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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 6 February 2020

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Organised Waste Crime

1. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to tackle organised waste crime. [900648]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): Waste crime blights local communities and our environment and this Government are determined to tackle it. Over the past six years, we have invested £60 million in measures to achieve that. Last month, we launched a joint unit for waste crime, led by the Environment Agency, and including the National Crime Agency, HMRC and the police. This new unit will help us crack down on serious and organised crime in the waste sector.

Craig Tracey: Fly-tipping in particular is an issue that costs our local councils and landowners hundreds of thousands pounds annually to clear up, with rural communities particularly affected. Just last week, the village of Austrey in my constituency was targeted yet again. What additional resources and powers can we give our local authorities and police to eradicate this scourge once and for all?

Theresa Villiers: I fully appreciate how strongly my hon. Friend's constituents feel about that issue, as do mine in Barnet. We are giving local authorities additional powers through our Environment Bill to tackle fly-tipping. We have also already enhanced their powers to search and seize vehicles, which may be involved in this menace, and we have granted them power to issue fixed penalty notices, and I encourage them to use those powers.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's answer, but I must tell her that landfill tax fraud is a multi-million pound business. From my experience in the north-east of England, where there is some good co-operation going on between various agencies, the problem is with HMRC, which will not investigate unless a certain threshold is hit. I asked for feedback on prosecutions in one high-profile case that was activated four years ago and found that, to date, nothing has happened.

Theresa Villiers: That is one reason we are bringing together the relevant agencies in this new joint unit. They include HMRC, which is absolutely determined to crack

down on tax fraud and evasion of all sorts. The right hon. Gentleman has his point on the record, and I am sure that the issue will be raised in the new joint unit.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Fly-tipping ranges massively from lorry loads of hospital waste to a sofa. Farmers are then expected to dispose of that waste at their own cost. We quite rightly welcome what the Secretary of State says about taking lorries, vans and cars away from people, because we really must stop this crime.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We are determined that our new joint unit to tackle this issue will ensure that those who are responsible for waste crime of all sorts, including fly-tipping, pay the price for what they are doing and are held to account.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Fly-tipping is a major issue in my area, not least because of changes in policy from North Lanarkshire Council. One way of stopping such crimes is by increasing the recycling rate and targeting particular sectors, such as the construction sector, which has a particularly bad problem with waste pollution. Will the Secretary of State outline potential areas such as training staff in those sectors to ensure that they are aware of how to recycle properly?

Theresa Villiers: Of course, training in this area is very important. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, as far as England is concerned, our new Environment Bill contains an extensive list of measures to improve rates of recycling, and yes, we hope that that will be part of a wider strategy to cut down on waste crime and ensure that more of our waste is recycled, and that all of it is treated appropriately.

Air Quality in London

2. **Felicity Buchan** (Kensington) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Mayor of London on improving air quality in London. [900649]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Mayor of London is responsible for air quality in the capital and has reserved powers under part IV of the Environment Act 1995 to reflect that. Although the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has not had any recent discussions with the Mayor of London on air quality, our doughty DEFRA officials are in regular contact with the Greater London Assembly.

I also wish to welcome my hon. Friend to her place. I know that she is already a strong voice in her area, and is obviously indicating that she will continue to be so.

Felicity Buchan: My constituency has some of the worst air quality in London. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Mayor of London needs to do more to improve air quality, given that currently only 2% of London buses have been converted to electric and only 10% of the 2 million trees that he promised have actually been planted?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend's question demonstrates how strong a voice she will be in this place. I must reiterate that the Mayor of London is responsible for

air quality in the capital and has reserved powers under the 1995 Act to do this work. A great deal of money has been committed to help with that work, especially the retrofitting of buses, but I would not underestimate the challenge posed by air quality in our cities, especially London.

Small and Medium-sized Food Producers

3. **Alicia Kearns** (Rutland and Melton) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on supporting small and medium-sized food producer businesses. [900650]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The Secretary of State holds regular discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the Government's work to help small and medium-sized enterprises. Food and drink is the UK's largest manufacturing industry—bigger than automotive and aerospace combined. It is worth more than £100 billion per year and is geographically dispersed, which means it brings wealth to every corner of our nation.

Alicia Kearns: What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to ensure that local British foods, which are some of the finest in the world, continue to benefit from a fair, competitive and transparent food supply chain post-Brexit?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Every Member will have examples of successful local food manufacturers. In her constituency, we have of course Samworth Brothers, a highly successful large business, and many other smaller enterprises. I congratulate her on having secured for her area the status of designated manufacturing zone. Government procurement rules encourage the local sourcing of food, and the requirements of some protected food name designations will also require food to be sourced locally.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): What is the Department doing, and what discussions has it had, about giving support to those small independent shellfish producers on the west coast of Scotland who, because of Brexit, are about to be put at a huge competitive disadvantage to their Northern Irish neighbours?

George Eustice: I hold regular meetings with the shellfish industry. As the hon. Gentleman will know, my constituency is in Cornwall, where we have a large crab and scallop industry. The political declaration on our future relationship with the EU envisages zero-zero tariffs on all goods.

Martin Vickers (Clethorpes) (Con): Last week, the Secretary of State followed in the Minister's footsteps, visiting Clethorpes and the neighbouring constituency of Grimsby, where she saw some of the fine seafood processors there. Can I urge her and the Minister to continue the support for that industry and to give it an absolute assurance that fish supplies will continue without any hitch?

George Eustice: I very much enjoyed my visit to the seafood village in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I look forward to visiting that area and Grimsby more generally again in the future. Our fishing industry will have many opportunities as we leave the European Union and depart from relative stability, but for our fish processors in constituencies such as his it is also important that we continue the flow of trade from countries such as Iceland and Norway.

Imported Agricultural Goods

4. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What her policy is on the compliance of imported agricultural goods with UK (a) animal welfare, (b) environmental and (c) food safety standards after the transition period. [900651]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): As we set out in our manifesto, we are committed to upholding our high standards of environmental protection, food safety and animal welfare. Now we have left the EU, our high standards, including import requirements, continue to apply. We will not dilute our standards, or put the UK's biosecurity at risk, in our future trade negotiations.

Chi Onwurah: My constituents benefit from the glorious countryside of Northumberland and County Durham—landscapes shaped by small-scale farmers. Those farmers would be devastated by unfair competition from the American agro-industrial machine, with its lower animal welfare, food and environmental standards. The Secretary of State talks a good talk and reads a good brief, but she will not put anything into law, so will she now unequivocally condemn any Government who trade away our high food, environmental and animal welfare standards?

Theresa Villiers: I can assure the hon. Member that we will not trade away our high standards of environmental protection, animal welfare or food safety. We will make sure that our trade negotiations work for our whole country, including the farmers she mentioned. I met farmers in Northumberland only a few days ago and had those very conversations.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): On Monday, the Secretary of State heard from both Opposition MPs and MPs on her own Benches that she had to put our high environmental standards into law to prevent US agriculture from undercutting them in any trade negotiations. Now that a few days have passed since that debate, has she reflected on the fact that there is cross-party support for putting those promises into law and will she do the right thing and put them in the Agriculture Bill?

Theresa Villiers: I reiterate what we said in a debate last week: our high environmental, animal welfare and food safety standards are already in law, including legislating to prevent the importation of chlorinated chicken or hormone-treated beef, and our manifesto commits us to continuing to defend robustly those standards in future trade negotiations.

Luke Pollard: I am afraid that is not a good enough answer from the Environment Secretary, because unless there is a specific clause in the Agriculture Bill that guarantees that there will be no undercutting of British farmers by imported US agriculture in particular—produce grown to lower animal welfare and environmental standards—no one will believe a word that the Environment Secretary has to say. The Trade Secretary is today publishing a document that will apparently lock those standards into law, so if it is good enough for the Trade Secretary, why is it not good enough for the Environment Secretary to put the same commitment into law?

Theresa Villiers: As I have said, those commitments are already in law, and the Government will defend them in our trade negotiations. There is a cross-party consensus in this House that we value our high standards. We will continue with those high standards; we will not compromise them in trade negotiations.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): How will the Secretary of State ensure that ractopamine-treated pork and turkey meat from the United States stays out of our food chains?

Theresa Villiers: As I have said, we will ensure that all food coming into this country meets our high sanitary and phytosanitary standards and our high standards of food safety. We will not under any circumstances compromise biosecurity or human health in our trade negotiations.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's and the Government's commitment to maintaining high food, welfare and health standards, but can she update the House on what plans there are for a food standards commission, as requested by the National Farmers Union of Scotland?

Theresa Villiers: I have discussed that with the National Farmers Union, and there is real merit in its proposal. We continue to consider it, but I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that, whatever the mechanism, we will engage very closely with farmers and other stakeholders as we take forward our trade negotiations.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend put the House at ease and confirm that any trade agreement will have to be ratified under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 and that this House will therefore have a full opportunity to scrutinise any effect of trade deals on our food standards?

Theresa Villiers: I can; this House will be involved in scrutiny of our trade negotiations, and I look forward to having those debates with hon. Members.

13. [900663] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is absolutely right that we focus on high-quality standards in our trade deals with the rest of the world, but the reality is that 90% of Cumbrian farm exports are to the European single market. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that my farmers next January will not be facing crippling taxes and tariffs on their exports?

Theresa Villiers: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the Government are clear that we are seeking a free trade agreement with the European Union without tariffs. That is something that the Prime Minister and his team will be working on in the months ahead.

Tree Planting

5. **Richard Graham** (Gloucester) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase tree-planting rates. [900652]

9. **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to increase tree-planting rates. [900658]

14. **Colleen Fletcher** (Coventry North East) (Lab): What plans she has to increase the number of trees planted each year. [900664]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): Our manifesto commits us to increase tree planting to a rate of 30,000 hectares a year by 2025 across the UK. Our £640 million nature for climate fund will help us to deliver a massive uplift in tree planting, as part of wider efforts to become a net zero carbon economy.

Richard Graham: The Secretary of State will know that many of us are leading on planting plans in our constituencies, working closely with local councils, local wildlife trusts and so on. A good example is the new arboretum at lower Westgate Street in Gloucester, which was planted at the beginning of January. However, does she agree that there is a risk that, however many thousands of trees we plant in our constituencies, somebody will always say that we should have done much more? Is there an opportunity for some independent body to make an objective assessment of how many trees can realistically be planted in urban constituencies such as mine?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend makes a good point about setting appropriate targets. We plan to work closely with local authorities as we drive forward with our commitment to plant more trees. The Environment Bill contains important changes to the planning system—for example, an environmental net gain—that will encourage investment in nature, biodiversity and tree planting.

Jason McCartney: Does the Secretary of State agree with me and the Woodland Trust that we need to get local councils writing emergency tree plans that identify land for tree planting, and that we need to ensure that developments that come forward from housing developers include a minimum of 30% tree canopy cover?

Theresa Villiers: I welcome my hon. Friend's ambition for tree planting in his local area. As I have said, changes to the planning system should incentivise investment in tree planting and nature. Programmes such as the urban tree challenge fund could provide a great opportunity for local authorities to play their part in delivering this tree-planting effort.

Colleen Fletcher: Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the pupils of Good Shepherd Catholic Primary School in my constituency, who recently planted 130 saplings in a new eco-area at the school? Does she agree that the new eco-area at the school will be a great

educational resource for the students, helping them to learn more about the natural world while also helping to improve the local environment in Coventry North East?

Theresa Villiers: I do congratulate them; it sounds like a wonderful effort. Our Environment Bill provides for local nature recovery strategies that are led by the local authority, but which I very much hope will involve engagement with schools and enthusiastic groups such as the one mentioned by the hon. Member.

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that the prime purpose of planting trees in the present climate crisis is to provide an effective carbon sink to produce the negative carbon emissions that offset other carbon emissions in a net-zero world? The Committee on Climate Change suggests that that means planting perhaps up to 50,000 hectares of trees per annum up to 2050—perhaps 2.4 billion trees. Does she agree that the present target in the clean growth plan of 11 million trees is tiny—especially as it is currently being missed by 71%—and almost amounts to “greenwash”? When is she going to get real on tree planting and management, and adopt measures that will secure the billions of trees we need and not the millions she is projecting?

Theresa Villiers: Where I would agree with the shadow Minister is that we do need massively to step up our tree planting in this country, and that is what we are determined to do, particularly by working with the devolved authorities as well. I encourage everyone to take the message out to their constituents that they can get involved with these programmes through the countryside stewardship woodland creation grant, the woodland creation planning grant, the woodland carbon fund, the woodland carbon guarantee and the urban tree challenge fund. We will soon be consulting on a tree strategy for England to drive forward further the crucial task of planting more trees in this country.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Councils are required to deliver a five-year supply of sites for housing. Has not the time come for us to require councils to provide a five-year supply of sites for tree planting?

Theresa Villiers: That is a very interesting idea. I hope that the process of local nature recovery strategies that we are establishing under the Environment Bill will embrace the kind of idea that my hon. Friend has just floated.

Glass and Plastic Deposit Return Scheme

6. **Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): When she plans to introduce a deposit return scheme for (a) glass and (b) plastic. [900653]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): In our manifesto, the Government committed to introducing a deposit return scheme to incentivise people to recycle plastic and glass. We are aiming to introduce that scheme from 2023. The Environment Bill that was published recently includes an important section on waste and recycling, and will introduce powers to establish deposit

return schemes. A deposit return scheme would include aluminium and steel cans, alongside plastic and glass bottles. The final details of the scheme, including types of drinks containers to be included, are being developed and will be presented in a second consultation.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Minister for her response. I think the whole House welcomes the introduction of the deposit return scheme in the Environment Bill, but the concern is that it is overly prescriptive, specifying two categories of plastic, rather than creating a framework that could be amended and widened in scope to incorporate more materials that could be recycled in future.

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. I am delighted that he is so interested in the scheme. The first consultation had very wide support and we will have a further consultation. The industries wanting to use the collected recycled materials, particularly plastics, want very pure and well-sorted materials so that they can then turn them into the next products. We are thinking about this very seriously. More will be heard in the second consultation and that will come through in the Environment Bill.

Air Pollution

7. **Elliot Colburn** (Carshalton and Wallington) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to reduce air pollution. [900656]

10. **Nicola Richards** (West Bromwich East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve air quality. [900659]

12. **Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve air quality. [900661]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Our clean air strategy sets out an ambitious programme of action to reduce air pollution from a wide range of sources. We have also put in place a £3.5 billion plan to tackle roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations. Our Environment Bill delivers key parts of our world-leading clean air strategy and makes a clear commitment to set a legally binding target to reduce fine particulate matter, as well as enabling local authorities to take more effective action to tackle air pollution in their areas.

Elliot Colburn: I thank the Minister for her response. She will know that incineration is considered to only be slightly better than landfill when it comes to disposing of waste, but Lib Dem-run Sutton Council seems to think that its Beddington incinerator has no harmful effects at all on my Carshalton and Wallington constituents. Does she agree that the council should improve air quality monitoring near the site, tackle congestion and be much more ambitious as regards tackling air pollution?

Rebecca Pow: I am aware that Sutton Council approved the development of the Beddington incinerator as an alternative to landfill, which would have a higher pollution impact. The incinerator is required to operate in compliance with the permit conditions set by the Environment Agency, as I am sure my hon. Friend knows; he has

mentioned the incinerator before. We encourage all local authorities, including obviously his Lib Dem-run council, to take action to improve air quality. I urge him to keep pressing it to keep within its commitments.

Nicola Richards: Birmingham City Council's planned demolition of the Perry Barr flyover, which feeds traffic from Birmingham into West Bromwich East, will do nothing to tackle the already poor air quality in the area and cause huge traffic problems for my constituents. Does the Minister agree that local authorities have an obligation to ensure that major roadwork projects, especially on busy highways, improve air quality and ease congestion?

Rebecca Pow: Local authorities are required by law to consider the impacts of development on air quality. Local authorities are best placed to take local planning decisions and should take into account a range of factors, including impacts on air quality, the local economy and traffic flow—so my hon. Friend raises a good point—when carrying out roadwork projects. In terms of the wider picture, we are providing financial and expert advice to local authorities to tackle air quality.

Kevin Hollinrake: Air quality is seen very much as an urban issue, but even in the bucolic rural constituency of Thirsk and Malton we have our problems, including in Malton town centre due to high levels of standing traffic. What support can my hon. Friend offer to the local authority to resolve this issue?

Rebecca Pow: The Environment Bill includes measures to improve air quality that will ensure that local authorities, including in Malton, for which my hon. Friend always speaks up so determinedly, have a clear framework and simple powers to tackle air pollution. The DEFRA and Department for Transport joint air quality unit works with local authorities, underpinned by £572 million in funding, to tackle nitrogen dioxide exceedances, and DEFRA provides grant funding and technical support via a dedicated helpdesk.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): If the Secretary of State has read the unprecedented four reports in the last Parliament by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee—chaired by the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who is sitting behind her—she will know that a lack of power and resources in local government is a real problem, particularly in two-tier areas, as is the chronic lack of joined-up thinking by central Government. When will those two critical issues be addressed?

Rebecca Pow: This Government take air pollution extremely seriously. We are investing £3.5 billion in air quality and clean transport. We are helping local authorities to tackle air quality through the implementation fund and the clean air fund, with a £572 million budget and a lot of expert advice. I am overseeing many programmes being rolled out, and the right hon. Gentleman will see a great deal happening this year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Two hours of exposure to diesel fumes leads to 24 hours of negative impact upon a person's health. What is being done to reduce diesel fumes for ordinary people in our communities?

Rebecca Pow: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Roadside pollution is a key area. Nitrogen dioxide is one of the serious issues tackled under our nitrogen dioxide plan. Local authorities have a legal duty to tackle high levels of pollution on roadsides, which is why we have introduced a comprehensive system to help local authorities to tackle it. We are also bringing down the rate of diesel cars on the market.

Topical Questions

T1. [900665] **Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): In recent weeks, DEFRA has been driving forward the biggest programme of legislation in Whitehall. That includes publication of our landmark Environment Bill, to introduce a new legal framework and demanding targets on matters such as nature, recycling and air quality. We have published our Fisheries Bill, to enable this country to take back control of its fishing waters and end the common fisheries policy. The Agriculture Bill has had its Second Reading, to ensure a brighter, greener future for our farmers. And of course, my team and I have played our part in securing the biggest election victory for the Conservatives in 30 years.

Stephen Crabb: Data published in the recent climate change agreements biennial report showed the dairy industry delivering a 21% improvement on its energy efficiency over the last 10 years—the latest in a long line of sustainability wins for the industry. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, far from being a villain in the climate change story, the dairy industry is proving itself a force for good?

Theresa Villiers: I very much agree. I pay tribute to the huge efforts made in the dairy sector to become more efficient and more sustainable. I know that those in the sector have further plans through the pioneering dairy road map, and I wish them well with that. We need to support UK agriculture in the tremendous efforts it is making to be part of the solution on climate change.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): This Government have made much of the fact that we are leaving the EU and all its bureaucratic processes, but only to replace it with the catch app, a far more complex system for smaller fishing boats. Will the Secretary of State instruct the Marine Management Organisation to change the new catch app and remove the risk of criminality, which is causing so much anxiety for fishers in our coastal communities?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I have met officials on that matter. The reason we introduced the catch app is that, if we want to improve our management of the inshore fleet and offer fishermen, say, three months' catch opportunities at a time, or even move to an effort-based regime, we need better, more accurate catch data. Those rules already apply to the over-12 metres and will in future apply to the under-12s as well.

T3. [900667] **Claire Coutinho** (East Surrey) (Con): I am proud to represent many farmers in East Surrey who are the guardians of our beautiful countryside. Does the Minister agree that the best way to support those farmers and protect the environment is to buy seasonal and to buy British?

Theresa Villiers: Yes, I do.

T2. [900666] **Liz Twist** (Blaydon) (Lab): If the biodiversity gain requirement is to make a real difference, local authorities will need additional strategic planners, ecologist and enforcement officers. What assessment has been made of the human and financial resources required, and will the Secretary of State confirm that those resources will be set out and funded in the forthcoming Budget?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Burdens put on local authorities through the Environment Bill will be fully funded. They will play a key role in helping with biodiversity net gain. They will also play a key role—as will other local organisations—in setting up our local nature strategies, which will inform what we do, and I very much look forward to that.

T4. [900668] **Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): In Beaconsfield, we have many hard-working farmers, as well as local environmental groups such as Transition Town Marlow and Wild Marlow, which are leading the way locally in animal welfare and environmental protection. Will the Minister join me in welcoming the new standards that we are going to put in place for environmental protection and animal welfare as we leave the EU, and for the protection of our British farmers?

Theresa Villiers: I will, indeed. Our departure from the European Union gives us the opportunity to introduce a new farming policy—a new system of farm support—that has sustainability and the environment at its heart. We can use that to support our farmers in the brilliant work they already do as stewards of our environment and countryside.

T6. [900671] **Fleur Anderson** (Putney) (Lab): Putney High Street is one of the most polluted streets in London and the country, although electric buses have helped a lot. Ammonia emissions, predominantly from farming, are rising and are above World Health Organisation safe limits. In London, particulates derived from that ammonia are the largest contribution to imported background or particulate pollution. Will the Secretary of State commit to tackling this issue of ammonia pollution in the Environment Bill?

Theresa Villiers: We have a strong focus on these matters. The measures we will be bringing forward in the Environment Bill will help us to set challenging and demanding targets on those issues. Our new system of farm support will also provide support to farmers in reducing ammonia emissions. I know they are determined to do it. I understand completely the importance of delivering on this.

T5. [900670] **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Will the super-talented Minister for litter consider requiring drive-through fast-food restaurants to print the purchaser's vehicle registration number on the receipt, so that the origin of roadside litter might be more readily identified?

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend, who is such a campaigner on this issue. It is a great idea. I believe that one fast-food chain is already considering doing this. It is something I have thought about myself when I am out on my bike and I see all the litter on the verges. Trust me, this Government are doing a great deal on litter, but we need to do more.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): One way to reduce food waste is to rebalance the relationships between suppliers and supermarkets. Will the Government therefore commit to expanding the power of the Groceries Code Adjudicator and amending the groceries supply code of practice to better protect our farmers' interests and reduce the amount of unnecessary food waste that can occur due to supermarkets' excessively strict requirements?

George Eustice: Our Agriculture Bill has an entire section on fairness in the supply chain, enabling us to introduce regulations that build on what we have started with the Groceries Code Adjudicator to ensure that there is fairness and transparency in that supply chain.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State is aware that for many years animal rights activists and welfare activists for animal rights have been calling on Government to stop exporting animals on the hoof, and to let them be slaughtered in our slaughterhouses and go on the hook. Now we have left the EU, can the Secretary of State confirm that that sort of practice will cease?

Theresa Villiers: We do want to see an end to live exports, and we will soon be consulting on measures to improve the welfare of live animals in transport. We hope that ultimately the effect of this will be an end to live exports overseas.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): My constituent, Mr Latimer, after exhausting every avenue to halt the flow of sewage on to the beach behind his very popular restaurant, ended up filing a complaint with the European Commission. The ruling from the Court of Justice of the European Union stated that the Government needed to rectify the problem within five years. That was eight years ago. Can he expect any action from this Government?

Theresa Villiers: I am certainly happy to look into that case and come back to the hon. Member.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Will the Minister tell us what the Government intend to do in their upcoming legislation on dog smuggling to prevent the import of drugged dogs by busker gangs?

George Eustice: There are already laws and regulations in place to protect animals used by buskers. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, it is a criminal offence to cause unnecessary suffering to an animal, or to administer an injurious or poisonous drug to an animal. If my hon. Friend has specific concerns, if he reported them to the police or the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, action could be taken.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Does the Government's policy in relation to the standards of agricultural imports align with the views of the relevant expert trade advisory group?

Theresa Villiers: As I have said, in our trade negotiations we will ensure that the outcome works for farmers and for the nation as a whole. We will defend our standards in future trade negotiations.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): As part of her proposals for a deposit return scheme, has the Secretary of State sought to persuade her counterpart in the Scottish Government that the interests of consumers, producers and administrators will be best served by a system that covers the country—the UK—as a whole?

Rebecca Pow: My hon. Friend raises a good point. Scotland introduced its scheme first. We are consulting to ensure our scheme is absolutely fit for purpose. We want ours to completely align and we are very much lining up with manufacturers and processors to get the right system that suits them.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): During the debate before the election on restoring nature and climate change, the Minister, who is now in the Lords, told the House that a legislative response to the problem of burning peatlands was being developed. When can we expect to see legislation being published?

Theresa Villiers: We are looking carefully at the issue of rotational burning on blanket bog. We are working closely with land managers to ensure that we see this practice come to an end. We have scrutinised the voluntary mechanisms and in due course we will have to consider whether to legislate in this area.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

LGBT+ Christians in the UK

1. **Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what steps the Church is taking to support equality for LGBT+ Christians in the UK. [900635]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Before I answer the hon. Gentleman, I would like to pay a short tribute to my predecessor, Caroline Spelman, who demonstrated humanity, helpfulness and humour, all qualities I will do my best to emulate in this role.

This is a timely question from the hon. Gentleman, in LGBT history month. The Church has worked with Stonewall to produce the “Valuing all God’s children” guidance, which proactively combats homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying in schools.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Member for his answer and join him in his tribute to the former Member for Meriden, with whom I worked on many issues. I totally agree with the comments he made about her and wish her well for the future; I am sure she has a big role to play in the country. However, the comments that he

made do not reflect the pastoral guidance that the Church issued in recent weeks, which the archbishops have apologised for and which suggested that sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage fall “short of God’s purpose for human beings.”

Does he recognise the great deal of concern within the Anglican communion that this potentially pre-empts the Living in Love and Faith discussions, which are ongoing, and sends a message of non-inclusivity at the start of LGBT history month, which is greatly regrettable?

Andrew Selous: The hon. Gentleman will probably be aware that the archbishops issued an apology for the way that that pastoral statement was issued. He is aware of the Church of England’s Living in Love and Faith project, which is looking very closely at all these issues and will be reporting later this year.

St Mary’s Graveyard, Stoke Mandeville

2. **Rob Butler** (Aylesbury) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what representations Church authorities have made to (a) the Department for Transport and (b) HS2 Ltd on the exhumation of graves on the site of the old church of St Mary’s, Stoke Mandeville. [900636]

Andrew Selous: I recognise the sensitivities in this issue and I can tell my hon. Friend that an agreement has been reached between the Secretary of State for Transport and the Archbishops’ Council about the exhumation of graves and the reburial of remains in consecrated ground. I can assure my hon. Friend that this will be done with dignity and respect.

Rob Butler: My constituent Mrs Bradley’s great great grandfather is buried at St Mary’s, Stoke Mandeville, and she was very distressed to learn by accident that the graves were to be exhumed by construction work linked to HS2. How will the Church of England monitor this to ensure that the exhumations are carried out in the way that my hon. Friend has just described, even on deconsecrated land?

Andrew Selous: I am extremely sorry that Mrs Bradley found out about the exhumation of her great great grandfather by accident, and we will announce the location of reinterment in consecrated ground in due course. I can tell my hon. Friend that in all cases this will be as near as possible to the original grave or graveyard and that the law requires that HS2 put up a memorial for all those who are reinterred.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The right hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

Leaving the EU: National Audit Office

3. **Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission what assessment the Commission has made of the effect on the work of the National Audit Office of the UK leaving the EU. [900637]

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): If you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, having served for 18 years as Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission and the Committee—I am standing down now—I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the National Audit Office, the Comptroller and Auditor Generals I have served with—Sir John Bourn, Tim Burr, Sir Amyas Morse and Gareth Davies—and the whole staff of the NAO and the Clerks who have served the two Committees. It is calculated that, during this 18-year association, we have saved £14.2 billion of public money—I just wish we were on commission.

In answer to my hon. Friend, the NAO's work programme, which is determined by the Comptroller and Auditor General, is regularly revised to ensure it reflects current issues. The UK's departure from the EU is of course a major task for Departments. Since 2016, the NAO has published 27 reports on various aspects of the preparations made by Departments. Departments have commented positively on the value of that work in assisting their preparations.

Mr Hollobone: I thank my right hon. Friend for his 18 years of exemplary service.

For all the problems of the Brexit process, rarely has a Government Department been set up for a specific defined purpose that is ultimately time-limited, but that is true of the Department for Exiting the European Union. Will the National Audit Office conduct an inquiry into the lessons learned from the establishment of that Department?

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. I am sure the Comptroller and Auditor General, who is completely independent in what inquiries he undertakes, will certainly want to do a report on the value for money of that Department and, perhaps, of our exit from the European Union in totality.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): With particular reference to Commonwealth countries, what does the right hon. Gentleman believe is the result of work carried out? How can we do more to see better guidelines in place and in operation throughout?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very good question. Clearly, the NAO, which is not concerned with policy matters but with economy and efficiency, will have its focus laser-like on how we can ensure, both in Northern Ireland and in the rest of the United Kingdom, a good exit from the European Union, good outcomes and, above all, value for money. There is no doubt that a very large sum of money could be wasted—for instance, in the recruitment of extra civil servants. We will have to ensure that we look laser-like at getting value for money.

NAO: Overseas Work

4. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, what recent comparative assessment the NAO has made of its work and that of similar bodies in (a) developing and (b) other countries. [900639]

10. **Adam Afriyie** (Windsor) (Con): To ask the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, what recent comparative assessment the NAO has made of its work and that of similar bodies in (a) developing and (b) other countries. [900645]

Sir Edward Leigh: The NAO is a leading, supreme audit institution in the international community and works closely with other offices. It believes that it can grow and learn as an audit office by sharing and exchanging ideas with others. It periodically benchmarks itself against other similar audit bodies in other countries.

Martin Vickers: May I join my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) in paying tribute to my right hon. Friend, whose career in the Public Accounts Commission I have followed closely both from the Government Benches and from previously serving as his constituency agent. Does he agree that there is widespread concern about spending on international aid? Will he outline what the NAO is doing to ensure we achieve value for money?

Sir Edward Leigh: Clearly, there are enormous risks in our overseas aid budget. I will not comment on policy aspects, but if we are linking expenditure with a proportion of gross national product, which can rise every year, there are enormous possibilities in the Department for International Development for waste, incompetence and employing too many staff. I know that the NAO is particularly concerned with ensuring that in our international aid work, which is so important, we concentrate on work on the ground and try to root out waste and incompetence.

Adam Afriyie: We have some excellent institutions, in addition to the NAO, that work towards underpinning our overseas trade and investment, such as CDC and UK Export Finance, but if we are to boost international trade we need to increase our appetite for risk. We need to accept that a higher number of failed projects will be a sign of success. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the NAO's attitude to risk is too risk-averse or too judgmental of individual project failures, there is a danger it may undermine our international trade objectives?

Sir Edward Leigh: I assure my hon. Friend that that is simply not the case. The NAO recognises that the civil service, and indeed Ministers, occasionally have to take risks, because that is the only way to learn—you learn from failure. We are not risk-averse, but we expect Departments to evaluate risk. On projects such as the Olympic Games, IT projects, the Child Support Agency and all the things we have investigated over the past 18 years, we expect Departments to evaluate risk and take risks, but get things right in the end.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Schools and Universities

5. **Stuart Anderson** (Wolverhampton South West) (Con): What recent assessment the Commissioners have made of the effectiveness of the contribution of Church schools and universities to the education system in England. [900640]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): The Church of England educates 1 million children every day, runs a quarter of all primary schools

and operates 4,644 schools in total, 91% of which are good or outstanding. There are also 15 universities in the Cathedrals Group in England, which educate 100,000 students and train 40% of all key stage 2 and 3 teachers.

Stuart Anderson: What help might the Church be able to give for the much-needed further education learning quarter in Wolverhampton?

Andrew Selous: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. The Church strongly supports investment in further education and the Wolverhampton education quarter is an imaginative proposal to benefit the city. While we are at a very early stage of possible Church involvement, I know that the diocesan director of education and senior local chaplains will be very willing to meet him to discuss the proposal.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman update us on what strategic national work the Church might be doing with the Department for Education to support local schools that are experiencing changes to school rolls due to population changes? Otherwise excellent schools, such as St George's and St Michael's in my constituency, are having to experience differences in their local population. What strategic work is going on nationally to support the local work that is so necessary?

Andrew Selous: Being relatively new in post, I am afraid that I am not immediately aware of that, but I am very happy to raise the hon. Lady's concerns with Nigel Genders, our director of education at Church House, and I will get back to her.

Christians in Nigeria

6. **Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** What steps the Church is taking to assist persecuted Christians in Nigeria. [900641]

Andrew Selous: The Archbishop of Canterbury knows Nigeria well and has visited it on a number of occasions. He is extremely aware of the local tensions and context of this issue. The recent attacks in northern Nigeria by Boko Haram and Islamist militia are a source of profound concern to him and the Church.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Is my hon. Friend satisfied with the progress in implementing the Bishop of Truro's findings?

Andrew Selous: I know my right hon. Friend takes a very close interest in these matters. Ten of the recommendations from the Bishop of Truro's review have been, or are being implemented, and the others are being worked on. Our diplomats are using the review to engage their host Governments wherever there are abuses of freedom of religion or belief.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The UK hosts Christians from all over the world, from Lebanon to Sri Lanka, and in Lewisham East we have a vibrant Nigerian Christian community. It would be a shame if the Foreign

and Commonwealth Office did not tap into the knowledge and culture available at home in the UK better to serve persecuted communities abroad.

Andrew Selous: I thank the hon. Lady very much for that excellent suggestion. I will certainly feed back to Church House and Lambeth Palace the point she helpfully makes.

Civil Partnerships

7. **Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab):** Whether the Commissioners were consulted on recent guidance by the Church on civil partnerships; and if he will make a statement. [900642]

Andrew Selous: I am accountable for the Church of England in this place. The Church Commissioners are not consulted on announcements by the College of Bishops. The archbishops have since apologised for the division and hurt caused by the pastoral statement.

Mr Bradshaw: Regardless of that, I think it was discourteous of the bishops not to inform the Second Church Estates Commissioner. The legislation was passed overwhelmingly in this House with all-party support. It is bad enough that the Church still treats its LGBT+ members as second-class Christians, but to say to the child of a heterosexual couple in a civil partnership that they should not exist because their parents should not have had or be having sex is so hurtful. Will he tell the bishops that unless this nonsense stops serious questions will be asked in this place about the legitimacy of the established status of the Church of England?

Andrew Selous: I will certainly feed back the right hon. Gentleman's strongly felt concern on this issue to the College of Bishops. In their apology, the archbishops did recognise that the pastoral statement had jeopardised the trust that has been built up as part of the Living in Love and Faith project, which is intended to discern the way forward for the Church of England on this issue.

Church of England Free Schools

8. **Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con):** What recent discussions he has had with the Commissioners on increasing the number of Church of England free schools in England. [900643]

Andrew Selous: The Church has been a successful partner in the free schools programme since it began. Dioceses work hard to help these new schools to open. The Church is also keen to support new alternative provision and special schools through the free schools programme.

Greg Hands: The fantastic Fulham Boys School will finally open at its new site in September, after a 10-year campaign. It is a Church of England-sponsored free school whose co-patrons are myself and Graham Tomlin, the Bishop of Kensington. However, the latest wave of free school applications shows very few involving the Church of England. What can my hon. Friend do, in his role, to persuade the Church to sponsor more free schools?

Andrew Selous: The Church of England educates a million children. It runs a fifth of all schools in England, and 91% of those are good or outstanding, which is just one of the reasons why they are so popular with parents. The Church is the largest sponsor of academies in England, with 900. I am delighted to learn that there has been a happy conclusion to Fulham Boys School's search for a new site, and I know that lots of parents are very happy with the school.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Compostable Waste from Parliament

9. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): To ask the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire, representing the House of Commons Commission, what steps the Commission is taking to ensure that compostable waste from Parliament is composted. [900644]

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire): It is a real pleasure to answer questions on behalf of the House of Commons Commission. This is the first time that a member of the Scottish National party has answered questions in the House. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Tom Brake, who answered questions diligently and conscientiously.

I thank the hon. Lady for this first and very important question. To ensure that compostable food and disposable materials such as coffee cups and salad trays are composted, Parliament's environmental sustainability team has set up a process to enable them to be effectively segregated. It covers the first point of disposal in dedicated compostable bins located throughout the estate to the final in-vessel composting facility. This initiative is backed by a wide range of communication and engagement tools to support Parliament's "Right Waste, Right Bin" campaign.

Kerry McCarthy: I welcome the hon. Member to—

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The establishment. [Laughter.]

Kerry McCarthy: To the establishment! A knighthood cannot be far behind.

An investigation by Footprint, whose findings were published in July, found that all the compostable packaging collected in the Houses of Parliament between October 2018 and May 2019 was incinerated rather than composted. Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that that is not the case, and that no further compostable waste has been incinerated since May 2019? Can he also share some of the challenges involved in trying to introduce composting on such a huge estate with other organisations that are seeking to introduce it?

Pete Wishart: I can reassure the hon. Lady that Parliament takes composting very seriously, and so far 15.4 tonnes of waste have been successfully composted. However, as she says, there was an issue with the new scheme at first because of the levels of non-compostable waste and the fact that the bins were far too high for the receiving facility to compost the first batch of it. I can reassure her that every subsequent load has been successfully composted as use of the bins has improved.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): It is a real honour to be able to ask a question of such a senior member of the British establishment. [Laughter.] Tempted as I am to ask him how much of this waste is Scotland's waste and when we are going to get it back—[Laughter]—I prefer to ask him what the parliamentary estate is doing generally to reduce the waste of all types that is produced on the estate.

Pete Wishart: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his very sincere congratulations and welcome. [Laughter.] I assure him that Scotland does indeed ensure that it receives its Barnett consequentials when it comes to the waste produced in the House.

Parliament takes this issue very seriously, and the environmental sustainability team works in close liaison with the Commons catering department to ensure that all the procurement specifications have all the necessary certifications. All the composting that takes place in the House has met the very highest standards, both European and world, and I am happy to reassure the House that we are making great progress with this scheme.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend—he should be right hon.—on his appointment. Can he confirm that, or find out whether, the signs used in the Division Lobbies to indicate an England-only vote under the EVEL process will be either recyclable or compostable when they are consigned to the dustbin of history?

Pete Wishart: I find all the welcomes that I have received very endearing. I understand that the signs that were produced earlier this week for the English votes procedure will not be required as part of the scheme as they are likely to be used again, but I think that once they have been binned we will ensure that they are effectively composted and no waste is produced.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Church Maintenance: Bosworth

11. **Dr Luke Evans** (Bosworth) (Con): To ask the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire, representing the Church Commissioners, what steps the Commissioners are taking to support the maintenance of churches in (a) Bosworth constituency and (b) the UK. [900646]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Andrew Selous): Lowest income communities funding supported mission and ministry in Holy Trinity and St John's churches in Hinckley in my hon. Friend's constituency in 2019. Across England from 2020 to 2022, £82.1 million will be allocated by the Commissioners as lowest income communities funding, with a further £82.1 million in strategic development funding to support diocesan plans.

Dr Evans: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for talking about the repairs that are going on in churches in my constituency and across the country, but churches in Hinckley and Bosworth, and indeed across the country, face the risk of having their roofs stolen. This is an

ongoing problem; it has not gone away. I would be grateful for his comments on what the Commission is doing to try to prevent this.

Andrew Selous: I am exceedingly grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this point, because it is a real issue for churches up and down the country, many of which

cannot get insurance if this happens on a second or subsequent occasion. The Church has asked the Government to review and strengthen the Scrap Metal Dealers Act 2013. Initially, the Act dramatically reduced thefts, but changes to serious organised criminal behaviour have led to increases, and I will be asking what plans the Government have to amend the Act.

BBC Licence Fee

10.31 am

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op) (*Urgent Question*): At the risk of getting a cold shoulder, I should like to ask the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to make a statement on the Government's plans for the future of the BBC licence fee.

The Minister for Sport, Media and Creative Industries (Nigel Adams): I would like to reiterate the words of the Secretary of State yesterday and, first, outline the importance of the broadcasting sector and the value that we as a Government place on it. Globally, the BBC is seen as a beacon of British values. It is one of the most recognised and trusted brands, reaching more than 400 million people around the world every week. However, it is important to acknowledge that the media landscape is changing, as is its content and how we consume it.

Set against that, there remain legitimate concerns that the criminal sanction for TV licence fee evasion is unfair and disproportionate, and indeed an anachronism. As we move into an increasingly digital age with more and more channels to watch and platforms to choose from, we must revisit the logic of criminalisation and ask whether criminal penalties for consumer choice are consistent with a just and democratic society. We therefore believe it is right to look again at whether the criminal sanction is still appropriate. This is why it is right, as the Secretary of State announced yesterday, that the Government are launching an eight-week public consultation to examine the decriminalisation of TV licence evasion and to share the thoughts on the TV licence model and how it may yet change over time. The Government will consider the results of the consultation when it is completed.

Tracy Brabin: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this timely and important urgent question. As our public sector broadcaster, the BBC is central to the lives of our constituents: 91% of Britons use the BBC every week, and 26 million households have a TV licence. The future of the BBC as a public service broadcaster is a crucial matter to all of us. Yesterday, the Government announced plans to look into the decriminalisation of non-payment of the licence fee, but decriminalisation was not mentioned in the Conservative party manifesto. Prisons are not overflowing with people locked up for non-payment, and the courts are not overwhelmed with non-payers. Last year, only five people were imprisoned for non-payment, so my question is: why now, when there are so many other pressing matters for Government time, and especially as the Government's own independent review, carried out as recently as 2015, concluded that the current system was the fairest and most effective way of funding the BBC?

Convicting people through the civil courts could mean higher fines for vulnerable people and greater evasion. The cost of transitioning to a new civil system could cost the BBC at least £25 million in set-up costs and lost revenue. Does the Minister think that that would be good value for money? Does he believe that the Government have a mandate for such a drastic change to the primary funding stream of our public

service broadcaster? Have the Government made any assessment of the likely impact on the BBC's ability to carry out core programming functions?

The Secretary of State said yesterday that the BBC needed to be more transparent and accountable, but does the Minister not think that the Government need to lead by example rather than deciding who may and may not attend press briefings and banning Ministers from appearing on respected news outlets? Can he assure me that this announcement is not part of a deliberate strategy by the Government to undermine an organisation with which they have been at loggerheads?

Nigel Adams: I absolutely assure the hon. Lady that this has nothing to do with what she mentions. I remind her that this is a consultation on whether criminal sanctions are proportionate and fair, and we believe it is right to look again at whether that is the correct model for licence fee evasion. I hope the hon. Lady does not mind me saying that she has some experience of not paying the licence fee, because I understand that her character in "Coronation Street" went to prison for not paying, and I do not think that that was particularly fair and proportionate. The consultation will run for eight weeks, and many of the hon. Lady's questions will form part of it. I am sure she will be contributing to it, and I encourage all Members and the wider public to ensure that they make their views known.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I say to the Government, through my hon. Friend, that the question underlying all this is the one identified by the Canadian broadcasting pioneer Graham Spry in 1932:

"It is a choice between the State and the United States."

If any change to the BBC leads to its disappearance or vulnerability, there will be a great responsibility on anyone who is involved in that process. May I suggest to my hon. Friend that in this consultation we should compare not the disadvantages of the present system with the advantages of the alternative, but the disadvantages of the alternative with the advantages of the present system?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend the Father of House speaks with great experience on these matters, but I gently remind him what this consultation is about. We believe it is right to look again at whether criminal sanctions are the correct model for licence fee evasion. There will need to be a much broader conversation as to whether the licence fee model is the correct model beyond 2027, but the current model is guaranteed until the end of that period.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Many criticisms could be made by politicians and others, but the BBC is more than just its news output. Scotland has the new BBC Scotland channel, which has a budget of only £32 million despite Scottish licence fee payers putting in £311 million a year, with only £249 million spent in Scotland. Despite that austerity budget—the broadcasting equivalent of DIY and ticky-tacky—the BBC has managed to produce some great quality output against the odds, with comedy, culture, "Debate Night" and the well-produced "The Nine", but it is not sustainable and must be properly funded.

Scotland has already implemented a system whereby no one faces a custodial sentence for failing to pay their TV licence, but there is a clear, unmistakable pattern

when it comes to this Government and their attitude towards the media. The BBC is not Netflix. Banning lobby journalists from press briefings, failing to participate in media interviews, and carefully cultivating a group of friendly journalists to pursue their narrow agenda is straight out of the Trump playbook. Many will rightly be concerned that the Tories now intend to use their majority to dismantle the scrutiny of public service broadcasting, having already forced the BBC to adopt social policy. What will the consultation do to ensure that moneys raised in Scotland for public service broadcasting are actually fully spent in Scotland?

Nigel Adams: Ministers do talk to the public through a wide range of programmes every day, including on the BBC. That has always been the case and will continue to be so, and the lobby meetings happen twice a day, as the hon. Gentleman is aware. I remind him that the media landscape is changing. For example, five years ago a TV licence was not required to watch or download content on the BBC iPlayer. I hope that he raises his concerns about the BBC in Scotland as part of the consultation.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I thank the Government for their wisdom in bringing forward a consultation to remove an anachronistic privilege. Does not the hysterical reaction of defenders of the BBC speak for itself?

Nigel Adams: The BBC is an incredibly respected brand around the world. My hon. Friend will be aware that the Prime Minister recently said the BBC is, in fact, a “cherished British institution”.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As a Yorkshire MP, the Minister will know the importance of the regional BBC—both local television and local radio—to our constituents and the role it serves in the community. I remember its public service announcement function during the 2007 flooding. What thought has been given to making that function clear in the consultation so that people fully understand what they get from paying their licence fee?

Nigel Adams: I completely agree with the hon. Lady. I have experience of working closely with the BBC regionally, particularly when we also had flooding. It is crucial that we have a BBC that reaches everywhere. The BBC serves our constituents particularly well. I hope she contributes to the consultation, which I remind her is about whether a criminal sanction is fair and proportionate for TV licence fee evasion. That is the remit of this consultation.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): One of the arguments being run by the anti-BBC forces is that the magistrates courts are being clogged by the number of cases. Yesterday, the chair of the Magistrates Association said the change would make a minimal difference—less than 1% of the time spent: it would be an insignificant difference and we would hardly notice it. At this early stage of the consultation, will the Minister note that the idea that magistrates courts are overwhelmed by licence fee evasion is simply false?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. My understanding is that over 120,000 people were prosecuted and sentenced for non-payment of the

licence fee last year, and the average fine for those who were prosecuted was £176. I am sure that takes a considerable amount of court time.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): For the second time today, may I recommend that a Minister reads the most recent Select Committee report on this issue? Chaired by the Minister’s excellent colleague, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the Committee considered the evidence in detail before the last licence fee review—I am sure the Minister likes evidence-based policy—and we found absolutely no grounds for doing this.

Nigel Adams: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we had the Perry review five years ago. The landscape has changed, and we believe it is right to look again at whether the criminal sanction remains appropriate. I met many people during the election who asked whether it is fair and proportionate to be potentially criminalised for non-payment of the TV licence fee.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the BBC’s public service broadcasting is at its best in local radio coverage of rugby league, cricket and football? Those sports are not getting any local coverage on commercial radio. Whatever the future funding model, that type of broadcasting must be protected.

Nigel Adams: I agree with my hon. Friend, who spent many years working for local stations in that sector. It is important that we maintain a local connection with communities via the BBC, and sport is an important part of that.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister has said several times that the media landscape is changing. Does he agree that for decades the main driving force in that developing media landscape—including iPlayer and Freeview—has been the BBC? By calling for this consultation and saying it will happen, does he appreciate that for a lot of people it calls into question the Government’s commitment to the licence fee and to the BBC as it is today? The concern for many of us is that this changing media landscape is being used as an excuse.

Nigel Adams: I do not agree on that point with the hon. Lady. The broadcasting landscape is constantly changing—she is right about that—and this is only going to get faster. Ofcom research found that more children recognise the names Netflix and YouTube than they do the BBC, which should be an eye-opener for all of us. Conservative Members believe that the BBC is a beacon of British values, but we should be alive to the changes in the way people are consuming television.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the nub of this is about fairness and proportionality? If we are to have a free and open market in television, non-payment of the licence fee should be treated no differently from that of any other service?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right: this whole consultation is about whether criminal sanctions are a fair and proportionate system in the current world in which we live.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Given the demand that the BBC takes on social policy on the over-75s concessionary TV licence and now this consultation,

[Neil Gray]

how can the Government say that this is about anything other than an attack on public sector broadcasting and asset stripping the BBC?

Nigel Adams: I am not sure I could disagree more with the hon. Gentleman. The Government are very disappointed with the BBC's decision to restrict the over-75 licence fee concession to those in receipt of pension credit. We absolutely recognise the value of free TV licences for the over-75s and believe they should be funded by the BBC.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): The hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine) alluded to the BBC being responsible for Freeview, but it is not free. People have to pay the tax in order to access other TV channels that are nothing to do with the BBC. The younger generation, who are not represented very well in this Chamber, do not watch the BBC any more, so why should they pay this tax?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend makes a fair point, and this is why we are having this consultation, to which he will no doubt contribute. Younger people, especially those I have spoken to in the past year, do not understand why they have to pay for a service that they do not use. It is only right that we look at whether criminalising people for non-payment of the TV licence fee is fair and proportionate.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not think the Minister really believes in the licence fee at all, but the truth of the matter is that nothing in life is free. "Gavin & Stacey" does not come for free, and neither do "Strictly Come Dancing", "Sherlock" or any of the great dramas, comedies or wildlife documentaries on the BBC. None of that comes for free. It comes free to air because everybody pays in and everybody gets something in return. It is a fundamental part of the way we do things in this country. The problem is that if we pull at a snag in a jumper, we end up unravelling the whole thing, and my worry is that that is precisely what the Government intend.

Nigel Adams: I have an awful lot of respect for the hon. Gentleman, but he is missing the point of what this consultation is about. At the risk of repeating myself, it is about whether criminal sanctions for licence fee evasion are proportionate and fair. I am sure he will be contributing to the consultation, as well as in this House, and I am sure he will do so on many more occasions.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): If the BBC is as popular and provides as much value for money as the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) and others say, surely it has nothing to fear from going to a subscription model, because presumably everybody will be queueing up to pay their subscription as it is such wonderful value for money. The BBC is petrified of abolishing the licence fee because this may emphasise how unpopular the BBC is and how few people want to contribute. I welcome this consultation on decriminalisation, but may I urge the Minister to go further and stop this unjustifiable tax on people, which they have to pay

whether they want to watch the BBC or not? It is unsustainable in the long term, because of modern technology. In the meantime, will he make sure that over-75s do not have to pay it?

Nigel Adams: Let me start by congratulating my hon. Friend on his election to the Select Committee. I know he is a huge fan of the BBC. He is right to say that as we move forward into an increasingly digital age, where there are more and more channels to watch and platforms to choose from, it is clear that many people consider it odd that they can be imprisoned for not paying their licence fee. On the over-75s free licence, we believe that is the responsibility of the BBC.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Is it not a fact that the BBC has been great at undermining itself? It tells us that it cannot afford to spend £750 million on licence fees for the over-75s, yet it can afford to pay 493 of its employees above their grade pay band and 129 of them above the highest-grade band, and it can afford to pay only 21 of those in the lowest-rate band above their pay band. When is the Minister going to get this out-of-control broadcaster under control?

Nigel Adams: The BBC is alive to the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises. It is having to deal with a number of pay-equality cases and I am sure that there will be many more of those cases. Nevertheless, I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the BBC is operationally independent from Government.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Surely this is an incredible opportunity for the BBC. The licence fee restricts its paying base to the UK, but if it had a subscription model, it could export to the entire world. As the Minister said, the BBC's own prediction is that it will have a global audience of a billion people a week by the end of the decade. If just 5% of those people were to take out a subscription to the iPlayer at £6 a month, the BBC would recoup the entire £3.7 billion that it gets from the licence fee, but as export income instead of a tax on the British people.

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes some good points, but we are talking about the decriminalisation consultation, not how the BBC is funded in future. The current model is valid until 2027 and there has to be a conversation before then about what model is appropriate for the BBC in a digital age.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): We have rightly heard about the importance of the BBC's local and regional coverage, but I remind the Minister of the importance of its international coverage. The World Service is the world's most trusted news provider and an important part of the UK's soft power. The Minister has said that the media landscape is changing, and he is absolutely right, which is why public service broadcasting is under pressure. At this time, surely the BBC needs our support more than ever.

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman makes a sensible point. The Government strongly support the BBC's mission to bring high-quality and impartial news to a global audience, including some of the most remote places in the world and particularly where free speech is

limited. The BBC recently launched 12 new language services, and we very much support its approach in that regard.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Can we not have an open mind and move on? We are no longer in the 1940s, with the whole nation huddled around a single radio set. This whole row about the licence fee for over-75s and this issue shows that we really have to consider other options. Is it fair to impose a poll tax on elderly people just to watch television when there is a whole mass of alternatives—one might say a morass? The same is true for young people. Will the Government please have a genuinely open mind about moving the BBC into the 21st century on a subscription basis?

Nigel Adams: My right hon. Friend is right to right to ask that question, and that is why we will be discussing how the BBC is funded going forward, but I remind him that the consultation is about whether a criminal sanction is fair and proportionate for non-payment and licence-fee evasion. Of course, we have to have conversations as to whether, in a digital age, the current licence fee model is appropriate.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I fear that if we look beyond the headline about the decriminalisation of non-payment, we see yet another attack from the Government Benches, led by the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), on the BBC and the very principle of public service broadcasting. Given the shambles of the licence fee for over-75s, does the Minister agree that power over the licence fee should be removed from Government to avoid such political jiggery-pokery in future?

Nigel Adams: When we look at how the BBC is going to be funded, we will speak to everyone, and all our masters, particularly the general public, will have their say.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I welcome this long-overdue consultation on the decriminalisation of non-payment of the TV licence—something that I tried to include in the Deregulation Bill back in 2014, and that at the time had the support of the majority of Members. My hon. Friend will be aware that the non-payment of the TV licence fee is currently managed by the magistrates court. Is he also aware that the Magistrates Association has been calling for the decriminalisation of non-payment of the TV licence fee for more than 25 years?

Nigel Adams: I am not surprised that the Magistrates Association has been calling for that. As I said in my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) earlier, more than 120,000 people were prosecuted last year under the current regime, which is why we are having the review and consultation.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Minister knows, S4C is largely funded these days via the licence fee, and the BBC itself is the main provider of broadcast news in both of the national languages of Wales. What assurances can the Minister give that these vital public broadcasting services will be adequately resourced well into the future?

Nigel Adams: The hon. Gentleman is completely correct to raise this matter. S4C, as a public service broadcaster, is currently funded via the licence fee. We will be having conversations about the next settlement starting in 2022. Clearly, funding for S4C will form part of those discussions.

Brendan Clarke-Smith (Bassetlaw) (Con): The television licence fee can be a heavy burden to pay for some of the poorest people in our society, so will the Minister please tell me what the Government are doing to make it easier for people to pay, so that they can avoid this enforcement action in the first place?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend is right to raise that matter. The licence fee is expensive for some people on the lowest incomes, so we will be introducing a new, simple payment plan. We have had trials of it, and I can confirm today that, with effect from 1 April 2020, there will be a new flexible payment instalment scheme designed to help exactly the people to whom he refers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Has the Minister considered that, in this day and age of streaming channels and hubs and the amount of work that independent channels have to do just to exist, it does seem absurd that there should be a state subsidised channel? Does he agree that it is time for the BBC to stand on its own feet and on its own merit?

Nigel Adams: All of the hon. Gentleman's questions need to be part of a much bigger conversation once we have done this consultation on whether criminalisation of licence fee evasion is fair and proportionate. We must have a conversation for beyond 2027, when the current deal via the charter expires, about how the BBC is funded in a digital age.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The BBC recently announced that it was shedding 450 staff from the news department, and yet it said that it would still provide a fully comprehensive service. When those reports are seen by my constituents, many of whom find it difficult to raise the funds to pay for the licence, they think that the BBC does need slimming down. Will the Minister assure my constituents that he will keep up the pressure on the BBC to reduce its costs?

Nigel Adams: The beauty of the current model is that there are assurances on funding, as there is a five-year deal. That has never been the case before, but I remind my hon. Friend that the BBC is completely independent from us, both operationally and editorially.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I declare an interest in that my late parents met while they were working for the BBC, and that I installed the computer system that is actually used for collecting and verifying the licences. What assessment have the Government made on the increase in the avoidance of paying the licence fee and therefore the increase in costs of catching those people who do not pay, because that all adds to the costs and, indeed, to the implications of the funding?

Nigel Adams: I am delighted to hear how my hon. Friend came about. We should all be grateful that he is the BBC's responsibility. This is exactly why we are

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having this consultation. Of course there will be costs. Huge costs are associated with these levels of prosecutions, and I urge him, especially with his keen personal interest, to make sure that he gets involved in the consultation.

Business of the House

10.59 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): The business for next week will include:

MONDAY 10 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Windrush Compensation Scheme (Expenditure) Bill, followed by a motion to approve the draft Social Security Benefits Up-Rating Order 2020, followed by a motion to approve the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2020.

TUESDAY 11 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information About Victims) Bill, followed by Opposition half day (3rd allotted day—1st part). There will be a debate on migration and Scotland on a motion in the name of the Scottish National party.

WEDNESDAY 12 FEBRUARY—Motions relating to the Police Grant and Local Government Finance Reports.

THURSDAY 13 FEBRUARY—General debate on matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

FRIDAY 14 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The provision business for the week commencing 24 February will include:

MONDAY 24 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of a Bill.

TUESDAY 25 FEBRUARY—Second Reading of a Bill.

WEDNESDAY 26 FEBRUARY—Opposition day (4th allotted day). There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition.

THURSDAY 27 FEBRUARY—General debate on a subject to be announced.

FRIDAY 28 FEBRUARY—The House will not be sitting.

The House will be aware of the remarks made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor during his statement on the evil attack in Streatham last Sunday. It is the responsibility of politicians from all political parties to play their part in keeping our constituents and the general public safe. To that end, the Government will bring forward the necessary legislation to stop the automatic early release of prisoners convicted of terrorist offences. This legislation will be introduced at the earliest opportunity, and it is with that in mind that I may need to return to the House early next week to make a further business statement.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the forthcoming business and for giving me notice, albeit at 10.31 am, of his statement. After the terrible events in Streatham, we think of those who were injured and hope they make a full recovery physically and mentally and again thank our outstanding emergency services who responded so swiftly. The Opposition say that terrorist prisoners should not be automatically released but should be subject to parole board assessment before release, during their sentences. We will look carefully at the Government proposals and work with them, on a cross-party basis and in the national interest, to protect our citizens. I hope the Leader of the House will convey that to the relevant Minister. He says he will find time for the draft legislation. I hope he will also give the Opposition time to look at it.

We have our nominees for Select Committees. The Leader of the House mentioned to me that he was waiting for the Labour party, but he is not; we have all ours in place. I should have mentioned that this was the last time at the Dispatch Box for my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan), as he is moving to a Select Committee. We have our Select Committee nominees. We are just waiting for the Leader of the House. Perhaps there will be some fallout from the reshuffle—who knows? When is he likely to introduce the motion on Select Committees? Will it be before or after the recess?

The Leader of the House will know that the European Scrutiny Committee needs to be set up under Standing Order 143. It has a statutory function under section 13A of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which was inserted by section 29 of the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020, and that statutory role will continue during the transition. Given that talks start on 3 May, and we need that scrutiny, will he say when it is likely to be set up?

We need more scrutiny, not less, and it is not right what the Leader of the House said last week about the Prime Minister coming to the House for 30 minutes being sufficient. He knows that that is just plain wrong. One Department has already been abolished. Scrutiny is important.

Is the Leader of the House not concerned about the events that took place at Downing Street this week and the way journalists were treated? Despite an urgent question that you granted, Mr Speaker, there was no explanation of whether special advisers overrode the civil service. Did they? Was there a breach of the civil service code, or is there a new civil service code? There was no explanation about who was allowed to stay. It cannot be right that a special adviser can decide whether one journalist is clever enough to take a technical briefing and another is not. It feels like a case of “Four legs good, two legs bad.” The Leader of the House knows more than anyone, with his background, that this is totally unacceptable, so can he find time for a fuller statement on the events that took place around the exclusion of journalists?

More Government shambles; the chief executive sacked and no one to replace Claire O’Neill. Is this the face of global Britain, which we debated last week—an absolute shambles? Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) held a meeting with the Nobel prize nominee Chief Raoni Metuktire and other indigenous leaders from the Amazon. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), the Chair of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, was there, as was I, but Australia, the Amazon, Bangladesh and the young people in Friday’s climate change strike all understand the urgency. When will the new chief executive be announced for COP26?

The Government may be reducing the amount of information given to journalists, but is the Leader of the House aware that more than 400 local authorities allow at least one third party to track individuals who visit their website? The data includes when people seek help for financial services or even for disabilities. Almost 7 million people are affected when they click on those websites. One data company, LiveRamp, is part of the group that sells profiles to Cambridge Analytica. Council websites perform a specific public service. Can we have

a debate on the misuse of personal data on council websites and, if necessary, whether the Information Commissioner requires further powers?

It has been two weeks since Richard Ratcliffe and Gabriella met the Prime Minister to raise the cases of Nazanin, Anousheh and Kylie. Will the Leader of the House say what the purpose of their incarceration is and what will happen next?

Finally, I want to pay tribute to one of the Doorkeepers, Paul Kehoe, who has been here for 40 years. The Clerk of the House has recognised his 40 years’ service, which also gives us an opportunity to thank Phil Howse, the Serjeant at Arms and all the Doorkeepers for looking after us. They do an excellent job.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I reiterate the thanks to Paul Kehoe? I have been holding roundtables with new Members, and I have said to them all when they have come to see me that if they want to know what is really going on in this Chamber, they should ask the Doorkeepers, because they are always better informed than anybody else—certainly better informed than me and, dare I whisper it quietly, sometimes even the Whips. We are very lucky to be so well served by a fantastic team of endlessly courteous and patient people who take such delight in their service to our Parliament. We are really privileged.

May I also reiterate the right hon. Lady’s thanks to the emergency services for their response in Streatham? I share her concern for the people who have been injured, both psychologically and physically, and thank her for the promise of co-operation in ensuring that the legislation can be brought forward effectively and swiftly. I assure her that the Government wish to work with the Opposition on this and that therefore her offer is received in the spirit in which is intended. We will make every effort to ensure that the Opposition are satisfied with the way that we respond.

As to Select Committees, the European Scrutiny Committee will be set up at the same time as all the other Committees, which will be done as soon as is practicable. We attach great importance to proper scrutiny.

The right hon. Lady asked me about events at Downing Street and the briefings that have been given, and referred kindly to my antecedents in this area. With reference to my antecedents in this area, it is perfectly normal for journalists to be given different briefings. Sometimes some journalists are briefed, sometimes specific journalists are briefed, and sometimes there is a general lobby briefing. That has been going on since my father joined the lobby in the 1950s, which really is a reasonably long time ago—although not quite as long ago as when my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) was referring to in earlier proceedings. What went on was perfectly normal. David Frost is a special adviser, it is routine for special advisers to give briefings to specialist journalists, and that was precisely what was happening.

As for COP26, the Prime Minister is taking a personal interest in this. It is a matter to which he is personally deeply committed. He gave detailed responses yesterday in response to six questions from the Leader of the Opposition, and it would seem, dare I say it, otiose for me to repeat the wise words of the Prime Minister.

I am very interested in what the right hon. Lady said about local authorities and the use of personal data, and I share her concern, although I must confess that I

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was previously unaware of this issue. Local authorities have a duty to be careful about the personal data they pass on, and I think this is a matter for the Information Commissioner.

With regard to Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, the junior Minister in the Foreign Office spoke to the Iranian embassy earlier in the week. There is a continued correspondence flow of representations, but we must always remember that the Iranian Government are behaving unlawfully under international law in holding Mrs Zaghari-Ratcliffe. We have to keep on pressing, but when a state of that kind refuses to follow international norms, there are limits to what the Government can do. I deeply regret that, but I assure the right hon. Lady that the Government will continue to press, and I hope that the Iranian Government will eventually be shamed into behaving properly.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): The Oxford to Cambridge expressway proposal is a hugely controversial issue in my constituency that would devastate the Buckinghamshire countryside, and would achieve little that cannot be achieved through improving existing roads and delivering, for example, a bypass around the village of Wing. During the general election, the Transport Secretary pledged a priority review into this scheme. Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on this matter, so that the folly of this scheme can be fully explored?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend's constituency is exceptionally beautiful and attractive—just for the record, it is not quite as beautiful as Somerset, but none the less—and I understand completely the concerns about the possible implications of development in the Oxford to Cambridge arc, and particularly about proposals for a new road link between Oxford and Milton Keynes. The Government will provide an update in due course on whether the Oxford to Cambridge expressway project should continue, but I recommend that my hon. Friend raises the issue prior to the recess in the debate on matters to be considered before the forthcoming Adjournment, because that is exactly what that occasion is designed for.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I have two questions for the Leader of the House this week. The first is: when can we expect the Government to bring forward proposals to scrap the English votes for English laws procedure, which is now an embarrassment to this Parliament and everyone in it? I ask because this week saw the outrageous spectacle of Scottish Members of Parliament being denied the opportunity to participate at Committee stage in legislation that would have a direct and material effect on the people they represent. The NHS Funding Bill will have an effect on the Scottish block grant, and it will therefore have an effect on the money available for my constituents. As much as the Government may try to laugh it off, this is actually a very serious matter that should be of concern to anyone who calls themselves a democrat.

My second question relates again to the Scottish claim of right. When I last asked the Leader of the House when he would bring forward legislation so that the Government might recognise and deal with the fact

that they do not have a mandate in Scotland, he gave me a rather flippant response. In order to understand the Government's motivation, let me ask him again: does he agree with the concept of the claim of right for Scotland, and does he agree that it is something that continues to exist, after 18 September 2014? I ask that question because not once, not twice, but three times since we last discussed it opinion polls have been published in Scotland that give an indication to the thinking of people in that country, and every single one shows that there is now a majority of people who wish Scotland to become an independent country. I congratulate the Government, because that rise in public opinion for independence is entirely their responsibility and entirely their contribution. I assure the Leader of the House that, when we in the SNP get started on our campaign, that figure will rise even further. If the Government really want to do something about the integrity of the Union, surely it is time for them to recognise the different situation that pertains in Scotland.

Mr Rees-Mogg: With regard to the English votes for English laws issue, I remind the hon. Gentleman that his party did not oppose the programme motion, which led to there being no Report stage, during which it would have been possible to move amendments. However, all Standing Orders of the House are considered and are open to discussion through the Procedure Committee. A new Procedure Committee is in the process of being established—the Chair has been elected—and although it would not be for me to tell the Committee what its business ought to be, this may well be a matter that it would like to look at.

As regards the Scottish claim of right, the decision was made in 2014. The right was debated, the vote was held, and the SNP lost. Sometimes it is hard to accept a defeat, but that is what happened. The people of Scotland voted to remain in the United Kingdom. Dare I say it, but on the first Opposition day offered to the SNP, did SNP Members go for the subject that they raise all the time, that comes up at business questions week after week, and that they constantly want to discuss? When they get their half day, do they decide to debate the claim of right? No, they think of something else.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I am aiming to run this until around quarter to 12, so it would therefore be helpful if we could have briefer questions and answers.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Leader of the House said that he was very much in favour of scrutiny, as I am sure he is. Standing Orders require us to have 13 days for private Members' Bills in a Session, but when a Session is more than a year, as this one is going to be, the Government have usually provided additional days. Could we have a statement on when these Bills are going to be debated?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is slightly putting the cart before the horse in that we will need to see the length of the Session before we decide on the additional days—although I do wonder why he wants them. Is it merely so that he can filibuster a greater number of Bills?

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House recognise that Vauxhall has a proud and long history with the LGBTIQI community? Does he agree that we should have a debate, during this LGBT History Month, to celebrate their fantastic contribution to the UK?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was unaware of Vauxhall's history in that regard, so I am better informed thanks to the hon. Lady. Vauxhall is not a million miles from here, but I am grateful to her for raising that point. I would have thought that as it relates specifically to one area—to her constituency—it is worth making an application to Mr Speaker and raising it in an Adjournment debate.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I can assure the shadow Leader of the House that we are taking the responsibility of getting our Select Committee nominees very seriously—but we have such a huge number of colleagues to satisfy.

Could we have a debate in Government time on the Government's decisions on the London plan? There are serious objections in relation to the green belt, parking issues, industrial land, density of housing, and back-garden developments. This does not just affect London; it affects the whole of the south-east. So could we have a debate in Government time on this pernicious plan put forward by the do-nothing Mayor of London?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we may be getting into the London mayoral elections in that question, and not unreasonably so. It is quite right that all levels of government, local as well as national, are held to account via this Parliament. I am sure that the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee has heard my hon. Friend's request, as I think it is more suitable to Back-Bench business time than to Government time.

Mr Speaker: Speaking of which, I call Ian Mearns.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House is very kind, and I am very grateful to the House for re-electing me unopposed as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, but I am currently a Chair without a Committee, and that does have implications for the business of the House. The Leader of the House has announced a general debate, subject to be announced, on Thursday 27 February. If we had been able to get the Committee up and running, had the Government party got its nominations together in a bit more of a timely fashion, we could be dealing with things like the applications for estimates day debates, which it now seems might not happen.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman's point reminds me of what Robert Maxwell—a former Labour Member of Parliament for Buckingham—said about the ideal Committee. He said that a Committee should be an odd number and that three was too many, so it seems to me that the hon. Gentleman is in the position that Robert Maxwell always aspired to. I appreciate his point. We are very keen for the Backbench Business Committee to be set up, but the debates later this afternoon are ones that were put forward to the Backbench Business Committee.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): One effect of EU membership has been the way in which rights are granted, the extent of which are then litigated in court rather than debated in this place. That has led to an explosion of judicial activism through the medium of judicial review, which has meant that the focus has moved away from this place to the courts. Can we have a debate on how we can restore this place to its proper position as the truly sovereign source of law?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend's point of view is widely shared, and the Prime Minister referred to that yesterday in Prime Minister's questions. Judicial review is a vital part of our legal system and must be protected, but we should also ensure that it is not abused to conduct politics by other means or to create needless delay. It is worth noting that one reason for there being so much judicial review is that, while the UK was a member of the European Union, law made by this Parliament could be superseded by law made in another jurisdiction. That is no longer the case. Since 31 January, our law and this Parliament are supreme, which I hope will lead to judicial review not being used as politics by another name.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Last month, it was reported that Justice Tolson, the senior family judge in London's central family court, found that a woman had not been raped because she had not taken sufficient physical steps to protect herself. The Court of Appeal found that his judgment was

“manifestly at odds with current jurisprudence”

and based on “obsolescent concepts” about consent. Justice Tolson is still overseeing cases of domestic abuse and rape in the family court, and just this Monday, despite the Court of Appeal judgment, he made the same ruling again. Complaints have been made to the judicial ombudsman, and it is obviously right that this is handled completely independently of this place, but does the Leader of the House agree that the judge should immediately recuse himself from all cases involving domestic abuse and rape and that the Ministry of Justice's review should be published urgently, to ensure that victims of rape and domestic abuse are not re-traumatised by the family justice system?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I absolutely hear and understand what the hon. Lady says. Her last point—that witnesses should not be re-traumatised—is right and fundamental. Victims ought to be at the heart of our justice system and protected. I am very limited as to what I can say about individual judges. If I may give her a steer, it is perfectly legitimate for this House to debate the behaviour and conduct of judges according to a specific motion, but not, unfortunately, to do so in the back and forth of questions.

Mr Speaker: We should not name somebody in the House in asking for that debate, but a substantive motion may be a way forward, which I am sure is what the hon. Lady was hoping for.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): Can we have a debate on the merits of cadets and the University Officers' Training Corps? I read with dismay that Cambridge University students' union has banned

[*Mr Tobias Ellwood*]

the officers' training corps from operating in the freshers' fair. I declare an interest: I was the proud president of my students' union at the academically superior Loughborough University. That idea was quickly kicked into touch when it was suggested. Does my right hon. Friend agree that officers' training corps represent an important symbiotic bond between our civilian and military communities and provide a good education on what our proud armed forces do?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First, may I congratulate my right hon. Friend on succeeding in becoming Chairman of the Defence Committee? I have a feeling that there may be a report coming on that important matter. I share his views entirely in relation to officers' training corps, which are a useful means of bringing the civilian and military population together. However, dare I say, it was Cambridge after all—I am sure Oxford would not do anything so silly.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), can we get the Backbench Business Committee up and running as soon as possible? There is now a huge queue of requests for debates. For instance, a number of Opposition Members want to apply for a debate on homelessness and housing, but we cannot yet make that application.

Mr Rees-Mogg: There was a debate on that last week, so these issues are being debated. The Government are trying to facilitate debates in the days we have available prior to the Backbench Business Committee's setting up, to ensure that issues raised by Back Benchers are given an airing, and we will continue to do so, but of course we want the Committee to be set up as soon as is practicable.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Yesterday, mums and dads, grandparents and loved ones of more than 20 young children who have epileptic seizures came to this House to ask for medical cannabis to be prescribed by their consultants free on the NHS. I ask again, as I have asked the Leader of the House several times, for a debate on the Floor of this House—not in Westminster Hall, and not through the Backbench Business Committee, although I am sure it would grant one—so that we can hold Ministers to account for why those who get a private subscription and can pay for it, get medical cannabis, but those who cannot pay for it are second-class citizens?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That issue was raised with the Prime Minister recently, and I know that the Health Secretary is well aware of it and pushing forward to ensure that matters are taken to a satisfactory conclusion. I understand my right hon. Friend's desire for a debate, but I would suggest to him that this is an issue that can be very suitably raised during the pre-recess Adjournment debate, and if a number of other Members raise it at the same point, that will ensure that the issue is thoroughly discussed.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I understand that the census order in Scotland was laid on 23 January 2020, and 10 years ago the census order

was laid on 21 October 2009. In December 2018, we were promised that the order would be laid in autumn 2019, but we are still waiting. Can the Leader of the House tell Parliament when we can expect the census order to be laid?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There was a general election in December, and that slightly interrupted the normal proceedings of business. However, yes of course it is important that the census orders are laid in a timely fashion, and that will happen.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): May we have a debate in Government time on compensation for Equitable Life policyholders? Previously, a Conservative Chancellor accepted the ombudsman's report in full and the differences between what policyholders would have received from their policies and what they received from elsewhere. On that shortfall, £1.5 billion has currently been paid out, but it is calculated that the actual loss was £4.3 billion. When will policyholders actually receive justice?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was on the all-party group on Equitable Life and, like many Members, I had constituents affected by this, but I think the Government have done what is reasonable to put this right. In 2011, they established the Equitable Life payment scheme and have paid out over £1.2 billion to nearly 1 million policyholders. The scheme was wound down in 2016, but there are no plans to reopen this scheme or to revisit any of the previous policy decisions.

I understand that there are some who are disappointed that the taxpayer could not fund the full £4.1 billion relative losses suffered by policyholders, but there are always constraints on Government expenditure. It is worth bearing in mind that, at the point at which this scheme came out, we were running a budget deficit of about £150 billion a year. Within those limits, I think the scheme was reasonable. Up to £1.5 billion tax-free was provided for the scheme because some of the most vulnerable did receive 100% of their losses.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Last week, alongside many colleagues from across the House, including the Prime Minister, I attended the excellent Keep Britain Tidy event. Littering and fly-tipping is of huge concern to my constituents as it adversely affects not only our environment, but the wellbeing of local residents. May we have a debate on the powers of local authorities to tackle this blight? Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as well as issuing fixed penalty fines, a fitting punishment would be requiring perpetrators to undertake supervised litter picking in their local community? That would be a better form of retribution and also act as a very strong deterrent.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It was marvellous to see the Wombles coming from Wimbledon all the way to Westminster—the Wombles of Westminster—ensuring that we try to keep Britain tidy. I think the punishment of offenders is probably a matter for the Lord Chancellor, but I will pass on the representations of my hon. Friend.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It seemed earlier this week that this place had become a very England-centric Parliament, but given the uncertainty we have around Brexit and the Government's desire to

level up the economy in Scotland and the north, will the Leader of the House meet me to discuss how we could reconstitute the Scottish Grand Committee to allow a full, focused and respectful discussion about matters important to Scotland and to the UK?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am always open to meetings with all right hon. and hon. Members, and if the hon. Gentleman would like to be in touch with me, of course I would be delighted to meet him.

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): I am very proud of the vibrant Muslim community in Newport West and the fantastic interfaith community work they do to support local people of all faiths and none, so can the Leader of the House tell us when the Government plan to adopt the all-party group on British Muslims definition of Islamophobia, and can we have a debate in Government time on the contribution of the Muslim community to public life in the UK?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I was absolutely delighted earlier this week to be able to go to the Muslims for Britain party celebrating the role the Muslim community played in the debate relating to the referendum in 2016. It is important that we recognise the commitment and the contribution made to our society by all communities and all religions. As regards a debate in Government time, I am not sure that that is going to be easy to arrange.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The terrorist outrage last week reminds us of Burke's wisdom that

“Good order is the foundation of all things”,

and further to the question raised at Prime Minister's questions yesterday by my hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Suella Braverman) and today by my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Robert Courts), will the Leader of the House look at judicial activism? We do need a statement not just on the escape from the clutches of the European Union but on rights legislation which is used to justify the unjustifiable and defend the indefensible. It is in the authority of this place that the people's power resides.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right: the power rests with this place and it is up to us to exercise it. The only constraints on this House and what it does have been placed on it by this House and, if this House wishes to review those constraints, it is entitled to do so. But the democratic will is exercised through Parliament and that is a fundamental constitutional principle.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I was very interested in the Leader of the House's response to the questions about compensation for the Equitable Life pensioners. It may be opportune to have a general debate in Government time on justice for pensioners. That would allow us to discuss the WASPI women—the 1950s women—and, just as importantly for my constituents, when the mineworkers and their widows can expect pensions justice. That would not cost the Government a penny; it is the miners' own money.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On the WASPI women, there has been considerable effort to ease the very difficult problem that involved raising the pension age. Nobody has had their retirement age increased by more than 18 months and seven years' notice was given of the changes, although I understand the distress that this has caused to some people. The issue the hon. Gentleman raises regarding the miners is of considerable importance. I will pass it on to the relevant Minister on his behalf and see if I can get him a fuller answer.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con): On 30 April this year, one of the UK's biggest cycling races, the Tour de Yorkshire, comes to Marske and Redcar for the first time. May we have a debate in Government time on the excellence of Yorkshire cycling?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The excellence of Yorkshire cycling is clearly known across the world. I believe that there is a second-tier event that takes place on the continent, which has nothing like the magnificence of the Tour de Yorkshire. I congratulate my hon. Friend, but I am afraid to say that I am going to puncture his enthusiasm because I am not going to be able to offer him a debate in Government time.

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): In October 2017, the Government announced plans to increase the maximum penalty for causing death by dangerous driving to life imprisonment; it is now 2020 and we are still waiting. While the Government dither, families continue to see the killers of their loved ones receive paltry prison sentences, which simply adds to their sense of injustice. Can the Leader of the House arrange for a Minister from the MOJ to make a statement to the House to confirm when the Government will bring forward these important proposals?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Those proposals remain Government policy and a sentencing Bill will, I believe, be coming forward. There are Justice questions on 25 February and I encourage the hon. Lady to raise this important matter, which has considerable cross-party support, on that occasion.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate on how we can encourage our constituents, no matter their background, sex, age or disability, to participate in organised grassroots sport as part of the campaign to encourage healthier lifestyles, and how important community assets, such as Bury football club and its Gigg Lane home, can be the drivers for such positive change?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I reiterate my congratulations to my hon. Friend on his campaign for Bury football club, which he is absolutely assiduous about? Never having had great sporting prowess myself, I have always been a bit nervous about trying to enforce on others that which I would not particularly wish to do, but the more cricketers we have in this country the better.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Scientists tell us that we need to protect about 30% of the world's oceans by 2030 by placing areas of oceans off limits to human activity. For the first time ever, a global ocean treaty being negotiated by the UN could

[Patricia Gibson]

make that possible. Will the Leader of the House make a statement setting out how the UK Government will contribute to the global ocean treaty negotiations, and can he confirm that the most senior members of his Government will participate fully in the negotiations to ensure as robust a treaty as possible to protect oceans?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I keep on reminding hon. Members that it is not my Government—it is Her Majesty's. That may be a particularly good thing to remind people of as today is the 68th anniversary of her accession. However, the Government take the matter of oceans very seriously. Hon. Members will be aware that large areas of sea under the control of Her Majesty's Government have been protected. I am therefore sure that the Government will, at the most senior level, be involved in those discussions.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): May we have a debate on neighbourhood watch schemes? Local people in my Colne Valley constituency are rightly worried after a series of car break-ins and burglaries. I very much welcome West Yorkshire police recruiting hundreds of new police officers this year, but neighbourhood watch schemes also have an important role to play, providing intelligence to the local police and helping to make our local communities feel safer.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Indeed. Preventing neighbourhood crimes, such as burglary and car theft, is a priority for this Government. Just last week, the Government opened up a £25 million safer street fund for local police and crime commissioners to bid for resources to invest in crime prevention measures, such as improved street lighting and expanding neighbourhood watch. My hon. Friend will be delighted to know that, for the part of policing that is actually done by the police, there will be a further 256 officers in West Yorkshire police in year one of the Government's police uplift, supported by an increase of £36.7 million in 2021. There is good news for policing in West Yorkshire.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The current Chancellor, when he was Home Secretary, suggested that the time had come when the Government might reconsider the current ban on asylum seekers working on their arrival in this country. Will the Leader please update the House on whether the Government are considering bringing forward some sort of review or change in the law on that aspect?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There are Home Office questions on Monday. I think that would be the right time to raise that important question.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Can the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State to come to the House to make a statement about flood defences? There has been a lot of focus, rightly, on places such as Fishlake, which suffered terribly from floods just before the general election, but my constituents are still waiting for improved flood defences from the Boxing Day floods in 2015. Perhaps the Secretary of State could come to the House to tell us when my constituents will get the flood defences they both deserve and need.

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is obviously very important that flood defences are put in place. The Government have a programme of improving flood defences, including expenditure of considerable amounts of taxpayers' money, but I will of course pass on my hon. Friend's question to the relevant Secretary of State to ensure he receives a fuller answer.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Junk food adverts drive childhood obesity, but the Government still have not banned them from before the 9 o'clock watershed. May we have a statement from the Government confirming when they will bring in this common-sense change?

Mr Rees-Mogg: There is always a balance with these things. By and large, people do not want the nanny state, however keen they may be on nannies. Before I get heckled by Opposition Members, let me say that nannies are splendid, the nanny state a little bit less so. There are Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions next Thursday, but it is a balance between free speech and the ability of businesses to carry on their business, and protecting young people.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I was tempted to ask if the legislation on the release of terrorist prisoners should be made retrospective in Northern Ireland, but that would probably be a bit cruel to the Government. Lord Dunlop was asked to write a report on promoting the Union. When will that report be published? Will it be published? Will its findings be debated and will there be a debate on the benefits of the Union?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I think we see the benefits of the Union every day, not least in the contribution the hon. Gentleman makes to our debates—and indeed in the contribution of our friends on the SNP Benches. Despite the fact they do not really approve of this place, they make a wonderful contribution and keep our debates going extraordinarily well. The Union is at the heart of our nation. The Prime Minister has made himself Minister for the Union and I share my right hon. Friend's desire to promote the Union at every possible occasion.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The mineworkers' pension scheme really needs review now. Since 1994, the Government have taken £4.4 billion out of the surplus—50% of it—and frankly, a much greater proportion should be going to the miners and their widows. There are miners' widows in my constituency who are surviving on virtual pittance. It really is time for a proper review and the trustees fully support having one. Will the Government look at this as a matter of urgency and will the right hon. Gentleman personally introduce the debate?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is not within my purview—it is not my responsibility—but I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave some moments ago to the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris). This is an important issue and I will take it up with the relevant Minister on both their behalves.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I am glad that the Leader of the House values the contribution of Select Committees. I am sure he agrees that they must look and feel like the areas that they are there to serve. Last Session, the Scottish Affairs Committee

was particularly effective because all its members were from Scottish constituencies and it felt a bit like the Scotland that we were elected from. Does he agree that as we go forward, it is important that we have the same type of representation on the Scottish Affairs Committee, that it must feel a bit like Scotland and that it must have Scottish-based Members on it?

Mr Rees-Mogg: A moment ago, our friends on the SNP Benches were complaining that the English were voting on things exclusively and that that was a bad idea. They are now saying that there should be a Committee that is exclusively made up of people from Scotland—I am not sure the two arguments go together.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): When will the Government re-establish the Intelligence and Security Committee so that it can resume its very important work, including publishing the much-awaited Russia report? Will the Leader of the House assure me that it will not take the Government five months, as it did after the previous election?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The progress on setting up Committees is continuing, as I mentioned, and they will all be established as soon as is reasonably practical, but I heard the Prime Minister say yesterday that the excitement over the Russia report is really rather overdone.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Hammersmith suspension bridge is a national treasure, built in 1824. Its necessary closure for repair works has caused chaos across south-west London. There are additional vehicles on roads that are already congested, people are spending an hour extra each way to get to work on buses, and people are unable to get to hospitals—we do not have an A&E in Putney. Will the Government make time to debate Hammersmith bridge and especially funding? The lack of funding will stop the repairs going on, but a debate could unlock the funding and open the bridge.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I congratulate the hon. Lady on standing up for her constituents, and many people who drive through London, on this considerable inconvenience, which has affected so many. The bridge is owned by the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham and it is for the borough to maintain and repair the bridge, but the Government are considering a proposal submitted by Transport for London on behalf of the borough for funding to repair the bridge and intend to respond in due course. I cannot promise a debate until after that response has been given, but I strongly encourage her to carry on making representations on this, because nagging away in this House can be very effective.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): My constituent has been awaiting an appeal on a personal independence payment claim since 11 June last year. She has now been told that it may be heard in March, which would mean she has been waiting for a decision on a PIP claim for a full nine months. Will the Leader of the House bring forward a statement or a debate to tell us what the Government will do to address this wholly unacceptable situation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I will make sure that that constituent's concerns are passed on to the Department.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Women across the nations of the UK coping with the menopause are suffering from the overall shortage of hormone replacement therapy medicines. Can we have a statement on what work is under way to end the crisis and what joint work is being undertaken with the Scottish Government?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I understand that there is a global shortage and that it is therefore not under the control even of our great Secretary of State.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Ahead of the Windrush debate on Monday, will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on how many people have died waiting for the compensation that they were rightfully owed? I have a constituent who was told by the Home Office, before he died in July, that his application had been concluded in his favour. He did not get the compensation before he died. His family still do not know what is going on, even though they have been told that they will get it. Will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to update us on exactly what is happening with those who have died?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The Windrush scandal is a serious blot on the nation's escutcheon. We should all be deeply concerned about the way in which it has affected individual constituents; that should never have been allowed to occur. Monday is the occasion to question the Home Office in relation to this, and I am glad that the Windrush Compensation Scheme (Expenditure) Bill will be coming forward.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): It is more than two and half years since the House debated the then new drugs strategy. Given that our drugs policy is failing the most vulnerable in our communities, may we have a debate on an update of the strategy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The drugs strategy is a matter of enormous importance to this country, and there are issues surrounding it and its enforcement. The Government have been pursuing the county lines issue and the policing of it, and have been quite successful in bringing people to justice. That must continue, and the drugs policy must be pursued vigorously.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) was absolutely right to mention the people and families who came to the House yesterday, including my constituent Rachel Rankmore. Her son Bailey's symptoms have been greatly alleviated by the use of medical cannabis, but it is costing £2,000 a month, which is unacceptable. Why can we not just have that debate and resolve this matter quickly?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have very little to add to what I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead a few moments ago, but I would encourage the hon. Gentleman to raise the matter in an Adjournment debate before the recess.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): When I was a councillor, the then Secretary of State for Health, Frank Dobson, wrote to all councillors

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

reminding them of their obligations and responsibilities as corporate parents. We know that children in care are over-represented in the prison and homeless populations, and as users of mental health services. In the light of the appalling findings in a report on children's social care services in Hull which was published morning, may we please have a debate about how the Government can strengthen political accountability for those children who have no voice? The director of children's services has gone. The chief executive of the council is saying that we cannot put the failings down wholly to the cuts, which have been enormous, but I think it is time for the holder of the education portfolio to consider his position.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The House has always taken the safety and wellbeing of children very seriously, and obviously the Government do as well. Extra funds are being made available: £410 million is being invested this year and next in social care, including social care for children, along with £84 million over five years to enable more children to stay at home safely. When issues involving child safety arise, it is the responsibility of the House and the Government to look into them carefully, and to see what can be done to ensure that children are safe and proper measures are in place. The Government are certainly trying to do that, but this is one of those areas in which one can never do enough, and we must carry on doing more.

Mr Speaker: We now come to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. You almost cut me out there, you know.

The Leader of the House and the Government are well aware of the issue of invasive alien plants, animals and birds, such as mink, grey squirrels and signal crayfish, and of the problems caused by ash dieback and moth caterpillars. It is time to put the balance back into nature. There are now more parakeets than owls and kingfishers in Great Britain. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on this matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend the Chief Whip has just whispered to me that he is very concerned about Japanese knotweed.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this important issue. The Government will shortly respond to the Environmental Audit Committee's report on invasive species, and it may be a good subject for a debate once the response is published. We are committed to being leaders in tackling invasive species, and our 25-year environment plan commits us to enhancing the biosecurity of the country even further. I note that the Committee of one that is currently the Backbench Business Committee heard what the hon. Gentleman had to say, and I therefore think that a debate on this subject may conceivably be forthcoming.

Historical Stillbirth Burials and Cremations

11.48 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): I beg to move,

That this House has considered historical stillbirth burials and cremations.

Let me begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) on securing the debate, which was also supported by my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes).

It is a fact that anyone can be a Member of Parliament and anyone can be a Minister, but only someone who really cares can get things done, and it is without doubt that the hon. Lady has achieved much in the time she has been in the House because she cares. I have the utmost respect for her. She has done a fantastic job, and I think that her compassion has been demonstrated by the fact that she called for this debate.

Over the past few years, debates in this House have successfully raised awareness of the importance of supporting families bereaved through a stillbirth and other types of baby loss. By speaking openly and sharing their personal experiences, Members of this House have helped to stimulate improvements in bereavement care, including the development of the national bereavement care pathway for pregnancy and baby loss.

Unfortunately, in the not so distant past, people thought differently. Until the 1980s and 1990s, bereaved families of stillborn children were kept in the dark by doctors and midwives, ostensibly for their own protection. It was assumed that if a mother or father was allowed to see their stillborn baby and establish any kind of connection with it, this would only prolong and worsen their grief.

When I was preparing for this debate, I was reminded of my own experience as a nurse. In 1976, I was working on a gynae ward, and I was asked to take receipt of a cot that was coming up from the labour ward. In the cot was a baby that was still alive, which I was told was to be returned to "Rose Cottage" and put in the sluice room. The baby went there until it died a few hours later. Remembering that experience of years ago and the work I undertake now on maternity safety show just how far we have come in the way we treat maternity incidents, newborn safety and mothers.

Many parents were never consulted over funeral arrangements for babies lost through stillbirth, with individual hospitals having to set their own procedures and their own means of disposing of bodies. That makes this difficult, because it means that there is not just one answer across the country. There is not a clear picture as the situation is very piecemeal. Many parents were never told what happened to the body of their baby or the location of any burial or cremation. People thought they were doing the right thing for the parents by not inflicting more trauma on them.

That is a generous interpretation. There was a slight culture in those days in which women were not regarded with the esteem that they are today. It was almost as though this was not just about protecting them, and that they were not worthy of being given the information,

either. There are question marks over the explanation, and that has a lot to do with the status of women at the time and again today.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Minister is making an excellent point about the culture and about how women were treated. With families now coming forward wanting information about what happened, does she feel that those women and families are being treated better now? Are they, for example, being given the opportunity to find out where ashes have been strewn without their knowledge or permission?

Ms Dorries: I certainly hope so. In fact, those parents and women who are coming forward now are enabling us to move along the pathway to women being given the full, correct information about what happens when a maternity incident takes place. We still have a long way to go, but, as I said at the beginning, the hon. Member for Swansea East is part of that process. The debates that we have here about baby loss are also part of that process. There is not one answer, one sledgehammer, that comes from the Department of Health and Social Care. Everybody has a role to play, because this is an issue that is spread over decades. It is about culture, and it is about the culture in hospitals today. It is about the esteem in which women and mothers are held within society. It is a complex picture with many parts, and everybody has an opportunity to play their part, as do those women who are now coming forward to ask where their babies' ashes are.

Some hospitals arranged for stillborn babies to be cremated and told the parents that, because the baby was small, it would not be possible to recover any ashes. Even if ashes were recovered, their parents were not told. The ashes might have been spread in a dedicated garden of remembrance, but in other cases they might simply have been disposed of or kept in storage at the crematorium.

Over the past 20 years, we have heard about the discovery of mass graves containing the remains of stillborn babies in, among other places, Lancashire, Devon, Middlesbrough and Huddersfield. The 2015 review of infant cremations at Emstrey commercial crematorium in Shrewsbury found that, by using appropriate equipment and cremation techniques, it is normally possible to preserve ashes from infant cremations.

We now recognise that parents are committed and connected to their children long before birth—I think we knew that back then—perhaps at the point of conception or even earlier, when women imagine themselves being mothers for the first time. I am happy to say that, nowadays, parents of stillborn babies are able to be as involved in decisions about what happens to their baby as they choose to be. New regulations were introduced in 2016 to ensure that parents' wishes for the cremation of their children are respected. The regulations introduced include a new statutory definition of what constitutes ashes or remains and require cremation request forms to be amended so that family's wishes are explicitly recorded prior to any cremation.

Thanks to tireless campaigning by the hon. Member for Swansea East, the Government launched the children's funeral fund last July so that bereaved parents do not have to worry about meeting the cost of burying or

cremating their child or stillborn baby. The fund is available regardless of a family's income and also includes a contribution towards the cost of the coffin. We have received over 1,000 claims to date, and I am sure that the hon. Lady must be incredibly proud.

The hon. Member for Swansea East called for this debate to consider what we in Parliament can do to help bereaved parents who did not have the opportunity to bury their stillborn babies and now wish to trace their final resting places. We know that parents never forget their babies, no matter how long ago their death occurred. Unfortunately, tracing a baby's grave or a record of cremation may not be easy, and it can be a difficult time for people, both mentally and emotionally.

Records containing information about the locations of the remains of stillborn babies are not held centrally. Parents therefore need to start their search by contacting the hospital where the baby was stillborn, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows. If records are still available, the hospital should be able to tell parents whether the baby was buried or cremated and the name of the funeral director who made the arrangements at the time—if, indeed, a funeral director was involved. Hospitals do not keep records indefinitely, and some records may not contain enough detail to be helpful. The hospital where the baby was stillborn may have closed or the funeral director involved—if one was—may no longer be in business.

Cemeteries and crematoriums, though, are legally obliged to keep permanent records. If neither the hospital nor the funeral director has a record of which cemetery or crematorium was used, parents can contact local cemeteries and crematoriums, starting with those nearest to the hospital where their baby was stillborn. As I mentioned, in many cases stillborn babies were and may still be buried in a shared grave with other babies. These graves are usually unmarked, although they do have a plot number and can be located on a cemetery plan. In many cases, several babies were cremated together. The crematorium should have a record of where the ashes are scattered or buried, but I am afraid the emphasis is on the word "should".

My sympathies lie with families who have had to deal with the pain of not knowing what happened to their children's remains for so many years. It is hard for many of us to imagine how long that pain must last. The Department of Health and Social Care expects all hospitals to provide as much information as they have available to any parents who inquire about what happened to their stillborn babies, no matter how long ago they died.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I echo the Minister's tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris).

It is unimaginable to think that parents who lost their child through stillbirth were not even privy to the arrangements for the cremation or burial of that child's body—it was a completely different world.

On the Minister's last point about urging hospitals to co-operate as much as possible, there is a bigger issue in that some of these children may not have been stillborn. Where a child lived for a while, as in the case she cited from 1976, there are greater questions to be asked about the child's birth in that hospital. As a result of my Civil

[*Tim Loughton*]

Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, coroners will have the power, when the regulations are introduced, to look at such cases. Does she agree that there is a serious question not just on the whereabouts of a baby's remains but on the circumstances of that baby's birth?

Ms Dorries: That is an entirely different question but, yes, I completely agree with the substance of my hon. Friend's point. I am sure he contributed to the Government's consultation on the proposal for coroners to investigate stillbirths, which closed on 18 June 2019. The consultation attracted over 300 responses from a wide range of stakeholders. Officials in the Ministry of Justice and the Department of Health and Social Care have been working carefully to analyse the responses received. The question of babies who were not stillborn but who lived for a period of time before they died is possibly worth considering.

12 noon

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I do not normally start with warm words about a Minister's speech, but what we have just heard shows great empathy for and insight into an incredibly difficult subject. I thank her for her introduction.

I express our sincere condolences to all parents who have not only suffered the loss of a baby or infant but have been denied the opportunity to grieve when their child was buried or cremated in an undisclosed place or when they did not receive their child's ashes following the cremation. That should never have happened—it was wrong—and I am sure all Members on both sides of the House will wish to join me in extending our sympathy and full support to all those bereaved parents who found themselves in that totally unacceptable situation.

Each year, thousands of people sadly experience the loss of a baby in pregnancy, soon after birth or in infancy, and the feeling of loss and isolation can be overwhelming for bereaved parents. Nothing can remove that pain and grief, of course, but we know from evidence that good bereavement care can make a very real difference to the experience of parents and families at such a tragic time, which is why what we have heard already today has been so powerful.

Not so long ago, things were very different for parents who lost a baby during pregnancy or shortly after birth. Indeed, as we have heard, many hospital staff had to quickly remove the baby, and the parents were sent home to try again. Fortunately, this is not something everyone has to think about, but the law is clear on what must now happen to babies who are stillborn after 24 weeks of pregnancy or who die in infancy: they must be buried or cremated, and cemeteries and crematoriums must keep records of those burials and cremations.

Before the mid-1980s, it was often hospitals that took care of funeral arrangements for stillborn babies and for babies who died shortly after birth, and we know that parents were often not consulted or involved in those funeral arrangements. We can all see now that that was not the right approach.

The bodies of the babies were cremated, buried or put in a communal plot. In some cases, the bodies were placed in a coffin with a woman who had also recently

passed away. Shockingly, information was not shared with either family in that situation. Many parents were not told what happened to their baby's body when they were buried or cremated.

If the baby had been cremated, not all parents received their baby's ashes. Some parents were wrongly told that there would be no ashes, and in some cases when ashes were recovered, they were disposed of without the parents' knowledge. Again, we all now find that shocking, and it is extremely hard to fathom why it was allowed to be the practice at the time.

At this juncture, I echo the Minister's tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for calling the Government to account and securing this debate. She has been a tireless campaigner for bereaved parents and, of course, she brings her own deeply moving personal experience to this place. She articulates why this is such an important issue in a way that only those who have suffered personal tragedy can and do. She is entirely right to demand help and support to enable the parents of stillborn babies to trace their graves so that they can finally commemorate their loss. It is only right that we do all we can do to support these bereaved parents, having failed them in the past.

I also want to commend all the brave individuals and families who first brought these issues to light, and those who have taken part in inquiries and consultations, sharing their own painful experiences, which we know would have been difficult, to ensure that lessons are learned and that no other families have to go through what they have gone through. I should also mention those who have worked selflessly and tirelessly to help bereaved families to trace their lost babies, as we are grateful for their efforts and extend our gratitude to them. I think we all agree that these people should never have been put in that position.

Thankfully, since the 1980s there have been significant and positive changes in the way those families are now treated. There is a much greater understanding that the care bereaved families receive from healthcare and other professionals following the loss of a child can have long-lasting effects. Indeed, the need for psychological support following pregnancy loss and stillbirth is recognised in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance, the "Better Births" report, the maternity transformation programme and the NHS long-term plan. All those documents rightly highlight the need to improve perinatal mental health care. However, we must ensure that those plans translate into action and that the needs of bereaved parents are explicitly addressed in quality standards, national guidance, training for healthcare professionals and guidance for local services. It is important that all parents who experience pregnancy and baby loss and need specialist psychological support can access it in a timely fashion.

We know that, unfortunately, good practice is not consistent across the board and we need to aim to ensure that it is. Too often, people who experience a psychiatric illness after their loss do not receive the support they need. Most mental health support is available only to mothers and is focused on women who are pregnant or have already lost their baby. As discussed in the annual baby loss debates, we urge the Government to develop a national standard, with guidance.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): We all agree that the woman, and indeed the whole family, should receive that psychological support if they need it, but just saying it does not mean that this help is getting to the people it should be reaching. In many cases, people find it almost impossible to get that support.

Justin Madders: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention, as he raises the very point: the support is not consistent across the piece. We rightly raise that issue when we discuss these matters, because we need better support, better funding and better delivery of these specialist services. As he says, this is a difficult issue and support is needed at the right time.

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I am pleased to hear what our Front Bencher is saying about this important subject, but I want to develop this point about mental health support. For families who have suffered and do not know where their baby's ashes have been strewn, asking the local council to make inquiries, as happened in Shrewsbury with the Emstrey inquiry, goes some way to seeing whether there are answers to the questions they still have. Will the shadow Minister commit his support to local authorities that want to carry out these independent inquiries, to give whatever closure they can to families by trying to get the information they seek?

Justin Madders: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I know about the work she has been doing in Hull. She has articulated in the past why it is clearly important for such inquiries to take place and how it is the most effective way for families to achieve closure on these difficult issues. I am certainly in support of what she says.

The availability of talking therapies for bereaved parents is not how it should be. Nearly nine out of 10 clinical commissioning groups do not currently commission talking therapies specifically for parents, and where the services do exist they are usually only for mothers. We need to do better than that. Of course, I acknowledge that there is much good practice out there, but Members will know that it is often reliant on charitable grants and third parties. That is one of the main reasons why provision is patchy and at risk from wider funding decisions. I therefore ask the Minister to undertake a review of the current provision, including an evaluation of the models of best practice. Will she ensure that parents and professionals are involved in that exercise? The Minister was absolutely right to identify that when she talked about the culture in the past.

We also need to acknowledge that although the culture today has definitely improved, it is still not where we would like it to be. As we know, most of the time those whose loved one has been involved in a tragedy in the health service just want to know why it has happened and how it can be prevented from happening again. The former Health Secretary, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), has on several occasions addressed the need for us to move away from a blame culture and towards a learning culture, so that when things go wrong there is proper analysis of why things have happened and we understand how we can prevent those things from happening again.

Only this week, I have heard from a constituent who has lost a lot of faith in the system in terms of getting to the truth about what happened to one of their family. They commented that the trust seemed to spend more money on lawyers than on actually uncovering the truth, and that should not be happening. We need to move away from the defensive culture that we see on occasions. I hope that we can look at that issue, possibly through the Select Committee, because there is still a temptation for trusts to lawyer-up at the first sign of concern. Most of the time, parents and family members want answers.

Back in October we heard that the Healthcare Safety Investigation Branch annual report would share some of the learning about the more than 1,500 individual cases in which something has gone wrong in one trust. I hope that report will be available shortly. I think the quote was that it was going to be available in "early 2020", so when she responds will the Minister update us as to when we can expect to see it?

Finally, although we rightly focus on the families in this debate, we must also not forget the impact on staff, some of whom will regularly have to deal with tragedies. The Minister set out clearly what that looks like. It is important that their voice is heard in this debate as well.

12.12 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Proust said:

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes."

My eyes were opened to the subject by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), since when we have worked together to bring about the children's funeral fund—under her leadership, by the way; I was merely her acolyte. In doing that work, I became interested not just in that subject but in the whole matter of how people are dealt with when they die and how their loved ones are treated. There is much to be said on that, but time does not permit us to say it all today, for this particular debate is of course about stillbirth and lost children.

The Minister rightly said that things have improved. Some of this issue relates to the past—what happened to those who were loved and lost in years gone by—but I implore the Minister to reflect on whether it is possible for us to do more with local authorities, which are responsible for these matters, because, as she said, cemeteries maintain records, and cemeteries lie within the purview of local government. Perhaps further work can be done to impress on local authorities the need to make information available. Furthermore, in respect of people who are stillborn now, perhaps we could be certain that all health authorities are doing their best. I agree that things have improved, but we need to make sure that that improvement is consistent throughout the country.

In respect of the support given to those who have lost, as a number of Members have said, we need to ensure that the counselling, which makes so much difference, is readily available, quickly, and to whole families. Much is made of maternal love, and rightly so, but too little is made of paternal love. It is sometimes underestimated and often under-celebrated. The love of fathers and grandparents needs to be taken into account, too. Support for whole families when these events occur is critical.

Tim Loughton: My right hon. Friend makes a good point about fathers. We talk a lot about the perinatal mental illness suffered by at least one in six women—and much more is being done about that—but it is less known that many fathers, particularly new fathers, suffer from perinatal mental illness as well. The impact of losing a newborn is of importance not just for the mother but equally for the father. We forget that at our peril.

Sir John Hayes: My hon. Friend, who served with me in the Department for Education, where he was responsible for matters concerning children, has a long track record of defending the interests of families and fathers. I pay tribute to that and entirely endorse what he has just said. Grandparents also feel these things very deeply. My children are only 19 and 15, so I am not enjoying grandparenthood yet, but those Members who are will know quite how profound their involvement is and their distress at loss can be. I entirely agree with what has been said about counselling, support and mental health.

I hope you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, for saying a word about public health funerals, a parallel but closely related matter on which the hon. Member for Swansea East and I have also co-operated. Councils in the UK spend about £4 million a year on nearly 15,000 burials or cremations for those with no next of kin or whose families are unable or unwilling to pay. They are known as public health funerals, although rather chillingly they are sometimes described as paupers' funerals, which sounds so Dickensian, does it not? None the less, public health funerals are held for about 3% of all deaths, and there are real concerns about poor practice. The number of public health funerals has increased dramatically since 1997.

Tragically—in some cases councils are providing the bare minimum provision. Some of these funerals are held behind closed doors and families are prohibited from attending. There are instances of councils refusing to return ashes to families, even when requested. Sometimes, loved ones are not told when the funeral is going to take place, so they do not even know whether their loved one has been buried or, in most cases, cremated. I take this opportunity, with your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, to call again on the Government to communicate with local authorities about the strict need to ensure that these funerals are dealt with in a decent, civilised and humane way. I am not confident that that is happening across the whole country, and it needs to do so without further delay.

I know that other Members want to contribute, so I shall draw my remarks to a conclusion simply by saying this. I spoke earlier of the Dickensian character of paupers' funerals. Dickens said:

“A loving heart is the truest wisdom.”

Love is greater than life because love lasts longer and, because it does it should be at the heart of policy makers' considerations when they deal with the highly important, very sensitive and profound issues that we debate today.

12.19 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I am very pleased to participate in this debate today. I echo the thanks that have been expressed to the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for securing this debate and for all the work that she has done in this area.

The death of a baby is an extremely traumatic event, which impacts on both parents and the wider family for many years, if not forever. It is not something that can simply be got over. It is an event that families and individuals simply learn to live with. The burial of a child is also very traumatic, but it can, for many bereaved parents and their families, form a very important part of the grieving process, and yet it was only in the mid to late 1980s that the death of a baby was truly starting to be recognised as a major bereavement. Until then, as we have heard some Members mention, any baby who died before birth, regardless of the gestation period, was swiftly removed from the labour ward, and parents were not given an opportunity to see or hold them. Some mothers were sedated after the birth because it was thought that this would help them to forget. It was a generally held view among professionals and, indeed, society that parents should forget their babies and that it was best to carry on as though nothing had happened. Grieving was actively discouraged.

Stillbirth truly was a huge taboo, and we are now gradually starting to break down that taboo and deal with these matters with more compassion and sensitivity. I agree with what the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) said about the role of fathers in such events. Until fairly recently, fathers of babies who died before birth were pretty much ignored, and their role was considered to be one of merely supporting his wife or partner in her attempts to forget about the lost child and to have another child as quickly as possible. It is genuinely hard to believe that, until very recently, that was how we as a society dealt with stillbirth.

Some parents did not even give their baby a name, because they were not advised that they could or should do so. Some did not even know the gender of their baby, and many had no idea about what had happened to their child's body. As a result, the grief felt at this traumatic life event was silenced and frowned upon, leading to unnecessary isolation, family breakdowns and poor mental health. It is down in great part to the work of charitable groups such as Sands—the stillbirth and neonatal death charity—that these appalling practices and attitudes, which, these days, are hard to believe, began to change.

Recent years have taught us that, although things are better these days, there can be no room for complacency. We have also learned that there are very different practices in baby cremations across the UK, with some parents receiving ashes from some crematoriums, while others are not. The availability of ashes after cremations seems to have depended on the equipment and cremation techniques used and/or how the relevant authority defined ashes. It seems that there was no statutory definition of ashes in the UK. That has now been rectified in legislation, and we have had legislation in Scotland similar to that mentioned by the Minister.

There is also the issue of parents being told that there were no ashes to be recovered when, in fact, there were ashes, but they were sometimes disposed of without the parents' knowledge. Indeed, such practices led to investigations in Scotland, going back some decades, at Mortonhall crematorium in Edinburgh.

Dame Diana Johnson: I am interested in asking the hon. Lady about the Mortonhall investigation inquiry. Does she feel that that helped parents who had questions

about what had gone on and why things had happened in the way that they had? Was it something that she would support for other parts of the United Kingdom in cases where there are still questions that have not been answered?

Patricia Gibson: The answer to her question is yes. There is no room for complacency. That investigation led to a whole swath of measures to make sure that nothing like this could ever happen again to parents and that the law would indeed be on their side when similar events occurred in the future. That, I think, is something in which the Minister will take an interest.

The investigation, the Infant Cremation Commission report, and the report of the National Cremation Investigation led to positive change. Now, in almost every circumstance, parents should receive the ashes from their baby's cremation. A code of practice has been established by a national committee on infant cremation, setting out key principles and minimum standards for all organisations conducting infant cremations.

In March 2015, the Scottish Government announced the appointment of an inspector of crematoriums for Scotland to ensure that all crematoriums were adhering to the current legislation and best practice following the national investigation into circumstances surrounding historical infant cremation practices in Scotland. A criminal sanction was introduced to prohibit the cremation of a foetus, a stillborn baby, or an infant with an unrelated person. Indeed, legislation was brought forward to overhaul policy and practice in the burial and cremation sector, with improved staff training.

We also know that, until fairly recently, the parents of stillborn children were never told where or how their baby had been buried. To us today, that seems almost too cruel to be true and utterly beyond comprehension. I had a stillbirth at full term, and I cannot imagine a situation in which my baby would have been removed from me with no information about how or where he was buried. For the parents affected, that must have made the grieving process much more difficult and much more traumatic. We know that some parents who endured this decades ago can perhaps trace their babies' graves now, but it is something that they should never have to do. It is probably worse if those parents who seek to trace their child's remains simply cannot find where they are. Imagine the years passing and the questions growing in their head about where their baby is. I can scarcely believe the attitudes of the recent past that thought this was an appropriate way to deal with the lost babies and grieving parents and families.

We know that some of the babies were buried with other babies, or sometimes with other random adults who had recently died in hospital. Parents trying to trace the burial place of their babies years later are therefore not always successful, which simply adds to the torture and pain despite the passing of years. What is clear is that everything that can be done must be done to assist the parents looking for their lost babies.

These parents were not usually informed that their babies' loss was officially documented and that they could obtain a certification of the baby's stillbirth. Such certification can bring some comfort because it is an acknowledgement—a recognition—that their baby existed. Most had not even known that they could name their baby.

Patients in all circumstances were kept in the dark for their own protection. It was assumed that if a mother or father were allowed to see their stillborn baby and establish any kind of connection, it would only prolong their grief, but, of course, we know that parents are committed and connected to their children long before their birth—perhaps at the point of conception, or perhaps even earlier, when they imagine themselves as parents for the first time. We recognise that to lose a baby at any point in pregnancy can be profoundly traumatic.

Today, parents are encouraged to see, hold or even dress their stillborn baby if they choose to do so. They can take photographs, handprints, footprints, and a lock of hair. They are encouraged to collect mementos of their baby and grieve for them, as any parent would grieve for a child, no matter how long their life was. To know that so many couples and families have been denied that chance is heartbreaking and, frankly, difficult to comprehend. Parents who lost babies decades ago still speak of the terrible guilt that they feel about not knowing anything about what happened to their baby, or where they are buried. Sadly, though, they had very little choice in these matters, as, still in the fresh bewilderment of their grief, their babies were simply taken from them and nothing more was said. It is hard to believe that, in the '60s and '70s, this was, if not mandatory, certainly extremely commonplace, and it sounds as though it was something that would have happened hundreds of years ago.

Thankfully, we are more informed and more enlightened about these matters now. I hope that the relevant authorities in all parts of the UK will do all they can, and continue to do all they can, to help such affected parents to find out where their babies are and give them the support that they need. I know that Sands has done some excellent work in this area. Finding a baby's resting place will surely provide some peace for many of the bereaved parents and their families—peace that is much needed and to which these parents and their wider family members are entitled.

Thankfully, we all now recognise what a huge and traumatic event it is to have a baby that is stillborn and how it casts a lifelong shadow over parents and wider family members as they cope with the absent presence of a child. Whether we are talking about cremation practices or burials, all parents must be given respect and their babies must be given the dignity of a burial or cremation that involves their families and provides a ritual that can be so important when grappling with overwhelming grief.

We are doing things better, but we must not be complacent on this issue, which is hugely significant for the families and parents left behind. It is right that this important debate has taken place, and I again applaud the hon. Member for Swansea East for securing it.

12.29 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I had not intended to speak in this debate, but, as is usual with subjects brought here by the hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), it is difficult to resist; they are always such important and emotive issues, and the contributions we have heard have only heightened that fact. I also pay tribute to the sensitivity

[*Tim Loughton*]

and real-world personal knowledge that the Minister has brought to this debate, and indeed to everything to do with children and babies generally. It greatly heightens the worth of what we do here.

Stillbirth, a hugely underappreciated subject, has been disproportionately debated in the Chamber in recent years, thanks to the brave personal testimonies of many right hon. and hon. Members whose families have been affected by baby loss in such tragic ways. Their contributions have been hugely valuable and moving, but, more importantly, have led to changes in legislation and greatly raised the profile of this important issue. It is an example of some of the great but underappreciated things we do in the House, and this is another great opportunity for us to do good on a really important issue.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) was right to mention the connection with mental illness, particularly around extended family members. Too often we look at mothers in isolation, with all the problems of pregnancy and childbirth, whether it is a healthy child or a stillborn child. We need to do more, as a society and as a Government, to think of the family in the round and the implications and impact that the tragedy of stillbirth can have on others, besides the mother.

We have made great progress in legislation in recent years, but, more importantly, we have made much progress in the sensitivity with which hospitals treat bereaved parents. We have legislated for bereavement leave, for example, but we should now consider extending that to this area as well. We have maternity and paternity leave, but losing a baby is hugely traumatic and impacts on the ability of parents to work normally afterwards.

I recently visited again the new bereavement suite in Worthing Hospital, which is officially the best hospital in the country with what is officially the best maternity department in the country. The bereavement suite is a fantastic facility. It is hard to imagine that until a few years ago mothers who had sadly just given birth to a stillborn child, or a child who died soon after, would be left within hearing range of children who had fortunately been born healthy to a mother in the same ward. Greater sensitivity is now shown throughout the whole NHS. It was great to visit that example of how well we now look after parents who tragically cannot take their child home with them.

It was through Worthing Hospital's maternity department and the experience of my constituent Hayley from Worthing that I became much more familiar with the issue of stillbirth. She came to me to say that she had given birth to a stillborn child at about 19 and a half weeks at Worthing Hospital. She had been there in labour throughout the weekend and had gone through all the pains and anguish of giving birth to a stillborn child. That led to my Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019 and a debate about the whole issue of how we look at and recognise the existence of children stillborn before the 24-week threshold.

Hayley's experience goes back to the extraordinary revelations we have heard already about how we used to deal with stillborn babies and how the parents had no involvement. Once a woman was delivered of a stillborn baby, any authority or interest the parents had in that

child apparently came to an end. It was an extraordinarily brutal and inhumane approach. In the case of Hayley, she and her partner held the child, named the child, had a formal funeral for the child and now know where the child is buried and can mourn. That has been part of the grieving process for them. It is right that the parents be able to do that, if it is their wish; they got the footprint and the photographs, and that was right for them.

The tragedy still is, however, that that child never existed in the eyes of the state, because he happened to have been born before the 24-week threshold, and that is what the 2019 Act aims to address. I wish to make a plea to the Minister. Section 3 obliges the Department of Health and Social Care to conduct a review into how we can do something about pre-24-week stillbirths—they are not technically called “stillbirths”. To give him his due, the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), set up the review before the Act became law—I sat on and contributed to it, along with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson)—but it has not met since 2018 and no subsequent review has been forthcoming. We still need to sort this out, because too many babies are being born just before 24 weeks. In previous debates, I have given examples of children born at 23 weeks, six days and a few hours. In one case, twins were born either side of the 24-week threshold. One was recognised and registered and one was not. This is an anomaly and an inhumanity and it is so important that we deal with it. I urge the Minister to inquire into where we are with the review.

We talk a lot in the House about historical injustices—this debate is technically about historical injustices, although we have spoken more about the present. I think of the historical child sex abuse scandal, the inquiry into which will go on for many years, but there are also parallels with the forced adoptions that occurred many years ago, when women, in an era of different morals, were forced to give up babies born out of wedlock. Many of those children ended up in Australia. There have been many reviews into how that was allowed to happen and into helping those children to re-establish connection with their birth parents.

What downside can there be to giving every assistance, difficult though it may be, to parents who, after having a stillborn child, were given no role in what happened to the body and have no knowledge of where the child's remains are? I acknowledge that, as the Minister said, it would be difficult, particularly going back several decades, but we must make sure that hospitals, crematoriums and other public agencies do everything they can to respond sympathetically and extensively to queries from those people, just as we have done with child sex abuse and historical forced adoption.

The point I raised with the Minister might meet with some reluctance in some hospitals where practices were not of a quality we might have expected. Another section in my Act empowers coroners for the first time to investigate stillbirths. At the moment, they cannot do that, because a child who is stillborn is deemed never to have lived, and coroners can only investigate the deaths of humans who have lived. In a minority of cases—this practice was not extensive—children born alive have been designated as stillborn to avoid investigation through the coronial system. There is no reason why, once the further regulations are passed—I hope they will be

soon; the Minister is right that the consultation ended last June—that we should not get on with giving coroners the power to investigate where they have reason to suspect that a stillbirth is not as simple or straightforward as it appears and that there might have been some medical negligence, oversight or whatever. If there were clusters of unexplained stillbirths, people might be reluctant to be co-operative in tracking down the details of what happened to that child and afterwards. I would hope, in the interests of providing parents who have already suffered a loss with some degree of closure, at least on what happened to the body of that child, that everyone involved in the national health service and other public agencies would want to be as co-operative as possible.

Sir John Hayes: I asked the Minister to consider new guidance for local authorities about both past and present practice, and perhaps my hon. Friend might echo that call by suggesting that the Government should make direct and urgent contact with health authorities, for exactly the reasons he has described, with the same kind of vehemence.

Tim Loughton: That is really the point that I was looking to make, but my right hon. Friend has done it much more clearly.

If it had not been her intention already, perhaps a takeaway from this debate for the Minister might be to send a communication around maternity departments, and indeed local authorities responsible for crematoriums and others, to express the hope that they would co-operate and to set out the exact extent of the potential issue that we are dealing with.

Patricia Gibson: To take the hon. Gentleman back to his earlier point, does he agree that the whole thrust behind instituting coroners' inquiries—or, in Scotland, fatal accident inquiries—when these events happen is, added to the trauma, the complete lack of co-operation or willingness by hospitals to engage with parents in the appropriate way to give them the answers they need, as was certainly my experience?

Tim Loughton: That is right, but again, to give the Department of Health, the NHS and Ministers their due, there have been new innovations in internal inquiries into stillbirths that have made it much easier to get a dispassionate look at exactly what happened and give a full explanation of why it was that a pregnancy apparently without complication resulted in the child being stillborn.

The issue, and the reason my Act is so important, is that in a few complicated cases where the explanation is not sufficient for parents or where not enough disclosure is forthcoming—there has been some resistance from the medical profession; some were not in favour of the relevant clause—the fallback position is that if the coroner sees that there is a case to answer, he or she can launch an investigation, regardless of the view of the hospital or, importantly, of the parents, into whether there was more to the stillbirth that merits inquiry and whether there might be wider lessons, particularly with clusters of stillbirths, as we have had with various scandals in hospitals in this country, to ensure greater transparency.

I think the point I am getting at is that it is in everybody's interests to have greater transparency, to ensure that we reduce the level of stillbirths, which has

been too big a problem for this country compared with other western countries, and we can only do that if everybody has full access to all the information about exactly what the causes might have been. That is my ask of the Minister. Can we chase the Department on why the other bits of my Act have not been introduced yet?

I again pay tribute to the hon. Member for Swansea East, who we are all looking forward to hearing, for bringing together the House on another greatly important matter—a matter that may seem of niche interest, but which is of huge interest to parents who have had their lives so affected by the trauma of a stillbirth, particularly where they do not even know what happened to the body of the baby.

12.43 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Leader of the House for allocating time for this debate and to warmly thank everyone for their kind words about the work that I have done. This place is at its best when we show compassion and work together to resolve the issues that matter to people. The work that we have done on children's funerals—on what I like to call Martin's fund—is typical of the kind of things that we can achieve when we work together.

Decades ago, when a woman had a miscarriage or gave birth to a stillborn baby, she was usually urged to forget about what had happened and often to try just to move on and have another baby as soon as possible. Families were not given time to grieve or offered any form of counselling. There were no special rooms with cold "cuddle cots". Rarely were there opportunities for parents to even hold their babies for just a few minutes, for the first and last time, let alone take any photographs or gather mementoes for a treasured memory box. Babies were simply taken away quickly and quietly by hospital staff, to be buried or cremated in an undisclosed place. Fathers were usually advised to hide baby products at home, to help with the healing process and avoid traumatising the mother further. They were sometimes asked to pay for the burial. I found it really painful to hear the story of a man who had kept the receipt of his child's funeral as the only memento of that child. These little ones' innocent bodies were either cremated, buried in a communal plot sometimes, or placed in a coffin with a woman who had recently passed away. In some military cemeteries, babies were given their own plot, but marked simply with a number, never with a name.

On 19 January 1958, my mother delivered a full-term baby girl. She was 8 lbs in weight, but she never took her breath. In those days, there were not endless antenatal appointments or scans, or reminders to pregnant women to count the kicks, so my sister's death was totally unexpected for my mum. Until her dying day, my mother believed that my sister had been buried with an elderly woman, but I honestly do not know if that was a fact or if it was a story that she had invented to comfort herself and over the years had come to believe as the truth. My mother never grieved for my sister properly. She put up a wall. She was always afraid to show emotion. She was the most wonderful, loving mother in the world, but she was pretty rubbish on hugs, because she was terrified that if she showed love, something bad would happen.

When I had a scan when I was having Martin, the date of birth they gave for him was 18 January 1981. It traumatised my mother that I was going to be having a

[Carolyn Harris]

baby on the day that she lost hers. Thankfully, Martin was born on 24 January, but my mother always believed that 19 January, the date on which Martin was due, was a bad omen and that we were to lose him in the way that we were. She carried her child for nine months. She prepared to be a mammy and then she left hospital without her baby, with no support and no idea of where her little girl's final resting place would be. My mother never really grieved for my sister until the day I lost Martin, and then she grieved as a mother and as a grandmother. My mother's life was destroyed on the day that we lost Martin, because she remembered Martin and she remembered the baby she had lost 30 years before.

The practice of taking stillborn babies' bodies and burying them without disclosing the location to the parents continued right up until the late 1980s. In the years since, families have started to search for their little ones' graves. One lady, Paula Jackson, dedicates her spare time, for free, to helping people to find their babies, and in the last 15 years has found 800 babies. Thanks to Paula and her group, Brief Lives Remembered, parents have been able to find peace after years of grief and uncertainty. They now have a place to visit and the opportunity to place a headstone or a flower, or something to commemorate the memory of their loved baby. But some women do not feel comfortable asking for help. They feel ashamed or at fault. They feel as if they deserted their children, even though they were never given a choice.

We should not be expecting these women to be asking; it should not be up to Paula. I commend her for the fantastic work that she has done, but she is spending her own time and her own money to help these families. Surely there must be a way of sharing information about where these babies are buried, whether from council records or hospital maternity units, undertakers, crematoriums or cemeteries. That has to be an easy way of finding out what happened to each of these babies. I am hoping that the words from the Chamber today will resonate more than any policy, and that those who have the information will allow us to see it and share it so that those families who want to know where their babies are buried or cremated will easily be able to find out.

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is making an incredible speech, and my heart goes out to the family circumstances that she has described. I want to ask her about institutions taking a proactive role by looking at the records they have and the information they can provide. It seems to me that lots of institutions—I am thinking of councils, in particular—do not do anything until someone asks a question, at which point it becomes a battle and is not the easiest thing to do. Does she agree?

Carolyn Harris: I certainly agree. I think the consensus in this Chamber—and some news channels, no doubt—will prompt local authorities, hospitals and other people to come forward and offer us the information we need.

Like my own mother, many have gone to their graves without knowing the locations of their babies. Many more are alive and still suffering from the grief and guilt, and very often from post-traumatic stress disorder. These mothers and fathers should be offered counselling

and emotional support if they need it. They should be helped to manage their grief, to locate their baby and to live the rest of their lives with a sense of peace that they have not known for a long time.

This matter was raised this week by BBC journalist Frankie McCamley. Since the story was run on BBC News, I have been overwhelmed by communications from parents and other family members about their babies. Indeed, today the Doorkeeper sought me out because one lady has travelled here from the south coast just to hear us discussing the issue today, and she wants to tell me her mother's story. People generations below the mums and dads who lost their babies are suffering, and are asking me to help them to find their babies; a lot of people out there need us to help them to get closure. I have received so many heart-breaking messages that I have suggested to some members of my staff that they do not read them, because I know they will be traumatised.

With everything that goes on in today's world, this issue may seem relatively unimportant to some, but to anyone who has lost a child, memories and a grave visit are the things that bring an element of comfort. It took me a long time to stop visiting Martin's grave. I would spend hours and hours and hours there. I would go to the grave, sit there and talk to Martin about everything I was feeling psychologically—all the questions I had, all the anger, all the guilt, and everything I wanted to communicate to him. I now know that Martin is in my heart, on my shoulder and in my head; he is everywhere. But until people get to the point in their grief where they understand that the person they have lost may not be here physically, but will always be with them, they need something to focus on.

I am asking that we find a way of helping the parents who want and need this closure to find their baby's resting place, giving them the opportunity to have the peace so many of them seek, and—most importantly—a chance to say their final goodbye.

12.53 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Let me start by paying a huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is a force of nature. She said that we in this place are at our best when we are compassionate and work together, and she certainly embodies that—in this debate and in the many brilliant campaigns that she has run since becoming a Member of Parliament.

In Hull, we have higher levels of stillbirth and neonatal deaths than the national average. I pay tribute to the excellent work of the Hull and East Yorkshire branch of Sands and the Lullaby Trust, the campaigning organisation. In the last few years, huge steps have been taken to improve and make changes to this whole area. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) talked about the debates that we have had in the House since 2015, which I think have occurred because the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss has made it its mission to ensure that we have the Baby Loss Awareness Week debate every year. A huge amount has been done since 2015, and I pay tribute to all the officers and everyone else involved in that group.

Since 2015, I have been raising a particular case from Hull: I spoke on 8 July 2015, 13 October 2016 and 10 October 2017 about my constituents, Mike and Tina

Trowhill. I want to explain why I have kept raising this case in the House of Commons and also to say that, very sadly, Michael died a short while ago, so it is now Tina, my constituent, on whose behalf I am raising this.

Tina and Michael had a baby boy, William Michael Brian Trowhill, who was born on 5 July 1994 at Beverley Westwood maternity hospital. Very sadly, he was stillborn and was cremated on 12 July 1994 at Chanterlands Avenue crematorium in Hull. Tina and Mike were told that there would be no ashes from the cremation. They also told me that they were not required to sign any forms. It appears that the forms that were required at the time were signed by an administrator at the hospital. It is quite shocking that the parents were not asked even to sign the form to give written permission for what should happen to their baby.

Moving forward many years, Tina was alerted to the possible concerns about what had happened to baby William when the Mortonhall inquiry—which the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) spoke about—was taking place in Scotland. The report on that inquiry was published in April 2014. In October 2014, Mike and Tina contacted the bereavement service in Hull and asked to see what it could find out about the circumstances around William. Unfortunately, it took until 3 November for the service to return the call, and the parents were told that an investigation was under way. On 4 November, they were told that William's ashes had been scattered in a children's garden of remembrance near the crematorium. On 5 November, the parents were told by the funeral director at Frank Stephenson & Son that it was not normal to receive ashes from a child's cremation. On 6 November, they were told that the funeral directors had a document that stated "cremate and strew"; it appears that at that time the funeral directors had a blanket contract with Beverley Westwood maternity hospital to undertake cremations of babies, and were given that instruction. On 6 November, Tina contacted the NHS complaints line, but given the many NHS reorganisations, copies of any procedures or policies in use at the time were not available.

My constituents came to see me just before the general election in 2015, and said that they would like to know what could be found out about what had happened in Hull and whether other families were affected. I thought that that seemed a very reasonable request, so I asked to see the leader of the council and took my constituents with me. Councillor Brady was very sympathetic. He understood that it was a sensitive issue, and said that he would have a think about what to do next.

Tina and Mike were very clear that they wanted a local independent inquiry. This was also at the time of the Emstrey crematorium inquiry in Shrewsbury. I understand that there were different circumstances there, but that the parents involved had similar concerns about what had happened at Emstrey crematorium, which was run by and accountable to the local council. Those parents had gone to see the leader of the council, who asked them, "What do you want?"; they said, "We want a local independent inquiry. Let's see what we can find out."; and he readily agreed. I believe that that inquiry cost about £50,000, and was overseen by an independent local solicitor. And that is what my constituents in Hull asked Hull City Council for—a local independent inquiry. Sadly, we received a letter from the council saying that it did not really think that that would help in

the circumstances and it did not see the need for such an inquiry. So I raised this with the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, and asked him how he felt about the situation where grieving parents who want to know the answer to questions about what has happened to their children's ashes are being told by a council, "No, we don't really need to do that."

I think the Prime Minister was rather busy and occupied at that time, so I ended up going to see, with Tina, the then Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). I have to say that he was an excellent Minister in terms of how he got it straightaway: he understood how, for families, this needed to be addressed locally. I was very grateful to him and to the then Secretaries of State for Health and for Communities and Local Government—three very senior Ministers—for what they did. The Justice Secretary wrote a letter to Hull City Council saying:

"My fellow Secretaries of State at the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government have agreed with me that there is a need for a historic investigation into the practices relating to infant cremations in the Hull area, and we have jointly today written to the Chief Executive of Hull City Council asking him to commission this. We have suggested that the whole investigation should have terms of reference similar to those of the Emstrey inquiry."

I am incredibly grateful for the compassion that he showed to my constituents and to the many other families who came forward. Tina, like the lady my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East referred to, had been finding out about and talking to other families, and she set up the Action for Ashes group in Hull, which has 420 members comprising about 100 families who have been affected. Tina has been working very hard to make sure that she provides support and help to other families in these circumstances.

Hull City Council received that letter in 2016. Unfortunately, there was a change in the Secretary of State's role at that time because, as we know, other events were happening. Hull City Council basically said to the Government, "No, we think we have looked into this and the parents are now fine—there is no reason to have a local independent inquiry." That was not the case. The parents still, to this day, would like to have that local independent inquiry. Hull City Council did carry out a limited internal investigation. When we compare and contrast that with the Emstrey report, we see that it is a pale imitation. The council did not proactively look through its records; it looked only where it was asked to by parents. I have some sympathy because I know there are parents who do not want to have all this talked about and looked at again. But clearly, for lessons to be learned that everything has been done, and so that we can reassure ourselves that this could never happen again, it would be right for all the records to be looked at by an independent person.

In the meantime, despite Hull City Council saying that it would not pursue an independent inquiry, I, along with Tina, put together a coalition of people who did think that it was the right thing to do: Co-op Funeralcare, the largest, I think, funeral care company in the country; the National Association of Funeral Directors; the charity Cruse Bereavement Care; and Dignity, the largest operator of crematoriums in England. These organisations all came together to back what Tina and the 100 families in Hull were saying.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

I was very pleased that last year the Minister's predecessor came to Hull and met a group of families who had been affected by this. At that meeting we had the chief executive of Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, as well as local council representatives. This is many, many years on for a lot of these women and their families, but it was clear that the pain is still there and the questions are still there. They still feel that the institutions, be it the council or the NHS, are not properly recognising or understanding the real concerns that the families still have.

We had that meeting. I hope that, now that my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East has called this debate, we might have another opportunity to say that a local independent inquiry in Hull would be the right thing to do for these families. It would provide some closure. I know it will not provide all the answers that people need, but it would help them to feel that institutions of the state are taking the concerns of families properly in this incredibly sensitive and difficult area.

1.4 pm

Justin Madders: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to sum up the debate. It has been, as these debates often are, very moving and very thought-provoking.

We heard first from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), who made a very fair point about whether more can be done with local authorities, in particular, in respect of public funerals. There are clearly issues about the capacity in local authorities to take on extra responsibilities, but some of the issues that he raised are really matters of sensitivity and appropriateness, rather than funding. I am sure that we can do more on that. He also made the very fair point that counselling needs to be available quickly and to the whole family. He was right to raise the issue of paternal concern, which a number of Members talked about. He also talked about the impact on grandparents, which can also be overlooked.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), who has spoken very movingly on these issues on a number of occasions, also picked up on the need for support for fathers. She rightly paid tribute to Sands, which does a great deal of work in this area. She articulated particularly well the differences between parents' experiences now and the experiences they would have had in previous decades. That contrast is stark and, in many ways, heartbreaking.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) spoke about the importance of the personal experiences of Members in this place and how, over recent years, that has helped to bring about change. We have heard again today personal experiences that cannot do anything other than bring about more change. He made an important point about the need for bereavement leave. I pay tribute to him for the work that he has done and the changes that he has already sought and brought about. He is right about the pre-24-week birth review. I think that needs to be resolved. As he says, it is an anomaly that does need sorting.

Of course, we could not help but be deeply moved by the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). She was incredibly

brave to talk about her sister and, indeed, her own son in the way that she did. She spoke very powerfully about how hard it would have been for her mother to deal with, first, the initial tragedy with her own child and then how that was repeated with her grandchild. The whole House will send its best wishes to my hon. Friend, and a huge amount of support and respect for the way that she has brought these issues forward, which we know will have been incredibly difficult.

I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work done by Paula Jackson in helping bereaved families. But she is also right to say that it should not have to be down to people like Paula—that surely more can be done to get this information to the families, who should not have to fight to get what should be theirs as of right. As she said, we really do need to get more done to make sure that families do have that opportunity to say their final goodbyes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) paid tribute to Sands, to the Lullaby Trust, and to the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which has led the way on this over the past few years. It is now the fourth time that she has raised the case of her constituents Mike and Tina Trowhill and their little boy William. She took us through the tremendous efforts that she has gone to, on their behalf, to get to the truth about what happened to their baby's ashes. The comparison that she makes between what Hull City Council did and what happened in the Emstrey inquiry is a valid one. I am sure that the persistence that she has shown so far will eventually lead to the full independent inquiry that the families clearly deserve.

It is fitting that we have had this debate today, on Time to Talk Day, because we have learned over the years that it is important to talk about these things. The more we talk about them, the more we understand and the more we can improve and change things for the better. It is through learning from personal experiences that areas such as this can see the changes that we will all see the benefit of in the long run.

1.9 pm

Ms Dorries: I would like to begin by paying tribute to everybody who has spoken in the debate. The hon. Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) is right: there are issues we discuss in this Chamber that transcend party politics. Indeed, party politics has no place in this Chamber when issues like this are discussed, and I hope that that has been demonstrated today.

I would like to pick up on a point that the hon. Member for Swansea East made about a lady who has come to the Public Gallery to watch the debate. If she would like to leave the Gallery after I have finished and make her way downstairs, I will meet her at the back of the Chamber and have a word with her.

I will comment on Members' individual contributions before going on to my substantive response. I thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) for the compassion he has shown today. It is not always easy when we discuss issues that are so emotive, but I thank him for his understanding and the points he made. He asked about HSIB's annual report, which was published in December 2019. As he probably knows, HSIB is a particular passion of mine, and we

hope to have more news about it. The thematic maternity investigation report is expected to be published soon, and I am pushing for it to be published as soon as possible.

My right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) said that love lasts longer. I think that love lasts forever. When Martin and other babies are mentioned, they have their voices here. It is love that brings them into the Chamber, and that is why we remember them; may we continue to do so.

My right hon. Friend asked whether I could do more with local authorities, as they are responsible for this. Actually, this issue is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice. I will raise this matter with my colleagues in the MOJ. Perhaps my counterpart in the MOJ and I could send a joint letter to local authorities asking them to assist parents who are trying to trace the remains of their lost babies. That might be a way to push local authorities to be more co-operative.

I turn to the comments made by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson). I have the notes from the meeting that she attended last July with my predecessor my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price), the families, the chief executives of Hull University Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust, Hull City Council and Mrs Trowhill. I am informed that the trust and council agreed to give everyone affected as much information as they had available to them and that Mrs Trowhill agreed to share contact details. Following the promise that the trust made to set out exactly what processes are now in place to ensure that similar incidents cannot happen in the future, could the hon. Lady let me know whether Mrs Trowhill is happy with how far the trust has gone and the service she has had from it?

With regard to the independent local inquiry, I imagine that there may be a sensitivity around that, because some women or girls who had babies at the time may have done so without family members or other people knowing. That may be an issue that lawyers have considered. I have no idea why it costs so much, but that may be one way to help in a particular area where there has been a problem, such as the hon. Lady's constituency.

Dame Diana Johnson: The issue raised with me as to why a local inquiry could not take place was that the local authority did not have jurisdiction over the NHS. Could the Minister say something about the co-operation that I am sure the NHS would want to extend to any local inquiry?

Ms Dorries: The hon. Lady is right; the NHS trust has the ability and the jurisdiction to conduct its own inquiry. I believe that NHS Improvement would have a similar responsibility. As a result of today's debate, I am going to investigate a little more deeply within the Department how we can go about having an inquiry and what the terms of reference would be. It may be that such an inquiry is not possible, but I will certainly find out whether it is.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) asked for an update on the pregnancy loss review. I attended the APPG on baby loss a few weeks ago. We expect the report being done by Zoe Clark-Coates and Samantha Collinge to be published in spring/summer, and we expect to publish a

Government response to the consultation in spring going into summer. Again, I will push and see how much longer that will take.

Tim Loughton: The problem is that nothing has been agreed, because the pregnancy loss review group has not met since 2018. If a report is imminent, it has not been approved by the panel members, including me and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). I do not know what will be presented to the Government before they can even respond. The Minister might want to investigate how the group came to conclusions of which we know little.

Ms Dorries: I will. If my hon. Friend drops me an email at my departmental address, we will look into that, and the officials will take it away. I am grateful to him for raising that, because I was not aware of it.

I do not think I have missed out anyone who made a speech. We have heard today how important it is to many parents to find the final resting place of their stillborn children's remains. Unfortunately, that is not always easy or possible, and I have explained that such records are not currently held by the Government. Rather, they are held by local hospitals that arranged for burials or cremations with local funeral directors or crematoriums. In some cases, records no longer exist, or they may not contain enough detail to be helpful.

Nevertheless, I reiterate that the Department of Health and Social Care expects all hospitals to provide as much information as they have available to them to any parents who inquire about what happened to their stillborn babies, no matter how long ago they died. I would like to praise the 800 parents who have attempted to find out where their babies' remains are, because they have helped to raise the profile of this issue. As the hon. Member for Swansea East said, only by raising the profile do we manage to get something done. We need to continue to do that, because that is how we will make progress.

We have also heard today about the new regulations and systems to ensure that parents are involved, as they want to be, in the burial or cremation arrangements for their stillborn children. Parents are required by law to register a stillbirth, and once registration has been completed the registrar provides parents with all the certification they need to organise their babies' burial or cremation, and a funeral service if they so wish. The required burial and cremation forms ensure that the wishes of parents are recorded and respected. Many NHS hospitals still do make arrangements for funeral services and support parents to consider various options and to make the decisions that are right for them. Some parents may wish to arrange a private burial or cremation with a funeral director. Most funeral directors do not charge for their services for stillborn babies. Thanks to the hon. Lady's efforts, the new children's funeral fund supports parents, as I said in my opening speech.

A funeral can sometimes be a catalyst for people to begin processing a deeply profound loss. At such a time, parents mourning their stillborn baby need as much emotional support, compassion and understanding as possible. However, the quality of support can vary from one maternity service to another. This is why the Government have funded Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, to work with other baby loss charities

[*Ms Dorries*]

and the royal colleges to produce a national bereavement care pathway. The pathway covers a range of circumstances of baby loss, including miscarriage, stillbirth, termination of a pregnancy for medical reasons, neonatal death and sudden infant death syndrome. The NBCP is now embedded in 43 sites, and a further 59 sites have formally expressed their interest in joining the programme.

I would like to talk a little bit about mental health support. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North is a campaigner on this, and she raised mental health during her speech. A couple of weeks ago, I visited nurses who are delivering perinatal mental health care support. As part of the new approach to and new funding for mental health, there are now specialist perinatal mental health community services in all 44 local NHS areas in England, and further developments are planned. Just in 2018-19, this has enabled over 13,000 additional women to receive support from specialist perinatal mental health services, against a target of 9,000.

I spoke to the nurses about the perinatal services that are being delivered, and in that particular trust they have helped 700 women who previously had no assistance whatsoever. It was incredible to hear the stories of how that assistance—the mental health support—is now being given to women. As I have said, all trusts now have in place those perinatal support services, which were never there before. Again, that is a huge step on the path towards delivering services that are focused on women and their needs.

Via maternity outreach clinics, we are also providing targeted assessment and intervention for women identified with moderate or complex mental health needs arising from or related to their maternity experience who would benefit from specialist support, but where it may not be appropriate or helpful for them to accept specialist perinatal mental health services, so we are even thinking further than that. In those services we are also assisting partners and families, so it is not just for the women, but for their partners and families.

A huge amount of work is being done in this area. I am not saying that we have finished—there is more to be done—but we are making progress. This actually fits in very well with our women's agenda in the Department of Health and Social Care. The women's agenda is not just about periods and menopause; it is about so many things. The particular area we are discussing today is a huge part of that.

Hon. Members present for the Baby Loss Awareness Week debate last October may recall that I undertook to write to Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent, the chief midwifery officer in England, to ask if those bereaved by baby death could be included in the NHS long-term plan commitment to develop maternity outreach clinics that will integrate maternity, reproductive health and psychological therapy support for women with mental health difficulties arising from or related to the maternity experience. I am delighted to tell the House that I recently received a letter from the chief midwifery officer confirming that access to these services is available to women and their partners who are experiencing moderate or complex/severe issues, so we have listened and we have addressed that need. At this point, I should pay tribute to Professor Jacqueline Dunkley-Bent for her understanding of and support for my role in helping to deliver better services to women.

As I have said, a funeral can often be a catalyst for helping people to deal with death and stillbirth death, and I believe that that is so important today. It used to be about protecting women or just not holding them in high enough esteem to inform them about what happened, but we now know that actually the opposite is true. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham mentioned, it is important to be involved not just in the death, but in what happened before, during and just afterwards. The question parents have at a time like this is: why? That question needs to be answered, and it does not get answered in a sentence or in a minute. Parents need to know and women need to know. They can only feel as though they have fulfilled their own responsibility to their child when they have explored every avenue and know every detail of what happened.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): This debate has been specific to England, Scotland and Wales, and not necessarily about Northern Ireland. I congratulate everyone who has made a speech on their very valuable contributions. After this debate, could the decisions, conclusions and the way forward on the strategy be conveyed to Northern Ireland, where this is a devolved matter, so that we can all work together to help everyone?

Ms Dorries: The hon. Member is quite right that this is a devolved matter. However, this is an issue that affects all women in the United Kingdom. He is quite right, so I will ask my officials what discussions take place with the devolved Assemblies and come back to him.

The stillbirth rate in England is falling. As I am sure the hon. Member for Swansea East knows, it was our intention to reduce the 2010 rate of stillbirths by half by 2025. I am delighted to report that we are ahead of that target: in January 2020, we were already ahead of what we are trying to achieve. Since my appointment as the Minister with responsibility for both maternity and patient safety, I have seen for myself how NHS maternity services in England are working hard to ensure that the care they provide is safe and personalised to women's individual needs.

Many measures have been introduced in maternity services that are achieving this reduction in the rate of stillbirths, and the issues raised in debates such as this on baby loss also make a contribution. We all know that applying pressure and raising the issue pushes the agenda further along.

The efforts have resulted in a 20% decrease in the stillbirth rate between 2010 and 2018. Between 2016 and 2018, there were 760 fewer stillbirths in England than in 2015. That is an enormous achievement, and something that we should be very proud of. There are 760 fewer families who have to go through the painful experience of planning a funeral for a much-loved and wanted child. I think we all know that there is nothing more painful for a woman or a couple than to go into hospital to have their baby and to leave with empty arms and broken hearts. The fact that 760 fewer families are doing that now, as a result of the measures that have been introduced, is a huge achievement.

In closing, I pay tribute to the initiatives that have been stimulated by Members of this House to improve support for families experiencing a stillbirth. These

include the national bereavement care pathway, the children's funeral fund and the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Act 2018, which provides for at least two weeks' leave for employees following the loss of a child under the age of 18 or a stillbirth after 24 weeks of pregnancy.

I also pay tribute to the clinical professionals and support staff working in acute and community maternity services. They work incredibly hard. I visit these maternity units and meet amazing midwives who dedicate their lives to being in that room at that moment when a baby is born, to ensure a safe delivery. Through their efforts, many more women and babies are being supported to have a healthy pregnancy, labour and birth. They will be supported nationally by the maternity transformation programme, which will continue to oversee the implementation of maternity safety initiatives, including those published in the NHS long-term plan and the new NHS patient safety strategy, published last July.

I would like to conclude by thanking the hon. Member for Swansea East yet again—we are truly in her debt for the issues she raises in this place—and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings for supporting her, or for being her acolyte, as he described himself.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered historical stillbirth burials and cremations.

Persecution of Christians

1.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians.

I am very grateful to all hon. Members who want to contribute to this debate today.

The suffering of men, women and children persecuted for their faith or belief is a matter of deep concern to the Government. The Prime Minister's special envoy on freedom of religion or belief, my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), would very much like to have been here today, but he is currently in Washington DC on a visit focused on this very subject.

The scale and severity of suffering is alarming, from daily discrimination in the workplace or in school to intimidation of businesses and families to large-scale violence or state-sanctioned persecution. On every continent, religious minorities are under threat. Everyone across the House will remember last year's Easter bombing attack on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka, which was deeply saddening.

Defending freedom of religion or belief is a long-standing priority for the UK. Last August, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said:

"Freedom of religion or belief is at the heart of what the UK stands for."

He also expressed our determination to use all the tools of British diplomacy in this cause.

However, despite our long-standing support of freedom of religion or belief, it is fair to say that we had not given the particular issue of Christian persecution the attention it warranted. That is why in 2018 the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt), commissioned an independent review to consider what more the Foreign and Commonwealth Office could do to support persecuted Christians overseas. The Bishop of Truro was asked to consider tough questions and make ambitious recommendations; his report highlighted the seriousness of the issue and gave practical recommendations on how the UK should respond and, as I am sure colleagues know, the Government have accepted all his recommendations. We reaffirmed our commitment to implement them in the Conservative party manifesto.

Before I say how we are implementing those recommendations however, I want to start with a note of caution: bluntly, we have to be a bit cautious about the scale of Christian persecution because we may not have the full picture. The reason for that is that, at the moment, only limited data is available on religious minorities. The UK is actively working to fill that information gap.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for leading this important debate in the name of the Prime Minister. She mentions data; will she join me in praising certain organisations, such as Open Doors, which does so much in this place? Each year, its event is possibly the best

[*Michael Tomlinson*]

attended by parliamentarians, MPs and Members from the House of Lords; I think no fewer than 100 parliamentarians were present this year. Its evidence suggests that persecution continues to worsen, and there are 260 million Christians on its watch list. Is that a number that the Minister recognises?

Mrs Wheeler: It is a number I recognise, and if my hon. Friend is able to stay for the rest of the debate, he will hear me talking about that figure in a little while.

In the meantime, we use what data is available from the excellent non-governmental organisations in the field, and—here we are—one of them, the highly regarded Open Doors, estimates on the 2020 world watch list that a staggering 260 million Christians are at risk of high to extreme levels of persecution. Open Doors says that the persecution takes many forms, including the growing use of surveillance technology by Governments to identify and discriminate against Christians.

What have we done so far to help? We have made good progress in implementing the recommendations of the review, both through in-house changes in the Foreign Office and through policy change. For example, we have recognised that our diplomats and officials must fully appreciate the role that religion plays in people's lives in political and social contexts, and that is why we are working to expand and enhance our religious literacy training. We have also appointed a senior champion for freedom of religion or belief, and we now mark “red Wednesday” in support of persecuted minority groups.

Policy-wise we are also making important changes. Colleagues will be aware of our plan to establish an independent human rights sanctions regime; this will allow us to take quick and effective action against those who commit serious abuses or violations, including against religious minorities, and will, we believe, act as a deterrent to others.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): We have substantiated claims about the persecution of the Uyghur Muslims in China. Can the Minister tell me whether there are going to be any real actions against the Chinese state because of it?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady is a doughty fighter on the matter of the Uyghur; she has corresponded with me on this matter a number of times. Now that we have left the EU, we are setting up our own sanctions Magnitsky scheme, and where there is clear evidence of named people, we can take that forward.

We have also announced that it is our intention to use our position as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council to highlight the issues faced by Christians and people of other faiths and beliefs in the middle east.

Of course, implementing the review's recommendations is only part of our broader work to promote freedom of religion or belief around the globe. For example, we use our influence to speak up for persecuted Christians and individuals of other faiths in multilateral institutions such as the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN. Last year, we joined 87 other states to co-sponsor a UN resolution establishing the international day commemorating the victims of acts of

violence based on religion or belief. We stand with the international community not only to honour those who have paid the ultimate price to practise their faith, but also to combat ongoing intolerance and discrimination, and that is why we call out specific countries that violate the right to freedom of religion or belief, including China, Iran and Russia.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The Minister has mentioned tolerance, and I wonder whether she agrees that we need to remember that tolerance is not reaching the same point of view, but is when we profoundly disagree with one another yet do not resort to force, whether lawful or otherwise, in order to try to force people to our point of view. Tolerance is agreeing to differ. Does the Minister agree that at the heart of problems of intolerance are blasphemy laws, and that this Government and this country must always stand against blasphemy laws in order to ensure that we have promoted true tolerance?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for his pertinent intervention. “Tolerance” is perhaps an underused word; we might consider it to be a British trait, but we ought to make sure it works right across the board and across the world. I will come on to blasphemy laws a little later.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): We have a prime position in the Security Council of the United Nations, as a permanent member—one of the five. Do the Government intend to introduce a United Nations Security Council resolution, and lead on that to try to get the whole of the United Nations against the idea of states being allowed to persecute Christians—not just Christians, but those of any religion?

Mrs Wheeler: My hon. and gallant Friend puts forward a noble cause, but I am afraid I must write to him on that.

So, we call out specific countries, as I have mentioned, and through our extensive diplomatic network we also lobby Governments for changes in laws and practices, and we raise individual cases of persecution. As the House will understand, the safety of the people we support is paramount and, given that much of this work is sensitive, it is best done in private. Finally, we also support work to promote freedom of religion or belief; we have given over £1 million for projects in Iraq, Malaysia, Myanmar and Sudan.

I am proud of our efforts, but we know that we alone cannot defend freedom of rights or belief. It requires concerted efforts by faith groups, NGOs, civil society, human rights defenders and others, including parliamentarians. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all Members from across the House for their work to defend this human right internationally. With your continued support, I hope we will succeed in this ambition to end religious persecution once and for all. I look forward to the rest of the debate.

1.40 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): I thank the Government for bringing forward this general debate on an issue that always stirs feelings in this House: the persecution of innocent, peaceful civilians across the world simply for trying to practise their faith.

I hope the House will indulge me if, before I begin my remarks, I pay tribute to a really doughty campaigner in my constituency. Her name is Joyce Sundrum. I mention her because she lies gravely ill, at the age of 90, in St Gemma's hospice in Leeds in my constituency, having spent a lifetime fighting for the rights of Christians and other faiths in her own area in Leeds, across the nation and throughout the world. Her surname is Indian. She married an Indian citizen who was not a Christian, but she continued to practise her own faith and she stands up for all faiths. I hope she will be with us for a lot longer, but somehow I doubt it, so I wanted to pay my own tribute to her for her extraordinary work.

It is especially timely to be having such a debate shortly after the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, when we saw the ultimate, unimaginable depths of evil; where such persecution can lead humanity. For a world that reacted to the horror of what was discovered at Auschwitz and other concentration camps with a solemn promise of "never again", it should appal and shame us that 75 years on we are still debating religious attacks, persecution and genocides that have happened in countries across the world in recent years.

I would also like to take the opportunity at the outset to pay tribute to my friend and colleague, Helen Goodman, the former hon. Member for Bishop Auckland. She remains a proud member of Christians on the Left and, in different circumstances, would probably have been leading the debate for the Opposition today. While she is a devout Christian, one of Helen's great strengths is that she believes passionately in the freedom of every religion and would just as fiercely fight for the rights of the Muslims of Mindanao in the Philippines as she would for Christians in Burkina Faso. She is greatly missed in this House and in these debates, as is our other former friend and colleague Liz McInnes, who did so much to try to help Asia Bibi find sanctuary in this country when her life was at risk in Pakistan because of her Christian faith. Helen and Liz may be gone from this House, but I am at least glad that this House will always echo their views and be united in saying today—

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): This might seem like an unusual question, but I just wondered whether the hon. Gentleman feels that Christian belief is a factor in the Labour leadership contest.

Fabian Hamilton: I am not sure it is for me to comment on whether Christian belief should be a factor in the Labour leadership contest. I think a strong set of moral values, one of which is a strong set of Christian values, is very important in any leadership contest and I know that all the candidates will have those strong moral values.

Whether it is the Jews in Portland Oregon, Muslims in Myanmar and New Zealand or Christians in Nigeria and Pakistan, we all believe that an attack on people of any faith is an attack on people of all faiths. I am sure that that will be the consensus we reach at the end of this debate. However, we must never mistake the consensus that we establish in this House for attitudes in our country as a whole. As much as we might reassure ourselves that Britain is a tolerant society where such prejudice and attacks do not occur, we know, sadly, that that is utterly wrong, whether it is the terrible scourge of

antisemitism, which poisons online debate and forces the Jewish community in this country to post guards around synagogues and Jewish schools; the appalling rise in Islamophobia and attacks on our Muslim population in recent years, unfortunately whipped up by the comments of some politicians and media commentators; or, indeed, the attacks by sick-minded Jihadists with bombs, guns, vehicles and knives on innocent crowds of people in our country who they have dubbed as unbelievers or kafirs. This is an issue we know we have to confront domestically.

Our task today, of course, is primarily to discuss how and where it needs to be tackled abroad, specifically in relation to the persecution of Christians. We are once again, as has been mentioned, indebted to the Open Doors organisation for its latest report on the scale of the issue, to which the Minister referred in her speech. It is not just the scale of the issue now, but the extent to which it has risen in recent years that should give us all real cause for concern. The report found yet again that the persecution of Christians is becoming both more widespread and more serious. Of the 50 countries on the Open Doors annual watch list, 45 of them are places where Christians were rated as experiencing very high or extreme levels of persecution in 2019, double the number of countries that were given that rating in 2014, just five years previously. That increase means that in 2019 approximately 260 million Christians across the world were at risk of high, very high and extreme levels of persecution, up from 245 million in 2018 and 215 million in 2017—shockingly high levels and a 20% increase in the number of Christians at the highest levels of risk in the space of just two years.

Open Doors also found that another 50 million Christians are facing high levels of persecution in a further 23 countries outside the top 50 on its watch list. The one small consolation, if we can call it that, from the Open Doors report is that the overall death toll from persecution fell last year from more than 4,300 in 2018 to just under 3,000—again, a shockingly high number. The number of deaths is still shocking and unacceptable.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the UK Government's words and actions should synchronise in a meaningful way, so that while we criticise the persecution of Christians and stand against it we should not be fêting and rolling out the red carpet for leaders who are guilty of it in the search for trade deals, for example with President Erdoğan of Turkey. Turkey was picked out by Open Doors as being a problem for Christians. Does he not believe that the UK Government should be more discerning in the friendships they build across the international community?

Fabian Hamilton: I will come on to mention that very issue on how far we compromise our high moral values in this country in favour of trade deals that we so desperately need. The sheer number of countries, and the rising number of countries, where the persecution of Christians is occurring is an indication of how huge this crisis is.

In the time I have, I would like to ask the Government about one specific country and I hope the Minister will be able to respond at the end of today's debate. That country, which has already been mentioned, is China. Much recent attention on religious persecution in China

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has rightly focused on the appalling treatment of the Uyghur Muslim community, but we also know that the Chinese Christian community, estimated to be 90 million people and rising, has faced an escalating wave of repression, interference and mistreatment over the past two years. According to Open Doors, over 5,500 Chinese churches were destroyed, closed down or confiscated during 2019. China has risen to number 23 on its world watch list, up from number 43 in 2018. Anyone under the age of 18 is banned from attending church. The celebration of Christmas in Christian churches has also been banned. Surveillance cameras and facial recognition software has been ordered to be installed in every remaining church, so that authorities can identify all worshippers and listen to the readings and sermons they hear.

Most seriously, what accompanies the repression in China is the routine detention and jailing of worshippers and their pastors under false charges of seeking to subvert state power. I will give one example as an illustration, although I could give hundreds or, indeed, thousands of examples.

In Chengdu province in December 2018, 100 members of the Early Rain Covenant Church were arrested. The church's pastor, Wang Yi, was charged along with his wife, Jiang Rong, for subversion of state power, all for the temerity of trying to celebrate Christmas together. Thankfully, Jiang Rong was freed last June, but at the end of December, her husband Wang Yi was sentenced to nine years in prison—nine years in prison for a man who led a church because of his faith, who spoke out against forced abortions because of his faith, and who spoke out against curbs on Christians because of his faith. That is the face of persecution, and it is being orchestrated by the second richest nation on the planet—a permanent member of the UN Security Council—which regularly hosts our Prime Ministers and members of our Government.

When the Minister speaks later, will she confirm whether the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary have ever raised the case of Pastor Wang Yi and all the Christians like him who face persecution because of their faith? My fear is that our current Prime Minister is instead walking in the footsteps of his predecessor, who was praised and acclaimed by the Chinese state media after her visit to the country last year for “sidestepping” the issue of human rights and putting the importance of “pragmatic collaboration” with China first. It concluded that

“May will definitely not make any comment contrary to the goals of her China trip...For the prime minister, the losses outweigh the gains if she appeases the”

United Kingdom

“media at the cost of the visit's friendly atmosphere.”

If the former Prime Minister, a devout Christian, could not be expected to raise the cases of Wang Yi and fellow worshippers a month after they were detained, what hope is there that our current trade deal-obsessed Prime Minister is any different? Perhaps the Minister will tell me later that I am wrong. I certainly hope that

she will, because if not, what was the point of the Bishop of Truro's report, and indeed, what is the point of today's debate?

1.52 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I had a quick look through *Hansard* and discovered that I first started speaking on this subject 20 years ago in a debate on the persecution of Christians in Egypt. Frankly, there was little interest from the Government then, but we see much more attention now, which I welcome. There is a special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. Numerous charities, such as Aid to the Church in Need, Open Doors and Christian Solidarity Worldwide, work on the frontlines and raise awareness here, and Red Wednesday, of course, has become an annual fixture. However, I believe that the Government, for all their efforts, could still do more.

We continually underestimate the clout that we have. We gave £463 million to the Government of Pakistan in 2016. The Department for International Development's planned budget for Nigeria in 2018 was £235 million. We have a long history and tradition of humanitarianism, which we want to continue. These countries have problems and we want to help them, but how are we helping when we are sending hundreds of millions of pounds to Governments who completely fail to protect their Christian citizens? We should not be afraid to turn off the tap when lives are on the line. We need to question countries with Islamist Governments on why they will not allow the total freedom of worship and religion and equal rights. Surely people everywhere, in every country, province and land, of every faith and denomination, should be able freely to practise their religion or belief in accordance with their conscience—it simply does not happen in the world today. How can we say we really think that if our aid budget does not reflect our thinking and we are not prepared to use our clout?

We sit here today in the heart of a country renowned across the world for our resilience in the face of challenge, and our magnanimity, fairness and concern for the vulnerable—that is all very good. We command one of the most capable militaries on the planet. We are a financial heavyweight, giving hundreds of millions of pounds each year to countries that are poorer than ourselves. That is fantastic, yet in the face of another radical threat to stability in the developing world, our resolve appears to have dimmed and our desire to help been neutralised.

Aside from questions of war fatigue, which I entirely sympathise with, we ought to consider how much more difficult it will be to solve this crisis in 10 years' time if we do not act swiftly now. Some of us were in the Chamber as our predecessors decried the actions of Saddam Hussein against his own people and the malicious rule of Gaddafi, and we took action. I ask the House: where is that same commitment when it comes to the persecution of Christians? Where is the same loyalty to the victims of the repressive proto-caliphate that is developing in the Sahel?

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should use our aid budget to help persecuted Christians and give more

money to the minority groups who are being affected, such as the poor Christians in Syria and across the middle east?

Sir Edward Leigh: That is a very positive suggestion. Perhaps we should take some money away from the Governments who are not doing enough and give it directly to people on the ground.

We could spend hours going over many countries in the world but I want to talk about Nigeria, to take one example. It is a wonderful nation on the west coast of Africa. It is a close partner in the Commonwealth. It is forecast to be the continent's "bread basket" within a generation. The UN predicts that Nigeria's population could be 411 million by 2050 and 794 million by the end of the century. We have many people born in Nigeria or of a Nigerian background living in Britain today, and we welcome all this. However, in the same way that the recent expansion of ISIS in Iraq and Syria could not have been so easily predicted, we should be careful not to exclude from our view the painful reality that parts of Nigeria are now ripe for an ISIS takeover. I will talk about a few distressing examples—all well documented—from Open Doors and other organisations.

Some 1,300 Nigerian Christians have been killed in the past year, in addition to the more than 6,000 deaths since 2015. The Islamic Fulani, a nomadic ethnic group of about 20 million people across 20 west and central African countries, are, I am afraid, largely responsible for this new wave of attacks. In the last four or five years, growing numbers of them have adopted a land-grabbing policy—motivated by an extremist belief system and equipped with sophisticated weaponry—leading to the massacre of thousands of people and the permanent displacement of vulnerable rural communities.

Despite centuries-long tension between sedentary farmers and the nomadic Fulani herders, recent attacks have exposed the Fulani's improved military capability and ideological fervour. The Global Terrorism Index in 2016 and 2017 named Fulani militia as the fourth deadliest terrorist group in the world, with only Boko Haram, ISIS and al-Shabaab considered deadlier. Targeted violence against predominantly Christian communities suggests that religion and ideology are key drivers in the massacre, which is going on in our time and, we might say, on our watch.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point. Does he agree that it would be useful to have an update both from the Department for International Development regarding its involvement in supporting those persecuted in Nigeria and on the FCO's and DFID's engagement with the Government in Nigeria on those issues?

Sir Edward Leigh: I will talk about our influence on Nigeria and the work of DFID and the Foreign Office, which is a very important point, but I will spend another couple of minutes detailing some of what is going on on the ground.

In Christmas eve in 2010 in Jos, at least 86 people were murdered and 74 injured in a series of Islamic bomb blasts and attacks, most of them targeting church services. Choir members were hacked to death in their pews. A year later in Madalla, Islamic bombers struck a

Catholic church during a morning Christmas mass, slaughtering 45 worshippers and injuring 73 more. The day before, 11 were brutally murdered in Maiduguri, including a pastor and his young daughter who were incinerated in the fire-bombing of three churches. Life can be unpredictably and unbearably short for Christians in the killing fields of northern Nigeria. On the Epiphany of January 2012, 20 Christians who had gathered for a funeral were machine-gunned to death at close range by Muslim terrorists shouting "Allahu Akbar", and a further 15 were brutally injured. In Rivers State in 2018, Islamic gunmen invoking the name of God opened fire on Christians returning from a church service, killing 17 and raping any vulnerable woman who could not escape. I could go on and on.

Warnings have been given by organisations such as PSJ, the Organisation for Peace and Social Justice. That organisation, which campaigns in Europe and the United States and is supported by many leading Nigerians, urges President Buhari to change course and raise his game. Its work is striking a chord with millions on the ground in Nigeria today. So many Nigerians have had their churches, homes, farms and even families taken from them in the harshest way imaginable. I commend the work of PSJ and other organisations, and hope that it can mark the beginning of a new era in Nigerian politics.

An ineffectual Government led by President Buhari have shown little sign of stopping the silent slaughter of the innocent. He has repeatedly paid lip service to possible solutions, but has failed to deliver on any of those vague promises. There are also geopolitical consequences. The President appears exceptionally relaxed about the fact that his border with Chad is porous and undefended, and, as such, it has become a transport hub for Islamist weaponry, intelligence and recruits.

Our long-standing connection and friendship with Nigeria means that we are well placed to do something about the unravelling situation. Whatever we do—if we save just one life—it is worth doing. At the same time we can respect national sovereignty, which, of course, we always do. Britain is one of the biggest donors of foreign aid to Nigeria: we give it £300 million each year. Is it not about time that we started to review the conditions attached to that aid, as our partners in America and Europe have been doing so in other contexts? One prominent example was in 2017, when the United States withheld nearly \$96 million in foreign aid to Egypt and refused to commit itself to a further \$195 million as a penalty for the country's abysmal human rights record.

More recently, the US Government have proposed basing the apportionment of foreign aid on the way in which countries treat their religious minorities—all religious minorities. The scheme would involve designating a ranking system under which foreign aid handouts could be reviewed depending on the severity of the situation in each country. At this moment, the European Union is also preparing a human rights sanctions regime, which would allow the bloc to target specific individuals in breach of good practice. That regime could be readily applied to many in the Nigerian Government.

We might also consider using such mechanisms to hold Nigeria to account. Adopting that approach would place its Government under pressure to improve. The argument that Buhari needs British handouts to solve

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

the problems facing him does not stand up to scrutiny. The fact that after years of generous aid packages the massacre of Christians is escalating is a sign that the money we have given him has not been used well. Continued and unquestioned support puts a seal of approval on his inaction. Undeserved aid packages of that kind provide a false sense of security, even when the situation on the ground is worsening.

We can help Nigeria greatly by incentivising it to use its natural wealth more effectively and equitably. It is 146th on the 2019 Corruptions Perceptions Index, and scores an abysmal 26 out of 100 for transparency. By contrast, Pakistan, which has seen horrendous human rights abuses towards Christians—most notably the poor woman Asia Bibi, imprisoned for years under an extremist blasphemy law—is 120th on the index, nearly 30 places higher.

One of the key policy aims of our Prime Minister and his new Government must be to defend persecuted Christians, at home and abroad. He has made some good moves so far, but they need to be backed up with more muscle. It is not that our impression of Nigeria as a resource-rich, joyful, and energetic part of the world is entirely wrong, but if we do not intervene soon, it risks becoming so. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

2.4 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to speak in this hugely important debate. Although not too many Members are present, I know that there are many others who, if not here in person, are certainly with us in spirit. I include in that my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), whose work on reuniting refugee children informed him about much of what we will be debating this afternoon. I thank him, and so many other Members, for being such a powerful voice in speaking up for the millions of persecuted Christians around the world. Sadly, that voice is more necessary now than ever, as it seems that anti-Christian discrimination and persecution are on the rise. That was brought home to many of us who attended the launch of the 2020 Open Doors report just last month.

As we have heard, every year the charity Open Doors publishes its world watch list of the 50 worst-offending countries when it comes to the persecution of their Christian communities. The list makes particularly depressing reading. As we have also heard, the 2020 report says that, from Colombia to China, a staggering 260 million Christians face extreme or high levels of persecution. A further 50 million face persecution in 23 other countries that are named, including Mexico, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo. That means that more than 300 million Christian people are living in fear of practising their faith, and it appears to be getting worse.

Patricia Gibson: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in order to take a really committed stand against religious persecution, the UK Government could, in solidarity against that persecution, allow asylum seekers who come to the UK and whose claims have been accepted to work if they are fleeing religious persecution?

Brendan O’Hara: Obviously I agree. We have argued in favour of that on many occasions. Perhaps it is time that, rather than just talking about Open Doors once a year, the UK practised literally opening doors to people across the country who need our help.

Five years ago, Open Doors ranked just one country, North Korea, as “extreme” in the level of its persecution of Christians. Today no fewer than 11 countries are in the “extreme” category: during those five years, Afghanistan, Somalia, Libya, Sudan, Eritrea, Yemen, Iran, India, Syria and Pakistan have joined the list.

On the night of 10 October last year, a 14-year-old Catholic girl, Huma Younus, was abducted from her home in Karachi by three men. She was taken to the city of Dera Ghazi Khan, 600 km from her home. A few days later, her parents received official papers informing them that their daughter had converted to Islam and was now married to a much older man called Abdul Jabbar. Sadly, abduction for the purposes of forced conversion and marriage is a major issue in Pakistan. According to the Centre for Social Justice, between 2013 and 2019 at least 159 cases were officially reported, the vast majority of victims being poor Christian or Hindu girls who were abducted and forced against their will to convert and marry.

Earlier this week Huma Younus’s case was heard at the High Court in Karachi, where her parents argued that her marriage was invalid, in line with the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929, which forbids marriage under the age of 18. They produced evidence, including her baptismal certificate issued by St. James Parish in Karachi, which showed that she was 14 years old, having been born in May 2005. Yet the judges ruled that, as per Sharia law, even if Huma was a minor, the marriage between her and her alleged abductor was valid because she had already had her first menstrual cycle. Obviously, the judges’ decision was a devastating blow to Huma’s family. In the words of her inconsolable mother,

“Once again, justice has been defeated and, once again, our state has shown itself unable to treat Christians as Pakistani citizens.”

In a direct appeal to international Governments, her parents said:

“We appeal to the international community and to the international media, we appeal for you to raise your voices in defence of Huma. Our daughter is just 14 years old.”

So I ask the Minister on behalf of Huma and her heartbroken parents: what is the UK going to do for her and for those other Pakistani children who are being sexually exploited, forced to abandon their faith and enter marriages against their will? What are the UK Government going to do? How are they going to lobby the Pakistani authorities in those cases where religious laws and customs that are discriminatory towards minors are taking precedence over state legislation and causing a flagrant breach of human rights? This year, the UK plans to give more than £300 million in aid to Pakistan. What assessment have the Minister and the Government made of Huma’s lawyer’s statement about the Child Marriage Restraint Act that

“in Pakistan these laws are formulated and approved only to improve the image of the country in front of the international community, to ask for development funds and to freely trade Pakistani products on the European market”?

Of course, Pakistan is far from being alone in this. Open Doors and other Christian groups have identified a number of trends that are fuelling the rise in persecution against Christian communities. They include increasingly authoritarian states clamping down and using legislation to control or suppress belief, and unscrupulous Governments and regimes discovering that appealing to a sense of national religious identity and depicting Christians as aliens or outsiders can be a useful way to boost their own power and position. They also include, as we have heard, the spread of radical Islam, which has been driven out of large parts of the middle east but is now becoming more prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa.

Last year in Nigeria, more than 1,300 Christians were killed for their faith by ISWAP—Islamic State West Africa Province—or Boko Haram. In Nigeria, more people were murdered for their faith than in any other country in the world. Among them were the 10 Christian men who were beheaded and whose murders were graphically shown to the world in a video released on Christmas day, of all days. Tragically, 2020 has started where 2019 left off. On Monday of this week, the body of 18-year-old Michael Nnadi was found by a roadside. Michael was a seminarian with the Good Shepherd seminary in Kaduna and had been missing since being taken hostage, along with three brother seminarians, by Boko Haram on 8 January. Michael's abduction and murder are the latest in a long line of atrocities committed by Boko Haram that include the murder of Father Clement Ugwu, the kidnapping of Father John Shekwolo and the continued detention of Leah Sharibu, the only one of the 109 young girls who were kidnapped in 2018 who is still being detained. She is being held because of her refusal to convert to Islam.

I am sorry to say that the activities of Boko Haram and ISWAP are spreading to the neighbouring countries of Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger and Mali, all of which appear on this year's Open Doors list. Last week, Bishop Bruno Ateba from northern Cameroon told Aid to the Church in Need that in the first two weeks of 2020 there had been 13 attacks on villages in his diocese. He said:

“Just when people thought that the beast of Boko Haram had been completely decapitated, the horror has resurfaced in northern Cameroon.”

The problem is undoubtedly getting worse, and the persecutions of Christians is becoming increasingly widespread. We have all watched with horror and great sorrow the systematic attempts to erase all traces of Christianity from its middle eastern spiritual homeland. His Holiness Pope Francis has said:

“It might be hard for us to believe, but there are more martyrs in the world today than there were in the first centuries. They are persecuted because they speak the truth and proclaim Jesus Christ to this society.”

Sadly, the response of this society to those speaking that truth is all too often to imprison torture, kidnap or murder them.

Thankfully, there are many individuals, charities and NGOs who work hard in this field. I pay tribute to the wonderful work being done by Aid to the Church in Need, which each year funds more than 5,000 projects in more than 140 countries around the world, helping and supporting persecuted Christians to live out their faith while providing practical and spiritual support to

millions of people. I was privileged last year to visit Lebanon and the Syrian border with Aid to the Church in Need to see that practical support in action. We met Christian families who had fled Syria, Iraq and other places in the middle east to seek refuge in Lebanon. Were it not for the day-to-day support and pastoral care provided by ACN, they would be absolutely destitute. On the feast of the Epiphany, I was honoured to be with the Melkite Greek Catholic Archbishop when St John the Merciful Table provided 1,000 refugees with their only hot meal. That is something that they do every single day. It was a small but wonderful example of how Christian organisations are helping those fleeing persecution, but with the growth in the number of people in need, this cannot be left simply to the charities to provide.

As I said, more than 300 million Christians are being persecuted or are living in fear of persecution. As we have heard, there is no identikit model for what that persecution looks like. It comes from direct state suppression, as in North Korea and China. It can come in the form of discriminatory laws that favour one group ahead of another, such as those we are currently witnessing in Pakistan. Persecution can also come in the form of terrorism from Daesh, Boko Haram or ISWAP, who use extreme violence against many of the poorest people on the planet in order to pursue their ideology. It can come with or in the wake of war, as warring factions seek to divide communities along religious lines for their own gain, as we are seeing in Syria. We have to be clear that, wherever it comes from and however it manifests itself, we all, as individuals, as groups and as the Government, have to call it out. We have to be seen to be doing everything we possibly can to stop it.

2.16 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): It is a great honour to speak in this debate and to follow the excellent speeches that have been made by the Minister and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for the work he has done over decades on this subject, and to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) for the interesting analysis that he has just presented us with.

As a Christian, I am well aware that this is not a new subject; it is a very ancient subject indeed. In fact, we had Christian persecution during the Roman empire on a monumental scale. It persisted through the middle ages and the wars of religion in France, and it was of course endemic in the communist era under Stalin. This is not only a question of what is going on in China today; it is something that permeates our history and our civilisation. I shall be bold enough to say that, in my opinion, religious toleration is the best evidence of a civilised society. I say that because it is not just about law-making; it is about attitudes, cultural life and thinking. Where there has been a proper degree of religious toleration in the past, there has tended to be peace. When that toleration breaks down and people compartmentalise their own ideology and use it as a weapon—and as a state weapon in the case of certain countries, many of which have been mentioned today—we end up with the increase in persecution that Open Doors has identified so well. This debate is quite rightly

[*Sir William Cash*]

about Christian persecution, which of course does apply and has applied in the past more particularly where there have been atheistic regimes and regimes that discriminated against Christianity but also against other religions.

I welcome and applaud what Open Doors has said. This has not been specifically mentioned yet, but Open Doors estimates that 260 million Christians in the top 50 countries on its world watch list for 2020 are being persecuted for their religious beliefs, compared with 245 million in 2019. In 2014, only North Korea was ranked as extreme for its level of persecution of Christians. In the 2020 report—only six years later—11 countries fall into that category, and Open Doors estimates that attacks on churches have risen by 500%, from 1,847 to 9,488, over the past year. That massive increase is highly dangerous and problematic not only for stability in the countries in which such things are happening, but in relation to what this country must do to attempt to mitigate and prevent them. The International Society for Human Rights estimates that Christians are the targets of about 80% of all acts of religious discrimination or persecution worldwide, so it is significant that this debate focuses on persecution against Christians.

I welcome the initiative of the Prime Minister and, indeed, the manner in which my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti) has taken over as special envoy on this matter, under the auspices—if I can use that expression—of my hon. Friend the Minister and the Prime Minister. I will issue a word of encouragement, rather than warning, because when I read the Bishop of Truro's report, and the commentary around it, I noted that only two of the 22 extremely important and significant recommendations are Christian-specific. It is worth making that point, because if the proportionality demonstrates that the increase in attacks on Christians is so much greater than in those on others, and that that is largely happening in countries with a particular state ideology about religious beliefs that is antipathetic to the Christian religion, then inevitably it is a serious problem on an international scale. For that reason, I am glad that the United Nations is taking an active interest in the matter.

It is one thing to say we do not like persecution, but it is another to say that it is coming from certain quarters and certain countries, and that it is aimed at certain categories of religious minority—in this case Christian—while the volume of persecution against Christians is increasing. It therefore becomes a matter of extreme importance to us, and I welcome what the Foreign Secretary has said about the matter. The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister are hitting the nail right on the head. It is one of the most intractable problems, as shown in the historical outline I gave from the Roman empire onwards, and it will not just go away. It will require careful diplomatic, belief-based and religious tolerance from those who want to prevent the situation from escalating.

As I said during the shadow Minister's very good speech, we must be careful not to generalise the subject in such a way that our attention is distracted from attacks on Christians. I have always been a strong supporter of Holocaust Memorial Day, and I feel intensely about the matter. I had the opportunity the other day to

sign the book, and I remember writing, "Never again." I do not need to write 10 lines, just the words, "Never again." Having been born in 1940, I am the oldest Member in the House of Commons, so unlike many others—I mean no disrespect; this is a problem of age—I actually lived through that period. I can remember as a small boy seeing the extent of the persecution when I watched black-and-white films after the war about what went on in the concentration camps.

One must remember that some people were taken to those camps due to their Christian beliefs. We all know about Bonhoeffer and Father Kolbe—St Kolbe as I think he is now—and so on, and I am just trying to contextualise the debate a little by saying that this is not a new problem and it is not confined to Christianity. However, this debate is especially important because of the degree to which Christians are now being targeted in a new wave of anti-Christian persecution by certain states that have either atheistic or, in some cases, Islamic objections to Christianity and have weaponised their state control in order to persecute Christians.

We must also be aware of the use of sanctions. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Alexander Stafford), the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) impressed me by mentioning the imposition of conditions on the aid we give. Members will know that I promoted the Bill that became the International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014. Its aim was to protect women and children from FGM and all those other matters. The Bill imposes a statutory obligation that where the Government, through the Department for International Development, are giving aid, they are allowed to impose conditions to promote the idea of protecting women and children, including from trafficking, honour killings and other matters whereby women are unfairly treated in different countries.

As we have heard, many countries are actively using state powers to promote anti-Christian persecution. Imposing conditions could be a fruitful line of inquiry and needs to be worked on, because although the 2014 Act related to the protection of women and children, it could just as well be used for ensuring that Christians are not persecuted. The law is already there, and I remember the former Prime Minister saying to me, "You do realise, Bill, that you have changed the law in a really big way," because the £13 billion that we give in international aid now has embedded in it a statutory obligation, subject to judicial review. I would be keen to see that principle applied to the purpose of ensuring that Christians in other countries are not persecuted.

This debate has been incredibly useful for many reasons, and I will finish by saying something about my great friend Jeremy Lefroy, the former Member for Stafford, who has sadly left this House. He is doing the most amazing work, and I am sure we shall hear more about it from my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce). His work, and that of others doing similar things, can play a big part in ensuring that we get this problem straightened out. I will finish on the domestic abuse of Christians. It has bothered me for a long time that some people appear to be able to go up and down Whitehall with placards attacking Christians—make no mistake—without being properly prosecuted. If Christians were to attack other religions in the same

context, it would immediately fall into the category of what is called human rights law. I am not against human rights and never have been, but I am deeply concerned—[*Interruption.*] I see one or two Members shaking their head. I have a very deep concern that human rights laws sometimes protect some people but can give rise to the invasive question of proper control over the misuse of freedom of speech. That is highly controversial and we do not have time to go into it now, but I put that forward as a proposition.

It is important that issues of religious toleration have complete equivalence of treatment under the law. Once it gets out of control, it becomes so pervasive and causes so much division in society—I come back to Holocaust Memorial Day and my concern for the Jewish population, and to what I have seen in the press about some aspects of the accusations against some members of the Labour party.

We all owe it to everybody to be fair, reasonable and tolerant, but also to put our foot down, using sanctions where necessary and financial conditions where required, to ensure that we do not allow Christians, either abroad or at home, to be persecuted. Such persecution is unjustified and hateful, and we can do something about it.

2.31 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this extremely important debate on the persecution of Christians, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As an officer of the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, I pay particular tribute to the group and its chair, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is here today. His tireless work in the group is outstanding, as is his support for Christians and all other religious groups to prevent persecution and to ensure these issues are regularly raised in this House so that we are cognisant of our responsibility to address them at all levels of government.

This issue is of immense importance to constituents and church groups across East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow. I have received over 60 emails in the past couple of weeks asking me to attend the Open Doors event in Parliament. I attended and was extremely impressed by its detailed work and its watchlist of countries where Christians are persecuted today.

I heard the poignant accounts of those who bravely practise their faith in countries where they experience threats to their life. As a Christian, I always seek to live by my values but, when there is a threat to someone's life and, particularly, a threat to their family's lives, the bravery, courage and absolute faith of those extraordinary individuals is commendable and insurmountable. I was moved by the whole experience of that event in Parliament.

Will the Minister take this away and consider the persecution faced by Christians in Turkey, China, Pakistan and Nigeria? I visited Nigeria with the Select Committee on International Development a number of years ago, and we heard at first hand the religious intolerance that appeared to be building and about the very real risks people faced every day. In support of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, we spent time with the mothers whose children had been abducted.

As my constituency hosts the Department for International Development, I ask the Minister to look at the Department's work. It is important to many

Members that the Department continues to make progress on the spirit and recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's report. The Department does fantastic work across the world, and people in East Kilbride are proud that we are at the helm of many programmes that support those facing persecution, as well as those in extreme poverty in developing countries.

As a member of the International Development Committee, I visited the refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan following the Syrian crisis. I went with the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who will speak shortly, and I distinctly remember that one of our reports highlighted how refugees from Christian backgrounds were often under threat of persecution and therefore could not, or felt they could not, go to the security and safety of the settlements developed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

We took evidence over many months in producing our detailed report, and we understood that the proportion of Christians included in the resettlement programme was desperately low and that the issue had not been addressed at the time. I am not sure whether the Minister can provide an update today, but perhaps she could write to update me on the UNHCR's work and on the number and proportion of Christians who are now part of the resettlement programme. Has that been addressed? My fear was that families were in hiding and were not able to take part in the very good programmes to which we contribute funding. That is extremely important.

We think about the international persecution of Christians, but we need to address how Christians across the United Kingdom sometimes feel. People from many different religions feel persecuted at times, and we must always address that. No matter our own religion or values, we must make sure that the UK has freedom of religious belief for everybody.

Some of the groups that contacted me over the past year have highlighted a gradual perception of the erosion of beliefs and values related to Christianity across the United Kingdom. That concern is felt by teachers who contacted me, and by individuals who feel it is important to celebrate Easter and who were very upset by the announcement a few years ago that Cadbury's would be taking the word "Easter" off its Easter eggs. I remember writing to Cadbury's at the time, and it subsequently reversed the decision. Although big companies might base such developments on their consumers, they have a fundamental impact on people with religious beliefs.

Other individuals highlighted cases where "Merry Christmas" has been replaced with "Happy Holidays," or where they felt pressured to make that change. I visited a hospital not so long ago where staff were greatly upset that the star had been taken off the Christmas tree. It is important not only that we continue to work together across this House on all these issues, but that this is not just seen singularly as an issue for other countries, because we have to accept that we also have a lot of work to do to ensure the continuation of freedom of religious belief, which we all hold so dear as an absolute value in this House. We must support that and do everything we can, across all parties in this House, to ensure that it is one of the core fundamental values that underpin our democracy.

2.40 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure, albeit a sad necessity for many of us, to speak on a debate on this issue yet again in this House. The analysis I have seen from Open Doors and others shows that in the past three years alone more than 10,000 Christians have been killed for their faith—that is a staggering number. We are right to hold this debate today, because, as others have mentioned, the evidence shows that Christians are the target of about 80% of all the acts of religious discrimination or persecution around the world.

However, as other Members have done, it is right that we focus briefly on the other 20% as well. It is a huge slight to this country that there are record levels of antisemitism here in the UK, but we are not alone, as this has increased by some 27% in France. We know that Muslims are persecuted around the world: there is internment in China, which we have heard about; 49 Muslims were killed in the mosque attack in New Zealand not so long ago; in June 2017 a 51-year-old man was killed coming out of a mosque in Islington, here in the UK; and in New York, in 2016, an imam and his associate were also killed. We also should not forget the issues that atheists face around the world. Thirteen Muslim countries punish atheism or apostasy with death, and in others legal status can be withdrawn. So although it is right that today's debate focuses on the 80%, I, like many other Members, wish to put on record that we are concerned about all abuses of human rights in matters of faith. The diminution of those rights for people of any faith diminishes all of us, Christian or otherwise, in this House.

Sadly, we could discuss so many countries in this regard, but I am going to deal with North Korea, which has been at the top of Open Doors' world watch list for a long time. I often feel that North Korea does not get the attention it should in these debates, probably because so little information comes out. However, some information does come out from time to time, and we need to recognise the indescribable brutality against Christians in that country and the fact that it is absolutely directed by its Government. I, for one, would like to see greater protest about that from young people and others, because it is absolutely unacceptable.

I learnt recently of a report from a defector from the North Korean national security agency, who was talking about being trained to look for things such as people who remained silent, with their eyes closed; people who were meditating; and habitual smokers or drinkers who quit smoking or drinking all of a sudden. Those people were to be watched closely, because those things were a sign that they might well be Christians. Severe recrimination, including torture, often leading to death, would follow as a result. There are brave people who have escaped from North Korea. Indeed, some have spoken in Speaker's House about what goes on in that country, and it gives me pleasure to give amplification to their words, because we do not hear and say enough in this country about what goes on there. We also know that North Korean national security service spies are commissioned to set up fake secret prayer meetings to attract Christians, who, again, will then be imprisoned. Those are the lengths to which that deeply evil regime goes to stop any form of faith happening in that country.

Later on this year, the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting will take place in Kigali, in Rwanda. Such a meeting happens every two years, and I am a big fan of the Commonwealth. It does great work around the world, and as we have left the European Union, we are going to need to invest in that important member organisation even more strongly, to boost our trade links and our links of friendship. But if Members look down the world watch list, they will see that on it are India, Nigeria, Brunei, Cameroon, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya and Malaysia. Those nine are all Commonwealth countries and they have things to answer for on how they are treating Christians. So one of my questions to my good friend the Minister, whom I know takes these issues extremely seriously, is whether Her Majesty's Government will engage on the issue of freedom of religion and belief with our Commonwealth friends and partners at that CHOGM meeting. I hope she will be able to give us answer in the debate, but if she cannot, perhaps she would write to us.

Like many Members here, I am extremely proud of the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Jeremy Hunt) instituted the Bishop of Truro's review. He was right to do that, and it is even better news that the previous Government committed to it, as has our current Prime Minister. We have a fantastic envoy in this area, whom I spoke to in America early this morning. He might be in Washington but he is still on the case and he is very interested in what we are doing in this House today. He was running me through some of the recommendations, and I wish to focus on three in particular.

The first recommendation was for the UK to seek a United Nations Security Council resolution, and I know the Minister was asked about that earlier. I understand that the United Kingdom will assume the presidency of the Security Council shortly, and I hope that will be a time when we press forward with that important resolution to Governments in the middle east and north Africa to protect Christians and other persecuted minorities in those countries. That is absolutely necessary.

The second recommendation on which I wish to focus is the training that we provide to our excellent diplomats. We are extremely fortunate in this country to have world-class diplomatic representation. As one of the Prime Minister's trade envoys, I have the privilege of working with some of our diplomats and know that they do fantastic work for this country all around the world. I understand that the recommendation is that all Foreign Office staff, at home and abroad, should have mandatory training on religious literacy, and that in some British embassies, high commissions and relevant companies there should be tailored responses to any violations of freedom of religion or belief. If the Minister is able to update us on the ongoing procurement of further training for our diplomats, that would be helpful. This issue needs to get into the DNA and culture of the Foreign Office—it is the bread-and-butter business of the Foreign Office. Trade deals matter, but so does freedom of religion and belief.

The final recommendation that I wish to dwell on for a while is the consideration of the imposition of sanctions on perpetrators of serious human rights abuses against religious minorities, including Christians. Again, I know that the Government are working on this issue. It would be really helpful to the House if in her response the

Minister could perhaps flesh out the situation and tell us whether the Foreign Office has any particular countries in mind. Indeed, it might be helpful to those countries to know that they are potentially in the frame. Perhaps they would raise their game and make improvements so that the sanctions were not imposed.

It would be useful for the House to know what the process is and what sort of things the Government are looking at. How will the sanctions apply? If the persecution comes from the whole Government, will the sanctions apply just to individuals or to the Government as a whole? How will the sanctions be worked into our trade negotiations? Obviously, we hope that the mere threat of sanctions would lead to improvements so that they would not need to be imposed. In a sense, to impose a sanction is always a failure. It is a tool that we want to have in the box but do not want to have to use, but sometimes we need to take the tools out of the box if there is no change or action. It would really help the House if the Minister could kindly flesh out a little more of the Government's thinking in that policy area. If she is not able to do that today—I may have put her on the spot—perhaps she would be kind enough to write to us to set out the Government's thinking.

2.50 pm

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted to have this opportunity to raise the plight of persecuted Christians. The last time I raised this issue in the House, in a debate just like this one, I focused on Nigeria and the horrifying persecution by the terrorist group Boko Haram. This time, I wish to highlight persecution by the Chinese state, which observers from the Open Doors world watch list believe is increasing.

In China, unlike many other countries where Christians face persecution, the origin of the persecution they face is not hatred from members of another religion; instead, it appears to be the Communist party's apparently endless desire to exert its authority over every institution, however small and potentially unthreatening, that could provide an alternative source of community or—they might possibly think—power. This desire for control leads to attempts to Sinicise every single church and every other religious and cultural institution in that place, forcing them under state control and into conformity with official interpretations of Chinese culture.

For those who do not fall into line, there have been crackdowns, detentions, interrogations, torture and disappearances. Local authorities are reportedly shutting down unregistered churches and arresting their members. Some regions have been told to replace pictures of Jesus with that of the Chinese leader. Members may have heard of the Early Rain Covenant church in Chengdu, more than 200 members of which were arrested in 2018. Its pastor, Wang Yi, was sentenced to nine years in jail. The Zion church, one of Beijing's largest unofficial Protestant churches, was shut down in 2018.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) mentioned in his opening remarks from the Front Bench, children under the age of 18 are systematically banned from attending church. In effect that strips parents of the right to pass on their faith to their children. Technological monitoring has strangled religious freedoms in China. As we have heard, surveillance cameras have been forcibly installed in churches as a so-called security measure.

Someone who has experienced all that at first hand is Pastor Jin. He realised that his country had changed in 2017. He says:

“There was something about the tone and urgency of the language that suggested a new campaign was coming”.

Pastor Jin was arrested because of his church work and detained for more than 10 days in solitary confinement. He says:

“As the days dragged on, doubt crept in. I began to go over and over the same questions: if I am called by God, am I really willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of the Gospel?”

I cannot imagine how difficult it must be for someone to choose between their faith or their freedom and safety, and the safety of their family, too.

Some of the worst affected are those who dare to stand up for Christians and their right to practise. They are the lawyers, the human rights defenders and the people who speak out against the state as Christians are forced underground. They have been subject to the most awful intimidation and violence. Gao Zhisheng was one of them. Amnesty has called him the bravest lawyer in China. He grew up in poverty. When he became a lawyer, he pledged to serve the underprivileged. It was when Gao defended underground Christians as well as the Falun Gong that he got into trouble. For his efforts, he was repeatedly abducted. He spent three years in a prison in Xinjiang from 2011 to 2014. He was physically and mentally tortured, beaten, deprived of sleep, placed in solitary confinement for long periods of time and electrocuted with cattle prods. He continued to speak out against the injustices that he saw. He wrote:

“My experience is just one part of the boundless suffering of the Chinese race under the cruellest regime in history.”

In 2017, Gao was disappeared. His family have not heard from him since.

Another man, Li, is known for defending sensitive cases, such as those in unregistered religious groups who have faced persecution. Li was attacked multiple times because of that and, in one incident in 2007, he was abducted, held in a basement of a building and stripped to his underwear. Those who abducted him were heard shouting that if they saw him in Beijing again, they would beat him. Then he was attacked with bottles and electric shock batons. By the end, he had bruises all over his body, and he had lost his hearing in his left ear. Returning home, he found his house ransacked and his computer wiped. In 2015, he was arrested and spent two years in prison and was tortured daily. His family were not told where he was for six whole months. He left prison frail and unrecognisable after pleading guilty to charges of subverting the system. Li returned home to close surveillance and restricted freedom of movement. Li's brother, Chunfu, was also detained for 18 months. Chunfu was hospitalised and diagnosed with schizophrenia. His wife, understandably distraught, was heard telling the police officer:

“His mind is shattered. Just what did you people do to him?”

These are just some of the horrific stories that have emerged—stories of people who were trying to defend the religious minorities in China.

As we know, and as we heard earlier, it is not only Christians who are being abused in the service of state control. Uyghur Muslims are being tortured and indoctrinated in modern day concentration camps in

[Ms Lyn Brown]

Xinjiang. In Tibet, Buddhist monasteries are being destroyed and their faithful monitored and imprisoned. Practitioners of Falun Gong have been targeted as an extremist group and reports suggest that they have been subjected to utter horrors, including live organ harvesting.

I know that hon. Members in this place would agree with me that it is a fundamental basic human right to have the freedom to practise religion or, indeed, to have none. The people who I have spoken about today have suffered so much to stand up for that basic human right, and they have suffered all the more because they stand alone and because we have not been standing with them. The protection of these rights needs to be at the heart of UK foreign policy. We must do everything possible to ensure that people have the right to pursue their beliefs without fear. The Government have been asked multiple times about their position on the breaches of human rights in China and elsewhere. Although I have heard nice words and that our concerns are shared, I am anxious that the Government's response has lacked depth, or—dare I say it—courage. The severity of the situation calls for a stronger reaction and a clear declaration of intent. Statements of concern from our Government are simply not enough. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office needs to be more than an extended department of trade, because if we in Britain will not stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves, who are we?

3 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I thank the Minister for allowing time for this important debate on the persecution of Christians, and I thank colleagues for their deeply moving and informed speeches. It is a privilege to follow them.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), I want to focus on the situation in Nigeria, which others have also touched upon. Yesterday, in a written answer, the Foreign Office Minister, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, said:

“We are appalled by and condemn the escalating levels of violence, including executions, instigated by Boko Haram and Islamic State West Africa (ISWA) in Northern Nigeria. The targeting of Christians, including those from Plateau State, has tragically increased in recent months”.

This is echoed by Baroness Cox, who was in Nigeria recently, and her organisation, Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, which does such great work there, in their report, “Your Land or Your Blood: the escalating persecution and displacement of Christians in northern and central Nigeria”. She writes:

“While the underlying causes of violence are complex, the asymmetry and escalation of attacks by well-armed Fulani militia upon predominately Christian communities is stark and must be acknowledged. It is too simplistic to label these atrocities as driven by desertification, climate change or competition for resources... The situation fulfils the criteria of genocide and should be recognised as such, with the responsibility of the international community to respond accordingly.”

I have some questions for the Government that I would like them to raise with the international community, but first I wish to read a few survivor testimonies from Baroness Cox's report. Archbishop Ben Kwashi of Jos says:

“We are still not safe in our homes. I am raising an alarm – if the government will listen”.

A pastor from Maiduguri in Borno:

“Every day we carry new corpses to the cemetery. They kill farmers. They destroy our homes and churches. They kidnap and rape women.”

Margaret from Ngar village:

“My sister was raped and her wrists cut off before she was shot through the heart. They took my brother, his wife and all their six children, tied and slaughtered them like animals.”

Veronica from Dogon Noma:

“They attacked me with a machete twice, once to the neck and once to my hand. I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I saw my daughter on the ground – she was dead – with my chopped finger in her mouth”.

Boko Haram has long been clear about the targeting of Christians, considering them to be infidels—non-believers. As its leader, Abubakar Shekau, who pledged allegiance to Daesh, said after the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls:

“We know what is happening in this world. It is a jihad war against Christians and Christianity. It is a war against Western education, democracy, and constitution... a war against Christians and democracy and their constitution. Allah says we should finish them when we get them.”

Sadly, those quotes come from an October 2014 newsletter, “The Voice of the Martyrs”. In other words, it is not recent news. The religious element of these atrocities is so important, yet it has been downplayed and ignored, altogether often, for far too long by so many. Sadly, that includes representatives of our own Government in Nigeria. In early 2016, the Select Committee on International Development, on which I then served, visited Nigeria to review the Department for International Development's programmes there. A roundtable meeting of community organisations was arranged by DFID staff there. During that trip, I repeatedly urged them to invite a senior representative of CAN, the Christian Association of Nigeria, to listen to his concerns about how Christians were being targeted and how disturbances and killings could not simply be put down to local disputes between travelling herdsmen and settlers, to the exclusion of religious elements. Yet in 2016 those DFID staff were not interested in listening to his concerns about religiously motivated attacks or dedicating resources to addressing them.

I hope that things have now changed on the ground there and ask whether the Minister will request that the DFID in-country staff there produce a report on what they are doing to address the persecution of Christians in Nigeria. How many lives could have been saved between then and now if they had listened to the representative of the Christian Association of Nigeria? Those lives might even have included the life of his colleague, Rev. Lawan Andimi, the chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria's Adamawa state chapter, who was kidnapped and killed by Boko Haram just a few days ago, on 20 January. Or perhaps they would have included the lives of the 10 Christians beheaded by ISWAP, which released a video showing 10 being beheaded and one man being shot on Boxing day 2019, with a voiceover saying:

“This message is to the Christians in the world... Those... you see... are Christians and we will shed their blood as revenge”.

Aid to the Church in Need's “Persecuted and Forgotten?” report said that between July 2017 and July 2019 there was

“an upsurge in the number and severity of attacks against Christians in the Middle Belt region.”

These attacks, clergy report, are “growing in ferocity and frequency”.

I join colleagues in paying tribute to organisations such as Aid to the Church in Need, Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Open Doors.

There is too, sadly, grave concern in Nigeria that the Government of President Buhari are not simply failing to address these atrocities, but possibly doing worse. Baroness Cox says in the report:

“We share widespread concerns that many attacks take place with the states’ connivance”.

Following the Boxing day beheadings, Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto told Aid to the Church in Need that the Nigerian Government, by placing what he called “hard-line Muslims” in key Government positions, are giving tacit approval to such groups. He says:

“They are using the levers of power to secure the supremacy of Islam...If the people in power don’t do enough to integrate Christians, then they give oxygen to Islamism. If they have countries where everybody is Muslim in power then you give vent to the idea that Islam should be supreme.”

He adds:

“Western nations are not doing enough...the Western nations could have reduced the influence...by 80 or 90 percent...Christians have every reason to feel insecure and...there is a general feeling of their marginalisation from the political process. If the principles of our religion were different, there would be a civil war by now”—

meaning that the only thing preventing Nigeria from being engulfed in civil war is the peaceful tenets of Christianity. I challenge the Minister to find out the Nigerian Government’s exact response to concerns raised by our own Prime Minister about the increasing levels of violence across Nigeria when he met President Buhari at the UK-Africa investment summit on 20 January and discussed UK support. We all know that it is possible for issues to be mentioned, even at the highest level, without concerns moving forwards in any substantive way. That simply cannot be allowed to happen regarding an issue of such gravity. Therefore, may I ask the Minister to raise a few specific points with her counterparts in the Nigerian Government? I have three questions.

First, despite the scale of violence in the farmer-herder conflict, few perpetrators—if any—have been brought to justice. What actions will the Nigerian Government take urgently to arrest and prosecute the perpetrators of violence, and what can the British Government do to help?

Secondly, in the farmer-herder conflict there have been many accounts of security forces not being deployed, not acting to prevent impending attacks or, worse still, being complicit in violence. What are the Nigerian Government doing to ensure that security forces respond to violence, and that any members of the security forces who perpetrate human rights abuses or willfully ignore attacks are investigated and prosecuted?

Thirdly, targeted attacks against churches and heightening religious tensions indicate that religious identity plays a role in the farmer-herder conflict. What are the Nigerian Government doing to address the religious aspects of this violence, and to promote reconciliation between religious communities in Nigeria at a local level?

Christian Solidarity International has written to our Prime Minister this week:

“The increasingly violent attacks and the failure of the Nigerian government to prevent them and punish the perpetrators are alarming.”

It has also issued a genocide warning for Nigeria.

I welcome the fact that the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court is now considering the situation in Nigeria. Its report from the end of 2019 said that there is a “reasonable basis” to believe that war crimes and crimes against humanity have taken place in Nigeria. However, the OTP has been considering this issue since as long ago as 2010, and one particular element of the atrocities continues to be neglected in its annual reports: atrocities perpetrated on the basis of religion or belief. The OTP must take the religion or belief element of such atrocities in Nigeria into urgent consideration. Will the Minister ensure that the Government do ask for that? Any other approach simply would not provide a comprehensive picture of the situation so would fail to address the issue properly or ensure justice for victims and survivors. I appreciate that the Minister will not be able to respond to all my questions today—and I do have more—but I would appreciate her doing so at a later date, when she has had time to consider them.

What urgent action will the UK Government take in their role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to uphold their commitment to prevent further genocide in Nigeria? The commitment to prevent genocide derives from the UK being a signatory to the genocide convention of 1948—a commitment reaffirmed in a 2005 declaration of the responsibility to protect.

I turn to the Bishop of Truro’s report, which I warmly welcome. I am appreciative that it is being given attention at the Foreign Office. Specifically with regard to Nigeria, how will the Government ensure that recommendation 7 on genocide prevention and determination and recommendation 21b on bringing Daesh to justice are given full and proper consideration, with particular reference to the increasingly violent attacks against Christians in Nigeria? May I politely suggest that if the Foreign Office is serious about its intention to implement the review’s recommendations, as I believe is the case, its approach could be analysed by a subsequent independent review, with particular reference to Nigeria as something of a test case? Might the Minister be willing to ask her FCO counterpart whether they could rise to that challenge? How will the Government ensure that Boko Haram, Daesh and other perpetrators are brought to account for the atrocities they are involved in? With regard to the Bishop of Truro’s report, what steps will the UK take to ensure that it prevents and suppresses the crime of genocide in Nigeria?

If you will permit me, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is a privilege to be able to speak at more length than usual in debates such as this—I would now like to refer to aid. This was touched on by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh). To say that huge amounts of UK aid go to Nigeria is inadequate; perhaps more proper would be the term that has been used by our parliamentary colleague Lord Alton, whose written question this week ascertained figures that he called “eye-watering” sums of money. The figures appear to indicate that the total UK bilateral official development assistance to the Federal Republic of Nigeria for the 10 years up to 2018 was £2.4 billion. If the calculations are correct—I stand to be corrected—then for 2018, the latest year of statistics, that would equate to over £800,000 per day; and that was not the highest year, by far. Could the Minister confirm—perhaps, I accept again, at a

[Fiona Bruce]

later date—whether that is in fact correct? What proportion has been used specifically to address religious persecution and the persecution of Christians in Nigeria, about which we have heard so much today? What proportion of the £12 million that the Government have committed to champion freedom of religion or belief worldwide has been allocated to Nigeria, and for what purpose?

Yesterday, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo launched the International Religious Freedom Alliance, stating:

“The Alliance is intended to bring together senior government representatives to discuss actions their nations can take together to promote respect for freedom of religion or belief and protect members of religious minority groups worldwide.”

At the launch, Secretary Pompeo stressed the ever-growing need for such a combined effort, listing some of the worst acts of violence based on religion or belief in recent years. We have heard about many of these today. He cited

“terrorists and violent extremists who target religious minorities, whether they are Yazidis in Iraq, Hindus in Pakistan, Christians in northeast Nigeria or Muslims in Burma”,

and

“the Chinese Communist Party’s hostility to all faiths.”

It is very good to see that the UK Government have immediately joined that alliance. How will they use their membership to raise concerns on these issues, particularly the persecution of Christians in Nigeria? Nigerian Christian leaders who met Baroness Cox in Manchester earlier this week are, she reports, desperate for us to do something, as recent unreported massacres bring a horrific toll of suffering. In Nigeria, as the president of the Christian Association of Nigeria, Dr Samson Ayokunle, said last month,

“Christians have become endangered species in their own country.”

3.18 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken before me, and those who will follow afterwards, for their contributions. It is always a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. We had a discussion this week about this debate. We thank her for her contribution, and the shadow Minister as well. The civil servants never get a mention, but they are in the Box over there. We have met them on a number of occasions. I want to thank them for their responsiveness to us as MPs but also for helping the Minister in the job that is done.

This debate is very important and also very timely, as it falls the day after the inaugural meeting of this Parliament’s all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief—FoRB—and the APPG for the Pakistani minorities. That took place just yesterday—we did both at the same time. I thank the Members who have contributed to those groups and who attended the AGM. We speak up for those with Christian faith, those with other faiths and those with no faith—it is important to put that on the record. This debate is clearly about the persecution of Christians. I am a Christian and I am here to speak for that faith, but we also speak out for those of all faiths, because they have a right to worship God. Our God is a god of love, and we want to put that on the record.

For Christians, the world is becoming more and more dangerous. Christians are in a fight for survival, and many of us are aware of that. I was particularly interested in this issue when I came to the House, along with other Members—the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) in particular—and we have come together to work on it. I have had the privilege to chair the APPG for international freedom of religion or belief for several years. It is encouraging to see the ever-increasing parliamentary appetite to engage on this issue. When the group started in 2013, it had roughly 30 or 40 members, and now it has well over 100. It was heartening to see so many Members join the meeting yesterday, and it is encouraging that today’s debate is mirrored by a discussion in the other place about freedom of religion or belief and international development.

The APPG made the following recommendations in November 2019: first, that Foreign and Commonwealth Office posts further implement the FCO FoRB toolkit as a normal part of their work; secondly, that the FCO in London continues to encourage, support and monitor posts’ implementation of the FCO FoRB toolkit’s recommendations; thirdly, that, building on the welcome appointment of a special envoy for freedom of religion or belief by two successive Prime Ministers, that post be made permanent; fourthly, that the commitment that the international roving ambassador for human rights will work with the special envoy for freedom of religion or belief is expressed in visible public activity at the United Nations, including the Human Rights Council, as well as elsewhere, including with FCO posts worldwide; and fifthly, that FCO posts actively engage with the Prime Minister’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief by proactively seeking ways to concretely advance freedom of religion and belief in country, as well as monitoring the special envoy’s work on social media. Those recommendations are very important.

Thousands of Christians will be murdered for their faith this year. Some 200 million will be persecuted for their faith, and 2 billion live in endangered neighbourhoods. Figures obtained from the Library and Open Doors indicate that some 83% of the world’s Christian population is threatened or persecuted. I had the privilege, as I think everyone speaking in the debate did, to attend the launch of the Open Doors world watch list a few weeks ago, where I learned that 260 million Christians live in countries where they are at a risk of high, very high or extreme levels of persecution. That important event reminded us all of the vital need to protect marginalised Christian communities around the world. That is why I am grateful that the Government are maintaining their commitment to implement the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro’s report on the FCO’s work to support persecuted Christians.

Today is an opportunity to do so, but I wonder whether we in this House speak out as much as we should on behalf of Christians being persecuted across the world and whether our efforts match the seriousness of the problems. I commend the Government for the work they have done so far and encourage them to focus on the recommendations that have the biggest practical impact, such as improving data collection and training, making better use of the FCO FoRB toolkit, increasing funding for FoRB projects and imposing sanctions on FoRB violators.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and pay tribute to him for his work as chair of the APPG. Whether it is Nigeria, Iraq or Myanmar, we have seen time and again how hostilities between religious or belief groups can lead to persecution and major humanitarian crises. I am concerned that our international-facing Departments spend enormous amounts of money responding to crisis but do little to promote freedom of religion or belief in order to prevent conflict. Does he agree that specific plans and funding for promoting FoRB should be included and shared between Departments working on international affairs?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is the co-chair of the APPG on international freedom of religion or belief, and I am very pleased to work alongside her. I absolutely and wholeheartedly agree with what she has said.

The funding and all that is necessary need to be looked at in taking another step up to improve the Government's capacity to engage on FoRB issues and to have a direct impact on lives. Last year, we had the Sri Lanka Easter Sunday massacre, when 250 Christians were killed, and that still ranks high with us.

I had occasion to visit Iraq with Aid to the Church in Need, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara), the spokesperson for the Scots Nats. We had a chance to meet a number of people—Archbishop Warda was one of those we met, as well as Archbishop Nicodemus—from the Roman Catholic Church and also from the Orthodox Church. We had a chance to visit many places in Iraq where we met individuals who had clearly been persecuted and victimised for their beliefs. At that time, Mosul was still under ISIS control, but now it is free. We saw the damage done in that city not just to the buildings, but in the number of lives lost. It was a special occasion to be in Iraq and to experience that.

Of course, in an ideal world one could do everything, but in this world decisions have to be made about where to direct the limited resources. I therefore suggest that the Government do not prioritise recommendations the practical outcomes of which are uncertain, and which may be very costly in time and diplomatic effort, such as seeking to secure UN resolutions. Instead, they should focus on recommendations that have a more certain practical impact. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) referred to that, and it is important that we do so. We should put the funding where it would help by making changes, and we should do that in a really practical way so that we can almost touch those changes.

The Government can really help Christians and people of all faiths and beliefs who are suffering now in places such as Nigeria, where the scale of violence is already enormous and getting worse. Across the middle east, Christians have been displaced in Syria, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and western Africa. The information on this from Open Doors takes cognisance of where we are today.

The number of countries in west Africa where it is safe to be a Christian is shrinking. One could travel from Morocco in the north-west the whole way down to Cameroon in the south-west without leaving the world

watchlist. That is a downward trend relative to what it should be in relation to human rights, but most importantly in the impact it is having on Christians.

The hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) is not here for this debate, but he reminded me this week of the Christian leader who was beheaded in Nigeria, primarily because of his beliefs. That is the violence we see across the world. Christians and Muslims in Nigeria are suffering enormous violence at the hands of violent Islamic groups. According to evidence from Open Doors, last year approximately 1,350 Christians were killed for their faith in Nigeria. Let us think about that: 1,350 Christians were murdered just because they were Christians. That really ranks high with us.

This violence is not only causing untold misery and suffering for those who have been directly affected by it, but it is exacerbating religious tensions in an already extremely volatile country. I fear that if something is not done, we may be in this Chamber years from now—I hope not, but we may be—lamenting our failure to respond appropriately, and ending up investing much more money and effort in dealing with a future Nigerian refugee crisis.

Boko Haram and ISIS groups are in a full killing spree against Christians in Nigeria. Central Africa, as many will know, is the source of supplies of weapons of all sorts for terrorist groups across the world, so Boko Haram has easy access to the weaponry it needs, and the terrorists seem to have full sway.

I want to put on record my thanks to Open Doors, CSW, Release International, the Barnabas Fund and many other organisations that are speaking up for Christians across the world. They do some absolutely superb and excellent work. I would be very grateful to the Minister if she shared the discussions the Government had with President Buhari of Nigeria during his recent trip to the UK about his plans to halt the violence? Others have asked for that.

We had occasion through the all-party group to have a meeting with the Nigerian ambassador's chief of staff, just to push these matters. From another angle, when the Government were meeting the ambassador and the President directly, we took the opportunity to speak to the chief of staff. I would also appreciate hearing what plans the Minister has to push the issue at a multilateral level, to ensure that the international community is collectively taking this issue as seriously as it should.

Pakistan is another country where I fear for the rights of Christians and other religious or belief minorities. I am ever mindful of the conference held in New York in, I think, September 2016. I remember it distinctly; different countries were represented, and we had two MPs from Pakistan, one a Muslim MP and one a Christian MP. Each of them stood up and the Pakistan Muslim MP said that he was speaking not just for Muslims in his country but for Christians, and the Christian MP did the same. That reminded me of what we can do if we do it together and do it well.

I had the privilege of travelling to that great country with two parliamentary colleagues in October 2018, and we were welcomed by a wide range of people from Parliament, Government and civil society. We shared stories of the challenges we face around protecting freedom of religion and belief, and we were humbled by

[Jim Shannon]

the desire we saw to meet similar challenges in Pakistan. Off the back of that trip, the all-party groups on Pakistan religious minorities and freedom of religion and belief produced a comprehensive report outlining some of the challenges and making recommendations for the Pakistani and British Governments to help ameliorate the situation.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute, the spokesman for the SNP, made a good contribution, as all contributions have been. He gave examples of young Christian girls who were abducted, forcibly converted, and then married at the age of 13 or 14. That was one of the things that we brought to the attention of the Pakistan authorities when we were in Pakistan. What is happening there is absolutely disgraceful and there seems to be no control or will to stop that. They tell us that it can be stopped, but there does not seem to be a will to stop it, which concerns us.

We also had occasion to visit some of the slums, a Christian slum in particular, where a school is in place. It is a rudimentary school with children from the ages of four up to perhaps 15 or 16, and there was one Christian lady who had taken it upon herself to educate those children. We need the education of the Christian children in Pakistan to be as it should be. Pakistan sets aside 5% of jobs for Christians, but the jobs it offers those 5% are usually menial jobs such as sweeping the streets and cleaning the latrines. Pakistan needs to ensure that those 5% who are Christians have the opportunity to get an education so as to bring themselves up to a level where they can be nurses, doctors or teachers, instead of keeping them down so that they will never ever get away. So there is lots to do in Pakistan.

We also had occasion, along with Maurice Johns, the Pakistan religious minorities administrator, to visit a church of the Church of Pakistan, which is the equivalent of the Church of England, the Church of Scotland or indeed the Church of Ireland. There was an English service first and then a Pakistani service, and I attended the English one, and sang along with the hymns in my Ulster-Scots. The scripture text chosen was important: Corinthians 4:8-9:

“We are hard-pressed on every side, but not yet crushed; perplexed, but not in despair...persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.”

If ever there was a sermon in a church that summed it up for us, that was it. We arrived at that church with a police escort and an army escort, and there were metal gates on the entrance to the church, but all the other people who attended that church came and went as they normally did, and they went home afterwards in their own way. That brought me back to what it means to be a Christian in Pakistan and other places.

I would be grateful if the Minister sent me a letter outlining her response to those recommendations from the trip to Pakistan, including the plans to encourage and support Pakistan to make the necessary changes to achieve its ambition of obtaining freedom of religious belief.

Open Doors also referred to India and, I say this respectfully, to Prime Minister Modi. In 2019, there were 1,445 attacks on Christians in that country. It is moving in a dangerous direction. Christians and Muslims

are under attack for their beliefs. It narkes me—to use an Ulster Scots word—and I hope we can persuade India to stand up and do the right thing. This debate is about Christian persecution, but freedom of religion or belief violations are a problem faced by all communities in India. Christians face significant persecution, but other religious belief groups face many challenges too. For example, countless Muslims have recently been effectively stripped of their citizenship in Assam state. That action bears worrying similarities to the fate of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar, who were stripped of their citizenship in 1982. The hon. Member for West Ham (Ms Brown) spoke about the Rohingya Muslims in a previous debate, which I think she secured. Unfortunately, we all know what that gross violation of human rights eventually led to. We must ensure that it does not happen again.

That terrible tragedy makes me wonder—I say this respectfully—whether the Government, or previous Governments, have learned the lessons of Myanmar, which is that unaddressed freedom of religion or belief violations can explode into conflict and humanitarian disasters. The report from Open Doors poses two questions: first, the need for the UK Government, and crucially the Department for International Development, to recognise religion as a vulnerability in any assessment of their programming around the world; and, secondly, the need for the UK Government to recognise local faith actors as a resource which, with support from DFID, should be utilised in development work. Those are two very salient points, which could be extremely helpful in taking things forward.

I would like to think that we have learned from such tragedies, but I fear that that is not the case. How else can one explain the fact that training in FoRB literacy and religious dynamics is an optional extra for staff in DFID and the FCO? It should not be optional. It should be mandatory. That is what I would like to see. I look to the Minister's response to see whether we can go from voluntary to mandatory training, thereby increasing what we can do and doing it better. I am not saying the staff do not want to do it, but if it is mandatory and they all do it, they will all gain from it. That is really important. Surely, if the importance of these issues was genuinely appreciated, the training would be mandatory and the position of special envoy for freedom of religious belief would be permanent? We ask that it does become permanent. That, too, is very important.

I hope the Minister can assure hon. Members that all that can be done is being done to protect freedom of religion or belief, for the sake of Christians and people of all religions and none in Nigeria, Pakistan, India, China, west Africa, Europe and across the world. Today, we have a chance to speak up for those with no voice—for the voiceless. The Open Doors top 50 world watch list for 2020 is not like premier league football, where if you are in the top 10 you are doing well—or, in my case, if you are Leicester you are in the top three and doing very well—but a chart for countries across the world that do not deliver when it comes to the persecution of Christians. It is a very, very serious matter.

Today's debate raises awareness, but we must continue to stand up for the millions of Christians who have hoped for change for many years and are yet to see it become a reality. If we don't, who will?

3.38 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): The Vatican suggested in 2014 that about 100,000 Christians were being severely persecuted. Open Doors suggests that 11 Christians are killed every day—or 4,000 a year. Christians are probably the most persecuted religious sect in the world. Unfortunately, most of that persecution takes place in Muslim countries. The top 11 countries on the Open Doors watch list are classified as places where there is extreme persecution. North Korea is at No. 1; then there is Afghanistan, Somalia and Libya, with Pakistan at No. 5. We then have Eritrea; Sudan, where my wife operated for the International Committee of the Red Cross; Yemen, where I was when I was a boy; Iran and India, which is No. 10; and Syria at No. 11. The watch list classifies all those countries as extremely likely to persecute Christians—by the way, just outside that at No. 12 is Nigeria, which we have heard quite a lot about.

I want to name-check a few of those countries—some have not been referred to so far—starting with North Korea. There is only one god in North Korea and it is Kim Jong-un. If people do not worship Kim Jong-un and they do not have his picture in their house, they are in trouble. There are apparently about 300,000 Christians in North Korea. A considerable proportion of them are in camps and their chances of getting out are slight.

Afghanistan, a country where we have given blood to help, is No. 2. We have done so much to try to help that country. Family members give up their families for execution and if someone is a Christian there, they are likely to end up in a mental hospital. It is appalling.

Pakistan, a country that we are very friendly with, is No. 5. As my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted, Pakistan considers Christians as second-class citizens. They are not allowed to have a decent job. Two Christians died because they were given inadequate clothing to work in the sewers. The law is against Christians. The anti-blasphemy laws are arrowed at Christians.

In India, for goodness' sake—the largest democracy in the world—thousands of Christians are persecuted every year. Why? Why are they doing this? How can they do it? I just do not understand how India can allow that to happen.

No. 12 is Nigeria, and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has said enough about that to shock us.

No. 13 is Saudi Arabia, whose elite come to our country, live in London, dress the way they like, worship the way they like, do what they like and then go back and impose extreme sharia law. People cannot even have a church in Saudi Arabia—is that not disgraceful for a modern country? If someone is an expatriate in Saudi Arabia, they are not allowed to show that they are a Christian, otherwise they might be arrested or expelled from the country.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman's contribution is, as always, absolutely on the button. In Saudi Arabia, if we in the Chamber got together in a house to have a Christian meeting, we would be subjected to surveillance, persecution and imprisonment. That is what happens in Saudi Arabia. What he refers to is only the tip of the iceberg, but I thank him for his comments.

Bob Stewart: I agree.

Iraq, another country where we have given blood to help, is No. 15. In 2003 there were 1.5 million Christians in Iraq; now there are 160,000. Throughout the middle east in the past 100 years, huge numbers of Christians have left. They used to make up 25% of the population, and now the figure is 5%. Is that not appalling?

Egypt is No. 16, and 16% of its population are Christians, yet the Government treat those people as though they were the enemy of the state. If a church is wrecked by some riot, no one can get it rebuilt, because it is a matter of national security. Christians are not considered to be “right on” for Egypt.

It is a matter of deep regret to me, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Kazakhstan, that the country I like so much is No. 35. About 4.8 million of the population of Kazakhstan—about 25%—are Christians. The majority of them are Russian Orthodox and tend to stay in their own community, and they do not get too much hassle, but if you happen to come from a Muslim background and you are a Christian, you have got a problem. How come such a great country, which is going to have a superb future in this century, passed a law in 2011 that stopped religious freedom? How wrong is that?

I am shocked—truly shocked—that, during our lives, so much persecution of Christians is taking place. I absolutely endorse the Bishop of Truro's recommendation that we, using our presidency of the United Nations Security Council in 2021—and, as I said earlier, it should be remembered that we have a permanent seat there—should persuade the United Nations as a whole to sign an agreement not to persecute Christians or anyone else. It will be difficult, but it is something that our Foreign Office should define as a top priority.

I will stop soon, because I think I have said enough, but I remain horrified that people who are peace-loving—all they want to do is worship privately—are so misused in our world, and it is to do with us. My mother, who went to Belsen in 1945 as an officer in the Special Operations Executive, never told me that she had been there until just before she died. When I asked, “How the heck, mum, did you not tell me that you had been in Belsen in 1945 with the British Expeditionary Force as an SOE agent?”—a spy, effectively—she said, “It is because, Robert, I am ashamed.” I said, “Mum, what do you mean, ashamed?” She said, “I am ashamed because the holocaust happened when I was alive.” Now I understand what she meant. We have got to stop the persecution of any religion, but this debate is about the persecution of Christians. It has got to stop. It is happening in our lifetime, and we must do everything we can to sort it out.

3.49 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): During this debate, it has been reported by the police in Northern Ireland that, on 31 January, they uncovered a massive lorry bomb that was in the port of Belfast to be brought here to the mainland to be exploded on Brexit evening. I think that that reveals what fanaticism really looks like. We see the root of the persecution of Christians that we are talking about today in what was behind the attack that the police thankfully prevented on 31 January—fanaticism, hatred, anger—unjustifiable as it is.

[*Ian Paisley*]

I want to start by commending my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He is a remarkable chap, as everyone in this House will know, because of his diligence and his service to this cause. I do not think there is anyone on the Front Bench who is not collared by him several times every week on this subject, and rightly so. He is outstanding on this matter and he probably does not get enough credit for the actions that he takes. It is important for me to put that on record, as other Members from across the House and across the parties have also done. Well done, Jim.

The architecture of this room is imbued with significant high callings. Indeed, the words inscribed on the Chair that you sit on, Mr Deputy Speaker, read as follows:

“The hand that deals justly is a sweet smelling ointment. A heedful and faithful mind is conscious of righteousness...Praise be to God.”

That lies at the heart of our Christian beliefs. That sweet smelling ointment means that Christians behave in a different way, and when they face persecution, they do not retaliate in the way that others of different beliefs perhaps would. That inscription on your Chair is a potent reminder of the history—the Christian history—of this nation and a reminder that we should all be alert to the need to defend those of faith who are persecuted, both here at home and abroad. It is important that we are frank about what happens at home so that we can also speak about righteousness abroad. Frankly, it is unfortunate that within this nation, which likes to be called Christian, Christians are seen as fair game for attack, for ridicule and even for hatred. Those who unashamedly hold biblical or Christian beliefs here are often singled out for attack. If we wish to allow freedom of expression for others abroad, we should ensure that there is freedom of expression for religious and, yes, difficult beliefs at home. If we are going to promote freedom outside this nation, we should ensure that we defend freedom inside it.

The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) commented on the inequalities that persist in human rights legislation. Three years ago a huge banner was openly displayed—certain Members of Parliament even walk with that banner—bearing the words “F—the DUP”. When I reported the matter to the police, they told me that that was within the human rights legislation on freedom of expression. I challenged them by asking whether, if I were to have a counter banner, that would be permitted under my freedom of expression. I was told that it would not be allowed because it would provoke trouble. The hon. Member for Stone rightly highlighted these inequalities, and we should not be afraid to address these matters.

We have also seen attacks in this place. A leader of the Liberal Democrat party was effectively driven out of the leadership because he is a Christian and expressed Christian views. More recently we have read in the press about an attack on a prominent Labour party member who hopes to be leader of the party. She holds certain moral views and keeps them private, but because she holds those views, she is game for attack. We need to call those things out and recognise that if that is allowed to grow, we cannot really stand here and talk about religious freedom elsewhere. People must have that moral and religious freedom.

Around the world, as Members have already put on record, there are 260 million Christians who live in either a high or very high state of alert as a result of extreme levels of persecution. It has rightly been said that, if someone travels from Morocco in the north of Africa to Cameroon in the west, they will be in danger in each and every one of the countries they pass through, all of which have widespread persecution. We saw the despicable bombing of a place of worship—the softest of soft targets—in Colombo last year. Those with hatred in their hearts see places of Christian worship in particular as legitimate targets for attack because they are soft and easy. Our Government’s special envoy on this matter should see giving greater security to places of religious worship around the world, including Christian worship, as one of his tasks. There is no reason why embassies cannot task someone with an analysis of where such places are most at threat and of what additional security can be given to them.

Anyone who listened to the moving words of David Linsey, who lost his sister Amelia and his brother Daniel in that outrage in Colombo, must admire the demonstration of genuine Christian love and generosity to his enemy that he has expressed since the attack. He is admired internationally because of his comments about how he wants to respond to the violence that was inflicted upon his family. This nation should be proud that he has turned that hatred into a platform on which he can express his Christian love to others. I invite Members to meet David Linsey on 25 February when he will be in Parliament to talk about how he overcame his hatred of the people who carried out that attack.

The Government should also move further on my and other Members’ campaign to proscribe the Muslim Brotherhood, an organisation which inspires hatred and attacks on Christians at home and abroad. Members have mentioned the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and its Foreign Secretary was here last week. He told MPs that his kingdom had banned the Muslim Brotherhood because it turns their sacred beliefs into a tool of hatred to inspire attacks against Christians in particular and against political freedom. It was amazing that he said that, but he also expressed amazement that the United Kingdom had not taken similar action to ban Muslim Brotherhood.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On that specific point, will the hon. Gentleman confirm my suspicion that the special report on the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in this country commissioned by David Cameron when he was Prime Minister has still not yet been made public?

Ian Paisley: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for putting that on the record. It is amazing. This is an organisation that uses and abuses the beliefs of a whole culture to attack Christians and others, which is frightening and wrong. It hides in and uses mosques illegitimately for its hatred against Christians, and it is right and proper that the full facts about the Muslim Brotherhood in this nation are brought out. I will be meeting the Home Secretary’s staff next week to talk about the Muslim Brotherhood and will pursue its proscription in this country.

Bob Stewart: When I went to Egypt in 2011, I met members of the Muslim Brotherhood in their headquarters. They assured me that they had no political intentions in Egypt and that they did not want to govern the country.

They are now the reason for the persecution of Christians in Egypt, and that persecution is pretty full-on. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman's point and with my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

Ian Paisley: Indeed, an app promoted last year by the Muslim Brotherhood encouraged the incitement of hatred against Christians and against Muslims who joined the British Army, identifying them as people to be targeted and killed. We can see where this fanaticism can go and how it is driven.

Some years ago, before I was a Member of Parliament, I visited the underground Church in China and met its worship leaders. Even today, they live in constant fear of persecution. They know they could be imprisoned for evangelising even members of their own family.

The watch list that has been widely debated today gives the statistic that 5,500 churches in mainland China have been destroyed, closed or confiscated in the past two years, which is a terrible indictment of a country we wish to partner on some major projects and with which we have great links. Indeed, several centuries ago, the first ambassador to mainland China hailed from Stranocum near Ballymoney in my constituency. There have always been great links between our nation and China, but the statistic on churches is appalling.

Brexit trade deals offer an opportunity—that with trade comes liberty of religious belief. We, our Ministers and our Government should be unashamed about asking for liberty of religious belief to go hand in hand with trade deals. We should open up the world, not to proselytise or evangelise but to allow freedom of belief and difference to abound.

As the Speaker's Chair rightly proclaims:

“The hand that deals justly is a sweet smelling ointment. A heedful and faithful mind is conscious of righteousness.”

4.1 pm

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): This has been an excellent debate, and I will shortly do my best to summarise the most memorable contributions.

I am glad that my new colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton)—I am the new one, not him—predicted at the outset that there would be consensus on tackling this rising crisis and on following up on the Bishop of Truro's important recommendations. However, it would be remiss of me not to say that the Bishop of Truro and other senior members of the Church of England must be careful what they preach for. Although they and we are right to stand up for Christians overseas, those senior members of the Church are entirely wrong in the pastoral guidance that says the only Church-approved sexual relations are within married heterosexual couples, and that those of us who do not fit into that category should be abstinent. That is important to this debate because tolerance on all sides is important and we must practise what we preach. We cannot be intolerant in one respect while asking for tolerance and respect elsewhere.

In this debate we have heard good examples of why tolerance is important, and let us remember that Christianity is often the bellwether of whether a state is repressive. Repressive states tend to choose to repress Christians. We know that Christians in many countries have suffered

huge repression. Since the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam, the Christian community in Iraq has dwindled by 83%, from 1.5 million Christians to just 250,000.

We have seen the rise in attacks on Christians and Muslims in Sri Lanka. I have been to Sri Lanka many times and I have been shocked at the level of intolerance that sometimes prevails—my driver will sometimes refuse to go into Muslim-owned restaurants with me. It is a deep concern that we need to tackle.

The latest nationality laws mean that many Muslims feel their place is not being recognised in India. That affects not only Muslims, but Christians in India. The rise of intolerance and Hindu nationalism is not something we should celebrate.

Although Christians communities have suffered, we must also remember the Rohingya communities in Myanmar, the Yazidis in Iraq and the Uyghur Muslims in China, whom we also heard about. Atheists around the world are also often persecuted. In Iran, there is particular persecution of those of the Baha'i faith, who have not been mentioned today. My constituency has a Baha'i centre and people there would be keen for me to mention them, too. The lesson is that intolerance anywhere—whether it is because someone is a Christian or a Muslim, or because they have no faith or a faith—is intolerable. We should all find it intolerable.

That is why some of the points we have heard today are important, particularly those made by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Ms Brown). Importantly, she summed this up when she said, “If we do not stand up, who are we?” We consider ourselves the mother of all Parliaments, one of the birthplaces of democracy. Who are we, as a country, if we do not stand up for important values? That is why, when the hon. Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) talked about the importance of linking our diplomacy to human rights and freedom of religion, that resonated with the views of Members from across the House.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about his work in the all-party group, for which he should be applauded. I hope the Government will not only continue to respond to the recommendations that he read out, but help start to implement them. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) talked particularly importantly about the repressive nature of Saudi Arabia, one of our key allies in the middle east. It might have made some progress, but it is clearly not enough. We have a responsibility to look not only at how we do diplomacy, but at how all of our organs of state interact with those in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the repression there. The hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) mentioned the Colombo attacks and the fact that Christians in this country are often subject to repression. All of those contributions were important.

The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) mentioned the work of Open Doors, which we all recognise is an important body of work. If there is one positive thing to come out of its report, it is that it shows a reduction in the number of attacks and murders this year, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North East. The bulk of that reduction appears to be down to the decline in the number of killings in Nigeria, which is still the deadliest place in the world to be a Christian. Any fall in the death toll there is welcome, but I hope the Minister shares my

[Lloyd Russell-Moyle]

concern that while we have seen that reduction and a push back in Nigeria, the threat of Boko Haram, on which we heard some extremely moving statements from the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), has spread elsewhere. Boko Haram and other extremist jihadist groups in north-west Africa need to be tackled in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and other countries. While there has been a reduction in one place, we have seen an increase in death and persecution in neighbouring countries. We need to tackle that rapidly and give it some attention. Perhaps the Minister could tell us what work is being done at the international level, particularly with the African Union, to try to get a grip on the situation before every country and Christian in that region faces the same kind of crisis as that in Nigeria today.

We have had a good debate and I thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for presiding over it.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mrs Heather Wheeler): This has been a lively and at times impassioned debate, and it has been a testament to the strength of feeling throughout the House and the country that no one should suffer discrimination, violence or persecution because of their faith or belief, or for not following a faith. I shall try to respond to all the points raised and highlight the UK's action on this issue.

First, we are deeply concerned about the way in which blasphemy laws are widely abused. The Government regularly apply diplomatic pressure to countries that abuse their blasphemy laws. That work is often done behind the scenes because of the sensitivity of the issue.

I know that Members care deeply about the treatment of religious minorities, including Christians, in Pakistan. I pay particular tribute, as so many others have done today, to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who works particularly hard to raise awareness of this issue. Let me answer the questions about Pakistan. The Government share the concerns expressed today and regularly urge the Government of Pakistan to ensure that all their citizens enjoy the full range of human rights, as laid down in Pakistan's constitution and enshrined in international law. The Government strongly condemn forced marriage and forced conversions.

In India, our missions often bring together members of minority communities, including Christian groups, to better understand the religious and cultural divides, and to help to bridge them, including through the projects that we fund.

Colleagues understandably expressed particular concern about the safety and security of minority communities in the middle east in the light of recent events. Let me state clearly and on the record that the Government will continue to promote and protect human rights in the region. We will not shy away from urging Governments to protect the rights of all their citizens, in accordance with international human rights law.

Dr Julian Lewis: The Minister has several times mentioned the policy of urging and condemning, but the Government do have considerable financial leverage by way of the huge international development budget.

Do the Government have a policy of using that budget, quite legitimately, to put pressure on Governments who abuse human rights, such that if they want to continue to get large amounts of aid they will have to mend their ways?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. That idea has been mentioned a couple of times and I will come to it in a little while.

Ms Lyn Brown: May I say gently that my anxiety about that line, although I respect it, is that it is almost cultural imperialism? There are other countries that are not in need of our aid that are more substantially economically viable. That does not mean that they should not have our opprobrium because they do not need our dole, to put it succinctly. The FCO is supposed to be one of the most skilled Foreign Offices in the world; I am sure it can find ways to apply pressure without taking food from those who need it most.

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady's intervention epitomises how difficult this matter is and how skilful our wonderful civil servants and others need to be on this matter.

In Iraq, the UK has committed more than £260 million in humanitarian support over the past six years. That funding has provided a vital lifeline for emergency food, shelter, medical care and clean water to the most vulnerable in Iraq, including members of minority communities such as the Christians and the Yazidis.

In Syria, Christians and other minorities have suffered dreadfully in the conflict, particularly at the hands of Daesh. The UK is working on a political settlement, which protects the rights of all Syrians, regardless of ethnicity or religion, and we are supporting work to bring accountability and justice to the people, including to survivors of religious persecution.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) spoke movingly, paragraph by paragraph, on the issues in Nigeria. I was almost ashamed to listen. Communities of all faiths have been affected by rising levels of violence. Communities of different religions live together peacefully across most of the country. Insurgent groups such as the Fulani, Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa seek to undermine the rights of freedom of religion as protected by the Nigerian constitution, with appalling attacks against civilians, including a recent spike in Christian targets. I will pass on my hon. Friend's request to Department for International Development officials, to reply directly to her.

I was also asked what we have done to make clear to the Nigerian authorities at the highest levels the importance of protecting civilians, including ethnic and religious minorities. We regularly raise concerns with the Nigerian Government about the increasing levels of violence. Most recently, the Prime Minister did so during his meeting with President Buhari at the UK-Africa investment summit on 20 January. It was important that that question was asked of me, as we now have the answer on the record.

Sir Edward Leigh: The Minister will recall that I raised this point in my remarks earlier. I do not believe that it is cultural imperialism to use our clout—given that we give more than £300 million a year to Nigeria—to insist that the Nigerian Government do what they must

do and protect their own citizens. That is not cultural imperialism; it is good practice. We will be following the US and the EU in doing that. It is perfectly good practice to insist that if we are giving taxpayers' money to Nigeria, it should protect its own citizens.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He has put his views on the record.

Dr Cameron: I thank the Minister for giving way; she is being very generous in taking interventions. She has said that points have been put on the record, but, with DFID in my constituency, I know that we are contributing enormous amounts of aid to these countries. What response do we get back? What progress is being made? What plans are being put in place? What concrete evidence is there that these countries are actually listening to anything we say?

Mrs Wheeler: With DFID offices in her constituency, the hon. Lady must realise that that is a question for DFID. Again, the civil servants in the Box will have heard what she said and, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton, I am sure that they will reply to her.

We have talked about other areas where the UK Government are particularly encouraging the Nigerian Government to do more to reduce conflict. The fostering social cohesion conference being hosted by Wilton Park this month will look at the complex drivers of conflict and aim to identify solutions that meet the needs of the communities. I hope that that goes some way to answering the questions asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh).

Today's debate has focused on the persecution of Christians, but, as other Members have mentioned, we should not overlook the suffering of other religious groups around the world. We are deeply concerned about the persecution of minorities in China, particularly the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, and we have raised our concerns on numerous occasions, including at the UN General Assembly last year. We are also aware of reports of church closures in China and of individuals being detained because of their faith, including Pastor Wang Yi who was sentenced last year. To answer the specific question: yes, we have raised our concerns about his case directly with the Chinese authorities. Lord Tariq Ahmad does this on behalf of the Government, and we will continue to monitor the situation closely.

I know that communities of Iranian heritage with links here in the UK, including the Baha'i community, are terribly concerned about the treatment of minorities in Iran. During the United Nations General Assembly in September 2019, the UK brought together many supportive states and independent legal experts to highlight increasing concerns about Iran's human rights record.

Bob Stewart: The Minister has twice mentioned the General Assembly. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) and I have both made the point that the United Nations is somewhere where we can have a moral authority to speak, especially when we are president of the Security Council. We should drive very hard to get the United Nations to be quite clear that the persecution of any religion is totally unacceptable.

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for that strong intervention. He has, again, absolutely put the point on the record, and the Government are under no illusions about the power of being the penholder in the United Nations Security Council—work in progress, my friend.

In November 2019, during Iran's universal periodic review, we urged that our specific recommendations be accepted and reiterated concerns about the treatment of minority religious groups. The Government share those concerns, and we are committed to taking action with the international community to press Iran to improve its poor record on all human rights issues.

It would be remiss of us in any debate on this matter not to recognise that discrimination against and hostility towards faith communities also exists in western countries. We were sickened to see antisemitic graffiti sprayed on businesses and synagogues around north London in December, and in New York, during the Hanukkah celebrations, five victims were stabbed as they worshiped at the home of their rabbi. These incidents were all the more appalling because they took place just weeks before the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, when we were all reminded of what can happen when good people turn a blind eye to hate. My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) has put on record the amazing story about his mother being present as an SOE officer at the liberation Belsen. That is a story that will stay with me for some time. That anniversary was also a time to recommit ourselves to enhancing understanding between communities of different faiths and beliefs. It is clear that there is much more to do, even in countries such as ours, with good human rights records.

Ian Paisley: Can the Minister tell the House how the Government intend to use their network of civil servants based in our embassies around the world to conduct a review of what are effectively soft Christian targets in various countries?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question; I will get to that in the next paragraph.

As I said at the start, the Government are committed to implementing the recommendations of the Bishop of Truro's review. I stress again that the recommendations do not focus just on Christians. As has been mentioned, only two of 22 recommendations refer to specifically Christian issues. Bishop Philip said clearly that we must seek freedom of religion or belief for all, without fear or favour. That is the basis of our freedom of religion or belief work. We will implement the recommendations in a way that will bring real improvements to people's lives.

To answer the questions about training for FCO staff, we believe that training staff to develop an understanding of religion is hugely important. We are in the process of defining and procuring a new, expanded training package, which will reach all officers who need it in the FCO and across government, and we will now make sure that issues related to soft targets around the world where we have any influence will form part of that training. That work is part of our wider, long-standing effort to champion human rights, because we know that where one right is denied, others are also under threat.

[Mrs Wheeler]

Looking ahead, the Government are determined to be a force for good in the world, not only as a champion of human rights, but as a defender of the rules-based international system and a leader in the fight against global challenges. The Government will take on board comments made about that and about DFID spend.

Andrew Selous: It is my understanding that the Government have agreed to all the recommendations in the Bishop of Truro's report. Recommendation 8 says:

"Be prepared to impose sanctions against perpetrators of FoRB abuses."

Can the Minister set out a little of the Government's thinking on how that might be applied? If she cannot, will she very kindly place a letter on this issue in the Library for hon. Members to have a look at?

Mrs Wheeler: I am sure that my hon. Friend would have shared his letter if I had written just to him. [Interruption.] Of course he would; he's a good Christian boy. I would be delighted to approach the answer to his question in the way he describes, to help all Members of the House.

Brendan O'Hara: I specifically asked about the case of Huma Younus, who has been kidnapped, forced to convert to Islam and forced to marry a much older man, and whose parents are desperately seeking an international response. Will the Minister or her Government respond—if not today, at some point in the future—to this critical issue of a child who has been abducted, forced to convert and forced into marriage?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Gentleman for repeating that very important point. I thought that I had mentioned that we condemn all forced marriages. If I did not say it loudly enough, I say it again now. My civil servants in the Box will see what we can do about making that a central point.

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend is being extremely generous in giving way, and probably over-patient. Several Members asked about attaching conditions to

the international development fund. I gently mention that that will require legislation; it is not just a policy decision to impose those conditions. Achieving those objectives would actually require legislation, as was the case with my International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014. I just mention that so that it gets locked into the Box.

Mrs Wheeler: I am grateful. My hon. Friend has been in this Parliament for so long that he knows all the intricacies; sometimes, however well-meaning our colleagues are, the practicalities of actually achieving what they would like to achieve might be slightly more constrained and long-winded than perhaps they might have thought would be the case. I am very glad that he has put that on the record.

Fiona Bruce: I am not seeking to stretch the Minister's patience too far; she is being very indulgent. One of the challenges that we have had with these debates over the years is that we have raised issues that have related either to the FCO or to DFID—or to both—but we have only had a Minister from one of those Departments before us. I raised a number of questions in my speech that straddled both Departments, so I would be grateful if the Minister liaised with her counterpart in DFID and wrote to me answering some of them. I appreciate that some of those questions were really quite detailed, and there is no way I could have expected her to answer today, as I said in my speech.

Mrs Wheeler: Of course. Forgive me if I did not say it loud enough, but I will be happy to repeat it now: I will get somebody from DFID to write to my hon. Friend with the answers to her questions.

The Government believe passionately that everyone should enjoy the same freedom to choose and practise their religion, or to hold no religion at all. We will continue to strive for that to become a reality for everyone everywhere, and to strive for a world in which all nations respect and protect the rights of all their people, irrespective of their faith or belief. Those suffering persecution today, including the 260 million Christians, deserve nothing less.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the persecution of Christians.

Children's Mental Health Week

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

4.29 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that my esteemed colleagues, including the Minister, will have already read my article concerning this important debate on the PoliticsHome website today. But I do understand the competition for parliamentarians' time, so I have brought with me a hard copy that I am happy to share if anyone would like to read it. Those more digitally minded can find it on the website.

The mental health of thousands of children and young people has reached crisis point. This week is Children's Mental Health Week, intended to shine a spotlight on the importance of children and young people's mental health. The Mental Health Foundation has found that childhood determinants are the primary factor in future mental wellbeing, with over three quarters of all mental health problems emerging by the age of 20. The Government set out their ambition in their mental health Green Paper in 2017. However, does the Minister agree with analysis by Barnardo's stating that the plans let down children and young people in three quarters of England who will see no improvement by the end of 2022-23?

I hope that everyone in the Chamber will agree with me that no child should have to reach crisis point to get help—but far too often, as we all know, that is the case. A crisis can come in many forms. It can be seen in the criminal justice system, where a staggering 95% of 15 to 21-year-olds in custody have been found to suffer from a mental health disorder. It can be seen in the tripling in the number of young people under 18 with a recorded diagnosis attending A&E since 2010. It can be seen in the 74% increase in suicide rates for 10 to 19-year-olds since 2010. It can also be seen in Local Government Association findings that social services were seeing more than 560 cases of children with mental health disorders every single day—an increase of more than 50% in four years.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I hope that I am not pre-empting what the hon. Lady is about to say, but does she feel that the explosion in social media and addiction to it among young people plays any part in the terrible increases that she is describing?

Preet Kaur Gill: The right hon. Gentleman makes that point very well. A lot of research has been done on this by the Royal Society for Public Health. It is a contributing factor—one of which there are so many.

Looking after our children and young people requires children's and young people's mental health services to be properly resourced. At the moment, this is simply not happening. Almost a quarter of NHS child and adolescent mental health wards were rated as inadequate or requiring improvement by the Care Quality Commission in 2019. We also know that we have a huge shortage of mental health professionals, with a workforce that has hardly grown since 2010. According to the Royal College of Psychiatrists, we need an additional 4,370 consultant psychiatrists to meet current Government commitments. A recent British Medical Association survey revealed

that almost two thirds of nurses said that on their last shift there was a shortage of one or more nursing staff. So can the Minister tell me how these shortages will be addressed?

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for this absolutely superb Adjournment debate on a very critical issue. While there is, as she says, an onus on Government to respond, does she recognise that, as the health charity Place2Be says in early-day motion 137, tabled only this week by me and others—it also says that the theme of this year's week is Find Your Brave—schools, churches and voluntary sector youth organisations also provide help to children at a time when they need it?

Preet Kaur Gill: The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point. Far too often, we do not recognise the work that schools are doing, and the charity sector, especially, has contributed significantly. Importantly, the Green Paper does not recognise that.

Today I want to focus on the public health approach, utilising early intervention and prevention. This is far too often overlooked, but it is a vital part of any attempts to tackle the crisis we are facing. Furthermore, if we fail to support children at an early stage, we will inevitably feel the impact further down the line when emergency services will be forced to step in. That is what we are seeing at the moment, and change clearly needs to happen.

So what am I talking about and what does it look like in practice? Let us take local government. Because of huge cuts by national Government, 60% of local authority areas have seen a real-terms spending drop on mental health services for children that come under the "low level" bracket, which includes early intervention for things like eating disorders and depression. Or let us look at our creaking and failing criminal justice system. Research by Revolving Doors found that children of offenders are three times more likely to have mental health problems or to engage in antisocial behaviour than their peers—and, as I said, almost all 15 to 21-year-olds in custody suffer from a mental health disorder. Reducing reoffending and the number of parents experiencing incarceration is not just a good in itself but may prevent their children from having mental health problems and reduce the likelihood that the child is involved in offending in the future. Will the Minister explain why, in answer to my written question, the Department for Health and Social Care admitted last week that it had

"not made a formal assessment of the adequacy of mental health services or mental health assessment in Young Offender Institutions"?

Let us take community-based mental health services. The Care Quality Commission, in its review of healthcare and adult social care in England in 2018-19, found that 21% and 10% of community-based mental health services for children and young people are rated as "requires improvement" or "inadequate" for the responsive key question.

Take schools, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned. Schools in Birmingham are facing a funding shortfall of more than £90 million in 2020, but they are still working hard to fund their own mental health support or arranging peer mentors. Why are they doing that? One reason is that waiting times for referrals—if the referral is even granted—are far too

[Preet Kaur Gill]

long. Last year, I conducted a survey of schools in my constituency of Birmingham, Edgbaston and discovered that 90% had seen an increase in staff and students suffering from mental health problems. That is not sustainable without a substantial increase in support for our schools. Take looked-after children. According to Government data, they are nearly five times more likely to have a mental health disorder than their peers.

Take poverty. The TUC found that poverty in working households has increased by 800,000 since 2010. Poverty contributes to mental wellbeing. The Centre for Mental Health's Commission for Equality in Mental Health found that children from the poorest 20% of households are four times more likely to have serious mental health difficulties by the age of 11 than those from the wealthiest 20%.

Ms Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend's speech is resonating with me. In the conversations I have had with primary school teachers, they talk about the stress that children as young as six, seven and eight are under because their families are struggling to pay the rent, despite the fact that the parents are at work. Poverty is a major driver of this. We have to tackle both things—the mental health needs of our young people, but also the poverty in which they live.

Preet Kaur Gill: My hon. Friend is right; poverty has consequences.

Take social security. The Government's flagship policy of universal credit is not only driving more households into poverty but is creating a climate of fear and threats. Those are all factors that lead to poor mental wellbeing.

No child should have to reach crisis point before they are able to get help with their mental health. We cannot pretend that the causes of mental health are simple or that they are not impacted and exacerbated by inequalities and injustice. The Centre for Mental Health has rightly raised the futility of funding mental health services that support symptoms if those resources are diverted from preventive measures to tackle poverty and inequality, including policies in the criminal justice system, education, public health, youth services, housing and social security.

Those sectors and services are all in vital need of long-term, sustainable support, and that is why I am calling on the Minister to ensure that a public health approach is introduced that promotes mental wellbeing, prevents future mental health problems and supports recovery from mental health issues. There are different ways to achieve that, but I would like to ask the Minister to take the first step and, with a reshuffle imminent, ask the Prime Minister to introduce a children's wellbeing commissioner, or similar, with real teeth, powers and resources to work across Departments.

4.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): It is a pleasure to respond to the excellent speech by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), and I thank her for securing this important debate. I also thank the Members who made interventions, to which I will respond, with your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I do not recognise some of the scenarios that the hon. Lady described. I have not read her article, but if she would like to give me a hard copy, I would be delighted to read it. She is obviously passionate about this subject. I have been in the House all morning, but I have had time to glance at the Children's Society report that was published today. I was delighted to see that the Children's Society highlights that the Government have made huge efforts to tackle mental health stigma through tireless work with schools and the Every Mind Matters campaign, which has reached 1.3 million people countrywide.

I am pleased that this debate is occurring during Children's Mental Health Week. Today is also Time to Talk Day, which encourages everyone to be more open about their mental health in an effort to end mental health discrimination. It is going to be difficult to achieve parity of esteem between mental and physical health until we can completely eradicate the discrimination associated with mental health.

Our most recent data shows that one in eight five to 19-year-olds has a mental disorder. When it comes to young women and girls, the data is even more striking. Young women and girls are more at risk of self-harm, with about three times as many young women and girls aged 10 to 19 self-harming compared with men. The suicide rate for women and girls between the ages of 10 and 24 is at its highest on record, and it has nearly doubled since 2012. So I am with the hon. Lady on her concern about mental health and young people, and I am particularly concerned about the mental health of young women.

Those figures are heartbreaking. However, as the recent Children's Commissioner's report highlights, there have been major improvements to children and young people's mental health care in recent years. I think it is important that we accept that. We need to get to that place so we can look forward to where we take these improvements.

I would like to mention Claire Murdoch, who is the clinical lead in NHS England responsible for the delivery of mental health programmes, as highlighted in the long-term plan. Claire described this to me yesterday as a bath that had been left empty for a very long time which suddenly had had the funding taps switched on—but we cannot fill the bath from empty to full immediately. The bath is filling, and it is filling with the £2.3 billion that this Government have committed to mental health. Just to put that into perspective, that is over half of the entire prisons estate budget. That is how serious our commitment is to addressing parity of esteem and mental health, particularly the mental health of children and young people. We will continue to drive forward this progress to ensure that every child can access the high-quality mental health care that they deserve.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Funding for mental health has increased right across the United Kingdom from when I first started in the field. However, we are really trying to raise awareness at the same time, and the more we raise awareness, the more we increase the demand. Increasing awareness and demand is a good thing, but we need many more psychologists to be working in the field alongside the psychiatrists to meet the demand.

Ms Dorries: The hon. Member is absolutely right, and I will come on to the workforce in a moment.

Making sure that people recognise this issue was part of the Every Mind Matters campaign. I do not know if everybody saw that, but we had the royals and celebrities such as Davina McCall promoting the Every Mind Matters campaign. We did that to reduce the stigma and to show that it was okay, because really successful people—hugely high achievers in society—have mental health issues and are concerned about mental health. Part of the project was to break down the stigma associated with mental health, which is a bit of a barrier to people accessing mental health care, and to get over that stigma to begin with.

We know that an increasing proportion of young people are seeking mental health help from the NHS, and we are responding by already ramping up capacity. We are on track to meet our commitment to improving access. By next year, 70,000 more children and young people will be accessing specialist treatment each year, compared with 2014-15. That equates to 35% of children and young people with a mental health condition, and that is starting from zero.¹

Preet Kaur Gill: Can the Minister expand a little on how those young people are going to access that specialist support, because an early years counselling service in my constituency has a waiting list of 500 young people? It really does concern me, because the only way they are going to get any support is when there is actually a crisis. She keeps referring to the money, but can she give a bit more detail about what people can expect on the ground?

Ms Dorries: Indeed; I will go on to address access and waiting times. The money that has been given to CCGs to spend on children and young people's mental health is ring-fenced, and the hon. Lady might want to go back to her CCG and ask to see how much money it has been given by the Government and how it is being spent so that she can assure herself that the money we are providing to her CCG is being spent on children and young people's mental health and is not being siphoned off somewhere else. Claire Murdoch and her team at NHS England have been looking at CCGs across the country where they think there are problems and mental health services are not being commissioned adequately, but the hon. Lady may want to go away and do that with her own CCG, and check that it is spending the money that has been given on children and young people's mental health.

Preet Kaur Gill: I think what my CCG will say is that the money is just not adequate. Birmingham is one of the youngest cities in the country; there are so many issues across the city in terms of trying to access care and there just are not the resources and the services, and we are not doing enough to engage our charity sector or support schools. I know that the Government have made an announcement about providing counsellors in secondary schools, but what about early intervention—what about primary schools given that we understand those issues are manifesting themselves very early on? Why are we allowing things just to continue and therefore having to spend much more money later on? That does not seem to make any sense.

Ms Dorries: One of our announcements has been to launch the trailblazer schemes, which we are hoping to have in 25% of schools by 2024. I do understand the problem in the hon. Lady's area. I recently spoke to a headmaster at a school in Birmingham, and he told me that a third of the pupils in his school were receiving pastoral care or mental healthcare, and the reason was that a third of his children came from chaotic homes where either one or both parents were addicted to gambling, drugs or alcohol. As a consequence of having a third of the school roll in this situation, the school had serious problems with the children in the school.

So in some areas the challenges are very difficult. The hon. Lady said that we cannot just throw money at this, but the money has to fund the services—that is where it has to start, and then the workforce have to come.

The trailblazer schemes are doing incredibly well. I went to see one in Hounslow recently. We have committed to having 50,000 more nurses and are trying to train more mental health nurses, and we are having great success in getting people through universities and through the right courses and into schools. The school I visited in Hounslow, where the mental health workers were working for the children, was incredible to see. I spoke to a large group of the children who are receiving mental health support during the day, and they told me that they are being taught coping strategies. One young boy, whose name I will not mention, said to me that he suffers from anxiety—he gets anxious—and they have put an app on his phone so he has his time to be anxious and panic. His app time is at six o'clock, and he will go on to his phone and use his app.

There are so many aspects to the care being provided in school. There is early intervention, spotting mental health problems as they begin very early on. They could spot eating disorders almost as soon as they were arising in young girls. There are also issues such as anxiety and depression, and others that may not wholly be mental health-related but where the presentation of the problem was a mental health issue.

We are hoping to have 25% of schools across the UK covered by 2024, but, as I said, the bath was empty, so when we turn the tap it cannot fill straight away. The work has started. The people are being trained; they are being rolled out in schools right now, as we speak. I can say that early intervention, having seen it at work myself, is working. That was reassuring, because 18 months ago there were none of those teams in schools; there was no early intervention in any school anywhere. So the fact that we are watching these teams roll out into schools is incredibly reassuring.

On eating disorders—I will work my way through my speech, just to make sure I cover every aspect—more young people are getting the treatment they need. There has been a significant improvement in treating times in NHS care. An extra £30 million is being invested every year into children's eating disorder services and there are 70 new or expanded community-based teams covering the whole country. Nationally, we are on track to meet the target of 95% of children and young people with an eating disorder accessing treatment, with a one-week referral for urgent cases and four weeks for routine cases.

I went to an eating disorder unit a week last Friday and met some of the young women there. It was fantastic to see the work being done. Once the young women go in, they have to stay in for quite some time. I am not sure that many people realise that an eating disorder is

1. [Official Report, 12 February 2020, Vol. 671, c. 9MC.]

[Ms Dorries]

the deadliest mental health condition. One in four young women die from their eating disorder. It is the only mental health condition where the person suffering from it is scared of getting better. It therefore presents an incredible challenge to the mental health professionals who are working with those young girls. I saw the new eating disorder unit up and running, the work it was doing to turn the young women around and the investment that has gone in. The unit is managing to turn those young women around in a shorter time; it is just fantastic to see.

While recognising that we are still filling the bath and that there is more to do, what I really want to do is celebrate—I do not think that the hon. Lady will blame me for doing so—the good work being done by NHS professionals, including doctors, mental health nurses and those coming out of universities, to work on our trailblazer schemes in schools with young people. I want to celebrate their achievements. I am also very pleased that, after years of under-investment, NHS funding for children and young people's mental health service is now rising and will continue to rise as we work towards the goals set out in the long-term plan. Funding for mental health services will grow faster overall in the NHS budget, in real terms worth at least £2.3 billion. The funding for children will grow faster than the funding for mental health care, which will grow faster than the overall NHS budget. This transformative investment will mean that by 2023-24 an extra—this is an important figure—345,000 children and young people from nought to 25 will receive mental health support every year.

Of course, some children will unfortunately experience a mental health crisis and will need rapid mental health support. I, like others across the House, am pleased with the strong focus on crisis care in the NHS long-term plan, which sets out investment of about £250 million in crisis care. I am not sure who mentioned A&E and hospitals; maybe it was the hon. Lady. We now have, in almost all A&Es across the country—I think it is 97%—a mental health liaison worker.¹ When somebody—a child or an adult—presents at A&E with a mental health condition, they are now seen by an A&E mental health liaison officer.

I am aware, however, that there is also a need to provide more support in the community, and to encourage early intervention and prevention. In fact, most of the £2.3 billion that has been allocated to mental health is for community services. Tim Kendall, NHS England's national clinical director for mental health, says that no mental health service is ever better provided in a hospital than it can be provided in a community, except for the most serious cases. That is why we are delivering a new school and college-based service to help children and young people, staffed by a new workforce, through our children and young people's Green Paper on mental health. It is about encouraging partnership working between services, and bringing together health and education to provide early intervention mental health support for children.

Dr Cameron: The Minister is being extremely generous in giving way. There is a lot of good work being done, as she has underlined, but one of the gaps—this is often raised by Members across the House—is autism diagnosis and intervention at an early stage, so that children get

the support they need with the least detriment to their learning, development and education. She may not be able to respond today, but perhaps she could let me know about that at some point.

Ms Dorries: It would not be appropriate for me to respond to that because autism is not in my brief as a Minister. That comes under the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinéage), but I will make sure that the hon. Member gets a response to that question.

To turn to the children and young people's mental health Green Paper, every school will be encouraged to have a senior lead for mental health as well as access to mental health support teams, which are the trailblazer schemes.

Preet Kaur Gill: Does the Minister think that it is right that we will be expecting teachers to take on another role? They are already leads for safeguarding, FGM and Prevent—a huge array of things. Does she really think that that is right and that it will address the issues?

Ms Dorries: As I explained, we have the trailblazer schemes—we are putting fully qualified, dedicated mental health workers into schools. I imagine that some of the schools in the hon. Member's constituency will be beneficiaries of that, so the responsibility will not be with the teachers; it will be with the mental health workers. I absolutely take her point: teachers have a huge amount to do. I will check with my officers which schools in the Birmingham area have trailblazer schemes and whether they are due to go in to help her. She described her area as having 500 young people waiting, so I am sure that it is very much on the list. I will also check with Claire Murdoch at NHS England, which is responsible for delivery. It is quite interesting that whenever I say to constituents in my surgery, "The Government provide the money and the policy but NHS England is responsible for delivery," they say to me, "Who are NHS England? I don't know who they are. You are the Government." However, it is responsible for delivery so I will check with Claire Murdoch what is happening in the hon. Member's area and where the trailblazer schemes are going.

Mental health support teams will be rolled out to a fifth of schools. I am sure that the hon. Member will be pleased to know that the new schools-based service is in addition to existing provision for children and young people with mental health needs. It is in addition to the additional funding that has been given to the care commissioning groups. I will also touch base with her commissioning group. One of my concerns has been that the money that is ring-fenced for children and young people's mental health is perhaps not always being spent on what it should be spent on, so I will touch base with it. That would also give us a better picture of what the care commissioning group is dealing with. These new plans will significantly increase the availability of mental health support to children and young people and build on existing provision.

On the workforce, to deliver and spend the money, most of which will go on salaries, we need the people to spend it on to deliver the mental healthcare. We are not complacent about the scale of the workforce challenges

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associated with achieving the very ambitious plans for mental health services, and making transformation a reality will require significant shifts and innovation in the way in which we deliver our services.

We have seen promising results from NHS Improvement's work to improve retention among mental health trusts. I spoke to a group of students recently who were considering healthcare as a future career; they were considering midwifery. We need more midwives. We have a lovely, glamourised image of the role of midwives from the television, from "Call the Midwife" and "One Born Every Minute". People who are considering going into NHS caring professions are looking at the more glamourised areas of care, and I am struggling to persuade people that mental health is a fantastic, rewarding career. We want more mental health nurses. In fact, two weeks ago, I announced that the grant for those who want to work in mental health nursing will be £8,000—they will get the upper tier.¹ They will also get assistance with childcare costs. So I ask people who are considering nursing overall as a career please to consider mental health nursing. I know how difficult it is. When I was training to be a nurse, we were offered 12-week placements in maternity or psychiatry, and my entire cohort chose maternity, so I know the challenge that I am up against. We need to increase the workforce, but we need to attract more people to that area.

Social media was mentioned earlier. In that regard, the NHS holds only part of the answer. We must do more across Government to protect the mental health of our children, and that includes protecting young people against harmful online content. We now know more about the impact of social media platforms on the health and wellbeing of our young people, and the need to manage the detrimental impacts. The scale of the challenge that we face in protecting children online is vast. That is why the chief medical officer commissioned an independent review of the evidence, and gave advice about setting boundaries for children and young people online. The Government's "Online Harms" White Paper sets out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures detailing how we will tackle online harms, and also sets clear expectations for tech companies to keep children safe.

My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) mentioned online harms earlier, and he was absolutely right. We face many challenges in our modern society, such as poverty—which was mentioned—as well as online social media and addictions, and many of those challenges filter down and have an impact on young children.

I am extremely proud of what has been achieved so far in relation to children's and young people's mental health. As I said earlier, we have achieved more than any previous Government, including those of my own party. We are increasing funding massively, and we are introducing a whole new service through mental health support teams so that more children and young people

than ever before—345,000—will be able to access mental health support. We have made huge progress on putting mental health on the same footing as physical health.

Preet Kaur Gill: We know that the Care Quality Commission has raised numerous concerns about mental health provision and instances in which young people are not receiving the care that they need. The Minister says that it is the responsibility of NHS England to deliver on that, but what more does she think she can do to put pressure on NHS England? What can we do? I do not understand how it is possible for a care provider that has been rated inadequate to continue to provide care for other people. Who should intervene if the necessary changes have not been made, and the CQC has allowed a young person to continue to receive inadequate care?

Ms Dorries: I am not sure which service the hon. Lady is talking about. If she is talking about an in-patient unit, perhaps she would like to speak to me afterwards so that I can obtain some more information for her, rather than just guessing. As for how we can ensure that NHS England delivers, I have regular meetings—in fact, I had a meeting yesterday afternoon—with both Claire Murdoch and Tim Kendall to get updates. Just a couple of weeks ago, Claire announced the launch of the first ever gambling clinic. They are working very hard at NHS England to deliver the long-term plan. As I have said, however, it is a long-term plan. The bath was empty, but the plug is now in, the taps are on, and it is filling up. Claire is working her socks off, as is everyone else, to deliver as rapidly as possible, but the other side of the coin is the workforce—getting the mental health nurses in and trained, recruiting them through universities, which has been more successful, and finding people who want to attract others to work in mental health. Claire is delivering those services as fast as she can, but they do not deliver themselves. They need people to deliver them, and that is what we are working so hard on.

In the context of NHS England, the hon. Lady asked what we could do. It is my job to hold it to account, and I can assure her that I am doing that every step of the way. Most people who work in mental health know Claire Murdoch and her 45-year reputation of working in mental health. She is a formidable force, and I do not think that anyone is going to prevent her from delivering as fast as she can. She has said to me that we have never had it so good and that we are going to motor ahead with this. That is exactly what is happening.

The Prime Minister has announced his absolute commitment to mental health, and I am confident that by continuing with record levels of investment, improving access and waiting times and focusing on prevention as well as treatment, we will provide a brighter and healthier future for all our young children.

Question put and agreed to.

5.5 pm

House adjourned.

1. [Official Report, 12 February 2020, Vol. 671, c. 10MC.]

Westminster Hall

Thursday 6 February 2020

[MR LAURENCE ROBERTSON *in the Chair*]

Acquired Brain Injury

1.30 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered acquired brain injury.

In 1980, I woke up in the middle of the night on a train from Barcelona to Madrid. All I could sense was the world moving in and out. It was not the worst headache that I had ever had or anything that could even be described as a headache; it felt as though my brain was struggling to burst out of my skull. As it turned out, I had viral meningitis. In the end, I was fine after a lumbar puncture and treatment in Madrid, but I feel very lucky, because many people who have had meningitis—with that precise feeling of the world going in and out as the brain pushes against the meninges and the skull—now have permanent brain damage.

Because of the work that I have done on the issue over the last couple of years, I am very conscious that there are some phenomenal people working with those who have brain injuries. Last year, I spent a beautiful day with the Children's Trust in Tadworth, where a third of the children have had a haemorrhage of some kind, while others have been in road traffic accidents. The trust does phenomenal work to rehabilitate those children—restoring in them a sense of themselves—and to get them back into the education system.

I spent a day with the National Star College near Cheltenham, which does phenomenal work teaching many of these youngsters skills that they can take into the work environment. I saw people whose injuries put them in a challenging position learning to socialise again, and to understand their personal lack of inhibition and its impact on other people. Professionals working in south London explained to me the difficulty in moving people out of hospital and into other forms of community support, especially when families may have been broken up by, for example, the same road traffic accident that led to the injury.

Whether in Norwich, Lincoln, Birmingham or Manchester, the most extraordinary people are doing what looks like miracle work. They can take somebody from needing five or six people just to be able to clean, feed and clothe themselves during the week to the point where, after a year or two of neurorehabilitation and care and support of every different kind, they can do the vast majority of those things more or less on their own, relying perhaps on only one person. The narrow-minded might say, "That is a great success, because it means that the state will not have to spend so much money on them," but it is a miracle to see such a transformation of those people's lives. It is also depressing to see, for example, a young lad who has been sitting in an east London hospital for far too long because there is nowhere else for him to go that is safe and can provide the right kind of care.

In Cardiff, I met a young lad for whom we recently held a fundraising dinner at the football stadium—he is a magnificent chap. He had to go all the way to Tadworth because it is the only place in the country with residential

neurorehabilitation of that kind for children. I want to that care to be provided closer to home so that parents do not have to make enormous journeys and children do not feel discombobulated and uncertain about their role in the family and how their life will proceed.

The Disabilities Trust has done amazing research—partly in Cardiff prison, but in other prisons, too—that the Government now wholly accept as factual and as the basis on which we should proceed. Who would have thought, even five or 10 years ago, that analysis of both male and female prisoners arriving in prison would show that more than half had sustained a significant brain injury at some point in their lives? The Government's website states that someone who has suffered a significant brain injury is twice as likely to commit a serious crime. There is perhaps not just a correlation between the two, but a causal link. Maybe this is not, as some of us have said, a hidden epidemic affecting 1.3 million people across the country, but something much more systemic. If we can spot those who need support, ensure that they get it and deal with brain injuries sooner, so many other societal issues might be addressed.

Work with young offenders in my patch of south Wales, where we have a very good co-ordinated approach, made it clear that a child from a poor background is four times more likely to suffer a brain injury under the age of five, with similar figures for teenagers from poor backgrounds. Those ages are both important developmental periods for the brain, which is a soft organ inside a hard, craggy shell, and is therefore extremely vulnerable if pushed around or jarred. In my patch, three quarters of the youngsters in the criminal justice system who caused the biggest problems were those who had suffered significant brain injuries that had been left largely untreated. If we had dealt with those injuries in the first place, we might have been able to help those children in the education and health systems long before they entered the criminal justice system. That would have meant a much better outcome for those individuals, their families and society, and a much greater saving to the public purse.

Members will know that a brain injury can come about for all sorts of different reasons: a traumatic incident, such as a fall or a crash, or just a single punch. I can remember so many horrific incidents in my constituency, outside pubs and so on, where somebody has been punched in a fight. That punch, or the individual hitting the pavement or the wall, may lead to an injury that completely changes their life. The cause of a brain injury could be that, or it might be a haemorrhage, an aneurism, a tumour or carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide poisoning can particularly affect people in rental accommodation, and we have to make sure that landlords properly test all the equipment in the house to ensure that a faulty boiler or heating system does not poison those who live there. We now have a much better understanding of carbon monoxide; not only can one big exposure to it do damage to an individual, but even relatively low levels sustained over a period of time can damage the brain in the same way.

Hypoxia is another cause of similar problems, as is stroke. I am quite conscious of this issue, because quite a lot of people have got in touch with me and said, "Why don't you talk more about stroke?" It is not because I do not understand the problems in relation to stroke and brain injury—many of the issues are exactly the same; it is an injury, just by a different means—but because there are organisations specifically dedicated to

[Chris Bryant]

stroke, such as the Stroke Association, which have been dealing with it. We in the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury have tended to leave that to one side. But when we bring it all together, we realise that we still have a limited understanding of how to look after, treat, care for, provide for and protect the part of our body that we think of as the place where our personality resides, and therefore as the bit that is most intimate to us as human beings.

It is only recently that people at the Ministry of Defence have started to think that perhaps some people who have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder actually had brain injuries that were not treated and that led to all the other issues.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. As other Members want to speak, I will not intervene for long. A lot of diagnoses were not made at the time, sometimes because the symptoms were just not there. There needs to be an understanding, not just in the Ministry of Defence but in the medical profession—I will come on to social services—of what a brain injury is. A brain injury does not necessarily show itself straight away, and it does not necessarily have physical symptoms; it is inside this little cocoon that we rely on so much.

Chris Bryant: Perhaps we have thought, “Well, a little blow to the head is okay; we don’t mind and we’re not going to worry about that.” The right hon. Gentleman is right; perhaps we have been a bit blasé about it, and perhaps even more so in the armed forces, where people want to show that they are tough and can carry on.

Incidentally, the appearance of symptoms some time later is equally an issue in education. A child might come back to school wearing a bandage, at which point everybody is warm, friendly, loving, caring and supportive. Nine months later, when the bandage is gone and everyone presumes that the child is getting on with their life, the child may start becoming difficult in class, finding it difficult to concentrate and falling asleep in lessons. They may be less in control of their inhibitions, and all the rest of it. The teacher may not recognise that as part of what happened nine months before.

Unless teachers and the whole education system are trained to understand fully the concept of neurocognitive stall, there is a real danger that the child will end up becoming increasingly difficult because they do not know anything else; they get shouted at, which sends them into panic rather than making them say, “Please, Miss or Sir, I need some support and help.” Then the child ends up getting excluded and falling into the criminal justice system. If the support had been sustained from day one for at least a year, and if we had made sure that all the teachers in the school understood those issues, we might have been able to save that person’s education.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I commend the hon. Member on bringing this debate to the House, and on the work he has done in this area for some time. He is right to point to some obvious potential ABIs and the lack of knowledge and response. Will he reflect on some areas where there are changes in social norms and ideas about how brain injury can be acquired, such as in the heading of footballs? The Scottish Football Association has considered banning children from heading footballs.

Chris Bryant: Interestingly, I had a phone call yesterday morning with Dawn Astle, the daughter of the famous footballer Jeff Astle, who was particularly renowned for heading the ball. I am a Welshman, and we have been boycotting the World cup for very long time—certainly the finals, anyway—so football is not my area of expertise. However, something I have been particularly disappointed about since the APPG produced its report “Time for Change” is that, even though we have been making recommendations about concussion in sport for quite some time, the Government want to wash their hands of it.

There is legislation in every state in the United States of America about sport’s duty of care to participating individuals. Sport is good for you; playing football, rugby and all these things are good for you. I do not want to mollycoddle or wrap anybody in cotton wool, but there may be subtle changes that one can make to each sport to prevent unnecessary damage to people’s brains. Also, I still think that there has not been a cascade of information and understanding of concussion from the professional medics in the organisation down to the grassroots of each sport. That will happen only when there is a shared set of protocols for all sport.

There is clear evidence that a professional footballer is three-and-a-half times more likely to suffer from dementia. There is lots of evidence to suggest that that is to do with heading the ball—not the weight of the ball, as many people say, but the physical process of heading the ball, because it pulls the brain from one side and hits it on the other, which leads to a significantly increased risk of dementia. It seems bizarre that that is not thought of as an industrial injury, which football needs to look at seriously. It also seems bizarre that, at the very highest level of football, a footballer who is taken off to be tested for concussion cannot be replaced, and that player gets only three minutes, which is nowhere near enough time for a proper analysis of whether somebody has suffered concussion.

Football still has some considerable way to go. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport must play a role in bringing all the sports bodies together round a table to analyse this problem. Otherwise, sports will end up facing massive court cases and very big fines, as has happened in the United States of America. I would prefer us not to go down that route.

There is a spectrum stretching from those who have suffered the worst traffic accidents or have had a severe stroke to those who have had a minor head injury and have lost consciousness for less than 15 minutes. Incidentally, there is a lot of misunderstanding about what losing consciousness and concussion means—I will not go into that, but there are different parts of the brain that might be affected.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Regarding road traffic accidents, there is a spectrum of vulnerability, and cyclists are some of the most vulnerable road users. There have been many studies about the efficacy of cycle helmets. The Cochrane review found that using a cycle helmet reduces the likelihood of brain injury by up to 88%. Should the Government not do more to encourage the use of cycle helmets for cycle safety?

Chris Bryant: I will not go beyond my area of expertise, so I hope my hon. Friend does not mind that I hesitate to respond. I have read the piece of work that he refers

to, and he is right. Other work suggests that there are other things we must do to ensure that cyclists are safe. We need a mixture of all those measures because in future more people will cycle, and we do not want that to lead to a significant increase in road traffic accidents.

The one thing I must praise the Government for, though, is the development of the major trauma centres in England. Despite in many cases not being particularly popular, because it has felt like a service is being made less local and a more regional centre of excellence, the centres have undoubtedly led to at least 1,000 extra lives being saved every year. I praise the Government for their work on that, and I am glad that we will have something similar in south Wales soon. I will not go into the issues about the accident and emergency unit at the Royal Glamorgan hospital today.

The downside of saving lots of lives is that there is a duty of care to provide the neurorehabilitation needed to ensure that those people have a decent quality of life. It is perfectly possible to do that, but at the moment a quarter of major trauma centres do not have a neurorehabilitation consultant. There has been significant progress in relation to neurorehabilitation prescriptions. When I last raised that subject, the Government said that around 90% of people were receiving such prescriptions, but whether they are going to the individual and their families, to ensure that that can be pursued, or whether those prescriptions remain with the doctors only, I do not know.

If the Minister looks only at one specific issue, I am keen she looks at how patients get written to. Some doctors, such as consultants, always write to the patient's GP or other doctor, sometimes in highly technical language. Some local health trusts copy that letter to the patient, but some doctors are now doing something far more effective—certainly far more effective in this area. They are writing not to the other doctor, but to the patient and copying that to the doctor. Of course, they have to use language that the patient can understand, but it is about empowering the patient. One message that I have heard more than any other from many patients and families I have talked to is that they feel completely powerless. Lots of other people are making decisions about them, but they do not understand how those decisions have been reached. They do not know whose door to knock on—or whose door to knock down for that matter—to ensure that their loved one gets the care and support they need. I wonder whether turning those letters on their heads so that the doctor writes to the patient, putting that information in their hands and empowering them, and similarly giving the prescription to the patient and family rather than to somebody else in the medical establishment, would not have a profound cultural effect.

I want to talk briefly about prejudice, because a degree of prejudice is another thing that sometimes comes with a brain injury. Perhaps the person in front of us in the queue in Morrisons or Sainsbury's or wherever is slurring their words. It is all too easy to get judgmental and think, "Oh well, they're drunk, and it's only eight o'clock in the morning," or whatever, but it might be because they have had a brain injury. It is great that work has been done on the London underground—it needs to be rolled out across the whole country—to explain that some disabilities are not visible, so we should suspend our tendency to be judgmental. We should probably suspend it more often in life generally, but we should do specifically in relation to potential disability.

In commenting on a story from earlier this week, I make absolutely no criticism of my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), who I think mistakenly used the word "vegetable" when she meant to say "vegetative state." Actually, I would like to get rid of the concept of vegetative state. It just sounds wrong. To any ordinary person, it sounds like vegetable, but these are people with all their humanity still in there, even if their personality may have changed in all sorts of ways because of the damage. The Minister will not do this, but I beg the medical establishment to come up with another term that is more sympathetic and genuinely expresses not just the downside of the condition, but hopefulness about the possibilities that may still be to come.

As I said, brain damage is not a pandemic and it is not catching, but it is in a lot of people's brains. The damage has been done, and many people who have suffered that brain damage do not know that the reason why they find it terribly difficult to concentrate or to get up in the morning—they suffer from phenomenal fatigue that hits them like a sledgehammer—why they find it difficult not to lose their temper, or why they get frightened of loud noise or chaotic circumstances and so on is because they had a brain injury at some point. That is all out there and it affects so many Departments of Government. We have had many wonderful warm words from lots of Ministers—this is my fifth or sixth debate on the subject—but now I really do want the Cabinet Office or Downing Street to set up a cross-departmental body to look at the issue in the round, rather than in each of the different silos. I am serious about this, and I am not asking for lots of money. I hope that the Minister will take that back to the Cabinet Office and Government. At some point, I would like the Prime Minister to chair that body, because we could bring about real, positive societal changes if we get this right.

I will set out what specific Departments can do. In the Ministry of Justice, we should be screening all new prisoners coming in so that we can give them proper rehabilitation. We know there will be many people who have not had their needs met heretofore. That will make it easier to run prisons and much easier to rehabilitate those people not just physically, but back into society to lead fruitful lives. The Justice Committee produced a report in 2016 on youngsters in the criminal justice system, which made specific reference to brain injury. I really hope that all the recommendations in that report will be taken up by the MOJ.

I turn to the Department for Work and Pensions. All MPs have experience of the assessment process not being able to comprehend varying conditions. That is one of the problems with many brain injuries: someone might be all right today and, probably because of their brain injury, they want to please the person sitting in front of them, assessing them. They say, "Yes, I'm fine. I am absolutely fine. Honestly, I am fine," but tomorrow they will not be able to get out of bed, not out of laziness, but because of completely debilitating fatigue. All assessors for personal independence payment, disability living allowance, universal credit DLA, universal credit, and employment and support allowance—everyone—must have a full understanding of brain injury and the way it works.

In the NHS, I know there are shortages in many categories of personnel. If I have one hope for something that might come out of a Government who have a

[Chris Bryant]

significant majority, it is for more long-term personnel planning. Specific work needs to be done, because we are falling a long way short in the number of beds needed for neurorehabilitation and, in particular, in being able to take children out of hospital and into community services. I have already referred to the rehab prescription.

There are two other bodies that I want to thank as I end. The first is the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum, run by Chloe Hayward. The all-party parliamentary group has worked extremely closely with it, and later this year we intend to do more roundtables to gather more evidence to take this work forward. I have discovered there are many spheres in medicine where all the organisations do not speak to one another or sit round the same table. I have been doing work on melanoma, and I would love to bring all the many melanoma charities together so that we have a co-ordinated approach. UKABIF provides that co-ordinated approach, I really want the Government to adopt that model. We could really crack something here if we manage to work on it not just with one Department at a time but with all of them co-ordinated together.

Finally, I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) will refer to this in a moment, but I want to thank Headway. I had an amazing day speaking to the Headway conference last year. I have referred to some of the professionals, but the most amazing people are probably those who have been through a version of hell that none of us would ever want to experience, having sometimes lost significant members of their family as well. I remember one woman said to me, “I know I have to use all the energy in my head to make my head better, but I am using all the energy in my head to try to work out this DWP form.” That is not what the state should be doing. That is when we really do want a nanny-state to help, to sustain and to support. All too often, of course, it is charities that provide exactly that, and I pay an enormous tribute to Headway for the work it has done.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Order. I want to start the Front-Bench speeches at half-past 2; please bear that in mind. We must also allow a couple of minutes for Mr Bryant to wind up at the end.

1.59 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Today, like every other day, some 954 people will be admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury. That is one person every 90 seconds. As the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has done such great work to highlight the issue, has already said, all kinds of events can be involved. It could be a brain tumour; I am president of the Lincolnshire brain tumour support group. Alternatively, it could be a traumatic event, such as a car accident or a blow to the head, or something else, such as a stroke. The effects are so varied that they are hard initially to diagnose, and then hard to rehabilitate—but that does not mean that we should not do so.

The initial NHS response to strokes, tumours and dramatic, traumatic events is invariably good, but the multitude and diversity of the effects of these events, as

well as the difficulties faced by those with acquired brain injury, will often not be obvious until long after the patient has left hospital. Indeed, the unpredictability of the consequences, as described in the previous speech, is immensely distressing for both the person concerned and those around them. There can be inappropriate behaviour and changes of personality, as well as the obvious matter of decreased capacity.

Proust said:

“Happiness is beneficial for the body, but it is grief that develops the powers of the mind.”

Grief is, of course, for the departed, but it is also for any kind of loss. People grieve the loss of capability and capacity—the inability to do the things they once did or the lost chance to do the things they had hoped to.

I had a serious head injury in my youth, but I was able to do all that I had hoped to. As I have said before, I wanted to be a Conservative MP from the age of seven; when I say that, the hon. Member for Rhondda usually raises his eyebrows in disbelief—right on cue, Mr Robinson, he is doing it again. My head injury did not stop me from achieving that ambition, but it might have done if I had had other ambitions, if the treatment and care I received had been different, or if, to be frank, I had not enjoyed the same good luck.

We cannot be clear either about the pace of recovery, which is also immensely variable—not only is the severity of the effect unpredictable, but so is the speed at which people’s lives can change. Although there can sometimes be a deterioration, more often there is a gradual—sometimes very gradual—improvement. That means that although the adjustment they will have to make, at work and home, to go about their normal affairs will sometimes initially be very great, gradually they will be able to do more and more.

As an all-party group we produced an extremely good report, which was, though I say it myself, very well received. It was the result of a great deal of work, done not just by us—in fact, done rather less by us than by the many people to whom the hon. Gentleman has already paid tribute. The Government gave it a good hearing and we have had a good response from Ministers, but as has already been said repeatedly, the issue requires a cross-departmental approach; I have a long speech here that I am not going to make, but I will highlight some points before allowing others to contribute.

The impact on individuals, in respect of benefits, the education system and possible changes in personality and capability, may mean that they engage in activities, including malevolent activities, in which they would not otherwise have engaged. The criminal justice system has a part to play, as does, accordingly, the Ministry of Justice. There are other things too, beyond health: almost every Government Department has a part in addressing the issue of acquired brain injury.

However, Governments are extraordinarily bad at cross-departmental co-operation and collaboration, as I know having been a Minister in many Departments myself. Unless there is a real determination on the part of Ministers, and probably the Cabinet Office, to pull together the activities of Government Departments—for the most part, by the way, officials resist that; they do not like that kind of thing—things will not improve in the consistent way we want. Some Departments have already done good work, while others have been rather

slower to respond to the recommendations in the report—it is available to colleagues and others, so I will not go through those recommendations in detail.

I want to amplify the call made by the hon. Member for Rhondda for a new emphasis on collaboration and for a mechanism to bring that about—probably through a Cabinet Office working party pulling together Ministers from different Government Departments. That can work, as I know from my own time in Government. I implore the Minister to set about the business of putting that in place, following this debate.

I have two other things to say, Mr Robertson. The hon. Gentleman drew attention to neurorehabilitation. A rehabilitation prescription should be made available to all individuals with acquired brain injury on discharge from acute care. It should be held by the individual, with copies made available to the general practitioner. A national review of neurorehabilitation is required to ensure that service provision is adequate. The Government should collate reliable statistics for the number of individuals presenting at A&E with acquired brain injury, and record the numbers that require and receive neurorehabilitation. There should be a significant increase in the number of beds, too. I am sure the Minister will want to comment on the whole subject of rehabilitation when she winds up the debate. Those are just a few of the things that we have argued for and to which I wanted to draw the House's attention, on the back of the remarks made by the hon. Member for Rhondda.

I said I had two further points, and that will not have been lost on you, Mr Robertson. So, finally, I draw attention to the important work that has been done at universities. My own university, Nottingham, is doing important work on both the primary science of the subject and the psychological effects of injury. I hope that the all-party group will go to Nottingham to take a closer look—indeed, we were discussing that yesterday. When the Government work with the higher education sector, they can drive forward public policy changes resulting from important work on assessing the effectiveness of different approaches by public sector, private sector and charitable organisations, such as Headway, of which I am a patron.

Proust also said:

“A change in the weather is sufficient to recreate the world and ourselves.”

When the storm of head injury happens, the skies darken for individuals. Our job as parliamentarians is to bring change to those individuals, through brightening their prospects in all that we do.

2.9 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I thank the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury for its continued determination to ensure that the issue is given the time and attention it deserves; I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who has campaigned admirably. Politicians' stock is low at the moment, but anyone who heard his contribution, with its passion, hard work, determination and sincerity, would feel a lot better about what we do.

As the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) said, one person is admitted to hospital in the UK every 90 seconds as a

result of brain injury, so it is imperative that the recommendations in the APPG's report, “Time for Change”, are implemented without delay. I fully support the excellent report and endorse all its recommendations.

As hon. Members may know, I have a long-standing association with the brain injury charity Headway, mainly through its chief executive, Peter McCabe, who has been my friend and colleague in Mitcham for more years than I care to say. His charity does incredible work across the UK to support individuals and families affected by brain injury. The help provided by Headway is seen as a lifeline to those who receive it, whether through its helpline—inquiries to which have more than doubled in the past decade; through the provision of free, award-winning publications to help people understand and adapt to life after brain injury; or through grants distributed via its emergency fund.

Many hon. Members will also testify to the exceptional work done by Headway groups and branches in their own constituencies. The APPG report rightly calls for a national review of neurorehabilitation to ensure that service provision is adequate and consistent throughout the UK. This report must not confine itself to acute care settings. Headway groups and branches are under severe financial pressure as a result of cuts to local authority budgets. The fact that they continue to provide such vital support, through rehabilitative therapies and social interaction programmes, is a testament to their determination to support this vulnerable community.

Let us be clear: the pressure under which Headway groups operate must be eased, and they must be afforded the funding they need to continue to support people who may otherwise be cut adrift from society. “Time for Change” also calls for improvement to how the criminal justice system meets the needs of brain injury survivors. In a previous debate on acquired brain injury, I highlighted Headway's brain injury identity card, which helps to identify brain injury survivors when they come into contact with the criminal justice system. To date, more than 7,000 such cards have been distributed to vulnerable adults in the UK.

The ID card is part of Headway's Justice Project, which is helping to increase understanding of brain injury within the criminal justice system. That includes the provision of training to the police, liaison and diversion services, the Crown Prosecution Service, the Public Prosecution Service in Northern Ireland and other agencies. As highlighted in the report, this work is vital and charities such as Headway must be supported in delivering the training required.

I have also previously spoken of the Headway emergency fund, which provides grants to families to ensure that they can be by the bedside of a loved one in the acute stage of care following a brain injury. Since it was established, the fund has distributed more than £400,000 to almost 2,000 families with limited income or savings. About 82% of those grants are spent on travel, accommodation or parking at hospitals when no alternative transport is available—an issue I would like to focus on.

In December, the Government announced a new approach, giving access to free hospital car parking for thousands of NHS patients and visitors. I congratulate the Government on that announcement, which stated:

[*Siobhain McDonagh*]

“From April, all 206 hospital trusts in England will be expected to provide free car parking to groups that may be frequent hospital visitors, or those disproportionately impacted by daily or hourly charges for parking”.

Each year, thousands of patients admitted with ABI will have sustained severe brain injuries, putting them at the greatest risk of a fatal outcome. If they survive, they face many weeks or months in acute care and rehabilitation. The development of major trauma centres and specialist brain injury units results in improved outcomes for patients. However, the emergence of such centres has meant patients being treated many miles from the family home, resulting in families facing financial hardship to be by the bedside of their loved ones.

If the patient is the main breadwinner or self-employed, the financial stress placed on the family can force them into impossible choices. The families of patients who have sustained potentially fatal acquired brain injuries will be desperate to be by the bedside of their loved ones at such a critical time, often for periods of several weeks or months. I am sure everyone agrees that they should be classified as “frequent hospital visitors” who are “disproportionately impacted by daily or hourly charges for parking”.

Will the Minister confirm that that will be the case? It is vital that we receive confirmation today that it will, so that that vulnerable group receive the support they so clearly deserve.

2.15 pm

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. I campaigned for free car parking with my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), and I completely agree with what the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (*Siobhain McDonagh*) said about it. Perhaps the Minister cannot commit now to abolishing car parking charges, but I am sure that the Government will do so because we campaigned for that all the way through. No distinction should be made between one type of case and another; people who need to be by their loved one’s bedside should not be paying car parking charges. The NHS was designed to be free at the point of delivery, and that includes car parking for people in that position.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (*Chris Bryant*) is right in most, if not all, of what he said. His personal experience has given him an outlook that someone like me could not possibly have. Interdepartmental work is the only way to take this forward. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings, I have been a Minister—in my case, in seven Departments, before I managed to upset the last one and came to the Back Benches. This will only work if the Prime Minister says that there will be an interdepartmental group that will meet regularly and will be chaired by so-and-so—probably the Deputy Prime Minister, as it was then, or the Cabinet Office—and that they will report back what each Department is doing.

As we have heard, nearly every Department will be affected, from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (*Neil Gray*) has alluded to football, and I will declare an interest about rugby and boxing in a moment—to the Department for Work and Pensions, which deals

with how personal independence payment is assessed, and where I used to be a Minister. As I said earlier, because of the nature of the injury, it is not always visible; very often, it is inside.

I will touch on some other points. I understand exactly where the Scottish Football Association is going in looking at the issue of younger people and heading, but if those young people go on to play professional football later, they will head the ball. The rest of the world of football must take a leaf out of rugby’s book—particularly rugby union. I declare an interest: I stupidly started playing rugby when I was 11, and I am still playing now. I will be playing against the Welsh Assembly at Richmond in a couple of weeks’ time; that game might be slightly more interesting than the England-France one was.

Perhaps because we have seen some shocking injuries and we know what is going on, the game has changed, not just in that we now pull people off the pitch to be assessed, but in how we tackle. To be fair, a lot of that has to do with American football, where they used to lead with their head because they had the protection of the helmet, and because of machismo. Women’s rugby is the fastest-growing female contact sport in the country, and it has been for years; quite right, because it is brilliant to watch. However, in women’s rugby as well as men’s rugby, the game had to change to protect the players—those going into the tackles as much as those coming out of them.

Neil Gray: Like the right hon. Gentleman, I declare an interest in view of my past, rather diminished career as a rugby player. Football certainly has a lot to learn from rugby, not least when it comes to what he is saying about the contact area. The enforced absence of a player from the pitch for a period of time following a concussion diagnosis is also important, and it is something that football needs to learn from.

Sir Mike Penning: I could not agree more, and I was just coming on to that point. The Football Association and FIFA do not need to reinvent the wheel. We need to take time to assess whether a person has been concussed and, if so, they should not play the following week or the week after that. Those assessments have to be done by professionals, away from the pitch, and sometimes with scans.

Rugby has led the way. I watched a rugby league match this weekend—I have a rugby league team in my constituency, even though I am deeply in the south. Some of the tackles just would not be allowed in rugby union any more. As far as I could work out, they were old-fashioned spear tackles—the player is allegedly going for the ball, but they catch their opponent around the top of the neck, and that causes damage to the brain, which rattles around inside the piece of bone that protects the brain. It is plainly obvious that we needed to change, and it has taken time—probably too long—but it has happened.

Boxing also has to change for the better. I declare an interest, in that I boxed for many years. I am talking not just about the terrible things have gone on in the ring, as a result of which people have died for a sport that they love and want to be involved in, but about what happens to people years later. I will not name names, but I know several former world boxing champions who now suffer the consequences of the brain damage that they incurred. They can be read about in the papers. I do not need to name them, and it would be improper to do so.

This is not just about concussion. People in this situation have gone through clinical depression, and their injuries affect them and their loved ones for the rest of their lives. We must support more awareness and encourage the sport to do all it can to open up. We do not need to reinvent the wheel, but we must learn from other sports. I wish the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts luck in Scotland on Saturday, and I hope that England play somewhat better than they did against France. Let us hope that there are no injuries like some of the ones we have seen in the last couple of weeks. There was a neck and spinal injury at the Saracens-Worcester game the other week, and it was spine-chillingly horrible. People want to play the sport and it is their passion—stupidly, I still play—but we have to make sure that we protect them.

I want to touch on long-term care and the assessments that are carried out when people with a pre-existing brain injury of some description get dementia. Continuing healthcare is an absolute minefield. I have heard about this from too many of my constituents, and from colleagues in the House over the years. Even though someone who is going into care has a medical condition—a brain injury—before dementia comes on, that seems to be put to one side when the panel look at continuing health provision for them. That is fundamentally wrong.

Just because someone develops dementia or Alzheimer's, it does not mean that their other medical conditions have vanished off the face of the earth. They have not. But time after time, I have had to help individuals and their families to go to appeals and tribunals to get something that they would probably have got if the individual had not got dementia, but that that they do not get because they have dementia alongside the pre-existing injury. It sounds very complicated, but it is actually very simple. If someone has a medical condition, such as a brain injury, that brings on dementia—we do not really understand that, and I was reading some research last night on the reasons for it—surely, the medical and nursing care that they needed for that brain injury should not be put to one side when they go for an assessment if they have Alzheimer's or dementia.

I give praise where praise is due. I was a shadow Health Minister for four and a half years when the last Labour Government were in power, and they started the major trauma centres. The debate started with them, and they progressed it. The issues with major trauma centres are about where they should be, how quickly people can get to them and whether enough people are using them to make them viable, given the required expertise. To be honest, it is the same old story as with A&Es. Major trauma centres are not A&Es; they are specialist units for people who need specialist care. People who need to go to A&E should go to A&E, and people who need to go to a minor injuries unit should go to a minor injuries unit. It is about making sure that people go to the right place.

With major trauma, the decision is made for people. All the major trauma centres have helipads now. I truly hope that as they develop as centres of expertise, we will recognise that people need travel to the right place to see the specific consultant specialist who can save their life. That may not be the centre that is just down the road or the one in London—for my constituents, such things often involve coming into London—but it might be one that is 20 minutes away by helicopter ride. That is

absolutely right, if that is where the expertise is. The time when people need to be closer to home, and to the support of their loved ones, is when they come out of major trauma centres and into rehabilitation.

Public understanding about major injuries is better these days. I was a fireman for many years and, sadly, I went to too many road traffic incidents. People are increasingly surviving major road traffic incidents or collisions. We tend not to call them accidents these days, because they are not accidents—they are preventable—and victims feel very strongly that we should not call them accidents. I understand that view. I made a big booboo as road traffic Minister when I talked about road traffic accidents. I did so because that is what firefighters did, but I respect the point: every accident is preventable, and these are collisions in which people's loved ones are involved.

Today's survival rate has a lot to do with the manufacture of the vehicles, airbags and how crush plates work inside vehicles. Those things mean that more people are surviving, but with very serious injuries. As I alluded to in my intervention, some of those injuries are physical and show themselves there and then, but a lot do not show signs until much later—sometimes nine weeks or nine months, or sometimes many years later.

That brings me to my final point, which is about our armed forces. We send our armed forces around the world. They work in a very dangerous occupation, and we try to make it as safe as possible. Sometimes, there are injuries in training. We sadly lost one of our Royal Marines only the other day; he was doing the job he loved and training to do something he was passionate about. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends and loved ones.

We must look after our armed forces personnel after they are injured. I can remember so many incidents around head injuries when I was a squaddie, and there was no way that I would have gone down to the medical officer the day after a head injury with a headache. The barrack room humour would have been all about, "Get on with it. You are supposed to be robust." I have been the Minister for the Armed Forces, and I think we are getting there, but the way forward is to improve public awareness. That involves debates such as this, and perhaps an overall Government body that can look at the issue in general terms. I hope we do not need too many of these debates—I have been around a long time—before we get to a better position in Government.

2.27 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate on behalf of the SNP with you in the Chair, Mr Robertson. I strongly commend the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for bringing the debate to the House, for his contribution over many years and for the erudite and informed way he goes about his business on this subject. I hope it means that ears are open to what he has to say, not least today. He has certainly earned respect for his erudite contribution in the debate today. I am only sorry that the debate is happening on a Thursday—normally a day when colleagues take time in their constituencies to carry out constituency business, which is why so few are here with us today.

The speeches today have been consensual in nature and informed and have added a very real quality to the debate, which I am sure the Minister will reflect on as she comes to sum up. The contribution of the hon.

[*Neil Gray*]

Member for Rhondda was very personal. He rightly mentioned the report of the all-party parliamentary group that he chairs, whose publication my party welcomed. He drew on examples of people he has worked with who require and deserve specialist provision as close to their home as possible. All Governments in these isles need to reflect on that, and on the wider societal impacts of ABI, which require earlier and greater intervention to prevent them from happening at all. The hon. Gentleman was also right to raise the issue of language in this context; he himself cited an unfortunate example and I hope that we will all reflect on it in the future.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) too made a very erudite contribution, which was also informed by his personal experience, and I commend him for the work that he has done with the all-party parliamentary group, too. And he was right about the need for cross-departmental and cross-Government co-ordination, which I will come on to later in my speech.

I commend the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) for her work with Headway. The point about a brain injury ID card was a very interesting focus of her speech. The benefits of such a card, which she articulated, are quite clear.

Like other colleagues, not least the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who have campaigned strongly on hospital parking charges, I am sure that the hon. Lady will be aware that in Scotland we have already got rid of them. I encourage them to keep pressing the Government in that regard, because of the very obvious benefits that such a change would provide for people using hospitals.

The right hon. Gentleman was right to focus on sport; our exchange on that subject is on the record. I entirely agree with him that sport undoubtedly has a role to play and can do immeasurable good for society, not only in terms of physical health but in terms of mental health. However, a lot of work needs to be done, especially in the particular sports that he mentioned but also in sport generally. The hon. Member for Rhondda rightly highlighted that issue as well.

As for myself, I will relate the Scottish experience. Be it in relation to ABI or any other issue, disabled people—regardless of their condition—deserve the right to live as independently as possible, and they should have freedom, dignity, choice and control over their lives. Accessibility is at the foundation of the approach that the Scottish Government are taking in providing disability support. I point Members towards “A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People”, which is the Scottish Government’s plan in response to the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. It aims to make equality of opportunity, access to services and independent living a reality for all disabled people, as well as being a national plan for accessible travel, an awareness-raising campaign about the barriers that disabled people face, and a review of the legislation regarding adults with incapacity. It also aims to increase the uptake of modern apprenticeships by disabled people, to provide a new social security system that treats people with these conditions with dignity and respect, and to call for more work to tackle disability hate crime and violence against disabled women and girls. The Scottish party’s vision is

that children and adults in Scotland with acquired brain injury should have equal access to the highest quality brain injury care, regardless of where they live.

The Scottish Acquired Brain Injury Network was established in 2007, with the key objective of enabling improvements in access to and the quality of services in Scotland. SABIN comprises service user representatives, healthcare professionals, service providers and voluntary sector groups, and it has published the traumatic brain injury and adult standards. Those standards have ensured that there is a joined-up approach to immediate and long-term care for people with an acquired brain injury. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings raised that earlier, and the Government here in Westminster should look at.

The Scottish Government have also made significant investment in the health service to provide the care that is required, including opening two major trauma centres in Dundee and Aberdeen, with further centres due in Glasgow and Edinburgh soon. I hope that all these centres will be adequately staffed with neurorehabilitation consultants, as the hon. Member for Rhondda suggested.

Clearly, there is work to do, not just in Scotland but elsewhere in the UK. Nevertheless, I hope that colleagues will recognise that Scotland is working hard on this issue. I thank the hon. Gentleman once again for bringing this debate to the House. I hope that his demands are taken seriously, and that that is reflected in the Minister’s response to this debate.

2.34 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Robertson.

I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on securing this very important debate, on his excellent speech, and on his continuing honesty and willingness to share details of his personal experience, in order to further the vital campaigning on acquired brain injuries.

I also thank the other right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate: the right hon. Members for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning); my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh); and the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who spoke for the Scottish National party. It has been an excellent debate and I am definitely looking forward to hearing the Minister’s response to it.

First, like my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda, I thank the charities working in this field, including the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum and Headway, whose chief executive, Peter McCabe, I also have the pleasure of knowing well. I thank them all for their invaluable work to support people with acquired brain injuries and their families. I also give special thanks to Headway Wearside, which goes above and beyond for people in my region in the north-east, especially for people in my constituency. Headway Wearside has given me a lot of help over the years with constituents’ cases.

As we have heard, acquired brain injury is a leading cause of death and disability in the UK. A brain injury can happen in an instant at any age or at any stage of life, and the effect can be devastating and life-changing.

ABI is a hidden epidemic, affecting many hundreds of thousands of people's lives in many ways. As a result, and as we have heard, people with ABI face challenges that are related to more than just one Government Department. That is why I am pleased to echo my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and the all-party group on acquired brain injury in asking the Minister to work with her colleagues across Government Departments to ensure that people with brain injuries get the care and support they need, whatever that care and support might be.

As we have heard, every 90 seconds someone is admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury. Thankfully, improvements in medical procedures and acute care have led to improved survival rates, which is welcome. However, as we also heard—I think it was the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead who made this point—that brings its own challenges and places further pressure on already stressed, indeed overstretched, health and social care services.

Early and continued access to specialist rehabilitation has been shown to optimise the chances of recovery and to be extremely cost-effective. However, there is an NHS workforce crisis, and we need more neurorehabilitation health professionals, such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists, and educational psychologists, to deliver services. What is the Government's plan to attract prospective professionals to neuro-rehabilitation, and what are the Government doing to retain the current workforce, especially when service provision is variable across the UK?

It is crucial that people with ABI get the support they need, because this issue is also about the quality of their lives. What consideration has the Minister given to the APPG's recommendation to establish a national review of neurorehabilitation provision? Also, rehabilitation prescriptions are very important in continuing communication and care across individual services, so will the Minister ensure that they are mandated across the services?

It is important that a patient and their family or carer know what care and support they need and what services they are currently accessing. That includes services provided by schools and other educational professionals, who may teach young children and young people with brain injuries. Best practice guidelines must be approved and followed for children and young people who return to education after an acquired brain injury, and operate throughout the rest of their education.

I will pick up on a point that my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda made earlier, namely that if a child suffers a brain injury in their early years before they have even attended school—when they are under five—the school may never be aware of the link between their acquired brain injury and their behaviour in class, their educational ability, or indeed their behaviour in society, leading to all the issues that my hon. Friend mentioned with regard to youth offending and the need to screen prisoners, so that those who have slipped through the net throughout their school years can start to receive the help and support that they need and deserve.

All education professionals must have an awareness and understanding of ABI and the education requirements for children and young people with the condition. What conversations has the Minister had with her colleagues in the Department for Education about supporting children and young people with ABIs throughout their education?

For those with pre-school ABIs—perhaps from a fall or meningitis—at the start of their education, what is being done to ensure that that information is captured and recorded in the child's confidential record which that will follow them throughout their school years, in case issues begin to manifest themselves many years later?

What conversations has the Minister had with her colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about ensuring that all benefits assessors are trained to understand the problems that affect individuals with ABIs? A few hon. Members also mentioned that issue. I am talking not just about medical issues, but about how people's behaviour or speech may be affected, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said. Those effects may make them seem difficult to deal with, and that needs to be explained to assessors; otherwise, individuals with ABI could perhaps be harshly dealt with for something entirely outside their control. Will the Government ensure that a brain injury expert is on the consultation panel when changes in the welfare system are proposed, to ensure that the system works for people with ABI and their unique needs?

As we have heard, ABIs can be complex and therefore require attention from numerous Departments to ensure that patients and their families and carers receive the support that they need. I therefore hope that the Minister will consider everything that she has heard said in this excellent—small but perfectly formed—debate and will work in a co-ordinated and consistent way with her Government colleagues to deliver on the recommendations set out in the excellent all-party group report.

2.41 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinage): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on again securing a really important debate on this issue. He is such a brilliant and effective champion of people with acquired brain injuries. His passion is incredibly infectious and set the tone for the rest of the debate, which I think everybody would agree has been incredibly constructive and thoughtful; there have been excellent contributions from everybody. The hon. Gentleman leads the all-party parliamentary group on acquired brain injury, about which all its members are very passionate. They have done superb work.

I thank everybody who took part in the debate: my right hon. Friends the Members for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) and the hon. Members for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

As hon. Members will know, it is estimated that the total cost of brain injury in the UK is at least £1 billion per annum and that the number of people living with ABI is more than half a million and could be as high as 1 million. Many hon. Members have explained that, as with many long-term conditions, the impact of ABI is not limited to an individual's health but is felt across many aspects of their life, including family, work, relationships and finances. Of course, such an injury could happen to any one of us. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead spoke about traffic incidents and collisions. That could happen to any one of us on our way home today.

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

I join the hon. Member for Rhondda in taking this opportunity to recognise, first, the outstanding work done by professionals in this field and, secondly, the wonderful work undertaken by charitable organisations such as Headway, the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum and the Children's Trust, which he mentioned. They are incredibly highly valued by those affected. They do invaluable work in raising not only money but awareness and by providing incredible support to those with the condition, as well as to their families and carers.

I have had quite a long-standing involvement with Headway in my region of Portsmouth and Gosport, since before I became an MP; as an MP, I have met my local team on a number of occasions. They are remarkable and offer the most fantastic support to people in my area. They certainly make a difference to people's lives and they are so inspiring. On one occasion, I visited them with a member of my team, and she was so buoyed up by the visit that she decided to go off and do the Great South Run to raise funds for the Headway charity. I am not going to follow her example: literally nothing apart from someone chasing me would make me run 13 miles, but people can see how—

Chris Bryant: It could be arranged.

Caroline Dinenage: Thank you; that is a very generous offer. People can see what an inspiring group Headway is.

We have heard a lot about the excellent and wide-ranging APPG report from 2018. As the hon. Member for Rhondda said, the Department of Health and Social Care co-ordinated with officials from across Whitehall to deliver the response, which was a truly cross-Government response, but I certainly feel his frustration at how silo working across Whitehall can be an impediment to getting the change that he wants. A number of right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned that today, and I will certainly take forward the idea of a real, collaborative cross-Whitehall group to discuss this. Even from the issues raised today, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Transport, the Department for Education, the Ministry of Defence and the Cabinet Office—I am sure there will be others—all need to be involved in the conversation.

Neil Gray: I thank the Minister for her contribution thus far. It was remiss of me, not just as someone who comes from an armed forces family but as a constituency MP with cases involving constituents who have been medically discharged from the armed forces, not to highlight and focus on the contribution from the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning) on the greater work that needs to be done within the MOD and across Government to ensure that we are treating our armed forces personnel, particularly when they leave service, with greater respect, and to ensure that we are providing for them, given the level of service that they have provided to all of us.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue. NHS England has a veterans trauma network, which delivers comprehensive medical care to veterans, including those suffering from brain trauma. It does excellent work, but there are also many

individual charities up and down the country that work to support veterans who may not have been diagnosed; they may have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or something else, but never actually had the original head injury diagnosed.

Almost as if to highlight the fact that this is a hugely cross-Government issue and the inadequacy of Ministers working in their individual silos, I will today be able to focus massively only on the issues relevant to our health service, but I will try to come on to a lot of the questions that right hon. and hon. Members asked.

Sir John Hayes: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. We had meetings as an all-party group with the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the former right hon. Member for Aylesbury. I believe that at that point there were suggestions, at least, that a Cabinet Office piece of work would be initiated. Can we take it from the Minister's assurances that she will write to the Cabinet Office colleagues who are now responsible for these matters and copy that letter to participants in this debate?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes, I am very happy to commit to doing that.

Before I go on to talk about the health implications of ABI, I want to deal with a couple of other things. They are not within my realm of expertise, but I want to touch on them.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden spoke about the Headway brain injury identity cards—how important they are and how important it is that they are recognised across the criminal justice system. I wanted to mention how Headway has been integral in partnering NHS England's health and justice liaison and diversion services programme team, to provide workshops in London and Leeds to raise the awareness of the prevalence of ABI within criminal justice populations. The objectives were designed in a "train the trainer" format, so that the attendees could return to their services and cascade the learning on how to identify people with brain injury, how to identify the brain injury cards that Headway has brought forward and how to understand the implications. I thought that was quite positive.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead was right to mention the positive progress that has been made in some sports. The Rugby Football Union's Headcase campaign and the British Horseracing Authority have also made great strides in this area. However, he was also right to say that other sports have a long way to go.

The hon. Member for Rhondda spoke about trauma centres. As he knows, in 2012 22 regional trauma networks were developed across England to ensure that those with the most serious brain injuries received the best care. Two years after their introduction, an independent audit showed that patients had a 30% improved chance of surviving severe injuries. Since then, as he says, the network has saved literally hundreds of lives.

For people who have ABI, neurorehabilitation that is timely and appropriate to their circumstances is a massively important part of their care. Access to high-quality rehabilitation saves money and, more importantly, significantly improves outcomes for patients. NHS England commissions specialised rehabilitation services nationally for those patients with the most complex level of need.

As we have already heard, trauma unit teams work to assess and develop a rehabilitation prescription for brain-injured patients. At the unit, patients can access care from specialists in rehabilitation medicine, whose expert assessment helps to inform the prescription.

These rehabilitation prescriptions are an important component of rehabilitation care, because they reflect the assessment of the physical, functional, vocational, educational, cognitive, psychological and social rehabilitation needs of a patient. The APPG argued that all patients should benefit from an RP; as I understand it, at discharge, all patients should have a patient-held record of their clinical information and treatment plan from admission as they move to specialist or local rehabilitation, supported by the RP. However, I take on board what the hon. Gentleman says about ensuring that the letter and the prescription itself are written in language that people can understand, are easily accessible and are available to them and their family members.

The “National Clinical Audit of Specialist Rehabilitation for Patients with Complex Needs Following Major Injury”, published in 2016, found that, on average, 81% of patients had a record of a rehabilitation prescription. That audit appears to have had a significant impact, because the latest data shows a rise to an average 95% completion rate. In April 2019, the third and final report of the Audit Commission to NHS England’s audit programme was published, and it is encouraging to see that 94% of patients accessing specialist rehabilitation have evidence of functional improvement.

However, the audit report also suggests that much more work needs to be done to ensure that all patients who could benefit from specialist rehabilitation can access it. Using data provided from participating centres, the audit’s authors estimate that the current provision caters for about 40% of those who need the services. To address the capacity issues highlighted, the audit makes a range of recommendations.

It is important to recognise that these audits play a massively valuable role in helping services to improve. They shine a light on variation and help to support services to best meet the needs of patients. However, there will always be different models of improving access to specialist rehabilitation, depending on the set-up of the services around the country. Therefore, local service providers and commissioners should review capacity in the pathways for specialist rehabilitation in the light of this audit, taking action where they can.

The majority of rehabilitation care is commissioned and managed locally, and NHS England has produced some documentation and services plans to help with that. “The Principles and Expectations for Good Adult Rehabilitation” describes what good rehabilitation care looks like and offers a national consensus on the services that people should expect. The NHS long-term plan has also set out some key actions on this, designed to improve care, treatment and support for people with long-term conditions such as ABI.

Community services, which play a crucial role in helping people remain as independent and well supported as possible, are going to receive significant investment, with £4.5 billion of new investment in primary and community care. Furthermore, NHS England has set out plans to roll out the NHS comprehensive model of personalised care, which includes self-care care planning, personal health budgets and social prescribing. It will

reach 2.5 million people by 2023-24 and is particularly relevant to people with acquired brain injury. The model is currently implemented across one third of England, but by September 2018, more than 200,000 people had already joined the personalised care programme.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden asked about free car parking. From April, all hospital trusts will be expected to provide parking to groups who may be frequent visitors. I interpret that to mean families visiting people who are in hospital for a long period of time, which I think is what she was asking me.

Siobhain McDonagh: I thank the Minister for giving way on this important issue. There are many terrible stories of people spending their life savings in an effort to keep being able to visit children and partners. Could the Minister specifically say, or could we have a response in writing to this effect, that that includes the families of people with acquired brain injury? I have been seeking some clarification from the Department, but all the responses have so far been obscure.

Caroline Dinenge: I will certainly seek to get that in writing for the hon. Lady.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead spoke about continuing healthcare. I know that that is a concern for many people, but what concerns me is that actually, CHC is needs-based, not diagnosis-based, so eligibility should be assessed by looking at all of an individual’s needs and considering their nature, complexity, intensity and unpredictability. If he wants to drop me a line about an individual case that he is concerned about, I will be more than happy to look at it.

Sir Mike Penning: It might be a lot of cases; I think the Minister will have had a lot of cases from across the House. I completely agree that that is what the principle should be. In practice, however, I ask her to look at the amount of appeals that have taken place, and she will realise it is not quite working.

Caroline Dinenge: I will very much take that on board.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West asked me a number of questions. I may not have written them all down, but she asked about workforce. We have the people plan, which Baroness Harding has been working on, which will be released later this year. It will look at all forms of medical professionals, but also the allied health professionals that the hon. Lady mentioned.

The hon. Lady asked what conversations I had had with the Department of Education. That Department is currently undertaking a review of special educational needs and disability, which will look at all aspects of supporting young people through their education. We are playing a key role in that SEND review. She also asked what conversations I had had with the Department for Work and Pensions about training. Case discussions about claimants with ABI now form part of a new entrant training for all healthcare professionals undertaking work capability assessments, and they all have access to a learning module on ABI, which was updated in 2018 and has been quality assured by Headway.

[*Caroline Dinenage*]

I hope that today's debate has continued to demonstrate how seriously the Government take ABI. We are committed to ensuring that people get treatment, care and support when they need it.

2.57 pm

Chris Bryant: Well, yes and no is the answer. Of course it is great—all the Ministers that I have ever heard speak to any of these debates have wanted to be warm, friendly and nice and to say nice things. However, I note that Ministers still stick to a number of 500,000 to 1 million, whereas I think most of the people who work in this field think that it is more like 1.3 million or 1.4 million. If there is a difference between 500,000 and 1.4 million, then there is a hidden epidemic, which even the Government are not really recognising yet.

That is my fundamental central point: it is not as though this were a disease out there that people might catch from each other; it is just that in many people's brains there are things that are not quite working right because they have had a brain injury. That is leading to all sorts of medical, societal and educational problems that we are not able to address because we have not gone to the root cause.

Let me take one single issue: homelessness and veterans. I would bet my bottom dollar that a very large percentage of the veterans sleeping on the streets in Westminster and London—and, for that matter, around the country—have had a significant brain injury at some point in their life and have not had the proper support and treatment that they required.

We will not be able to solve any of these individual issues unless we go to the centre and deal with this in a co-ordinated way. The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) is absolutely right: David Lidington was clear that this was going to happen. There were some other things going on last year, but none the less, this was going to happen. I hope that the Minister will go back and kick some shins, metaphorically and physically, to ensure that we get the co-ordinated approach that we need across the whole of Government.

I went to John Bercow's book launch last night; in his book, he says of me that I am not shy of repetition. I can assure the Minister that I will not be shy of repetition. I will not be shy of repetition.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered acquired brain injury.

Civil Aviation Authority: Aviation Safety

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Civil Aviation Authority and aviation safety.

It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the Chairman of Ways and Means, to whom I am grateful for having been allowed this time, and the industry bodies, air traffic controllers throughout the highlands and islands and others who briefed me ahead of the debate. I place on the record particular appreciation of the Civil Aviation Authority, which took a great deal of time and trouble to talk me through some of the basics. The interest from outside the Chamber is not necessarily reflected in attendance inside it, but we have plenty of time, so I hope we can do the subject justice.

Before coming to the matters that I want to bring to the House's attention, it is worth putting on the record why to me, an islander representing island communities, aviation safety and the provision of safe, reliable lifeline services are so important. Good transport links, and especially good air transport links, affect just about every aspect of island life in a way that is unimaginable for mainland communities.

For a businessperson in Orkney or Shetland who is required to spend time on the mainland—to see customers or regulators, perhaps—the time away from their business is critical. Those from Shetland will not necessarily want to spend 12 hours on an overnight boat to get home at the end of the day. Opportunities for young people to develop their talents in sport, music or other leisure activities rely on their being able to get that degree of competition that they may not have in their own community, which again requires travel off-island. Good transport links can affect something as simple as attending a family funeral, which can come up at short notice and to which a substantial cost is attached. An employer might give someone a day off to go to a funeral, but not three days. Most importantly of all, transport links are critical to the provision of emergency services. For us, the operation of the air ambulance service is every bit as important as the surface ambulance service is to any other community.

I wish to raise two matters, both of which stem from the operation of air services within the highlands and islands, and in my constituency in particular. First is the proposal by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd to centralise air traffic control—to remove air traffic controllers from seven of its 11 airports in the highlands and islands and to operate it all from one remote base, which we now know to be in Inverness. That is my most substantial area of concern, but I have further concerns, which are shared by many of my constituents who work as air traffic controllers, about the handling of a whistleblower complaint relating to an incident on 5 April last year involving an air traffic controller employed at Kirkwall Airport.

It might assist the Minister and others if I explain the role and genesis of HIAL. It is wholly owned by Scottish Ministers and operates 11 airports: 10 of them are in the

highlands and islands, at Sumburgh, Kirkwall, Wick, Stornoway, Benbecula, Barra, Tìree, Islay, Campbeltown and Inverness, and there is also Dundee Airport, which was acquired more recently. The company was born out of the break-up of the Civil Aviation Authority in the 1980s, which led to the setting up of what then became the British Airports Authority, which owned most airports as a private company. I think it was fairly easily understood that the market would not provide airports within the highlands and islands, so it was necessary to find a mechanism by which that provision could be maintained effectively within the public sector. As a result, HIAL was set up.

HIAL announced a consultation and a feasibility study into the idea of a single centralised point of control in 2018. Parenthetically, the company does not have a great record on consultation. It is not germane to the debate, but it still rankles that HIAL introduced car parking charges at both Kirkwall and Sumburgh airports without any consultation. It said it knew it would get an unfavourable answer but was going to do it anyway. I think we all understand that sentiment, but as a means of engaging with communities such as Orkney and Shetland, it is indicative of a certain attitude, which permeates a lot of the company's dealings.

HIAL announced in 2018 that it was conducting feasibility studies and consulting on the principle of moving to a single point of control. At that point it was not specified where that would be, although I think we all knew that it would be in Inverness. It was one of the least surprising pieces of news for some time when that was eventually confirmed. Since then, feasibility studies have been carried out, and last month HIAL announced that a system covering seven of its airports from this single, centralised, remote control tower would go live in 2024.

The proposal will affect no fewer than 86 jobs across the highlands and islands. To mainland communities, that may not sound like a tremendous number, but these are well paid, highly skilled professional jobs in some of the country's most economically fragile communities. For the communities and individuals concerned, the blow will be quite dramatic.

Various justifications have been put up, principal among which is that it is difficult to recruit and retain air traffic control staff. Everyone accepts that there is a nationwide shortage of air traffic control staff, but it has not been particularly acute in the highlands and islands—at least not within most stations concerned. Some areas of the highlands and islands, as a consequence of what was described to me as poor management, have had recruitment and retention difficulties, but I do not think that a company that has problems with poor management should redesign the whole system—at least not until it has tried good management instead. A practice that continues to be beneficial when it is followed is the practice of local recruitment and training staff to work in the highlands and islands. It has proven to be profitable and stable in the past, and there is no reason why it could not continue to be so in future.

The Prospect union surveyed its members and found that 82% would be more likely to leave the company if the changes were implemented. It seems perverse to go ahead with something designed to improve recruitment and retention if the move that is anticipated leads to 82% of staff feeling it more likely that they will want to leave. Let us consider the reasons for that.

The people who are recruited and trained locally in Kirkwall, Sumburgh, Stornoway and elsewhere in the highlands and islands have their wider family networks in the communities. Many were born and brought up there, or have chosen to move and make their life there. They will no doubt have partners who have careers in the local area. If you take one partner out of a community you do not expect the other partner to commute every week from Shetland to Inverness or wherever, so it is hardly surprising that the figure Prospect found was so high.

Essentially, it appears that HIAL has come to a solution without a problem. It was described to me and my colleague Beatrice Wishart in the Scottish Parliament by a respected industry figure, who said that the whole concept of remote towers is “not yet mature”. On the proposal, two years ago HIAL's own consultants said that, “one of the most expensive and certainly the most difficult and risky”

options to pursue was remote towers.

Ahead of today's debate, I got in touch with the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil), who is similarly affected and has similar issues to those that I bring to the House today. He made the very good point that if centralisation can be done, it can be done in the isles; it does not need to be done in Inverness. I think the reason centralisation is not done in the isles, apart from the fact that Highlands and Islands Airports loves to centralise everything in Inverness, is that there is not the communications resilience with the island communities. If they cannot operate the whole system in the islands, they should not seek to operate part of the system in the islands. He also said that the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament must not give HIAL a free hand, and I absolutely agree. Unfortunately, however, particularly as far as Scottish Ministers are concerned, that is exactly what is happening.

There is absolutely no indication coming from Transport Ministers or the so-called Islands Minister that they are doing anything to hold the company to account for the execution of its duties, bearing in mind its original purpose as a company was to serve the interests of the highlands and islands. Parenthetically, I would say that is perhaps less than surprising given that not a single member of the board of Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd is actually resident in one of our island communities. As a result of the lack of direct input from our islands community, the company has allowed itself to become, to use its own words, remote and out of touch with the sentiment in our island communities.

My concerns are shared by parliamentarians throughout the highlands and islands, as well as Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council and Western Isles Council. It is not a political issue because those councils are all almost exclusively run by independent councillors, who have as their primary concern the quality of services in island communities, and they have all rejected the proposal put forward by HIAL.

The chair of the board and the other non-execs do not seem to be putting a brake on the plan. Right at the start, the chair was brought down here with the managing director to brief Members of Parliament. It seems she has been put up by the company as a cheerleader for the project. That is not my understanding of the role of non-executive directors, so I have some concerns about the

[*Mr Alistair Carmichael*]

way in which HIAL works as a company. It is clear that if there is to be any meaningful and substantial scrutiny of the proposal, which, as I say, is right at the heart of the provision of the most important lifeline services that we have, it will have to come from the regulator. It will not come from the company, the board or Scottish Ministers. It will be the Civil Aviation Authority that ultimately has to sign the proposal off as a safe and viable system.

I have dealt with the Civil Aviation Authority on numerous occasions during my time representing the northern isles in this place, and I have always been impressed by the professionalism and high standards that it maintains. The rigour with which it has approached concerns that I have taken to it in the past and the candour it has displayed in dealing with me has been exemplary as a public body. I say that because I am going to come to a few concerns about how it handled whistleblowing complaints in a minute. However, as far as this project and all the dealings I have had with it during my time in Parliament are concerned, I have no complaint to make.

The particular concerns that I have in relation to HIAL project and which I want the Civil Aviation Authority to submit to the most minute scrutiny are, first of all, the practicalities of how the scheme will work. It will rely on the installation and operation of remote cameras transmitting pictures of the airfield back to the remote tower in Inverness. It will also use the cameras, as I understand it, for weather observation and forecasting. In relation to the operation of Sumburgh in Shetland, a recently retired weather broadcaster described it to my colleague in Shetland, Beatrice Wishart, as “unsafe in marginal conditions”. We work at the margins a lot over the winter months in the highlands and islands.

The siting of the cameras will be crucial. During a visit to the control tower in Kirkwall some time ago, the air traffic controllers pointed out to me that they did not just have sight of the runway and the airfield from the control tower; they had a 360° view. They could see all the fields around, so could be aware of any potential hazards that there might be on the road or in the fields. It is not like the control tower at Heathrow or Gatwick. The airport sits right beside the public road, surrounded on most sides by fields and in small measure by the sea.

The question is whether we will ever have cameras that provide coverage as good as, and consequently as safe as, that provided by the human eyes in air traffic control towers. Air traffic controllers, not just in Kirkwall and Sumburgh but elsewhere across the highlands and islands, tell me that we will not.

There is also a particular concern about how things will work in Shetland, at Sumburgh airport. There are only two airports in the whole of Europe where a public road runs across an airport runway, and it is my good fortune that one of them is in Shetland. Obviously it is critical to have sight of that road. However, if the mast is sited where the road runs across the runway to enable that, there will inevitably be problems with coverage of the southern part of the airport. Doubtless there could be some technical solution to those things. It will come at a cost. I hope that the Civil Aviation Authority will turn its mind to those questions and interrogate those determined to go ahead with the project before it gives it the go-ahead.

On the siting of camera masts, the idea of a remote tower is not novel in the United Kingdom; those of us who fly out of London City airport have air traffic services provided by NATS at Swanwick. The cameras at London City airport are rated for winds up to 35 knots—or a summer breeze, as we might call it in parts of the highlands and islands. I am being flippant, but I assure the House that 35 knots is by no means unusual. In fact, I checked the forecast on the BBC website before I came here today. I am due to fly from Orkney and Shetland on Sunday afternoon, and wind speeds in the region of 40 mph are already being forecast there—and that is still just a yellow warning.

Not that long ago, I was getting on a plane at Sumburgh airport when one of my friends walked out of the runway shelter and was—as an adult woman—very nearly literally blown over. That was on one of the days when we could fly. Those weather conditions, although severe, are no by no means exceptional across the highlands and islands. The expense of producing something that is good to 35 knots at London City will be even greater when trying to produce something resilient in the highlands and islands—because it comes back: what will the consequence be of the idea that an air ambulance plane cannot be got into Sumburgh or Kirkwall because a camera mast has blown over in a gale that is entirely unexceptional in that part of the world and that should be foreseeable when plans are made for the safe provision of aviation services?

The other principal concern that I want the Civil Aviation Authority to explore is the resilience of the digital connection between the airports themselves and the remote tower in Inverness. The House has heard me bore on long enough and often enough about the poor quality of broadband provision in my constituency but, again, the service provided for London City has three levels of resilience to it. They are the one that operates, the one that will operate if the first one goes down, and the third one, which is used to close down in the event of the other two not being available. That is the very obvious standard that we would expect of something as inherently challenging and dangerous as air traffic control. From Sumburgh to Kirkwall there is only one, and if that link goes down we are surely left without any sort of air traffic control. As a consequence, the safety of flights in and out of the islands will be compromised.

I realise that those matters are not within the competence of the Minister answering today, but they are very much within the purview of the Civil Aviation Authority, for which he does have responsibility. I hope that he will impress on the Civil Aviation Authority that he expects the most thorough and rigorous examination of the proposals, when they come. I say “when they come” because I understand from the Civil Aviation Authority briefing that I was given yesterday that the case has not yet been put to it.

We have four years, and we are not yet at the point where there is a formal proposal, and my concerns and those of local air traffic controllers and my constituents have not yet been submitted. That is remarkable in itself. It suggests to me that there is a certain attitude within Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd that the proposal is going to go ahead come hell or high water, and that it has made the decisions now before even getting the proper regulatory approval.

I want to know from the Minister that there will not be any question, at any later stage, that somehow or another there is a commercial imperative: “We have spent all this money, we have installed these cameras, we have done all these things so you’ve got to authorise it or we will have wasted that money”—which incidentally, because it is a Government-owned company, is effectively public money. I want to know that those considerations will not be allowed to be part of the CAA’s examination.

I want to turn briefly to my concerns about an incident that happened at Kirkwall airport on 5 April last year. The essential context and background is that at the time an industrial dispute was going on between members of Prospect who were air traffic controllers working for Highlands and Islands airport and the HIAL company itself. The dispute was fairly rancorous and generated a deal of ill feeling on both sides. The 5 April incident that led to a whistleblower making a report to the Civil Aviation Authority happened when a Saab 2000 operated by Loganair requested start-up at 1943 hours. The airport is due to close at 2000 hours and the rule is that the air traffic controllers have to be there for 15 minutes after the departure, so it was clear to the air traffic controller that they would not be able to meet the requirement; they would be outside their hours. As a consequence, they refused permission for the plane to start.

That is completely in accordance with the regulations under which air traffic controllers work. If they choose to work outside the parameters of the regulations, that is absolutely up to them, but they cannot be compelled to do so, and I suggest that they should not be compelled to do so, whether the reason is industrial action, their concern for aviation safety, tiredness or anything else. Inevitably, there was some pushback from the flight crew and the airport management. The air traffic controllers, however, closed the airport on time at 2000 hours. At that point the Saab 2000 was still on the apron for the night, as far as they were concerned, and they went home.

As the matter was described to me, there was nothing out of the ordinary or exceptional in any way for the operation of air traffic control at Kirkwall airport. The Minister probably has something in his briefing about different systems that may operate at other airports. However, as to the work of air traffic controllers at Kirkwall, as things were described to me, what happened was nothing out of the ordinary as far as they were concerned. It was only when they reported for duty the next morning that they saw the Saab 2000 was no longer on the airport apron and had departed. In fact, what had transpired was that discussions between the airline and off-duty HIAL managers had resulted in the view being taken that they did not need air traffic control for the plane to depart. They made the necessary arrangements to depart the airport without air traffic control.

The point of significance is that the airport fire service had departed at the same time as the air traffic controllers; it was only at the point where it had been decided that the plane should depart that the fire service was called back to work. A message was passed to the air crew saying that they would be able to depart, so they boarded the passengers and the Saab 2000 started its engines and taxied from the apron on to the runway, and it was then lined up for departure. That, it has to be

emphasised, was done before the airport fire service had returned, and that is a clear breach of the airport’s licensing conditions.

I have no doubt that these issues have a sliding scale, and this incident may be towards the bottom end of it, but this event is prima facie a breach of the airport’s licensing conditions. Had there been an incident, there was no system or procedure in place to safeguard the 32 passengers and crew of that aircraft, however unlikely such a thing might have been.

Once the fire crew returned, they obviously were made aware. The flight crew realised that by that time it was too dark to depart as, with no air traffic controllers in place, there was no runway lighting. The aircraft therefore taxied back to the apron to shut down, but arrangements were apparently made for a member of the airport fire service to enter the control tower, switch on the runway lights and then return to their fire service duties. It was only when that had been done that the plane was able to depart for Edinburgh at 8.45 pm, some 45 minutes after the air traffic controllers had gone off-duty and left the airport, believing it in fact to have been closed.

As a consequence, there was unsurprisingly a fair amount of local comment and a significant amount of briefing within the local press by Highlands and Islands Airports and Loganair, both on and off the record. A link was fairly clearly drawn between the question of industrial action and the decision to close the airport at the end of the shift. When it then became known that a whistleblower report had been made to the Civil Aviation Authority, that also attracted some press comment.

It was suggested on the record that in fact the air traffic controllers had somehow or other operated outside the agreement on their industrial action. I see no evidence for that, but the difficulty is the whistleblower’s report submitted to the CAA. After some considerable period of time, the CAA concluded its investigation. The issue remains in the public domain in Orkney, but we have no means of finding out the conclusions of that investigation. The investigation is held in that way, and its conclusions are kept confidential. Admittedly that is a result of the CAA operating to international standards, but it only speaks to the airlines, the airport operators and other stakeholders.

It seems to me that the operation of the procedures in this instance is extremely unsatisfactory from the point of view of the whistleblower himself and certainly from that of the air traffic controllers. Their professionalism and conduct have been brought into question in the public domain, and there is now no means of putting the record straight. The most recent public comment put into the local media was, “There is no problem here. There is nothing to see. Just move on.” As I have outlined, however, there is at least one breach of the airport licensing conditions.

I say to the Minister that the relationship between the Civil Aviation Authority and the stakeholders concerned in these whistleblowing cases does not conform to modern rules of transparency and freedom of information. A system that allows somebody to have their professionalism questioned in the way in which that of the air traffic controllers in Orkney has been, and then to have no official explanation as to the outcome of the investigation, is an unsatisfactory one. That could be remedied.

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

I do not know the outcome of the Civil Aviation Authority investigation, because I am not entitled to know and I would not want to know as a consequence, but Highlands and Islands Airports knows, and I think probably the airline operator Loganair knows, too. If the Civil Aviation Authority cannot put the information into the public domain, it might well suit one of those two bodies—the airline or the airport company—to put the information out there so that, for the purposes of the air traffic controllers in Kirkwall and for the benefit of public confidence in air travel in my constituency, that matter can finally be put to rest.

I realise that no other Back Benchers are present, and I have done my best to occupy the attention of the House this afternoon. It is a rare pleasure, Mr Bone, actually to be able to expound in detail on a matter of supreme importance to communities such as mine. I hope that the words in the Chamber will not only be heard by the Minister today, but by those people outside who are concerned.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): I thank the right hon. Gentleman; he has put his points across very well.

3.37 pm

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for raising these aviation safety issues. The level of detail in his remarks shows how important the issue is for his constituency. His speech dealt almost entirely with local issues, but I am sure the House recognises that he collects more air miles than any other Member, given the location of his constituency.

I want to touch on some other matters relating to airport and aviation safety. I hope the Minister will cover them and give some reassurance in his summing up. First, with Brexit, the UK left the EU last Friday. I certainly hope that does not mean the UK will throw the baby out with the bathwater and no longer align its aviation structures and safety measures with those of the EU. Coronavirus, the failure of Thomas Cook and the growth of drone technology demonstrate the importance of aviation safety and regulation to protect services and passengers. There is no reason why the UK Government should not match the EU in seeking aviation safety and security provisions that are “as stringent as possible”. We should therefore seek as close an alignment as possible with the EU on such matters.

It would be totally unacceptable for flight safety to be put at risk because of the Government’s view on Europe after Brexit, or because the Government had some rigid view about non-alignment in matters of airline and aviation safety. The European Commission said that a deal with the UK on a future post-Brexit relationship should secure aviation safety and security provisions that are, as I said, “as stringent as possible.”

According to the 33-page paper outlining the draft negotiating directives, the negotiations could give British-registered airlines so-called fifth freedom rights, which allow airlines to fly to a foreign country and then onward to a third destination,

“taking into account the geographical proximity of the United Kingdom”.

However, the document also notes that

“the United Kingdom, as a non-member of the Union, cannot have the same rights and enjoy the same benefits”

as those countries that are members—that is, the EU27.

Similarly, on road haulage, the same document states that the deal

“should establish open market access for bilateral road freight transport,”

but that UK truckers will not secure the same rights to unrestricted operations when, for example, a trucker undertakes multiple trips within a foreign country. On all such matters, there remains an awful lot to work to do. The current timeframe, which envisages negotiations being concluded and the outcome ratified by the end of 2020, is still a big ask. We on this side of the Chamber are concerned that the Conservative Government have still not ruled out a no-deal Brexit, which would not only put co-operation on aviation safety at risk, but be a huge problem for, and pose a huge threat to, our economy.

On a different theme, the ease of air travel means that people can travel across continents and through time zones in hours, when such journeys might have taken days or weeks a few years ago. The coronavirus, for example, has been categorised as a global health emergency by the World Health Organisation. The death toll in China has increased to 361—higher than during the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak—with the total number of cases now above 17,000. Cases have been reported worldwide, including in Canada, the UK, Australia, Germany and Japan. As we know, last weekend 11 UK nationals were flown back from the outbreak’s epicentre in China.

From a world health perspective, air travel means that viruses can be even more easily transmitted worldwide. I hope that the Minister can say a few reassuring words about the actions that the Government are taking, especially during this most recent outbreak, and about the work that is being done with airlines, airport security, world health organisations and, indeed, our own NHS services locally to assure passengers that every step has been taken to make their travel as safe as possible.

The other point I want to make concerns drones. Since the launch of a mandatory national registration scheme in November last year, drone users in the UK must sit an online test and pay a £9 annual fee or face a fine. The Civil Aviation Authority expects 130,000 people to sign up. The scheme was announced following public concern in 2017, when drone usage was all the rage. Such usage included everything from prison drug smuggling to potential collisions with planes.

Analysts from Barclays estimate that the global commercial drone market will grow tenfold from \$4 billion in 2018 to \$40 billion in four years’ time, so it is vital that this area of UK policy can adapt and change with speed. That is especially relevant given that we are still getting news of reported drone sightings. I think a recent flight was stopped at Gatwick airport last year.

This year, the Department for Transport published its response to the consultation on future drone legislation. The report confirms that the Government intend to legislate to give the police more powers to tackle drone misuse, including the power to issue on-the-spot fines and to better protect airports by extending the area

around airport runways in which drones are banned from being flown. The Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill was announced in the recent Queen's Speech, and it is currently progressing through the House of Lords. Again, I ask the Minister to give us some reassurances that the legal framework is future-proofed, and that any wider policies can be kept up to date as the drone market grows in the coming years, as it undoubtedly will.

On some of the specific issues raised by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, there is no doubt that the recent position of Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd has been of real concern. For those who do not live in the highlands and islands, the airport services that it provides are genuine lifelines, allowing people to access health services or see members of their family, and allowing companies to do business.

I agree with the right hon. Member about the sheer professionalism of the CAA, which I am certain would never allow the installation of infrastructure that was not absolutely safe or fit for purpose. I hope that he will work with other highland MPs, such as my hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), within whose constituency the airport sits. I am sure that my hon. Friend would be more than willing to share his experiences as a regular user, and as a local MP receiving feedback from his constituents.

Mr Carmichael: Of course, we have done so; we have all been briefed together about this matter. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the concerns that I have expressed today are exactly those held by the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I do not anticipate much disruption to services in the constituency of the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), because there is only one airport in his constituency: the one in Inverness, which will have control. Does the hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) agree that, rather than leaving it to the CAA, it would be preferable if there were more rigour from the board of Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd and the Scottish Transport Minister?

Douglas Chapman: Absolutely. The right hon. Member makes a strong point. Obviously, he and his constituents are living with the situation daily, and I absolutely respect his point of view, but I think it is about getting round the table and trying to work out feasible and practical solutions to some of the problems that Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd faces. I am sure that Scottish National party Members who represent highland and island constituencies would be more than happy to be involved in that. As he says, some of those discussions have already taken place.

I look forward to the Minister's comments on some of the issues that I have raised. I hope that he can give us some reassurance that the high standards in airport safety that we all expect will be maintained.

3.48 pm

Karl Turner (Kingston upon Hull East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on introducing this incredibly important debate. His knowledge on this

matter is obviously far better than mine, and no doubt far better than that of any other Member present. I thank him for providing the House with the opportunity to consider this really serious issue. It is clearly incredibly important to the right hon. Gentleman and to his constituents. However, I will not detain the House for very long, not least because, as I have intimated, my knowledge on this issue is not very good.

I start by commending the Civil Aviation Authority on its work. It does a brilliant and incredibly difficult job to ensure people are kept safe and secure. However, from what the right hon. Gentleman has said, I do worry: the CAA has clearly said that it will do a full probe, but I am concerned about the fact that the report is going to be kept private. The very least that ought to happen is that he should be given the opportunity to consider the content of the report. I accept that there is no legal requirement for the CAA to publish that report publicly, but frankly, a member of the Privy Council ought to be given the opportunity to see what is in it. However, I make no criticism of the CAA.

The right hon. Gentleman raises two crucial points, and I think he has the support of the entire House in doing so. I hope that the Minister can provide some assurances and offer him some support.

3.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your continued chairmanship, Mr Bone, in which we all rejoice. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), not only on having secured this debate but on the way in which he presented his case. He clearly has very detailed knowledge that far exceeds mine, although I am the Minister. Perhaps we can swap places—who knows?

In recent years, we have had few opportunities to discuss this subject. Every year, the CAA's reports and annual accounts are laid before the House and are tabled, but that rarely results in a debate. The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) and I rarely get a chance to talk about these issues, so today is a good chance to do so.

We recognise that the CAA has accrued many duties down the years, including functions relating to aviation security, economic regulation, unmanned aircraft, space and consumer rights. It almost seems like a case of you name it, the CAA does it. However, the core of what it does has to remain aviation safety: the safety of passengers, crew, and the wider general public. That is partly because aviation is such an important part of our national economy, contributing at least £22 billion, along with over 230,000 jobs. For the seventh consecutive year, passenger numbers have increased. Safety is vital to maintaining that thriving aviation sector.

Regional airports such as Kirkwall and Sumburgh and the connections, jobs and investment they provide ensure that we spread those benefits across the country. The right hon. Gentleman spoke eloquently about the fundamental role played by air links, both between the islands and the mainland and between the islands themselves—I know that “mainland” means two things on Shetland, not just the mainland as I understand it. I also recognise why aviation safety is especially crucial in that part of the world, given the history of the local area. The right hon. Gentleman will remember the Chinook incident in the mid-1980s.

[*Paul Maynard*]

Back in April 2019, the right hon. Gentleman wrote to the then Secretary of State for Transport to draw his attention to the incident at Kirkwall, copying us into a letter he wrote to Richard Moriarty at the CAA. The person making the report claimed that the incident amounted to a passenger flight departing from Kirkwall airport at a time when that airport was closed. The then Secretary of State noted that the incident potentially raised serious safety concerns that were being investigated by the CAA. At that time, the CAA had conducted an initial assessment and provided an assurance that no immediate or urgent safety actions were required. The CAA then intended to conduct an in-depth investigation to ensure that it understood all the facts treating to this report, and that appropriate action could be taken.

As the right hon. Gentleman has set out, the incident involved a Loganair aircraft with 32 passengers on board departing Kirkwall airport in the evening, without air traffic control in attendance and without the aerodrome being declared open through the notice to airmen process. The flight crew of that late-running flight were told that they would not be permitted to take off as the time was too close to the closure time of the airport, and an extension to the opening hours could not be granted by air traffic control due to the industrial dispute that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. Management at Loganair called their counterparts at Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd to see if anything could be done to allow the flight to depart, and were initially informed by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd that this would not be possible.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister says that the flight crew were told that it would not be possible to extend due to the industrial action, but I do not understand that to have been the case. It may or may not have been—I do not know—but my understanding is that this was the end of the day and no link was made.

Paul Maynard: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman has more detailed knowledge than I do, but that is the sequence of events I have been informed about. His information may well be more accurate than mine, so I will go back and consider his point carefully.

Once both Loganair and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd had looked into the matter further, they agreed conditions by which the flight could depart under visual flight rules, meaning that there would be no need for an air traffic control service to be deployed. Under that agreement, the flight could depart if the airport fire service was in attendance and if the pilot of the aircraft agreed. The fire services were then recalled to the airport, arriving after the flight had commenced to taxi but before its departure, as the right hon. Gentleman set out. The aircraft departed under visual flight rules and contacted the Scottish area control centre after departure for an air traffic control service. The CAA was alerted immediately by Loganair, and received two separate whistleblower reports in the course of the following week.

The Civil Aviation Authority conducted a review in accordance with its own procedures, interviewing key individuals at both Loganair and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. After concluding its investigation, the Civil Aviation Authority highlighted its findings with the organisations involved during the summer. The

CAA has since held several meetings with the airport to discuss progress. The airport has also conducted its own investigation, and as a result commissioned a study into the findings raised by its own report. The right hon. Gentleman might wish to request that report from the airport company.

I understand and sympathise with the right hon. Gentleman's wish for the CAA's report into the Kirkwall incident to be placed in the public domain. The sixth principle of the Government's regulators' code—I am getting a bit technical here, for which I apologise—states:

“Regulators should ensure that their approach to their regulatory activities is transparent”.

However, transparency in that sense means regulators setting clear standards for the services that they deliver, not necessarily publishing investigations themselves.

One issue that the Civil Aviation Authority needs to consider when deciding whether to publish the report has to do with trust and openness between the regulator and those it regulates. Aviation bodies need to be confident that, in certain cases and for certain investigations, the information they provide will not be made public. That helps the CAA to fulfil its role of regulating the UK aviation industry and ensuring organisations comply with required safety standards. It might be likened to no-fault reporting in the NHS, where people can admit that something has gone wrong and seek to learn some lessons from it without feeling themselves to be placed in personal professional jeopardy. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that the air accidents investigation branch routinely publishes reports. A further consideration in this instance is that the relevant information came through two whistleblower disclosures. It is particularly important that staff feel able to make such sensitive disclosures without suffering adverse consequences.

Mr Carmichael: We come to the nub of the matter. I make no complaint about the CAA and the way it has conducted this process, inasmuch as it has done so entirely in accordance with its own rules, and the basis for those rules is sensible and rational. It has conformed to international regulation and good practice. However, what has been done remains unsatisfactory. Information was put into the public domain right at the start, which caused some distress to the air traffic controllers in Kirkwall, and that remains uncorrected. That has two consequences. First, there is lingering concern about safety, the culture within HIAL, and the operation of the relationship between it and the air traffic controllers. Secondly, in the circumstances, there is a public interest point about the likelihood of future whistleblowers coming forward.

Paul Maynard: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's point. I was about to say that I understand the jeopardy that the individual concerned feels placed under. There is an apparent asymmetry of information available in the local community, with, on the one hand, a public discussion about what occurred, and on the other hand, the private information as to what was found and what was done with that information. I am more than happy to make a commitment to talk to the CAA to see what more can be done to assist the individual concerned, and perhaps try to provide some degree of reassurance or to resolve the matter in that way. I hear his point and I hope that we can find a solution.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about the wider issue of the remote control towers being centralised in Inverness. I understand his points. When I started out in the House, I was a member of the Transport Committee. My first big victory on that Committee led it to challenge the Government about the withdrawal of the emergency towing vessels in Shetland and the closure of some of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency stations. The Transport Committee flew up to Stornoway from Newquay on a regional flight; we were the only people on board. I saw for myself how rapidly conditions change in that part of the world and the significance—the vital importance—of having reliable communications facilities for those remote locations. I understand entirely where he is coming from.

Mr Carmichael: That is a good parallel, because the proposal was for all the coastguard services to be provided from two stations, one in Hampshire and the other in Aberdeen. It is the same point that the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) made to me. I asked the coastguard, “Why Aberdeen and Hampshire?” and they said, “Well, that’s one at the top of the country and one at the bottom”—ignoring the fact that Shetland is hundreds of miles further north than Aberdeen. I said, “Why not put the north one in Shetland, which is properly the top of the country?” They said, “Oh no, we couldn’t do that. The connectivity’s not good enough.”

Paul Maynard: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to go further than my brief.

I recognise the worry that the new system might include a single centre with a consequent single point of failure. I also hear the right hon. Gentleman’s concerns about retaining skilled jobs in the peripheral areas and the potential wider impact on the local community and economy. The air traffic management system programme across the highlands seeks to bring together air traffic management for a number of airports in one location, as he set out. Innovative approaches to air traffic control have already been implemented successfully elsewhere, such as in Scandinavia in 2015 and at Cranfield in 2018. London City airport plans to launch its digital remote air traffic control tower later this year, as the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. There are precedents for the centralisation of air traffic control. I do not share the universal scepticism about it as a model of provision, and I have not encountered that scepticism when visiting air traffic control towers around the country, many of which are at high altitude, so full 360° visibility of the surrounding area is often not possible due to cloud.

Air traffic control arrangements are a commercial matter for Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd. I read today the debate that occurred in the Scottish Parliament, which was led by the right hon. Gentleman’s MSP colleagues, Beatrice Wishart and Liam McArthur. It was a cross-party debate, with concerns raised by Members from all the political parties represented in the Scottish Parliament. I noted Michael Matheson’s response too.

I am now aware that Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd will undertake an island impact assessment in line with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. I assure the Chamber that, before any new air traffic management system could take effect, the CAA would need to approve it. In giving its approval, the CAA would be bound by

its overarching duty for the maintenance of air safety, so Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd will need to make sure that its proposals satisfy the local conditions. The CAA will not accept the safety case if all that can be said is, “Well, it worked at London City.”

The right hon. Gentleman’s points about the road cutting across the runway are germane to what HIAL has to prove to the CAA. I assure him that it will be treated as a single isolated application, not just one of many, so it will recognise those local conditions definitively. I note his observations about board membership; I am sure that Mr Matheson did as well. I note his comments about why Inverness was selected; I gather that was down to a staff survey. I also believe in the importance of an ongoing conversation with the CAA about many of these issues, not least the resilience of the digital connection, which he referred to.

More widely, I recognise that Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd is a vital part of the community across the north of Scotland. I have embarked on a review of regional airports and regional connectivity, and I look forward to visiting Scotland. I have not got there yet, but it may well be that Kirkwall and Sumburgh are on my schedule. I did three visits in Northern Ireland on Monday, so I am sure I can fit more in across the Highlands as a whole. I hope that if I am in Shetland or Orkney and the right hon. Gentleman is too, he will join me on my visit and we can see the roads running across the runway for ourselves.

The hon. Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) made a number of interesting additional points that I will try to cover as best I can. It was rather difficult to prepare for the debate, because it was so widely set. I wondered who would attend and what issues they would raise. Many of the hon. Members I predicted would attend are not here and some of the issues that I did not predict have arisen. Such is the joy of having officials to tell me what to say occasionally.

I understand the hon. Gentleman’s concerns in the light of our departure from the European Union. Historically, aviation safety across the world has been led by this country and by the CAA. We remain a leading player in the International Civil Aviation Organisation. We have always been a leading player in the European Union Aviation Safety Agency. Our expertise is valued around the world. One of the CAA’s major roles is to provide services across the world to improve aviation safety. I do not think for a moment that that expertise, or the appetite for it, will be diminished. We take that very seriously.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the various freedoms that enable as broad a range of destinations as possible to be served. I am sure he agrees that it is in no one’s interests to diminish that ability. Our objective in any future relationship is to agree as ambitious and comprehensive an air transport agreement as possible with the EU. I am confident that we can do so in the timescales described.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the interesting issue of drones and the extent to which technology is outpacing our ability to legislate. That is often a challenge in government and in Parliament. In many Bill Committees that I have sat on, we have tried to see into the future, but the important thing is to have a flexible approach to legislation, so that as things develop over time, the regulations can also develop. It is as much about the framework that we set up as about prescribing exhaustively

[Paul Maynard]

every possible combination of circumstances that may or may not occur in future. All too often, our predictions about the future prove entirely wrong. I remember watching “Tomorrow’s World” as a teenager; I thought I would have my own jet pack by now, but I still take the District and Circle lines.

Our concept of the future can be misleading, but we can get the framework right. As the hon. Gentleman correctly points out, the Air Traffic Management and Unmanned Aircraft Bill is in the House of Lords and will come down here. If he were the SNP Member on that Bill Committee, I would be delighted. He could help with my futurology by making sure that the legislation is fit for purpose.

I thank the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull East (Karl Turner) for his comments and for allowing me to focus on the concerns of the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland. I thank you, too, Mr Bone.

4.9 pm

Mr Carmichael: Normally we have two or three minutes to sum up. I assure the House that I will not take the full 21 minutes available to me.

I thank the Minister for his response. It indicated that he had listened, understood and engaged, and my constituents will be enormously grateful. We will take comfort from what he said and we will continue to

pursue this issue, because it is not going away. I note what he said about the determination of the Civil Aviation Authority to ensure that this application is treated and examined in the context of its facts and circumstances, and that the approach will not just be taken that it can work because it works at London City. That message will be well received in the highlands and islands.

I note what the Minister said about the circumstances surrounding the investigation into the incident on 5 April 2019. I strongly remain of the view that sunlight is often the best disinfectant. At some point, some of the information will have to find its way into the public domain.

It has been a few years since we had a UK Transport Minister visit Orkney and Shetland. To my knowledge, the last one was Patrick McLoughlin when he was the Secretary of State. That, of course, was in the halcyon days of the coalition Government. The Minister is very welcome to return. I recommend that he comes in the foggy season—the summer, as we call it—rather than the windy season in which we currently find ourselves.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Civil Aviation Authority and aviation safety.

4.11 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 6 February 2020

TREASURY

Problem Debt: Breathing Space

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government are establishing breathing space to help those individuals in problem debt. Today, the Government are updating the House in order to reaffirm our commitment to implementing this in 2021, as planned, and to provide figures from the impact assessment which is also published today.

Breathing space will provide a period of up to 60 days, where people in problem debt would be protected from enforcement action by their creditors and the accrual of further interest and fees on their debts.

This protection will help those in problem debt move towards a sustainable debt solution. The protections from enforcement action, fees and charges will encourage more people to seek out debt advice and to seek it earlier. It will provide them with the time and space to work with their debt adviser in an environment free from creditor pressure, in the knowledge their debt would not escalate due to further interest or charges. This will help give people the time and space they need to choose the right debt solution for them.

To ensure that breathing space works for everyone, people receiving treatment for mental health crisis will be able to enter breathing space without seeking advice from a debt adviser. They will be able to remain in breathing space for the period of their crisis treatment and a further 30 days.

In its impact assessment, the Government forecast;

700,000 people to be helped by breathing space in the first year, rising in time to over 1 million a year.

25,000 - 50,000 a year are expected to receive a breathing space via a specific route designed to support those in mental health crisis treatment.

The Government impact assessment can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/breathing-space-impact-assessment>

[HCWS100]

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence Annual Estimate 2020-21

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace): The Ministry of Defence Votes A Estimate 2020-21, will be laid before the House on 6 February 2020 as HC 33. This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2020-21.

[HCWS99]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The UK did not attend the Agriculture and Fisheries Council in Brussels on 27 January 2020.

The UK Government decided that until 31 January UK Ministers and officials only attend EU meetings where the UK has a significant national interest in the outcome of the discussions.

[HCWS98]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Cemeteries Endowment Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mrs Heather Wheeler): I announce today the transfer of the cemeteries endowment fund (“the fund”) from the High Commission in New Delhi to the British Association for Cemeteries in south Asia (“BACSA”), a UK based charity.

The fund was originally established in India in the late 19th century for the purpose of maintaining European graves and cemeteries. Any such cemeteries maintained by the Government of India could be endowed by friends or relatives of deceased persons and such endowments were credited to the fund.

After India gained independence in 1947, arrangements were made for the UK Government, through the High Commission, to take responsibility for the maintenance of the European graves and cemeteries. A parliamentary undertaking, in the form of answers to parliamentary questions in both Houses, was given on 15 March 1949, that the UK Government would be responsible for European cemeteries in India—and had been since April 1948. The Government of India authorised transfer of the fund to the High Commission in June 1949 and the Secretary of State for the Commonwealth Office inherited responsibility for the fund.

Over recent years, it has become apparent that administration of the fund requires dedicated resources. For this reason, the High Commission requested that the fund be transferred to BACSA, a UK-registered charity (charity no. 273422) which would be able to use the fund more effectively in accordance with the fund’s original purpose. BACSA has as its aim to promote the preservation, conservation and recording of former European cemeteries and isolated monuments in south Asia and elsewhere in Asia. It also seeks to promote education in the history of all places in south Asia and elsewhere in Asia associated with European residence, and in particular the territories formerly administered by the East India Company and the British Government of India. Its objectives therefore coincide with those of the fund.

Following appropriate consultation across Whitehall and with BACSA, the fund was transferred to BACSA on 15 March 2019 to the sum of £19,047.64.

[HCWS97]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Finance

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Today I laid before the House the “Local Government Finance Report (England) 2020-21”, the “Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Principles) (England) Report 2020-21” and the “Referendums Relating to Council Tax Increases (Alternative Notional Amounts) (England) Report 2020-21” which represent the final local government finance settlement for 2020-21.

This year’s settlement delivers an increase in core spending power from £46.2 billion in 2019-20 to £49.2 billion in 2020-21. In real terms this is a 4.4% increase and the largest year on year real-terms increase in a decade.

The local government finance settlement relies on collaboration. My Ministers and I have engaged extensively with the sector, holding meetings with representative groups, with councils, and with MPs. During this process, we received over 200 representations from organisations or individuals, and these have been carefully considered before finalising the settlement. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all colleagues in the House, and council leaders and officers, who have contributed to the consultation process.

This year’s settlement is a strong and well-balanced package that delivers significant extra resources to the priority areas of adult and children’s social care, whilst protecting other vital service areas.

Extra social care resources

This Government are serious about protecting the millions of people who rely upon adult and children’s social care in their daily lives. To do this, this settlement will allow local authorities to access an additional £1.5 billion for social care. This comprises £1 billion of additional grant—for both adult and children’s social care—and a proposed 2% council tax precept for adult social care, which will enable councils to access a further £500 million. Some £150 million of the additional grant will be used to equalise the distributional impact of the adult social care council tax precept.

These additional resources sit on top of the existing social care package, which will continue at 2019-20 levels, and mean that local authorities will have access to almost £6 billion of dedicated funding across adult and children’s social care in 2020-21.

Core settlement resources

The local government finance settlement for 2020-21 will also protect other key services by providing a uniform percentage uplift in core settlement resources, in line with the change in the small business rates multiplier. Vital services are also protected by continuing other key grants from 2019-20.

Council tax

Local authorities will continue to be able to increase council tax in 2020-21 by a core principle of up to 2%, without holding a local referendum, with a bespoke council tax referendum principle of 2% or £5, whichever is higher, for shire district councils, and a £10 Band D council tax referendum principle for all police authorities.

Authorities with adult social care responsibilities will be able to increase their council tax by a further 2% on top of the core principle, without holding a local referendum, to be spent exclusively on adult social care.

The proposed referendum principles strike a balance between giving local authorities the flexibility to address service pressures, and not overburdening council tax payers with excessive increases which do not have local support.

The 2020-21 final local government finance settlement will mean that the expected average council tax increase for 2020-21 will be the lowest since 2016.

New homes bonus

The Government will be making a new round of allocations of the new homes bonus for 2020-21, amounting to £907 million.

As part of this, I am committing an additional £7 million to maintain the growth baseline for payments at 0.4%. We will make no legacy payments on these new allocations, but the Government will make legacy payments on allocations made in earlier years which are due to be paid in 2020-21.

In order to ensure that the new homes bonus is focused on incentivising homes where they are needed most, I am announcing that the Government will consult on the future of the housing incentive in the spring. This will include moving to a new, more targeted approach that rewards local authorities where they are ambitious in delivering the homes we need.

Rural services delivery grant

We will continue to recognise the extra costs of delivering services in rural areas and propose to maintain last year’s rural services delivery grant of £81 million, which is the joint-highest paid to date. It will be distributed using the same methodology as in 2019-20, which allocated funding to the top quartile of local authorities on the “super-sparsity” indicator.

Conclusion

This settlement acts as the foundation for a robust and resilient future for local government finance, delivering on calls for certainty and stability from local government. For those who deliver key front-line services, it provides significant extra resources where they are needed most.

I look forward to debating this topic with all MPs next week.

[HCWS102]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Free Trade Agreements

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): On Monday the Prime Minister set out our approach to negotiations with the European Union. This statement sets out the Government’s proposed approach to negotiations with other priority partners. Further details will be made available to Parliament as the negotiating process develops.

Having left the European Union the UK now faces an opportunity to re-emerge after decades of hibernation as a campaigner for global free trade. According to the

IMF, 90% of global GDP growth is forecast to come from outside the EU over the next 5 years. The UK needs to be ready to capitalise upon this. As set out in our manifesto, this Government have ambitious goals for British trade. We aim to secure free trade agreements with countries covering 80% of UK trade within the next 3 years. We will drive a hard bargain and, as with all negotiations, we will be prepared to walk away if that is in the national interest. Independence will allow the UK to become a truly global Britain, championing free trade and showing the UK is a force for good.

A key priority is to deepen trade and investment relationships with like-minded partners, starting with the USA, Japan, Australia and New Zealand. These bilateral negotiations will also be a potential stepping-stone to joining the comprehensive and progressive agreement for transpacific partnership. Regarding the UK-USA FTA the Government will be setting out their negotiating objectives in due course, alongside a response to the public consultation as well as an initial economic assessment. This will be the first in a series of statements setting out our plans for FTAs with global partners.

By striking free trade agreements with partners across the globe, the UK has the opportunity to increase prosperity in all parts of our country. In the negotiations the Government will strike a tough bargain and seek an agreement in the national interest that removes tariffs and cuts red tape to support British businesses and benefit British consumers, as well as setting out cutting edge rules that will help underpin our world-class digital economy. Any agreement must respect the autonomy and sovereignty of both parties. In its negotiations, the Government will be acting on behalf of the whole UK family and our overall principle is to ensure all parts of the UK benefit from any deal. In addition, nothing in any agreement will undermine the Government's commitment to tackling climate change.

The Government have been clear that when we are negotiating trade deals, the NHS will not be on the table. The price the NHS pays for drugs will not be on the table. The services the NHS provides will not be on the table. We will not agree measures which undermine the Government's ability to deliver on our manifesto commitments to the NHS.

As we committed to in our manifesto, in all of our trade negotiations we will not compromise on our high environmental protection, animal welfare and food standards.

Over the last 3 years, the UK has developed a world-class trade negotiation function, bringing the best talent from international organisations, leading law firms, business, civil society and Government. The Government have the capacity to conduct all of its priority negotiations.

Further information on some of the priority areas of the UK-US FTA, is set out below.

Goods market access

The FTA will secure comprehensive, far-reaching and mutually beneficial tariff reductions—taking into account sensitive UK products—which will increase access to the US market for UK businesses, and lower prices and increase choice for UK consumers. This market access will be further supported through the FTA by efficient, predictable, and transparent customs procedures, with a reduction in technical barriers to trade. The FTA will aim to remove measures that currently

restrict UK trade and to prevent their imposition in future, while upholding the safety and quality of products on the UK market

Trade remedies

An FTA with the US will enable the UK to protect its interests when threatened by unexpected surges in imports of goods or unfair trading practices, while making the appropriate commitments to transparency, due process and proportionate use of trade remedies. It will also remove trade distorting tariffs.

Sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS)

The UK will maintain its own autonomous sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) regime to protect public, animal and plant life and health and the environment, reflecting its existing high standards. We will not compromise on our high animal welfare and food standards.

Sustainability

The Government will maintain and seek to advance the UK's world-leading environmental, labour and anti-corruption standards, including to support domestic climate ambition and UK low carbon industries, technology and innovation.

Trade in services

The FTA with the US will provide a boost for our world-leading services sectors including in key UK export sectors such as financial services, telecommunications, professional and business services, and transport services. The Government will make it easier for professionals from across the UK to do business in the US, including by easing business travel, securing ambitious commitments to ensure fair competition and consolidating and improving market access for UK services exporters.

Mutual recognition of professional qualifications

An FTA with the US will encourage the mutual recognition of UK and US professional qualifications, by strengthening regulatory co-operation, so that qualification requirements do not become an unnecessary barrier to trade.

Investment

The US and UK are each other's biggest investors, creating high-skilled jobs and growing our economies. At the end of 2018, British companies had investments worth £295.1 billion in the US.

The Government will address market access barriers and ensure UK investors operating in the US have the same level of protection and standards of treatment they receive in the UK.

SMEs

Over 31,600 small British businesses are already exporting goods to the US. The Government will seek to include a specific SME chapter in the US FTA to support and further stimulate this trade.

Digital trade

The Government will set global best practice by future-proofing the agreement to take account of changing technology and developing areas of the economy. For example, the Government will secure cutting-edge provisions which maximise opportunities for digital trade across all sectors of the economy.

Intellectual property

Recognising our two world-leading Intellectual Property regimes, the US FTA will secure provisions that support UK creative and innovative industries, whilst maintaining consumer access via an effective and balanced global framework.

Government procurement

To maximise access for UK companies to Government procurement opportunities at US federal and state level the UK will seek additional market access outcomes that go beyond the level set in the World Trade Organization agreement on Government procurement.

[HCWS96]

Independent Tariff Policy: Consultation

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): This morning the Department for International Trade launched a public consultation to inform the development of the UK's new independent tariff policy.

Now that Britain has left the EU, it will use its new powers to make its mark internationally as a champion of free trade and a bulwark against the forces of protectionism that exist in the world. The Government's message is that free trade is good for all nations, is right for the UK and will deliver benefits for British businesses, households and consumers.

As part of our new approach, the Government are developing a new UK most favoured nation (MFN) tariff schedule which will enter into force on 1 January 2021. This will be a bespoke regime known as the UK global tariff (UKGT). It will be designed specifically for the UK economy and will replace the EU's common external tariff, which is currently applied on imports into the UK. It will ensure UK businesses compete on fair terms with the rest of the world while benefiting households through greater choice and lower prices.

This is the first time in almost 50 years that the UK will be able to set its tariff rates on imported goods. This consultation represents an opportunity for every business, every person and every civil society group, in every part of the UK, to have their say. We are calling on businesses, consumers and other groups to help us shape this new instrument of trade policy for the UK.

To inform the development of this bespoke regime, the Government are seeking views on a series of potential amendments as the UK moves away from the EU's common external tariff. These are:

- simplifying and tailoring the tariff;
- removing tariffs on key inputs to production;
- removing tariffs where the UK has zero or limited domestic production.

The Government will also seek views through a series of events across UK regions and devolved Administrations to engage with businesses, business representatives, consumers, civil society groups, associations and other interested individuals and organisations.

The Government previously developed the temporary tariff regime (TTR) in 2019. The temporary tariff regime was developed for a possible scenario in which the UK left the EU without a deal. Now that the withdrawal agreement has been approved by both the EU and the UK, this scenario is no longer relevant.

The consultation will close on 5 March 2020 and once the Government have carefully considered available evidence, including the consultation responses, an announcement on the UK's new global tariff schedule will follow in due course.

[HCWS95]

Export Licences: Saudi Arabia

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): I gave a statement to Parliament on 26 September 2019 on matters related to the breaches of the undertaking given to the Court of Appeal on 20 June 2019 by the then Secretary of State that we would not grant new licences for export to Saudi Arabia of arms and military equipment for possible use in the conflict in Yemen, and the broader commitment to Parliament, also on 20 June 2019, that we would not grant new licences for exports to Saudi Arabia or its coalition partners which might be used in the conflict in Yemen.

The UK Government are deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crisis in Yemen. The Government fully support the peace process led by the UN special envoy, Martin Griffiths, and urges the parties to engage constructively with this process. A political settlement is the only way to bring long-term stability to Yemen and to address the worsening humanitarian crisis.

In relation to the breaches, I announced that the permanent secretary had commissioned, on my behalf, a full independent investigation to establish the precise circumstances in which these licences were granted, establish whether any other licences have been granted in breach of the undertaking to the Court or contrary to the parliamentary statement, and confirm that procedures are in place so that no further breaches of the undertaking can occur.

This investigation, led by an independent senior official (the director general of policy group in the Department for Work and Pensions), has now concluded. The report identifies the circumstances in which these licences were granted and assesses the interim procedures which were put in place to ensure no further breaches can occur. It is noted that no further breaches of the undertaking or the parliamentary statement have been identified since I updated the House.

The report notes the steps that have been taken to ensure that there have been no further breaches. In particular, the report states that the

“new processes established address the shortcomings that led to the breaches...The process has a greater iterative and real-time involvement, with the weekly meeting process providing more opportunities for information to be updated and changes in circumstances to be reflected in decision-making. There is greater senior involvement and oversight which should strengthen assurance.”

The interim process has led to improved, timely information sharing across Government and there is now a clear process in place to ensure that any changes in circumstances in the conflict in Yemen are addressed. Further steps have already been taken forward, including increased governance and risk management within the export control joint unit (ECJU), to meet the issues identified in the report.

I will be considering whether any further action is necessary to ensure the continuance of robust and rigorous operations and assurance processes more widely within ECJU.

I will be placing copies of the report in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS101]

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