it now, but I have read about it. We must remember that animals do not use

screens, but there is evidence of the impact on them of electromagnetic fields from things such as smartphones and 5G. I would have to find that evidence and send it on to my hon. Friend.

Geraint Davies: On that point, there is clear evidence that with high-frequency 5G—there is some denial about the idea that the frequency may be so high—there will be an enormous loss of insect life. To get the necessary coverage we need to place masts every 150 metres. The coverage will be enormous, and there is an incredible risk of substantial damage. Surely we should apply the precautionary principle, even if all sorts of commercial threats are being made to the Government behind closed doors about what will happen if they do not go ahead.

Tonia Antoniazzi: We need to apply the precautionary principle when we look at anything. Many councils and the Government have embraced 5G, which has come up on us so quickly, as a solution to connectivity. To be honest, given the potential impact, I would rather see fibre broadband—fixed, wired broadband—in all the houses in my constituency and across Wales, rather than having masts put up everywhere just because that seems to be a cheaper solution.

I will not accept the response that electrosensitivity does not exist; studies show that it does. It has many effects that are not at all subjective, including effects on proteins and DNA, cell death, altered brain activity and effects in animals, as my hon. Friends have mentioned. Those effects can be measured, and they cannot be dismissed as being all in the mind.

We all know that decisions relating to technology can have unintended consequences. We are discussing one such consequence: the impact on our health. Similarly, it could be argued that the effects on our mental health are being caused by online contact or screen time, but in combination with studies about animals, we can see that the signals themselves have effects. Animals do not look at screens or use social media.

In the past, no matter what questions, evidence or concerns have been put to Public Health England or the Department of Health and Social Care, they have responded with their standard reply, which includes them saying that they have thoroughly assessed the evidence in the 2012 report by the independent Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation. The World Health Organisation International Agency for Research on Cancer classified all radio-frequency signals as possible human carcinogens in 2011, based on significant increased risks of gliomas and acoustic neuromas associated with mobile or cordless phone use in humans, as well as animal and mechanistic studies. Subsequent studies have strengthened the evidence in humans and provided clear evidence of tumours in animals. Some scientists are even calling for the classification to be upgraded to a definite carcinogen.

Why, then, has Public Health England removed all mention of the IARC classification of radio-frequency signals from its website? It informs people about other possible carcinogens. People cannot make informed decisions or protect those they are responsible for if the information is withheld. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that Public Health England informs people on its website and in leaflets, communications and presentations that all radio-frequency signals are a possible human carcinogen?

Following the publication of a paper on the AGNIR 2012 report in *Reviews on Environment Health*, the AGNIR was quietly disbanded. However, the inaccurate report is still on its website and is used to justify its advice to MPs and the public. When will the 2012 report be retracted because it is scientifically inaccurate and out of date?

The Department for Education in England and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland have said that it is the responsibility of schools to carry out risk assessments before technologies are introduced and used. However, schools cannot safeguard pupils or staff through a risk assessment if they have been given inaccurate information. Can schools be accurately informed about the risks, so that they can fulfil their responsibilities to safeguard children?

Schools and parents could have been informed that wireless signals are a possible human carcinogen; that there is evidence of damage to fertility; and that there are adverse effects on brain development. Schools could have been advised to use wired technologies to prevent possible harm to children's health and development. The EU has sent a cautionary message about wi-fi in relation to schoolchildren, but only France has removed wi-fi from its primary schools.

The Cyprus Government have produced short, practical videos warning teenagers and pregnant women about the risks of radio frequency signals and offering simple actions. When will children, young people, parents and pregnant women in the UK be offered similar advice so that they can take steps to stay safer?

By denying the existence of adverse effects and providing inaccurate information, Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care have prevented the UK public from living and working in safe environments. When will the Government listen to the warnings from scientists and doctors to help MPs to better protect their constituents?

If we are to develop safer technologies in the future, we need to be honest about the risks. We must not ignore the fact that people have ES; those people exist, and their lives are being ruined. Others without ES also have genuine concerns about the roll-out of 5G. People do not need to suffer to be concerned, because the name 5G is deceptive: it implies a simple upgrade from the current 4G, or fourth generation, wireless, but it is so much more than that. It is a massive experiment, and the consequences of our actions are largely unknown.

One thing I feel very strongly about is that for people with ES there is literally no escape—they will have nowhere to go. Can we create safe public spaces and living and working environments so that everyone has somewhere to exist? That is extremely urgent, particularly with the introduction of 5G smart cities, smart roads, the internet of things and thousands of 5G satellites.

I would like the Government to give a commitment to creating white zones, where people can have respite when they need it; to pledge to provide up-to-date, transparent and independent research on the impact of electromagnetic fields; and to replace the 2012 AGNIR report. The science needs to be reviewed—no one can disagree that the technology moves on so quickly that there is even more need to keep up to date with the science.

Finally, I recently received a letter with a heartfelt request from a mum in west Wales:

"I'm told you think the only way forward is a white zone, I agree but also to get ES recognised as a disability. I have spoken with my MP and he agreed that if ES could be recognised as a disability, other things such as access to education would fall into place."

I agree with Sarah. Her struggle is real, and so are the lives of many people who are largely ignored and belittled. Electromagnetic fields have had a dramatic impact on the life and health of my old classmate Annelie over the past 10 years. We can no longer hide and pretend that this is not happening. It cannot be swept under the carpet, especially in the light of the future impact of technological advances at the expense of people and our environment.

In conclusion, it is evident that the Government need to ensure that the research is independent. They need to recognise electrohypersensitivity as an occupational disease, as a French court did earlier this year, and put guidelines in place for employers to make reasonable adjustments so that their employees can continue to work in a healthy environment. I remember the days when we made plans to meet without mobile phones to say that we were running late or could not make it. Advances in technology have swept through our lives. Before I am accused of being a luddite, I stress that I think the technology is wonderful and offers a great many benefits to all, but we cannot continue to deny that there is an impact on some people's health and wellbeing. This is not about stopping progress; it is about making sure that there are no health concerns about the technology, and about doing what is best for our constituents.

4.52 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) has done an admirable job in at least raising the issue that the precautionary principle should be paramount before we take on any new technology. As someone who represents a semi-rural area, let me say at the outset: please give me 3G. I am not worried about 4G or 5G; I just want 3G, with all the consequences it brings. My constituency still has at least one market town that cannot even get that. That was just a little plug for getting the existing technology in place.

What my hon. Friend says is worthy of debate. It should be taken seriously by the Government and should help the public to understand that their representatives are listening. Stroud being Stroud, an active campaign is already under way on 5G. People are saying, "We don't want it and we'll do anything to stop it, so please listen to those who have already raised concerns."

Like my hon. Friend, I have met people who are incredibly affected by electromagnetic sensitivity—to the extent that, when they moved into their house, they had to have the smart meter taken out, and even asked their neighbour to take out theirs. Once that happened, their health dramatically improved. People say that electromagnetic sensitivity is all psychosomatic, but I have seen the evidence of people's sensitivity to electromagnetic waves. If we ignore it, there will certainly be health and biological consequences, and there may be many more problems. Since my hon. Friend has done a valuable job of explaining the possible health and biological impacts, I will say more about planning.

[Dr David Drew]

It is only fair to ask the Government to at least respond to the growing evidence from the International Electromagnetic Field Scientist Appeal, PHIRE—the Physicians' Health Initiative for Radiation and Environment—and other reputed scientists in the field, as well as from communities. Brussels has now stopped the roll-out, and so have a number of cities in California. There is growing concern, and it needs to be recognised and answered. It is a shame that we seem to be in complete ignorance of some of the effects of 5G. I have not seen proper medical studies that deal with people's susceptibility to it. It would be right and proper for us to see those studies.

Geraint Davies: I apologise that I will have to leave before the end, Mr Hollobone.

Is my hon. Friend aware of the veracity of reports that 5G companies, which have enormous commercial power, have put pressure on the Government to move ahead quickly and are making threats similar to those made about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership? It may be that we have signed up already, and if we pull back on the basis of the precautionary principle and risks to human and wildlife health, the Government may end up being sued by big commercial interests. We should resist that in the interests of the public.

Dr Drew: I agree. My hon. Friend's work on air quality is very important. Politicians in general are at last beginning to take note of the threats. It seems lamentable that, now that we understand the threats to air quality through pollution from cars, incineration and other things, another technology is coming in that could be as damaging. Maybe we will not see its effects for years, but will in decades unless we understand what it can do to people. It may not affect everybody—it may be down to genetic susceptibility—but we ought to listen to what is happening to those people.

It would be useful for the Government to put the studies, and their responses to them, on the record. As my hon. Friend the Member for Gower says, one problem is that, now we are into 5G, there is a view that existing masts can be added to or that additional technology can be used. I put it to the Minister that the biggest worry is that there is a view, certainly in Stroud, that lamp posts will be seen as a perfectly acceptable substitute and that, instead of putting up new masts, the technology could be added to existing infrastructure.

It would be useful to know what powers exist, because I understand that the electronic communications code has granted virtually unlimited powers to companies to construct, maintain or develop the current infrastructure without any planning permission. It is all done under delegated responsibility, which means that the general public do not even know what is going on, because normally these things are not publicised. There is little recourse unless the public take court action to stop it, but the means of doing so are limited. Even a private landowner has little authority to stop it. The matter needs to be looked into and properly investigated.

I ask the Government to look at how they can consult the public, because the public are getting worried. The scare stories may not have the full scientific rigour that they should have, but the public know no more

than what they have been told by various experts in the field, and there are always experts on either side of the argument. Our case is that, at the very least, there should be an open, honest and transparent investigation of the health and biological impact of the new technology.

Driving forward 5G is about financial interests. It is not being done for altruistic reasons, but because an awful lot of money stands to be made out of it in a very short period. We need to look at that. It exacerbates the digital divide. As I have said, I would be satisfied with 3G my constituency.

Having listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower, I hope the Minister will be able to say what plans the Government have to investigate the impact on the ecosystem, which is as important as human beings. We need to keep our bugs, birds and other fauna in the state they are in, given that they are under enormous attack. We talked about that yesterday in relation to the climate change statutory instrument that we passed. We are not just talking about our own survival but the survival of other species. It would be a tragedy if we have done things to protect them and yet we let 5G come in. There are allegations that 5G has an impact on other species, particularly in rural areas where we see many living creatures.

My final point is that part of the problem is that the new technology is coming through without much questioning, or even recourse for people to question it. The biggest problem is the speed at which it is being introduced. There is no way that communities that are at best uncertain about the impact of that technology on their children, their schools and their wider community can do anything.

I ask the Government to look at this carefully, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gower said, so that we consider the implications both for individuals' health and the wider ecosystem, and that we also take time and recognise that the precautionary principle is as important in this area as it is in general about air quality.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): We now come to the Front-Bench spokespersons, the first of which will be from the Scottish National party.

5.1 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone.

I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this debate and for the interesting comments she made about electrosensitivity, highlighting the issue of the 5G roll-out, in particular with relation to electromagnetic fields. As she pointed out, 5G operates on different frequencies and with much higher ranges than those we have seen before with previous roll-outs.

Of course, exposure to electromagnetic fields is not new, but due to technological advances it is now far more common for people to be exposed to man-made electromagnetic fields than it ever was in our parents' or our grandparents' time. In recent decades, we have seen the public becoming concerned about potential health issues involving numerous electromagnetic field sources, ranging from overhead power lines to computer or TV screens in the home, as well as from radars, microwave ovens and mobile phones, to name just a few other sources.

Of course there are some significant differences between these sources. With some of them, people can self-select to take a precautionary effect: we do not need to have a microwave in our home; we can limit our mobile use; and we do not need to have a TV screen in our bedroom. With other sources, such as overhead power lines or telephone masts, people are pretty much stuck with them if they are outside their home. It is different with those sources.

The evidence so far seems to show that electromagnetic fields do not have detrimental health impacts. However, more research is always being undertaken, which is especially important as the technology changes and the frequencies involved change—that point has been made by a number of hon. Members. There is current research on the effects of the long-term use of mobile phones. The World Health Organisation has said that, as yet:

“No obvious adverse effect of exposure to low level radiofrequency fields has been discovered.”

However, as has been pointed out, the frequencies of the new 5G technology are significantly higher than those used before, and therefore the research into that new technology is somewhat different than earlier research.

Over the years, the WHO has identified some “25,000 articles” on electromagnetic fields that “have been published over the past 30 years.”

The WHO says of that body of scientific knowledge—indeed, it is undoubtedly the case—that

“scientific knowledge in this area is now more extensive than for most chemicals.”

However, the WHO also says that there are still

“some gaps in knowledge about biological effects”

and so there is a need for “further research”.

The European Union Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks published a lengthy report in 2015—that is not so long ago in terms of years, but in terms of technology it is almost a generation ago. That committee’s final opinion was:

“The results of current scientific research show that there are no evident adverse health effects if exposure remains below the levels recommended by the EU legislation. Overall, the epidemiological studies on radiofrequency EMF exposure do not show an increased risk of brain tumours. Furthermore, they do not indicate an increased risk for other cancers of the head and neck region.

Previous studies also suggested an association of EMF with an increased risk of Alzheimer’s disease. New studies on that subject did not confirm this link.

Epidemiological studies associate exposure to Extremely Low Frequency (ELF) fields, from long-term living in close proximity to power lines to a higher rate of childhood leukaemia. No mechanisms have been identified and no support from experimental studies could explain these findings, which, together with shortcomings of the epidemiological studies, prevent a causal interpretation.

Concerning EMF hypersensitivity...research consistently shows that there is no causal link between self-reported symptoms and EMF exposure.”

The evidence is a little conflicted, but we would definitely benefit from having further evidence.

The role of the Government when it comes to the effects of electromagnetic fields is to ensure that policy is supported by the latest scientific research, so I do not envy the Government in considering the opposing research that has been published. According to the WHO, the heating effect of electromagnetic fields is the current focus of guidelines and regulation. The WHO has said

that, to date, no adverse health effect from low-level, long-term exposure to radio frequency or power frequency fields has been confirmed. However, that is not to say that research into the effects of prolonged low-level exposure to these fields should not continue. We must always make sure that the policy is expertise-led.

With the seemingly exponential increase in the rate of technological innovation, the regulation and monitoring of the effects of these technologies on our health needs to continue. However, we must bear in mind not only the physiological impact of technology but the psychological impact of huge amounts of screen time, which can affect mood and sleep, which in turn can have an impact on mental health. This psychological impact must also continue to be monitored.

In conclusion, I concur with the hon. Member for Gower on the need for independent research into the 5G technology, because without public confidence in and understanding of that technology, we will all be faced with many people campaigning against it when it comes into their areas, and we need to know the answers now, before the technology is rolled out.

5.6 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing this debate and for her excellent speech, which set the scene and informed us all about this issue. Earlier this year, I met her to discuss it, so I am pleased that she was able to secure the debate on it.

I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who spoke for the Scottish National party, for their thoughtful contributions to this debate. There were also excellent interventions by my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies); I am pleased that he is still with us in Westminster Hall, as he had said that he had to leave early.

As we have heard, the World Health Organisation has concluded that current evidence does not confirm the existence of any health consequences from exposure to low-level electromagnetic fields. I know that the Government have followed a similar line, with the independent Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation concluding that although a substantial amount of research has been conducted in this area, there is no convincing evidence that electromagnetic field exposures below guideline levels cause health effects in either adults or children. However, as we have heard, concerns exist about the long-term impact of electromagnetic fields, and although my hon. Friends did not go into great detail about individual cases, I have read of such cases and I am sure that all hon. Members have also read some of the details about them. As we become ever more reliant upon modern technology, such concerns will only increase.

On a more light-hearted note, those people who have Netflix might have seen the impact of electromagnetic fields being played out, albeit in a fictional sense, in a programme called “Better Call Saul”, in which the brother of the main character is terribly affected—indeed, he is housebound—by EMF. It is often said with these

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

types of issues that Hollywood leads the way in bringing them to the public's attention, and this example is definitely a case in point.

International studies, such as the cohort study of mobile phone use and health, or COSMOS, and national studies, such as the study of cognition, adolescents and mobile phones, or SCAMP, exist to continue research into any possible impacts. It is important that such studies continue, so that the public can be aware of all the current advice about electromagnetic fields. As we have heard, as technology develops there will be concerns—new and old—about the impact that it could have on our health. What assessment has the Minister made of all those studies, specifically those that conclude that radio waves are carcinogenic? As we have heard, Cyprus and Austria advise children and teenagers how to limit their exposure to radio waves. Will the UK Government consider doing that, too?

Some of my constituents have written to me with concerns about the new 5G network, as also reported by other hon. Members, and I am grateful for the Minister's response on that. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Gower has had conversations with her constituents, who are concerned about the new technology being rolled out across the country. As she said, she would like white zones to be considered and protected. White zones give people who are sensitive to electromagnetic fields, or are concerned about their impact, somewhere to live without interference from radio waves, and that is why it is important that the matter is looked at cross-departmentally.

Geraint Davies: Is my hon. Friend aware of the concern that 5G cannot penetrate trees and that, as a result, we are looking at the destruction of thousands and thousands of trees? That destruction has already started around Swindon. How can we possibly be serious about our ambitions for zero carbon if we are destroying the trees and have this huge carbon footprint? It does not add up and is clearly environmentally ridiculous.

Mrs Hodgson: I was not aware of that, but my hon. Friend has put it out there on the record. I had heard, though, that 5G can go through us, where other things go around us, so it cannot go through trees but it can go through humans. There is a lot more we need to know about the technology.

As I was saying, anything that looks at this must be cross-departmental because of the impact on health, business, digital and the environment. Each of the Departments responsible for those areas should consider the health implications of electromagnetic fields, whether it is for a small minority of the population or the majority. Is that something the Minister has considered?

As we roll out digital technology, particularly in rural areas, the protection of white zones should be considered. We can be world leaders in digital, but that must not be at the expense of health and wellbeing. I therefore urge the Minister to ensure that all the information about the health and wellbeing impacts of electromagnetic fields is made available to the public, and kept under constant review as we find out more. I also urge her to work with her colleagues, across several Departments, to ensure that health and wellbeing is prioritised throughout the digital roll-out.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Seema Kennedy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) for securing the debate and giving us the opportunity to discuss this important subject.

People are exposed to radio waves in the home, at work and throughout their daily lives. As the hon. Member for Gower mentioned, people have been talking about the issues for about 100 years, since early in the last century, but the numbers of devices and transmitters have increased rapidly, and the pace of change in how this technology becomes part of our lives can be very unsettling to some. People ask whether radio wave exposure levels are increasing and whether there could be health consequences, and I want to put on record right at the beginning that, very importantly, radio waves are non-ionising radiation. That means that the packets of energy that form the radiation are too small to break chemical bonds: the radiation cannot damage cells and cause cancer in the same way as ionising radiation. Even so, there are concerns that this type of radiation could have health effects, and a great deal of research has been done in the United Kingdom and around the world to clarify the matter, which is something the Government take very seriously.

A number of issues, both for my Department and for colleagues in others, have been raised during the debate, and I will try to address them. I will also pass them on to colleagues.

Health concerns about electromagnetic fields have been raised in relation to each successive wave of new communications services, from 2G to 3G and 4G mobile phone networks, and with wi-fi, smart meters and now 5G. I have certainly noticed the growing number of letters I have received from parliamentary colleagues, passing on their constituents' concerns, and I am grateful for the opportunity to address some of them today.

Concerns about telecommunications networks first came to the fore in the late 1990s. A report containing an evidence review and recommendations was prepared for Government by the independent expert group on mobile phones, under the chairmanship of Sir William Stewart. A major research programme was undertaken and the international exposure guidelines were adopted, with a commitment from industry that they would be followed. Although many new services and technologies have been launched, the basic way they are delivered—by radio—has not changed, and the science of how radio waves affect the body does not change when a new technology is launched. However, the Government take people's health concerns about electromagnetic fields very seriously. They have committed, and continue to commit, significant resources to supporting research and analysis on the topic, and policies are in place to ensure the exposure guidelines are followed.

Public Health England monitors the health-related evidence and collaborates internationally to ensure that any important new evidence is identified and responded to.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Will the Minister give way?

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Lady might be about to refer back to her speech. I was going to respond to a comment she made, but I will happily give way.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for allowing me to ask this question: is she able to point out where the recent evidence that the Government and Public Health England have is? Is it in the public domain?

Seema Kennedy: I think the hon. Lady talked about accurate information, and about honesty concerning the information put out by Public Health England. Public Health England conducts extremely rigorous research, all based on the best available international evidence and on monitoring assessments of expert reviews. Some of those things will, of course, be in the public domain, and others will not. I will happily write to the hon. Lady with all the evidence that is available in the public domain.

The Committee on Medical Aspects of Radiation in the Environment has a watching brief on non-ionising radiation. It assesses all the available data to give health advice. Many scientific studies have been done over several decades, and a wide range of health topics have been investigated, including cancer, reproduction, cognitive effects and electrical hypersensitivity.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Minister referred to the frequency range. It is true that we are talking about lower frequencies than the ionising radiation that would be beyond the visible spectrum. However, it is not true to say that all low frequencies are not harmful. Looking at microwave radiation, for example, if we get a high enough intensity of non-ionising radiation we can still cause harm. I would not want to be in a microwave oven and I am sure the Minister would not either. So it is not just about frequency; it is about the intensity of the radiation.

Seema Kennedy: The hon. Lady is talking about risks and hazards. *[Interruption.]* Yes, we are talking about two different sorts of radio wave, but she said that I would not want to go in a microwave oven. I am not suggesting that I would put myself or anyone else in a microwave oven, so we are talking about hazards and risks. The best scientific evidence given to Government is that the radiation is safe, and I was going to go on to talk about the evidence that Government have used before addressing some of the points that the hon. Member for Gower raised. I apologise if I have not quite understood the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan); I will happily discuss it with her later.

Expert groups in the UK and around the world have examined the evidence and published many comprehensive reports. In the UK, the Advisory Group on Non-ionising Radiation produced reports in 2003 and 2012. The Government have played their role in the international effort to learn more about the health effects of radio-wave exposure. They supported the dedicated mobile telecommunications and health research programme that ran from 2001 to 2012 and they continue to fund research.

A challenge in understanding the evidence is that some studies report effects, while others do not. Sophisticated analyses are needed to draw studies together, considering their strengths and weaknesses and working out what they mean collectively, which is the role of expert groups. Simply counting or listing studies that have found effects is not an adequate way of assessing where the overall evidence lies.

An expert group reporting to the European Commission delivered a review in 2015, and the World Health Organisation is currently carrying out a major review on radio waves and health, which will include studies performed over the past 25 years. Overall, those expert groups have not found any clear evidence of adverse health effects occurring if the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection exposure guidelines are followed. The ICNIRP exposure restrictions have been incorporated into a 1999 European Council recommendation on limiting public exposures to electromagnetic fields. The United Kingdom and Public Health England support that recommendation.

Since 1996, the World Health Organisation has been running an international electromagnetic field project that provides a forum for countries to gather together, discuss and share knowledge on this topic. The WHO's main conclusion is that electromagnetic field exposures below the limits recommended in the International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection guidelines do not appear to have any known consequence for health. However, as the hon. Member for Gower and other Members have mentioned, that does not mean that people who have electrical hypersensitivity do not have symptoms. Those symptoms are real and can be very debilitating, and the Department's guidance is that those people should seek medical advice, so that their personal situation can be taken into account and the best possible treatments found.

I will also address the points raised by many hon. Members about the effects of screen time on the mental health of children; as any parent can attest, there are some effects. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), referred to SCAMP, and the Government conduct research that looks at the effects of technologies on schoolchildren.

Exposure levels reduce very rapidly with increasing distance from transmitting antennae, which means that being in immediate proximity to the transmitting antenna of a mobile phone handset held next to the head is different from living near a base station. There is long-standing precautionary advice from Public Health England and the NHS for mobile phone users, and research is continuing. We are continually looking at the evidence and updating our advice.

Tonia Antoniazzi: What work has been undertaken by Public Health England to look for evidence of risk in mobile phone usage? Is it looking at what damage it is actually doing, rather than saying, "Well, it is not really hurting anybody"?

Seema Kennedy: Public Health England takes its role very seriously, and is always monitoring the evidence. Since perhaps 10 years ago, there has been a lot of research into having mobile phones next to one's ear. Of course, the way we use our phones is changing, but Public Health England is always looking at this issue and reviewing the best available evidence.

There has been a general trend from 2G through to 5G for transmitters to become smaller, to be mounted nearer to the ground, and to use less transmitted power. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) raised a point about the electronic communications code, which I think is a matter for colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

[*Seema Kennedy*]

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) has left, but I do not think we are cutting down trees; in fact, I am sure that the Government have committed to planting more trees. I know that the Secretary of State is very keen on them, so I will write to him on that issue.

To answer the questions that were asked about radio frequency fields and cancer, a working group of the International Agency for Research on Cancer reviewed the health effects of exposure to RF fields and concluded that such exposures are possibly carcinogenic to humans—group 2B, based on IARC’s classification scheme. There was a minority opinion in the working group that current evidence for humans was inadequate, and therefore there was no conclusion about a causal association. In terms of the different classes of carcinogens, there is a statement on the PHE website that responds to the IARC classification. PHE has summary advice statements that it sends to inquirers with a full explanation of different carcinogens; there is a broad spectrum, including petrol engine exhausts, bracken fern and talc-based body powder.

Since 2001, the Office of Communications has been carrying out an audit of the emissions from mobile phone base stations. The Advisory Group on Non-Ionising Radiation’s 2012 report contained a summary of over 3,000 measurements made at over 500 sites by Ofcom. The maximum exposure found at any location was hundreds of times below the international guideline levels, and typical exposures were much lower still. Public Health England advises that there may be a small increase in overall exposure to radio waves when 5G is added to an existing network or a new area, but that is expected to remain low relative to guidelines.

I hope I have demonstrated that the Government take seriously the potential health effects of the introduction of 5G, and that Public Health England is well placed to

identify and respond to any important new evidence that may emerge. I reiterate that the public’s levels of exposure to electromagnetic fields from telecommunications networks are currently very low in relation to the international guideline levels, and are expected to stay that way after the deployment of 5G.

5.26 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Minister for her response and Members from all parties who have taken part in the debate.

I have concerns about the international guidelines, and I think that the effect of exposure to electromagnetic fields should not be underestimated. When my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) asked the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport a written question, a Minister replied that her belief was that the next-generation network would not endanger the public, and added that Public Health England had found no evidence of any significant risk and that the Government

“anticipate no negative effects on public health.”

I am afraid that those statements are far from reassuring. Belief and anticipation are insufficient grounds for making such statements; we have to think about the precautionary principle. To state that there is no evidence of significant risk prompts the questions of what level of risk is acceptable, and at what stage an unknown risk moves from being acceptable to significant.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the health-related effects of electromagnetic fields.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 25 June 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

EU Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The EU Energy Council will take place on 25 June 2019 in Luxembourg, where the Deputy Permanent Representative to the European Union will represent the UK.

The presidency will put the Council conclusions on the future of the energy systems in the energy union to Ministers for adoption.

The European Commission will provide information regarding the EU's external energy relations. This will be followed by an exchange of views.

Any other business (AOB) will include:

A presentation from the Commission on the draft integrated national energy and climate plans; and

Information from the Finnish delegation on the work programme of the incoming presidency.

[HCWS1649]

TREASURY

Finance Bill

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government will introduce the Finance Bill following the next Budget.

In line with the approach to tax policy making set out in the Government's documents "Tax Policy Making: a new approach", published in 2010, and "The new Budget timetable and the tax policy making process", published in 2017, the Government are committed, where possible, to publishing most tax legislation in draft for technical consultation before the legislation is laid before Parliament.

The Government will publish draft clauses for the next Finance Bill, which will largely cover preannounced policy changes, on Thursday 11 July 2019 along with accompanying explanatory notes, tax information and impact notes, responses to consultations and other supporting documents. All publications will be available on the www.gov.uk website.

[HCWS1657]

DEFENCE

F-35B Lightning Aircraft

The Secretary of State for Defence (Penny Mordaunt): The House may welcome an update on the deployment of the RAF's new F-35B Lightning II aircraft.

The F-35B Lightning II is an advanced, fifth-generation aircraft procured to operate alongside the RAF's Typhoon. It will be jointly manned by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy, will be able to operate with equal capability from land and sea, and will form an integral part of carrier strike operating from the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers. With advanced sensors, mission systems

and low-observable technology (stealth), the Lightning is a fifth-generation air system which will provide the UK with a world-beating combat air capability. The Lightning will give the UK operational flexibility, allowing us to act at a time and place of our choosing. Some 17 of the first tranche of 48 F-35Bs have already been delivered; we will maintain our plan to buy 138 F-35 Lightning aircraft over the life of the programme, as stated in the strategic defence and security review 2015.

A detachment of F-35B Lightnings from RAF Marham has been forward-based at RAF Akrotiri since late May, developing the capabilities of this formidable new fifth-generation combat aircraft. This deployment has proven extremely successful. It was therefore, decided to offer the aircraft for use on Operation SHADER as part of the UK's contribution to global coalition operations against Daesh. On 16 June, UK F-35B flew its first ever operational sorties as part of Operation SHADER. Since then, UK F-35B Lightnings have flown in the skies of Iraq and Syria, performing a variety of roles for our partner forces on the ground.

This F-35 activity is part of the UK's ongoing contribution of sophisticated air power to global coalition efforts to find, identify and degrade Daesh's military capabilities. Although Daesh's military capability has been diminished, the organisation continues to pose a threat, and counter-Daesh operations are as crucial now as they were at Daesh's height. The UK's F-35B Lightnings will continue to help combat Daesh over Iraq and Syria, before returning to the UK in July 2019.

[HCWS1650]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Commonwealth Games

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I wish to inform the House that, on 25 June 2019, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport laid a minute advising of the investment of £778 million in Birmingham and the west midlands to deliver the 2022 Commonwealth games. This is an update to the minute laid on 9 October 2017, which set out the contingent liabilities that were taken on by the Government in order to support Birmingham's bid to host the 2022 games.

The Government's other commitments to the games, including the underwriting of the organisation and delivery of the games and a number of guarantees, will remain in place until the end of the 2022-23 financial year, following the successful bid by Birmingham and our agreement of a hosting contract with the Commonwealth Games Federation.

[HCWS1658]

EDUCATION

Relationships and Sex Education: Statutory Guidance

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Today, following the successful passage of the regulations for the introduction of relationships education, relationships and sex education (RSE) and health education, the Government have published the final accompanying statutory guidance.

At the heart of preparing children for life in modern Britain is making sure that they understand the world they are growing up in. It is 19 years since the sex and relationships guidance was last updated. For children and young people, the challenges that they face today are very different. Children are encountering a more interconnected and interdependent world, and this has changed significantly how they build relationships, interact with their peers and manage their own mental and physical wellbeing.

This presents both opportunities and risks, as children have greater exposure to information, content and people that can and do cause harm. There is little distinction for many young people between their lives online and off, and that is why we believe now more than ever, that we need to provide young people with the knowledge they need in every context to lead safe, happy and healthy lives.

We have therefore brought forward measures requiring the introduction of compulsory relationships education for all pupils in primary schools, compulsory relationships and sex education for all pupils in secondary schools, and compulsory health education for all pupils in state-funded schools from September 2020.

With cross-party support, the regulations for these subjects were approved by both Houses of Parliament and were made by the Secretary of State on 9 May. The statutory guidance published today sets out the legal duties with which schools must comply, the required core teaching content for the subjects, and guidance on how the content should be delivered in an age appropriate way.

We will be setting out further details on how we will support schools to introduce the new subjects in September 2020. This will include working closely with the many schools who are choosing to begin teaching the subjects from September 2019, so that we can support their journey, learn lessons and share good practice.

We will also be convening a new working group, who will provide insight into how the new guidance is working in practice. This group, with representatives from teaching unions, sector experts, faith and minority groups, parents and young people, will provide us with evidence and feedback to improve the delivery of these subjects.

We believe that these subjects are an historic step in education that will help equip children and young people with the knowledge and support they need to form healthy relationships lead healthy lives and be happy and safe in the world today.

[HCWS1656]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Forensic Service Provider: Cyber Incident

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): On 3 June, Brussels-based scientific testing company Eurofins Scientific reported that it had been victim to a global ransomware attack. In the UK, its subsidiary Eurofins Forensic Services (EFS), which is a significant private sector forensic testing provider was affected.

Ministers have been briefed on the situation by operational leads and a range of actions have been taken to mitigate the impact on our criminal justice system and the public.

The National Crime Agency (NCA) has taken the operational command of the criminal investigation in the UK, with the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) leading our cyber response. Both the NCSC and NCA have deployed specialist officers to Brussels to assist Eurofins in the international investigation. These experts continue to work closely with both the company and the Cyber Incident Response firm EFS has employed to contain the situation. The affected UK law enforcement agencies reported the incident to the Information Commissioner's Office. There is no evidence to date that this crime was specifically targeting the UK company.

We have taken immediate steps to minimise the impact of this crime on the criminal justice system. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) suspended use of EFS immediately and isolated police networks from the forensic service provider to retain their integrity. The NPCC put in place the national contingency plan and diverted urgent and priority submissions to alternative suppliers. Other forensic submissions are being managed nationally to ensure that sufficient capacity is available for all forces.

These measures are temporary but will remain in place for as long as necessary. The NPCC, the UK Accreditation Service and the Forensic Science Regulator are working closely with the company to assess when it can continue to resume accepting forensic submissions.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) is working to ensure all hearings remain based on reliable evidence. While investigations are ongoing, prosecutors will assess the impact on a case-by-case basis working closely with partners across the CJS and EFS.

If prosecutors or the police believe that there may have been an impact, they will contact the victims or witnesses involved. But if any victims are concerned, national support services are also available. These include the 24-hour Victim Support helpline with details on the Ministry of Justice website. However, I want to stress that at present we have no reason to believe there has been an impact on the forensic evidence tested by EFS.

The serious nature of this incident highlights the importance of all firms being cyber-aware; and we urge businesses of all types and sizes to follow the guidance on this growing threat on the NCSC's website.

The Government continue to assess and enhance our cyber-security capabilities and it is vital we build strong defences—and every person, organisation or business has a part to play.

The investigation into this serious cyber-attack remains live but we will use our understanding of this latest incident to limit future harm to the UK.

[HCWS1655]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Joint Inspection Team: Contingent Liability for Indemnity

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am today informing the House of changes to the contingent liability for the provision of an indemnity for the Joint Inspection Team (JIT) as set out in my statement and associated Department minute of 11 December 2018

(Hansard reference: HCWS1169). The purpose of the JIT is to provide support to local authorities in making hazard assessments of high-rise residential buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material cladding and then to provide advice to local authorities on enforcement action where the building owners are reluctant to remediate. As set out in the Department minute of 11 December 2018 the Local Government Association (LGA) was unable to obtain professional indemnity insurance to cover the work of the JIT and the LGA requested the Government to provide an indemnity. The LGA has subsequently requested a technical amendment to the contingent liability for the provision of the indemnity. The change is to allow the LGA to operate and manage the JIT from the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), which is part of the wider Local Government Group. The contingent liability will also be amended so that the indemnity provides cover against claims for death and personal injury for a period of 125 years and cover for all other types of claims for a period of six years after the JIT ceases to operate. The LGA has formally agreed it will not seek any further amendments to the indemnity.

I am laying a Departmental minute approved by Her Majesty's Treasury providing further detail of the changes to the indemnity for the JIT.

[HCWS1654]

JUSTICE

GRECO

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government have not opted into the adoption and application of the Council Decision on the position to be taken, on behalf of the EU, on the EU's participation as an observer at the meetings of the Group of States Against Corruption (GRECO).

GRECO is a body set up by the Council of Europe (CoE) to monitor compliance with CoE criminal law convention on corruption and the civil law convention on corruption. The EU's participation in GRECO has been a priority for co-operation between the European Union and the Council of Europe. We are supportive of the EU gaining observer status and attending the June meeting.

The UK and Ireland have a special position under Protocol 21 to the treaty on the functioning of the European Union in relation to JHA measures and have three months from the date of the publication of a legislative proposal to decide whether we want to participate in the measure. The JHA opt-in applies in this case because one of the legal bases of the proposed decision is article 83 TFEU, relating to criminal justice co-operation in relation to serious crimes (including corruption).

The Commission proposal was published on 6 June and adopted at Council on 18 June, to enable the EU to attend the GRECO plenary on 17-21 June 2019 as an observer.

The Government did not therefore have the three month period allowed for in Protocol (No. 21) to the EU treaties to decide whether to opt in to the proposal. The UK is not therefore bound by this Council Decision. The Government judge that in this particular case there is no practical effect of not being bound as the Decision pertains to the EU's participation as an observer in

GRECO. The UK tabled a statement at Council expressing regret at not having the three month period allowed for under the EU treaties to reach this decision. Additionally, the UK underlined that the Council Decision had not gone through Parliamentary scrutiny processes and that the procedure should not constitute a precedent for similar decisions.

[HCWS1653]

PRIME MINISTER

Office for Disability

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This written statement confirms that the Office for Disability Issues (ODI) will transfer to the Cabinet Office from the Department for Work and Pensions in November 2019 through a machinery of government change.

The ODI will be incorporated into the newly established cross-Government disability team based in Cabinet Office. This move recognises that disabled people face barriers across a wide range of aspects of their lives and coordinated cross-Government action is therefore vital. It also signals the importance the Government place on disability.

The new disability team in the Cabinet Office will sit in the new equalities hub alongside the Government Equalities Office and the race disparity unit. Together they will be better equipped to drive meaningful progress on equality and to tackle intersectional issues.

This aligns with the Minister for disabled people's written statement laid today on a new cross-Government approach to disability.

[HCWS1652]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disability: Cross-Government Approach

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Justin Tomlinson): Today I am pleased to launch a new cross-Government approach on disability which is guided by a vision that recognises the contributions that disabled people make and where disabled people can participate fully in society. To drive forward this approach, Government will establish a new cross-departmental team in the Cabinet Office, recognising that disabled people face barriers across a wide range of aspects of their lives and co-ordinated cross-Government action is therefore vital.

To inform this new approach, Government are committed to strengthening the evidence base on disability and to improve engagement with disabled people and disabled people's organisations, in line with relevant recommendations from the United Nations.

The Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Health and Social Care will consult on how employers can best support disabled people and people with long-term health conditions to stay and thrive in work. This will include measures to reform statutory sick pay so that it is better enforced, more flexible and covers the lowest paid employees as well as improved quality, cost effectiveness and capacity in the private sector occupational health market.

Alongside this, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will consult on raising mandatory accessibility standards for all new homes in autumn.

The Department for Work and Pensions will also in the coming months bring forward a Green Paper on health and disability support, to enable a conversation about building a welfare system for the future that is an ally of disabled people. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will also be setting out plans to work with Departments, regulators and stakeholders to improve consumer outcomes for disabled people through developing metrics to compare how well companies deliver for disabled customers in essential markets.

The team will work closely with disabled people, disabled people's organisations and charities to take forward this new approach to disability, with their views and experiences at the forefront of any new policy.

This written statement aligns with the Prime Minister's written statement tabled today on Machinery of Government change for the Office for Disability Issues.

[HCWS1651]

Petition

Tuesday 25 June 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Treating epilepsy/multiple sclerosis with cannabis oil

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the petitioners are disturbed by the Home Office ban on doctors prescribing cannabis oil and THCA to those with epilepsy or multiple sclerosis, especially the two children Billy Caldwell who needs a prescription urgently, and Alfie Dingley; further that this is very urgent as the Sunday Times on May 20 stated that Mrs Caldwell only has enough medication to last until June and her son's epileptic fits were very serious and life threatening and he needed oxygen before he had the treatment, first in Holland and then in County Tyrone in Northern Ireland, whereas with the treatment he can lead a normal life; further that a few weeks ago his doctor, Dr Brendan O'Hare, was warned not to write any more prescriptions for Billy, and further that cannabis can be dangerous in the wrong amounts, but in the correct dosage, prescribed by a doctor it can be very beneficial.

The petitioners therefore requests that the House of Commons urges the Government to urge the Home Office and the Department for Health and Social Care as a matter of urgency to inform Dr O'Hare, that he can resume his prescriptions for the child Billy, although they include THCA; further that we urge the Government to inform Mrs Dingley that her doctor can prescribe medicines containing cannabis to her son Alfie whose epileptic seizures were reduced by 60 to 70% in Holland with cannabis oil but are much worse now, without it; further to urge the Government to write to the Multiple Sclerosis Society to say that doctors may now prescribe cannabis; further to urge the Government to allow doctors to prescribe cannabis oil (cannabidiol) which is supposed to be legal in the UK, and THCA, which is a Class A drug, to patients and to provide doctors with an easy-to-fill-in, two-page form to get a licence to do so, instead of ordering them to stop the treatment as they did to Billy's doctor, and further to urge the Government to announce that it will allow doctors to prescribe treatments derived from cannabis whenever the patients need it, such as those with severe epilepsy and multiple sclerosis, to prevent desperate patients having to go to illegal drug dealers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Caroline Lucas.]

[P002480]

Ministerial Correction

Tuesday 25 June 2019

EDUCATION

Free Schools

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on Free Schools on 19 June 2019.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that the academies programme has led to more schools being put into special measures and requiring

improvements, but the opposite is the case. In 2010, when there were just 200 academies, 68% of schools were good or outstanding; today, that figure is 86%.

[Official Report, 19 June 2019, Vol. 662, c. 114WH.]

Letter of correction from the Minister for School Standards:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to a point made by the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis).

The correct information should have been:

Nick Gibb: The hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) said that the academies programme has led to more schools being put into special measures and requiring improvements, but the opposite is the case. In 2010, when there were just 200 academies, 68% of schools were good or outstanding; today, **that figure is 85%**.

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**not later than
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