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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 25 June 2014

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before I call Alec Shelbrooke, I wish to inform the House how I will be applying its sub judice rules to any exchanges on Mr Coulson's case. I ask the House for some forbearance, as it is important to Members and those outside the House that the position is clear. The House will know that Mr Coulson has now been convicted on a charge of conspiracy to intercept communications. The court has not yet sentenced Mr Coulson for that offence. There has as yet been no verdict on two charges against him of conspiracy to commit misconduct in public office. The rules of the House's sub judice resolution, which the House rightly expects me to enforce, apply to criminal cases which are "active". They cease to be active when, and I quote, "they are concluded by verdict and sentence", so they apply in this case.

At the same time, the House's resolution gives the Chair discretion in applying the rules. I have taken appropriate advice, as the House would expect—and, indeed, been in receipt of unsolicited advice, for which I am of course grateful. In the light of all the circumstances, I have decided, one, to allow reference to Mr Coulson's conviction; two, not to allow reference to his sentencing by the court, such as speculation on the nature of that sentence; and three, not to allow reference to those charges on which the verdict is awaited. I rely on hon. Members to exercise restraint, but if that proves unavailing, I will of course intervene. I hope that is helpful to the House.

Oral Answers to Questions

CABINET OFFICE

The Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Trade Union Facility Time

1. **Alec Shelbrooke** (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): What recent progress he has made on reform of trades union facility time in Government Departments. [904453]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Mr Francis Maude): Mr Speaker, with permission I will take questions 1 and 10 together.

At the time of the last general election, there was no monitoring of taxpayer-funded trade union facility time in the civil service. We now have controls in place that saved £19 million last year, and we have already reduced

the number of taxpayer-funded full-time union officials from 200 in May 2010 down to around a dozen this month.

Mr Speaker: I allowed the right hon. Gentleman to continue his answer, but my office advises me that it has not been notified of the grouping to which he refers. It might have been the intention, but my office indicates that it has not been notified of it, which obviously it should have been.

Alec Shelbrooke: In the past, Departments gave paid time off for union conferences. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that this Government will not be spending taxpayers' money packing civil servants off to the seaside?

Mr Maude: Under the rules that operated under the last Government, it was absolutely the case that thousands of union officials, paid for by the taxpayer as civil servants, were given paid time off—sometimes, extraordinarily, with paid travel and expenses—to attend union conferences at the seaside. We have stopped this. They can take unpaid time off to attend conferences, and any decision to award paid time off is entirely at the discretion of the Minister in charge of that civil servant's Department.

Mr Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman ensure that the guidelines will allow those people responsible to the Home Office for the efficient administration of passport services to be involved in the consultation to find a solution to the crisis, given that they predicted it in the first place?

Mr Maude: It remains and has always been the case that union officials are entitled to paid time off to pursue their union duties, as opposed to activities. If those discussions are in pursuit of their duties because they relate to particular employment issues, that will of course continue to be the case.

10. [904463] **David Morris** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What has my right hon. Friend put in place to monitor and indeed limit the facilities provided to trade unions at taxpayers' expense within the civil service?

Mr Maude: Again, there were no arrangements at all to monitor what facilities were being made available to union officials at taxpayers' expense. We have now put in place arrangements to try to find out exactly what is going on, but I regret to say that the data are not yet complete. However, we will continue to pursue this.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): The Paymaster General will of course be aware that many private sector employers, such as Rolls-Royce, Jaguar Land Rover and Airbus, all take advantage of facility time, because they know it helps with workplace relations and with their obligations to consult. The private sector can recognise the benefits of facility time, so rather than knocking facility time in the public sector, why can he not recognise its benefits for that sector?

Mr Maude: I do recognise the benefits, which is why—even if we wanted to, which we do not—we are not proposing to get rid of it altogether. All we are saying is that it should be in accordance with the law and the obligations that the statute places on us as

employers. I am the first to recognise that there are often advantages in being able to resolve disputes quickly and locally before they escalate, which is why some facility time will continue to be available.

Departmental Efficiency

2. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the Government's efficiency agenda. [904454]

5. **Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): What progress he has made on his programme of savings through efficiency and reform of central Government. [904457]

7. **Charlie Elphicke** (Dover) (Con): What estimate he has made of the savings arising from measures to increase departmental efficiency; and if he will make a statement. [904460]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Mr Francis Maude): On 10 June, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and I announced savings through efficiency reform of central Government of £14.3 billion for 2013-14, against a 2009-10 baseline. Those savings are both recurring and non-recurring items, and include £5.4 billion from procurement and commercial savings, £3.3 billion in project savings and £4.7 billion from work force reform and pension savings.

Nick Smith: The Government have said that they want to move jobs out of Whitehall and into areas such as south Wales, but in August 1,000 jobs could be offshored, perhaps to India, from the Ministry of Justice shared services centre in Newport. Will the Minister look at this again?

Mr Maude: Earlier this week, the MOJ announced its plans to take forward the agreed plans on shared services, which were first put forward under the Labour Government in 2004 but did not begin to be implemented until 2012. There are major efficiency savings to be made. I am sure that SSCL—Shared Services Connected Ltd—the shared service company the MOJ proposes to use, will look carefully at all the facilities and will want to concentrate activity at the most effective and efficient ones, and I see absolutely no reason why Newport's should not be among those.

Henry Smith: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his answer and for the significant amounts of taxpayer money that the Cabinet Office is saving. What role can greater digitisation play in obtaining further efficiencies?

Mr Maude: Moving public services online has a major part to play, both in making services more convenient and designed around the needs of the user rather than the convenience of the Government, and in making major savings. Typically, the cost of an online transaction is about one fiftieth of the cost of the transaction being done face to face, but for those people who are not online there will always be an assisted digital option.

Charlie Elphicke: Does the size of the savings being made not highlight the truly galactic waste of money by the previous Labour Government? Will my right hon. Friend set out his vision for further savings in the future?

Mr Maude: No good organisation gives up on pursuing efficiency savings year after year. The Office for National Statistics has shown that in the public sector productivity remained static during the Labour years while it rose by nearly 30% in the private services sector. If productivity had risen by the same amount in the public sector, the budget deficit that the coalition Government inherited could have been many, many tens of billions of pounds lower.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I want the Minister to understand just how fearful and uncertain staff at the MOJ shared services centre in Newport feel after this week's announcement of privatisation. How can he justify the hypocrisy of the Prime Minister talking about the UK becoming an onshoring nation when under this contract jobs could be offshored? What guarantees are the Government offering that these jobs could stay in Newport?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Minister answers, the hon. Lady must withdraw the use of the word "hypocrisy", as it relates to an individual Minister.

Jessica Morden: I withdraw it.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady.

Mr Maude: The hon. Lady is making assumptions about what will happen to those jobs which I have no reason to believe are justified. If the quality of the work and the efficiency at Newport is as good as she believes, I am sure that the management of SSCL will want to look carefully at retaining jobs there.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Which part of which Department has provided the most fertile ground for efficiency savings?

Mr Maude: That is a very good question, but if I were to go through that in elaborate detail, you would cut me short, Mr Speaker. There are opportunities for efficiency savings right across Government and the public sector. We have made significant progress, but, as my hon. Friend would expect, there is considerably more that can and should be done.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Serco had to repay £68 million and G4S £104 million because they overcharged the Ministry of Justice. Why are they still receiving contracts when they have obviously been very good at efficiently taking money off the taxpayer?

Mr Maude: The practices to which the right hon. Gentleman refers date from contracts let by the previous Government, and those malpractices had been going on for many years. It is because the quality of contract management in Government is at last beginning to improve that those malpractices came to light at all. Therefore, the taxpayer was able to be recompensed for the money that had been wrongly pumped out of the door during that time. We are making progress on this, but again there is more to be done.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister boasts that his efficiency agenda is cutting hundreds of millions of pounds from Government IT

spend, but figures that we have seen show that IT spend is flat overall, and has in his Department and others, including the universal credit maxed out Department for Work and Pensions, risen massively between 30% and 70%. Will the Minister confirm that IT spend is not falling, and accept that it is his lack of leadership in allowing continuing turf wars between the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Cabinet Office and DWP that is preventing the IT transformation that we need?

Mr Maude: The hon. Lady is completely right that we need an ICT transformation. What we inherited—the legacy—was a series of extremely expensive, opaque IT contracts. The Government did not even know what they were getting for what they were spending. We need to reform that. We must wait for some of these contracts, which were excessively long, to come to an end. That process is beginning. The British Government were spending more on IT per capita than any other Government in the world, yet our rankings, until recently, were falling. There is much to be done, but she is in no position from where she sits to be lecturing this Government, who are grappling with the issue.

Government Statistics

3. **Kelvin Hopkins** (Luton North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure the accuracy of Government statistics. [904455]

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Nick Hurd): The UK Statistics Authority was established to promote and safeguard official statistics for the public good. As the hon. Gentleman knows, it is an independent body directly accountable to Parliament, and it is responsible for assessing and monitoring the accuracy of Government statistics against the code of practice for official statistics.

Kelvin Hopkins: Estimates by the TUC and others of uncollected taxes—the so-called tax gap—are some three times higher than those figures given by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the Government. Are the Government simply massaging those figures downwards to disguise how appalling they really are?

Mr Hurd: I would like to think that this Government, unlike the previous one, are not in the business of massaging statistics. The central point is that we now have, as a result of the lack of credibility of statistics under the previous Government, the official UK Statistics Authority, which does an excellent job in safeguarding the integrity of public statistics.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): The Nomis website publishes estimates of unemployment by constituency using the annual population survey, which itself uses a sample of under 300 people of working age per constituency. Does the Minister agree that it is incumbent on the publishers of local statistics based on national surveys to assist the users of those statistics in understanding the confidence intervals, which can swamp tiny sample sizes?

Mr Hurd: Absolutely, yes.

Union Subscriptions

4. **Mr Nicholas Brown** (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): Which Departments have responded to his cross-departmental review of check-off deductions of union subscriptions. [904456]

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Mr Francis Maude): We have asked Departments to review their own arrangements. The civil service management code requires Departments to recover the cost of the provision of this service, but most do not do so. These reviews, therefore, are very timely.

Mr Brown: A number of Secretaries of State have already rejected the idea. The only one to take it forward ended up in court. They lost and had costs found against the Government. There is no public interest or cost saving in what the right hon. Gentleman is doing, so why does he persist in attacking the Government's own employees for trying to act in combination by joining a trade union?

Mr Maude: This is in no sense an attack on membership of trade unions. [HON. MEMBERS: "Yes, it is."] We can see who speaks for the trade unions and for their paymasters. The right hon. Gentleman ought to know better, from his experience. Why is it that many trade unions do not rely on check-off at all but use the modern means of connection with their members of direct debit, which is available to all?

Youth Services

6. **Pat Glass** (North West Durham) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain the level of youth services provision. [904458]

9. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to maintain the level of youth services provision. [904462]

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Nick Hurd): We are supporting the voluntary sector in offering new opportunities for young people through programmes such as the National Citizen Service. In addition, we will be offering practical support to local authorities who want to deliver high-quality new services in an innovative way, for example by access to our £10 million support programme for mutuals.

Pat Glass: Youth services have largely disappeared under this Government and have been replaced by the National Citizen Service, which, despite the accolades that it receives in the House from Ministers, is turning into little more than an extra six weeks' holiday for students and young people who really do not need it. What are the Government doing about youth services for the most vulnerable and those at greatest risk?

Mr Hurd: I am afraid that the hon. Lady is talking rubbish about the National Citizen Service. I refer her to the independent research which shows exactly the benefits that it gives to young people, which is why more and more of them are signing up to take part in it. She is right that it has been too easy to cut youth services at local level. There are no easy choices, but we are actively working with local authorities who want to commission in innovative ways to help them to deliver better with less.

Mike Kane: The BBC has revealed that in real terms the amount spent on youth services has fallen by 36% in the past two years. Does the Minister agree with Fiona Blacke, the chief executive of the National Youth Agency, that in the areas with the greatest cuts, the opportunities for young people are being significantly diminished?

Mr Hurd: The Labour party continues to be in denial about why there were cuts in the first place. I have said very publicly that we are concerned that youth services have been too easy to cut, in part because there is insufficient evidence about the value of the work that they do in terms of outcomes. We want to work with commissioners to change that, but at the same time we are actively investing from the centre to create new opportunities for young people, not just through the NCS but by backing the scouts and other uniformed organisations and the organisations that have formed part of the Step Up to Serve campaign.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Does my hon. Friend accept that well-directed youth work is a vital part of crime prevention and as such saves money and prevents victimisation in the long run?

Mr Hurd: I agree wholeheartedly. The Government are a strong supporter of the value of high-quality, well-structured youth services, which is why we are working with local authorities to help in their difficult task of delivering more with less, as well as supporting the voluntary sector to offer more opportunities for young people to develop.

13. [904466] **Jason McCartney** (Colne Valley) (Con): Hundreds of young people in my constituency have enjoyed the team spirit, camaraderie and community projects that the National Citizen Service brings. Will the Minister assure the House that even more NCS programmes will be rolled out this summer?

Mr Hurd: Yes, because young people want them. This summer the 100,000th young person will take part in NCS; 98% of young people would recommend it to their friends. There is a fantastic buzz around it because young people recognise that it is a fantastic use of their time and they get so much out of it.

Social Enterprises

8. **Jeremy Lefroy** (Stafford) (Con): What recent progress his Department has made on supporting social enterprises. [904461]

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Nick Hurd): We are doing a great deal to support the growth of social enterprises. We are making it easier for them to access finance through social investment and to deliver public services through the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012, and through a wide range of capacity-building support.

Jeremy Lefroy: Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the progress of Big Society Capital, in particular the provision of capital to smaller, local community social enterprises, which may need thousands or tens of thousands rather than millions?

Mr Hurd: Big Society Capital is the first institution of its kind in the world and I am delighted to say that it is working very well. Its recent annual report shows that it has already made £150 million of new money available to social enterprises through 31 different investments.

Topical Questions

T1. [904443] **Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Mr Francis Maude): My responsibilities are for efficiency and reform, civil service issues, public sector industrial relations strategy, Government transparency, civil contingency, civil society and cyber-security.

Peter Aldous: In March my right hon. Friend visited East Coast Community Healthcare, a staff-owned social enterprise providing community-based NHS and social care in my constituency. At present it is disadvantaged by having to pay more for insurance and IT than if it had remained in the NHS. Can my right hon. Friend give me an assurance that the Government will work with social enterprises such as ECCH to address such obstacles to their long-term success?

Mr Maude: I will certainly talk to my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary about that issue, but my hon. Friend will have seen, as I did when we visited that public service mutual, the extraordinary level of enthusiasm, commitment and dedication which, having spun out of the NHS to be a staff-owned mutual, was invested in their activity.

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): An excellent report published last week by the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research at Sheffield Hallam university on the state of the coalfields confirmed that the most deprived areas of the country have the lowest concentration of voluntary sector organisations. On top of that, we know that local authorities in those same areas are suffering disproportionate cuts—a double whammy for the poorest parts of the country. Why are the Government not doing enough specifically to help the voluntary sector in the poorest parts of the country?

The Minister for Civil Society (Mr Nick Hurd): Well, we are. We set up a programme, Community First, which is delivering neighbourhood grants in the 600 most deprived wards in the country. We have also worked closely with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Big Lottery Fund to use the European funding structures to unlock £500 million-worth of funding for social inclusion in some of the most deprived communities in the country. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will welcome that.

T2. [904444] **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I welcome the work that this Government have done to encourage volunteering, especially through the Points of Light programme. When will my constituents, who work so hard, be recognised through this programme?

Mr Hurd: With more and more people volunteering, it is right that we should do more to recognise and celebrate their great work. Points of Light is a new daily award from the Prime Minister. Today he is announcing the 50th winner. I would welcome recommendations from all constituencies, including South Basildon and East Thurrock.

T3. [904445] **Dan Jarvis** (Barnsley Central) (Lab): City Year recruits 18 to 25-year-olds to volunteer as mentors and tutors in schools in deprived areas. They have a proven track record of tackling educational under-attainment and developing young people to become more employable and more engaged citizens. Will the Minister consider recognising a full-time year of voluntary service as a new pathway for young people, as a transition between education and employment, by giving it a status that will ensure that young people have confidence that their commitment is publicly recognised?

Mr Hurd: Like many Members across the House, I am a huge supporter of City Year. The Cabinet Office has backed it with a substantial grant and it is part of a wider coalition of organisations that got together to structure the Step Up To Serve campaign, which is supported by all three party leaders and led by the Prince of Wales and which aims to double the number of young people involved in volunteering. I hope the hon. Gentleman can welcome that.

T4. [904446] **Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): As part of their long-term economic plan, this Government have saved £1.2 billion by rationalising the Government estate. That is the equivalent of 26 Buckingham palaces. What more can be done by local councils and local authorities to replicate such savings?

Mr Maude: We have already done a great deal on this front, as my hon. Friend recognises, but there is much more that can be done to collocate different public sector agencies, including local government. That not only saves a lot of money by sharing the overhead, but provides a much more convenient place for the citizen and businesses to interact with the state in its different forms.

T5. [904447] **Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): The Government agreed to refund the Big Lottery Fund the £675 million taken for the Olympics. With the sales of the Olympic assets, is that still going ahead? How will the lottery be refunded if Olympic assets are leased instead of sold?

Mr Speaker: If the Minister heard that, I congratulate him on his hearing. The acoustics were not great.

Mr Maude: I heard some of it, Mr Speaker—enough to know that the right thing for me to do is to write to the hon. Gentleman with a detailed answer.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Mr Damian Collins at the start of questions to the Prime Minister, I wish to inform the House how I will be applying its sub judice rules to any exchanges on Mr Coulson's case. I ask the House for some forbearance, as it is important to Members and those outside the House that the position is clear.

The House will know that Mr Coulson has now been convicted on a charge of conspiracy to intercept communications. The court has not yet sentenced Mr Coulson for that offence. There has as yet been no verdict on two charges against him of conspiracy to commit misconduct in public office. The rules of the House's sub judice resolution, which the House rightly expects me to enforce, apply to criminal cases which are active. They cease to be active when "they are concluded by verdict and sentence", so they apply in this case.

At the same time, the House's resolution gives the Chair discretion in applying the rules. I have taken appropriate advice, as the House would expect—and, indeed, been in receipt of unsolicited advice, for which I am of course grateful. In the light of all the circumstances, I have decided, one, to allow reference to Mr Coulson's conviction; two, not to allow reference to his sentencing by the court, such as speculation on the nature of that sentence; and three, not to allow reference to those charges on which the verdict is awaited. I rely upon hon. Members to exercise restraint, but if that proves unavailing, I will of course intervene. I hope that that is helpful to the House.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [904428] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 25 June.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and in addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Damian Collins: Andy Coulson's conviction shows that the parliamentary inquiry into phone hacking, of which I was a member, was consistently misled by him and others over the extent of, and knowledge of, phone hacking at News International. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that our first concern should be to see redress for the victims of phone hacking and to uphold the democratic principle of a free press?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The first thing is that we should remember the victims, people who had their privacy wrecked, and we should ensure that that cannot happen again. As we do so, we must, as he says, cherish a free and vibrant press in our country. I said yesterday, and I say again today, that I take full responsibility for employing Andy Coulson. I did so on the basis of assurances that I received and that the Select Committee also received, but I always said that if those assurances turned out to be wrong, I would apologise fully and frankly to this House of Commons, and I do so again today from this Dispatch Box. I am sorry; this was the wrong decision, but I think it is right that we have had a public inquiry in this

country, and it is right that we have proper investigations. Yesterday once again showed that no one is above the law in our country.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Today we know that for four years the Prime Minister's hand-picked, closest adviser was a criminal, and brought disgrace to Downing street. We now also know that the Prime Minister wilfully ignored multiple warnings about him. On 8 July 2009, *The Guardian* published evidence of phone hacking on an industrial scale while Andy Coulson was editor of the *News of the World*. At that time, Andy Coulson was his director of communications. What action did he take?

The Prime Minister: As I said a moment ago, the assurances I sought and received were the same assurances received by the Press Complaints Commission, by a Select Committee of this House, and by police investigations. They were also thoroughly gone into by the Leveson inquiry—an inquiry the right hon. Gentleman supported. He talks about warnings. Specifically on the warning from *The Guardian*, Leveson had this to say:

“The editor of the *Guardian* did not raise the issue with Mr Cameron at meetings both in the month after the article was published and the following year.”

He says this—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members will want to hear it:

“there can be no criticism of Mr Cameron for not raising the issue”.

We had an exhaustive inquiry. I know the right hon. Gentleman did not like the result of the inquiry, but he should accept it.

Edward Miliband: That is a long-winded way of saying that, when it came to Andy Coulson, the Prime Minister just did not want to know the evidence. First warning: ignored.

Let us move on to May 2010. The Deputy Prime Minister warned the Prime Minister in person about his deep concerns about Andy Coulson. So he was warned by his deputy. What action did he take?

The Prime Minister: Every single one of these issues was dealt with by the Leveson inquiry. [*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Lucas, calm yourself. I am trying to offer you, on a weekly basis, therapeutic guidance, but there is a long way to go. There needs to be calm on both sides of the House.

The Prime Minister: Every single one of these issues was dealt with exhaustively by the Leveson inquiry. The terms of reference of the Leveson inquiry were agreed by the right hon. Gentleman, and they included

“the extent to which there was a failure to act on previous warnings about media misconduct”.

That is what Leveson looked into. He looked into all of these questions about the warnings I was given and the response I gave, and he made no criticism of my conduct. I know that the right hon. Gentleman was disappointed by the Leveson inquiry, but he called for it, it took place, and he should heed what it said.

Edward Miliband: No, this is about the Prime Minister's character, his judgment, and the warnings he ignored, including from the Deputy Prime Minister. Warning No. 2: ignored.

Then, in September 2010, *The New York Times* published a front-page investigation detailing Andy Coulson's extensive knowledge of phone hacking, which included one former editor saying:

“I've been to dozens if not hundreds of meetings with Andy”

when the subject came up. What action did the Prime Minister take?

The Prime Minister: All of these issues—every single warning—were dealt with by the Leveson inquiry: an inquiry the right hon. Gentleman called for and an inquiry whose terms of reference he agreed. I know he cannot bear it, but Leveson made no criticism of my conduct in this regard whatsoever. You cannot call for a judge-led inquiry, participate in a judge-led inquiry, write the terms of reference of a judge-led inquiry, and then ignore what it has to say. I have to say, Mr Speaker, that all of the questions he is raising today are not new; they are the questions dealt with by the Leveson inquiry. I know—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister is offering an answer and it must be heard. [*Interruption.*] Order. It must be heard by the House. Both sides must be heard by the House, and that will happen, as it always does, however long this session has to run—about that, let us be absolutely clear.

The Prime Minister: I can quite understand why the right hon. Gentleman does not want to listen to an eight-month-long inquiry that cost £5 million, that interviewed people under oath, and that was led by a judge, but that is what he asked for, that is what was delivered, and it did not criticise my conduct in this regard at all. Instead of casting aspersions about that, he should accept the inquiry that he supported.

Edward Miliband: No answer—[*Interruption.*] No answer on any of the questions. No answer on why he did not act on *The Guardian*; no answer on why he did not act on the Deputy Prime Minister; no answer on why he did not act on *The New York Times*.

Let us come to the issue of vetting. Amid all those warnings, the very least he should have—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I apologise for interrupting the right hon. Gentleman, but there is the usual ranting from the usual suspects. Be quiet, or if you cannot be quiet, and you have not got that level of self-restraint, leave the Chamber—we can perfectly well manage without you.

Edward Miliband: Let us come to the issue of vetting. Amid all those warnings, the very least that the Prime Minister should have done was insist immediately on coming to office that Andy Coulson should have the highest level of security vetting, as his six predecessors over the previous 14 years had had. Why did he not insist on that?

The Prime Minister: Again, Leveson, in his inquiry, looked directly into that issue. This is what he found—*[Interruption.]* He concluded:

“The level of security clearance was not the decision of either Mr Cameron or Mr Coulson but the Civil Service.”

Those are the correct procedures. If the Leader of the Opposition’s contention is that direct vetting would have got to the bottom of Mr Coulson’s conduct at the *News of the World*, he should be very clear about what Leveson found. He found that

“the process of considering Mr Coulson for DV status would not have involved a detailed investigation of phone hacking at the NoTW”.

That undermines the entire case that Labour has been trying to make all morning. I know that the right hon. Gentleman does not agree with it. I know that he is so desperate not to talk about the economy, not to talk about unemployment, not to talk about the deficit, but he cannot rerun an inquiry that has already taken place.

Edward Miliband: Now it is clear from the Prime Minister—*[HON. MEMBERS: “Weak!”]* I will tell them what is weak: failing to stand up for doing the right thing, and that is what this Prime Minister has done. Now we know the rule of this Prime Minister: the buck does not stop here, and he blames the civil service. On the civil service—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Sometimes one has to repeat a thing because people do not get it the first time. If there is quiet, we will continue. If people try to shout other people down, against the principles of British democracy, they will be stopped in their tracks. It is very simple and, I would have thought, pretty clear.

Edward Miliband: On the civil service, can the Prime Minister assure the House that at no time did Sir Gus O’Donnell, the then Cabinet Secretary, or any senior civil servant raise concerns with him or his office about hiring Andy Coulson?

The Prime Minister: Gus O’Donnell made that very clear in the evidence he gave the inquiry. Indeed, on the issue of vetting, he was absolutely clear that the decision about vetting is for the permanent secretary at No. 10, Sir Jeremy Heywood, someone who has served Labour Governments with impeccable service as well as a coalition Government led by a Conservative Prime Minister. What the right hon. Gentleman is trying to do is go through all the old questions that were answered by the Leveson inquiry. He did not like the answer, because he wanted to try to prove some cooked-up conspiracy between the Conservatives and News International. He cannot manage to do it, because the Leveson inquiry cannot find it. He asked a minute ago what is weak. I will tell him what is weak: attacking Murdoch and then standing up with a copy of *The Sun* newspaper, only to apologise a few hours later.

Edward Miliband: The Prime Minister said in his previous answer that Sir Gus O’Donnell was asked whether he raised concerns with him or his office about Andy Coulson. He was not asked that question at the Leveson inquiry. There is now a very important question, which the whole country will want an answer to, about

whether Sir Gus O’Donnell or senior civil servants raised concerns with the Prime Minister or his office about Andy Coulson.

The truth about this is that the charge against the Prime Minister is not one of ignorance; it is wilful negligence. At the heart of this scandal are thousands of innocent victims of phone hacking that he did not stand up for. The Prime Minister will always be remembered as the first ever occupant of his office who brought a criminal into the heart of Downing street.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman brought up the warning from *The Guardian*. I totally disproved him using the evidence. He brought up the idea of direct vetting. I have totally disproved him using the evidence. He cannot bear the fact that an eight-month inquiry which he hoped would pin the blame on me found that I had behaved correctly throughout. That is the case. All these issues were examined by the Leveson inquiry. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to debate the calls we make and the leadership we give, I am happy to do so anytime, because it is leadership that has got this economy moving, it is leadership that has got our deficit down, it is leadership that is putting Britain back to work, and it is the total absence of leadership from the Labour party that shows that it has nothing to say about Britain’s economic future.

Mr Speaker: Jake Berry—not here.

Mr Elfyn Llwyd (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): After many months of vehement anti-Iranian rhetoric from the Government and now the sudden change of heart, does the Prime Minister believe that the maxim “My enemy’s enemy is my friend” trumps all else?

The Prime Minister: No, I do not believe that. I think we should judge every regime and every organisation on its commitment to human rights, the rule of law and building pluralistic societies. We should engage with the Iranians but, as I have said, with a very clear eye and a very hard heart. We should not forget what happened to our embassy or the things that they are responsible for around the world, but we should start to build a dialogue with them in the way the Foreign Secretary has set out.

Q3. [904430] **Mr Nigel Evans** (Ribble Valley) (Con): On Friday, my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) and I jumped from a plane 13,000 feet over the Yorkshire countryside—fortunately, we had parachutes and training from the Army’s Tigers parachute display team. As we approach armed forces day, will the Prime Minister pay tribute to our armed forces, and to the charities and the generous British people who do so much to support those who give such commitment to Queen and country, and will he reinforce the fact that this Parliament will never, ever underestimate the contribution of the armed forces of this country?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely support what my hon. Friend has said and commend him for jumping out of an aeroplane with a parachute. Not only should we commend our armed forces, but it is right that we have put the armed forces covenant—the military covenant—into the law of the land. Armed forces day is now an important part of our national character. On

Remembrance Sunday, we remember those who have served and those who have fallen, but armed forces day is an opportunity to celebrate all those who serve today, to thank them and their families, and to celebrate the values they live by and all they bring to our country.

Q4. [904431] **Mr Ronnie Campbell** (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister realise he has made history by employing a crook at No. 10?

The Prime Minister: I have given a very full answer to this. Obviously, I regret the decision to employ Andy Coulson on the basis of the assurances I was given, but what I would say is that no one made any complaints about the conduct of Andy Coulson while he was at No. 10. That stands in quite a contrast to the conduct of Damian McBride, Jo Moore and Alastair Campbell. What we had from the previous Government were dodgy dossiers, burying bad news and smearing Members of Parliament.

Sir Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): The firefighters' dispute continues, with some worrying consequences and no sign at present of a resolution. Before Easter, Ministers at the Department for Communities and Local Government got the Government Actuary's Department to cost a set of proposals that the Fire Brigades Union was ready to put to its members. Will the Prime Minister look back at that proposal even now, and consider whether it might still have a useful part to play in bringing an end to this dispute?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to look at what my hon. Friend suggests. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), has been working extremely hard on this issue. I think it is important that we listen to what the firefighters say but at the same time recognise that the pensions they have access to would require the building of a £500,000 pot for anyone else in our country. We should bear that and the taxpayers' contribution in mind.

Q5. [904432] **Mark Durkan** (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Prime Minister accept that his death at 60 proves that Gerry Conlon lost more than 15 terrible years in prison, and the anguish of his father's torment, owing to the injustice from layers of this state? As well as his wider campaigning against injustice, there were two particular issues that mattered to Gerry in recent years. One was the need for proper, quality mental health services for those who suffered miscarriages of justice. Secondly—I would like the Prime Minister to address this in particular—notwithstanding the egregious 75-year seal put on the Guildford and other papers, Gerry was recently promised access to the archives at Kew and that people could accompany him. It was his dying wish that that would be honoured through the people he wanted to accompany him. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the dying wish of an innocent man is honoured?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this, and for the way in which he does it. It is hard to think what 15 years in prison, when you are innocent of a crime of which you have been convicted, would do to somebody. It is absolutely right that a

previous Prime Minister apologised as fully as he did when this came to pass. I am very happy to look at the specific request about the records at Kew, which has not been put to me before, and perhaps contact the hon. Gentleman about that it.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Unemployment in north Northamptonshire is down by a third. Last week, this Conservative-led Government approved the Rushden Lakes development—2,000 new jobs, a major retail park and a fantastic leisure facility. Will the Prime Minister explain how we have such a success? Could it be down to his long-term economic plan?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for detailing what is happening in Northamptonshire in terms of the extra jobs and the development. I think what it proves is that we have an entrepreneurial economy, particularly in Northamptonshire, but we need key developments to go ahead to help unlock the jobs, growth and investment that we need for our country.

Q6. [904433] **Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Prime Minister said yesterday that he was just giving Andy Coulson a second chance. That means that the Prime Minister knew that there was a first offence. He knew from the very beginning that he was taking a criminal into Downing street, and then he refused to sack him. Yesterday—and again today—he was busy praising Andy Coulson. What message does that send to the victims? Is not the truth of the matter that the Prime Minister is only sorry because he got caught?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that on this issue the hon. Gentleman has got it wrong time and time and time again. What I said about giving someone a second chance was because the individual in question had resigned as editor of the *News of the World* because of what had happened. Let me just refer the hon. Gentleman to what he said in this House of Commons. He said that there was no doubt that there was a

“deal...secured between the Conservative party and News International...before the general election”.—[*Official Report*, 13 November 2012; Vol. 553, c. 32WH.]

After eight months of an inquiry that cost £5 million, that was found to be complete and utter rubbish, yet have we ever heard one word of retraction from the hon. Gentleman? As ever—not a word.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his judgment and resolution in standing up for Britain's national interest on the question of the presidency of the EU Commission? May I put it to him that he is in tune with the concerns of the public right across Europe, unlike so many of our continental partners?

The Prime Minister: I think it is important on this issue to stand up and speak for what you believe in. I believe that the European Commission President should be chosen by the elected Heads of Government and Heads of State on the European Council. That is the right approach, and it is wrong to sign up to this power grab by the parties of Europe and the European Parliament. I also think it is important that the people involved

understand that we need reform in Europe. It does not matter how hard I have to push this case, I will take it all the way to the end.

Q7. [904434] **Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): They have been to breakfast with Boris, to tea at No. 10 and have danced with the Business Secretary, but businesses in Shoreditch and the City still cannot get superfast broadband. This is now a national embarrassment. What is the Prime Minister going to do?

The Prime Minister: We have put a huge amount of money into expanding superfast broadband, and we are now doing better than other European countries in terms of the roll-out of our network and the speeds that are available. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport is working very hard to deal with those areas of the country that do not yet have superfast broadband, and I will make sure that he puts Hackney firmly on his list.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Prime Minister recruited Andy Coulson in 2007. In 2009, Nick Davies of *The Guardian* came to the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and said:

“I have never seen a piece of paper that directly links Andy Coulson to any of the activity that we are discussing of either kind.”

In February 2010, the Select Committee, on which I serve, concluded, with all-party support:

“We have seen no evidence that Andy Coulson knew that phone-hacking was taking place.”

Does the Prime Minister agree that those who now claim they knew he was involved in 2007—that seems to include the current Leader of the Opposition—should explain why they did not pass on that information to the police or to the Select Committee? Or are they trying to rewrite history to deflect attention from their own chronic leadership shortcomings?

The Prime Minister: I think my hon. Friend put it rather better than I did—[*Interruption.*] Thank you.

Q8. [904435] **David Simpson** (Upper Bann) (DUP): I am sure that the Prime Minister and the whole House will join me in welcoming the successful visit by Her Majesty the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh to Northern Ireland this week. Will the Prime Minister also join me in condemning Sinn Féin’s foolish approach to welfare reform, which, instead of protecting the vulnerable in Northern Ireland, is costing the Northern Ireland Executive £5 million per month in fines?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the hon. Gentleman on both counts. As ever, the Queen’s visit to Northern Ireland has been a huge success, and it has highlighted the economic renaissance that is taking place there. With over 800 foreign investors, Northern Ireland is now one of the top UK destinations for investment. May I just say that I am extremely envious of Her Majesty’s being able to see the iron throne on the set of “Game of Thrones”? That is now one of the most successful television productions anywhere in the world, and it is hosted in Northern Ireland.

The hon. Gentleman is also right about welfare reform. The point of it is to help people to get back to work, rather than just to cut budgets, and we need to explain to all the parties in Northern Ireland that we should be engaging in welfare reform to help to get people back to work.

Q9. [904436] **Guy Opperman** (Hexham) (Con): On this side of the House, we have a long-term economic plan, with education funding at its heart and as a consequence. This can be seen in the enhanced £269 per pupil funding that all schools in Northumberland will receive next April. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to continue to make progress on education funding, so that as the plan takes effect we get fairer funding for all the schools in this country?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that education and better schools and skills are at the heart of our long-term economic plan. He should note that we are spending £18 billion on school buildings during this Parliament, which is more than Labour spent in its first two terms combined. Specifically on the issue of a fair national funding formula, we have made some progress by allocating £350 million to the least fairly funded local authorities. That will make a real difference in the coming year.

Jim McGovern (Dundee West) (Lab): On Monday morning, before boarding the 9 o’clock train from Dundee to London, I joined a picket line with members of the Public and Commercial Services Union. They were protesting against the closure of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs offices in Dundee and trying to protect their terms and conditions. Their main concern, however, was that they believed there to be a Government plan for the privatisation of HMRC. Will the Prime Minister assure those members that there will be no such plans on his watch?

The Prime Minister: The plan we have for HMRC is to make it more efficient and more effective at collecting taxes from the people who should be paying them. That is the plan.

Q10. [904437] **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): On Sunday, 17-year-old James Goodship tragically drowned in Lake Burwain in my constituency. His death has left his family and friends, and the local community, in shock. As this week is drowning prevention week, what can the Prime Minister do to raise awareness of the dangers of open water and to improve water safety, particularly during this warm summer?

The Prime Minister: My heart goes out to the family that my hon. Friend has mentioned, and he is absolutely right to raise this issue. For anyone to lose a son in such a tragic way is absolutely heartbreaking. We need to spread better information about the dangers of swimming in open water. We also need to do more to teach swimming and life-saving skills in schools. I also think that the heroism Bill that we are bringing forward—which will help people who want to do good and rescue people—will help, in a small way, as well.

Hazel Blears (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): Hundreds of young British men and some women are fighting in Syria and now with ISIS in Iraq. Some of them will come back to the United Kingdom trained, radicalised and ready to attack. Our Prevent programme has been

cut by £17 million, and the funding for local authorities to do the essential long-term community work has all but disappeared. Will the Prime Minister undertake an urgent review of the Prevent strategy to make sure that we have the plans and the resources to protect our young people from the extremists?

The Prime Minister: I have great respect for the right hon. Lady on this issue, because she has always spoken clearly about the need to confront not just violent extremism but all forms of extremism. This Government have made sure that the Prevent programme is properly focused and works to target those at most risk of being radicalised. As well as doing that, we need to make sure that we shift resources in our intelligence, security and policing services to target those who are potentially returning from Syria or Iraq so that they are properly covered and dealt with. We have made a large number of arrests and we have confiscated passports. We have taken all the action necessary to keep our country safe.

Q11. [904438] **Annette Brooke** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Julia's House, a wonderful children's hospice in my constituency, is currently carrying out research with Bournemouth university into the impact of short breaks on family relationships. Will the Prime Minister give higher priority to the funding of short breaks as an invest-to-save measure?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about this issue. Any family bringing up a severely disabled child knows that finding one of these hospices—I will never forget finding Helen House in Oxford, which was actually the first children's hospice, I think, anywhere in the country—is a complete life saver as they carry out brilliant, brilliant work. That is why we have committed over £800 million for local authorities to invest in short breaks for disabled children, and I am sure that this research by Bournemouth university will help inform our work in the future.

Q13. [904441] **Mr Gerry Sutcliffe** (Bradford South) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister aware of the alleged mis-selling of cash-back warranties by Scottish Power? Does it concern him as much as it concerns me that one of the UK's largest utility companies has allegedly tried to evade paying back money to 625,000 people, many of whom are the poorest in our society? I wonder whether he would be prepared to meet me and a cross-party delegation to get to the truth of the matter.

The Prime Minister: I commend the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. Of course, this took place over a decade ago and it was looked at at the time by the then Department of Trade and Industry, but in the light of the concern among members of the public about the outcome of the liquidation, I would like to encourage the hon. Gentleman to give the Business Department all the new information that has come to light, if he has not done so already, and I will fix a meeting for him with the Business Secretary and members of the all-party group so that we can try and get to the bottom of this issue.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My constituent Michael Butcher installed CCTV in his mother's flat because she was a dementia sufferer, and he recorded on

it a brutal assault on her by her carer. Unbelievably to me, the Crown Prosecution Service has refused to prosecute her carer, because it says it is not in the public interest. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that we as a society should be totally intolerant of all attacks on vulnerable people with dementia?

The Prime Minister: It would not be right for me to comment on a CPS decision in a specific case, but on the general point about whether we should be intolerant of breaches of care against elderly people, particularly those with dementia and who are reliant on others, yes, we should. Our dementia strategy is all about not just increasing the research into trying to tackle dementia but about making sure that our care homes and hospitals and, indeed, communities become more dementia-friendly.

Q14. [904442] **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): Did Gus O' Donnell or senior civil servants raise directly with the Prime Minister any concern they may have had about Mr Coulson?

The Prime Minister: A number of senior civil servants gave evidence to the Leveson inquiry and were closely questioned by Leveson. The whole process of the employment of Andy Coulson, his arrival in No. 10 Downing street, his vetting and the warnings that were given—each and every single one was dealt with by the investigation that the Leader of the Opposition supported, but the Leader of the Opposition cannot bear the fact that an independent, judge-led inquiry came to that conclusion. He is the first Leader of the Opposition not able to ask for an independent judicial inquiry—because he has already had one.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Although the World cup football results may not have been quite what we wanted in England, we have the 2015 rugby world cup to look forward to. As my right hon. Friend knows, four foreign teams will be playing in Kingsholm in my constituency. Does he agree that this is a great opportunity to use the Chancellor's new brownfield site fund, plus perhaps a new city deal from the Department for Communities and Local Government, to ensure that the regeneration of our small cities is ready for the World cup 2015?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to say that after the disappointment of the football, and also of that stunning test match where we lost on the second last ball, it is perhaps time to look to rugby to provide us with something to lift our spirits.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, Caroline Lucas.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): In my constituency, one-third of homes are in the private rented sector. Tenants are often ripped off and forced to move at a month's notice, and the average rent for a two-bedroom home is £1,200 a month. Will the Prime Minister back my call for a living rent commission to explore ways of bringing rents back into line with the basic cost of living?

The Prime Minister: There is a debate shortly on the private rented sector and how we get more houses and more competitive rents. Of course we want more competitive rents, but looking at the policies of her party it seems as if it would never build any houses anywhere for anyone, and as a result rents would go up.

Point of Order

12.36 pm

Mr Robert Buckland (South Swindon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there any way that we can place on the record my understanding that the reason for the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) is that his wife has been rushed into hospital and he has had to attend at her bedside?

Mr Speaker: There is, and the hon. Gentleman has helpfully done just that. I thank him for that, just as I think the House will thank him. Needless to say, we wish Mr Berry's wife a speedy recovery.

BILL PRESENTED

SMALL BUSINESS, ENTERPRISE AND EMPLOYMENT BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Vince Cable, supported by the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Michael Gove, Secretary Chris Grayling, Secretary Edward Davey, Mr Oliver Letwin, Andrea Leadsom, Michael Fallon, Matthew Hancock and Jenny Willott, presented a Bill to make provision about improved access to finance for businesses and individuals; to make provision about regulatory provisions relating to business and certain voluntary and community bodies; to make provision about the exercise of procurement functions by certain public authorities; to make provision for the creation of a Pubs Code and Adjudicator for the regulation of dealings by pub-owning businesses with their tied pub tenants; to make provision about the regulation of the provision of childcare; to make provision about information relating to the evaluation of education; to make provision about the regulation of companies; to make provision about company filing requirements; to make provision about the disqualification from appointments relating to companies; to make provision about insolvency; to make provision about the law relating to employment; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 11) with explanatory notes (Bill 11-EN).

Opposition Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Private Rented Sector

[Relevant Documents: First Report from the Communities and Local Government Committee, Session 2013-14, on The Private Rented Sector, HC 50, and the Government's response, Cm 8730.]

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have not selected the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas).

12.37 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the private rented sector's growing role in meeting housing need; notes that there are nine million people, including more than one million families with more than two million children, now renting privately; notes with concern the lack of stability and certainty that the sector provides to those who rent privately; further notes the increasing cost of renting and the unreasonable letting agent fees levied on tenants; calls on the Government to bring forward legislative proposals to reform the sector by banning letting agent fees being charged to tenants and making three year tenancies the standard for those who rent their homes in the private sector; and further calls on the Government to act on unpredictable rent rises by prohibiting excessive rent rises during longer-term tenancies.

The Opposition have called this debate because we believe that the private rented sector is simply not fit for purpose—in fact, it is more suited to the 1980s than the 21st century. The sector has grown massively in size, and is beyond recognition in terms of the demographics and character of those renting from private landlords. Some 9 million people now rent privately—more than those who rent a social home. More than a third of those who rent privately are families with children, and nearly half are over 35.

Many people who are renting privately do so not out of choice but because they cannot get on the housing ladder and are being priced out, or because they cannot secure a social home. Private renting is not a cheap alternative—far from it. In fact, it is the most expensive type of tenure. On average, people renting privately spend 41% of their income on housing, compared with 30% in the social rented sector and 19% for owner-occupiers, but that extra expense is not buying greater stability or higher standards. In fact, those who rent privately are more likely to live in a non-decent home than in any other tenure. We have one of the most short-term, insecure and unstable private rented sectors in Europe.

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): The hon. Lady is right to highlight the problems with the private rented sector. I presume she is aware that I tabled a private Member's Bill on this subject last year. Does she support its contents, and can we work together to make some progress on it? Many people across the House share these concerns.

Emma Reynolds: There is cross-party concern on this issue, but the question is whether the Government are willing and able to take action; I am afraid that up until now they have not been.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware that the issues in the private rented sector are a particular problem in London, where renters are the victims of an increasingly dysfunctional housing market and spiralling house prices and rents?

Emma Reynolds: My hon. Friend pre-empts a point I was about to make. She is absolutely right that the private rented sector is particularly problematic in high-demand areas, not only in London, but in Oxford, York and other parts of the country where demand is far outstripping supply, which is one of the reasons rents are so exorbitant.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): I appreciate the hon. Lady's point, but she did not mention—inadvertently, I know—Northern Ireland, which, as I am sure she knows, particularly suffers from a lack of supply in the private rented sector.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for reminding me of that fact.

The status quo in the private rented sector is good for neither landlords nor tenants—both parties need and deserve greater stability—but the Government do not have to travel to Venezuela or Vietnam to find a more stable, just and equitable private rented sector: 10 years ago, Ireland introduced four-year tenancies, with a ceiling on rent increases linked to average market rents. As set out in the motion, our reforms would give greater stability and peace of mind to the 9 million people renting in the private rented sector.

Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Will the hon. Lady accept that in 13 years the last Labour Government built fewer council houses than even the Thatcher Government? One of the reasons for the housing crisis, including in the private rented sector, is that the last Labour Government did not build council houses; the coalition Government are starting to build them.

Emma Reynolds: I will take our record over the Government's record any time. We built 2 million houses in government, 500,000 of which were affordable, and I am really proud of the decent homes programme, which transformed the council housing stock in our country, which was left in a shocking state at the end of the '90s.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con) *rose*—

Emma Reynolds: I want to make a bit of progress, as I know that several hon. Members want to speak in this debate, but I will give way shortly.

I shall set out the three proposals in our motion. First, we would legislate for longer-term tenancies; secondly, we would act on unpredictable rent rises; and thirdly, we would ban letting agent fees on tenants. On the first element, our motion calls on the Government to legislate to make three-year tenancies the norm. Under our proposals, tenants would have a six-month probationary period, and as long as they respected the property and paid their rent on time, they would then have the stability of the rest of that three-year period. Of course, we would build in protections for landlords—that is obviously essential—but crucially it would provide much-needed stability for private renting tenants.

Mr Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Security of tenure is crucial. Under the coalition Government, which the hon. Member for Colchester (Sir Bob Russell) supports, councils are discharging their responsibilities into the private rented sector, and tenants are regularly being evicted only because they are reliant on housing benefit and because rents are so high—in my constituency, it costs £770 a week for a three-bedroom flat—and according to the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), who has responsibility for housing, the fact that they are on benefits is a good reason to evict them.

Emma Reynolds: The housing Minister's comments were absolutely appalling, and it is a shame he is not here so that we can debate them with him. It simply is not acceptable for a private landlord to evict somebody just because they are on benefits, which is why we are proposing to get rid of no-fault eviction.

Mr Prisk *rose*—

Emma Reynolds: I give way to the former housing Minister.

Mr Prisk: The hon. Lady says that a Labour Government would legislate for a minimum of three years. Is she telling the House that no shorter tenancies would be allowed under a Labour Government, and if there would be exceptions, what would they be?

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman raises a key point—in fact, he has pre-empted the very next section of my speech. He is absolutely right that there would still be students and people working in different parts of the country who would want more flexibility. Our proposals do not exclude that; they include it. Essentially, however, our main message today is that whereas 20 years ago students and people moving around the country were the main groups renting privately, there is now an increasing number of people who are settling in the private sector—they can be individuals, couples or families with children. We think that the current set-up does not cater for that growing group of people within the private rented sector.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I absolutely follow the logic of what the hon. Lady is saying, so I put it to her that, following that logic still further, why have the official Opposition not adopted the position of Shelter and others that are looking for a five-year minimum tenancy along those lines?

Emma Reynolds: We are calling for a three-year tenancy. We think that we need to change the culture of short-termism that has developed around the private rented sector. We certainly draw a lot of inspiration from the excellent work done by Shelter, and many of its proposals are a feature of our proposals.

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to encourage longer-term landlords, such as the former owners of the New Era estate in Hoxton, which has just been sold on? Tenants

there are facing huge rent increases. Many people have lived there for over 20 years and felt that they had security, but that is no longer so certain. Does my hon. Friend thus agree that the long-term tenancies are important?

Emma Reynolds: Absolutely, which is why we would legislate for long-term tenancies. We simply do not agree with the Government that a voluntary approach is appropriate. Longer-term tenancies are simply not coming about, so the people my hon. Friend talks about face great insecurity.

Paul Uppal (Wolverhampton South West) (Con) *rose*—

Emma Reynolds: I will give way to my parliamentary neighbour, but then I want to make some progress.

Paul Uppal: I worked in the real estate sector for 20 years. I accept that the hon. Lady is sincere in her desire for long-term tenancies, but the way to achieve that is to bring institutional investment into housing. The last time we regulated rents to regulated tenancies, it destroyed the sector, and investment went from residential into commercial property.

Emma Reynolds: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's first point, and Sir Michael Lyons and his housing commission are looking into that. We absolutely need institutional investment in the private rented sector—I agree on that point—but what we are suggesting, as I shall explain in more detail in my speech, is not to go back to 1970s rent control. In fact, what we are suggesting is not that different from what the Secretary of State suggested back in October, which was to have predictability in respect of rent increases. That is not to say that the market should not set the rent up-front—the agreement on rent would obviously happen between the tenant and the landlord at the start of the tenancy—but at the end of years one and two, there would be an agreement—a benchmark and a ceiling—which is what happens in countries such as Ireland, Spain and elsewhere. That actually looks pretty similar to the press release put out by the Secretary of State in October, and we do not think that that would have a negative impact on supply.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Emma Reynolds: Let me make some progress; otherwise, I will be crowding out others who want to speak.

There are now 2 million children living in the private rented sector. Private tenants are nine times more likely to move than those in any other tenure. Research done by an academic, Christopher Arnold, in the black country, which, as the Minister will know, is a part of the country close to my heart, suggests that one of the main drivers of children becoming NEETs—not in education, employment or training—later in life is frequently to do with moving from house to house and from school to school during childhood. We really need greater stability for families with children.

It makes absolute sense—I hope that all Members will see this—for the default tenancy to be longer than the six to 12-month assured shorthold tenancy that is now the norm. Our proposal today is so difficult to argue against that many Government Members seem to

have embraced the idea—well, apart from the Conservative party chairman. On hearing our proposals, his first reaction was, regrettably, to say that these proposals were “Venezuelan-style rent controls”. It seems that the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) had not spoken to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who states clearly on his website that plans for longer-term tenancies

“will also give tenants the know-how to demand longer-term tenancies that cut costs and meet their needs”.

Was the Conservative party chairman suggesting that his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had gone all the way to Venezuela to draw inspiration for the Government's private rented sector proposals, or was he comparing his right hon. Friend to Hugo Chávez? Alternatively, the Secretary of State may have gone all the way to Venezuela to observe its bin collection regime, but perhaps that is an issue for another day.

I can only assume that, having examined our proposals in more depth, the Government realised that they were pretty similar to what they themselves had proposed, although we have also suggested that there should be legislation to back it up.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will, but then I must make some progress.

Neil Parish: I think that longer-term tenancies are a great idea, but would it not be an even better idea to make that voluntary and allow the private sector to embrace it, thus keeping the supply of housing in the rented sector? Would that not be better than using legislation?

Emma Reynolds: It may sound like a terrific idea when the hon. Gentleman voices it in the House, but it clearly is not working. Most of the 9 million people who are renting in the private sector—including the 2 million children who are members of the families who rent—face insecurity year in, year out, not knowing whether their children will stay in the same school, or whether they will be in the same local authority area.

I was talking about Government Members. Let me complete the hat trick. During the week in which we presented our proposals, the Minister for Skills and Enterprise, the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matthew Hancock), said on the BBC's “Daily Politics”:

“On the rents issue, we put forward that policy at our conference last year”.

Is it not interesting that there seems to be such agreement across the House on this matter? Writing in *The Spectator*, the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the Government's housing adviser, called not for three-year tenancies, but for six-year tenancies. He said that the private rented sector was not fit for purpose, and was

“blocking aspiration and isolating families”.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend has articulated very well what Labour Members feel about a Government who are quick to criticise our proposals without doing anything themselves. Does she share my concern about the fact that, although

[Luciana Berger]

the Government announced last October that a model tenancy agreement would be published, we are still waiting for it nine months on?

Emma Reynolds: Indeed. I have before me a press release from the Secretary of State, which contains plenty of warm words but no action.

Let me explain further the second element of our proposals, to which there has been an hysterical reaction from, in particular, the Conservative party. I must make it clear, in order to avoid any more ridiculous misinterpretation, that the Labour party is not proposing a return to 1970s rent control. We are proposing that landlords and tenants should agree and set initial rents based on market value, and should conduct rent reviews no more often than once a year.

As Ministers will know, there are different housing markets in different parts of the country. In areas of lower demand there is not a great deal of pressure on rents, but in areas of high demand, real problems are caused by excessive rent increases. We propose that there should be an upper ceiling on any rent increases. That works well in Ireland, Spain and other parts of the world.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the Opposition on raising an issue in which every Member of Parliament has an interest. In my constituency, demand greatly outstrips supply, which is leading to housing problems and problems with the allocation of housing benefit. Does the hon. Lady share my concern, and that of many people outside the House, about the fact that rent arrears are causing financial difficulties and evictions? Is it not time for us to address this issue before it becomes too difficult to do anything?

Emma Reynolds: There are problems with rent arrears, notably in the social housing sector. Many people are, for the first time in their lives, finding it difficult to pay their rent and finding themselves in arrears because of the Government's callous bedroom tax.

Our reforms will be good for tenants, but they will also be good for landlords, and it will be essential for us to provide the right safeguards for them. The vast majority of landlords in England are small landlords with one or two properties, and they regard their extra house as a pension pot. They are interested in the increase in the value of their property over time, and in finding good tenants who pay their rent on time and treat the house like a home. We want to work with landlords to ensure that we get the balance right, but we also feel that tenants deserve extra protection and longer-term tenancies.

Meg Hillier: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Emma Reynolds: I am going to make a bit of progress, because many Members on both sides of the House rightly take an interest in this issue. I will stop talking about the Secretary of State, because he seems to be becoming slightly annoyed about it.

Let me finally deal with the third element of our proposals. We will ban the charging of letting agents' fees to tenants. Too many letting agents charge extortionate fees every time there is a change of tenancy.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: In a minute.

Often both landlord and tenant are charged for exactly the same service, which is otherwise known as double charging. I am afraid that it is not just a matter of a few rogue letting agents; it has become widespread bad practice throughout the industry. Mystery shopping conducted for the Labour party established that some tenants were being charged up to £450, and Shelter found that some were being charged as much as £700.

James Morris: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: In a minute.

Those fees have included the charging of hidden sums for inventories, references, check-outs and renewals, in addition to the large amounts of money that people must find for the payment of rent up front and deposits. One in four people must borrow money in order to pay the fees and obtain a home.

James Morris: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: In a minute, if the hon. Gentleman will be patient.

When a first-time buyer buys a property, that buyer does not pay the estate agent. The seller pays the estate agent, because the estate agent is working for the seller, in much the same way as the letting agent is working for the landlord. If first-time buyers do not pay to obtain the keys to their first homes, why should tenants have to pay £450, £700 or more in order to obtain the keys to theirs, when they are having to pay rent and a deposit?

James Morris: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has been very patient.

James Morris: I understand what the hon. Lady is saying about the need for transparency in regard to letting agents' fees, but some commentators have pointed out that one of the unintended consequences of her policy would be an increase in rents. In Scotland, which has introduced the policy, rents have risen by a greater proportion than in any other regional country in the United Kingdom. What does the hon. Lady make of that?

Emma Reynolds: I simply do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. According to Shelter, which conducted a survey of letting agents throughout Scotland, there is no evidence—[*Interruption.*] I allowed the hon. Gentleman to intervene; perhaps he will have the politeness to listen. The survey by Shelter established that, since 2012, landlords in Scotland were no more likely to increase rents than landlords elsewhere in the United Kingdom.

What the hon. Gentleman and other Government Members must ask themselves is this: is it reasonable for letting agents to charge whatever they want to charge? For that is exactly what is happening. Is it reasonable for a letting agent to charge £300, £400 or £500 for inventories, references, and all the other things

that the landlord needs, because the letting agent is working for the landlord? And guess what? The landlord is paying a percentage—usually 8% or 10%—in order to pay management costs to the letting agent. It is not as if the letting agent is not getting any money out of the transaction.

We are merely suggesting that, given that the tenant does not shop around for a letting agent—the tenant shops around for a property—the tenant should not have to pay the fees. If Government Members want to set their faces against Generation Rent, let them go ahead and see what the electoral consequences are.

Mr Prisk: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will give way to the former housing Minister.

Mr Prisk: I think that we all share the ambition to get rid of shoddy practice, but what will Labour's proposals do to prevent landlords from raising the rent? There is nothing there.

Emma Reynolds: I have explained very clearly. I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not listen. We will put a ceiling on rent increases during the three-year tenancies, at the end of year one and at the end of year two. In Ireland there is a ceiling on rent increases during its four-year tenancies, and there is also a ceiling in Spain. We will consult industry representatives in order to reach agreement on what the best ceiling would be, but Ireland—[*Interruption.*] Members should listen. Ireland uses the average market rent, which seems perfectly reasonable, and Spain uses a measure of inflation that takes housing costs into account.

We can have a sensible debate, but all I say to the hon. Gentleman, who is a former Housing Minister, and other Government Members is, why should not families have stability and security for three or four years to plan the lives of their children? Why should they face the insecurity of their rents going up excessively and their having to change area and school? Such insecurity is having a massive impact on the aspirations and life chances of children in that situation.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right to focus on unfair letting agent fees. Is she aware of the study by citizens advice bureaux that showed that 73% of private tenants are dissatisfied with the service they receive from their agents?

Emma Reynolds: I have seen that report. Citizens advice bureaux are not the only ones making that point—the Office of Fair Trading has said that there is a substantial level of complaints about the letting agent industry. I say to the Government: ensuring transparency is not enough. If I am a tenant, knowing that I am going to be ripped off by £400 or £500 will not make it any easier, or any cheaper.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am pleased that my friend has moved on to the administration of the agencies. Is she concerned that there is some suggestion by "Panorama" and others of racial profiling of tenants by some agencies and that many agencies refuse to even

accept an application from anyone who is on benefit, which completely discriminates against people who need to be rehoused urgently?

Emma Reynolds: Such practice is criminal and should not be happening. At the tail end of last year, I saw reports, following some mystery shopping, that letting agents were sometimes instructed by landlords not to take on people from the black and minority ethnic communities and that letting agents were sometimes doing that themselves. That is appalling, and I am sure that there is cross-party agreement on the issue. Such practice is already criminal. This is a matter of enforcement. The law is already in place, which should stop that; but unfortunately, it seems to be happening in the capital.

Mr Slaughter: Will my hon. Friend look at the condition of the private rented sector? Double the number of private rented sector properties are unfit compared with housing association properties. When tenants complain, they are often evicted and thrown out on to the streets.

Emma Reynolds: Absolutely. That is why we proposed—I regret that the Government got rid of the legislation within weeks of getting into office—a national register of landlords and greater powers and flexibility for local authorities in areas where that is a particular issue. In London and other areas of high demand, it is a big issue. Those local authorities should have greater powers to introduce licensing schemes.

Nick de Bois (Enfield North) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will, and then I will wind up my speech.

Nick de Bois: In the motion, there is much that many can support, but where I struggle is on what you are saying about fees. You talk about limiting rents—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not talking about anything. I think that the hon. Gentleman is referring to the hon. Lady.

Nick de Bois: I apologise, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady talks about limiting increases in a three-year contract, but surely, without the fees, all that the agencies will do is front-load increases: we will see incremental, large rises at the beginning.

Emma Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point. According to research by Shelter, which has conducted a thorough piece of work on the issue, only one landlord in 120 that it surveyed said that they had noticed an increase in agency fees and had passed that on in full to their tenants. Therefore, to be frank, the change we are suggesting is not that big. It is pretty big news for tenants, but it will not make a massive difference to the letting agent industry. It will have to change its business model slightly, but what it has done, especially in the years of the global financial crash, is shift ever so slightly, often little by little, the costs of the tenancy on to the tenant, who does not have the power and leverage to negotiate with the letting agent. The tenant sees a property that they like. They do not choose the letting agent. They do not have leverage over the negotiations.

[Emma Reynolds]

The landlord has that leverage, and the landlord should do the deal with the letting agent on the fees, including on the fee that the landlord pays the letting agent to manage the property.

Dr Huppert: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Emma Reynolds: I will not, as I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman and others want to speak.

The sad truth is that Ministers and some Government Back Benchers know that there is great concern about the instability and insecurity in the private rented sector, but they are simply unwilling to do anything about it. They have paid lip service to the concerns of generation rent, but they lack the courage of their convictions to bring about any meaningful change.

The Government have claimed that they are in favour of long-term tenancies and predictable rents. As I said, the Secretary of State has talked about inflation-linked rent rises, but four years into this Parliament, they have failed to act. I urge right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches to look carefully at our proposals to make three-year tenancies the norm, to put a ceiling on rent increases and to ban letting agent fees charged to tenants. It would be far better for the Government to take action now, but if they continue to ignore generation rent, the next Labour Government will not.

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): My hon. Friend wants to end her speech, but I wonder whether she would be surprised to know that there will be a debate this afternoon in the Scottish Parliament on a similar subject. The Scottish National party-run Government are taking the same line as the coalition Government here and are resisting the motion proposed by my colleagues in Scotland, which is very similar to that which my hon. Friend has tabled.

Emma Reynolds: It is regrettable that the Scottish Government do not see the value of longer-term tenancies, predictability, stability and peace of mind for the millions of people renting in the private sector.

The Minister is an assiduous Member and a very eloquent one, but he has a tendency to lecture us on everything being our fault, despite the fact that he is the one in government. Therefore, in a spirit of co-operation and friendly advice, if he supports our proposals, he will have our support—it is a generous offer. I hope that he will have the 9 million people renting from private landlords in mind when he speaks. I also hope that he can engage with our proposals, which are reasonable and sensible. They are serious proposals for a vastly improved and more secure private rented sector. In that spirit, I commend the motion to the House.

1.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Nick Boles): It is a great pleasure to find myself doing combat with the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds). I hope that you will forgive, Mr Speaker, a brief further reference to “Game of Thrones” but I now know what the hound must have felt like when he faced Brienne of Tarth. I suspect that not everyone in the

House will get that reference, but I recommend that Members look it up. It is intensely flattering to the hon. Lady. I feel sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), who is the Housing Minister, as a distinguished former soldier, would have been better equipped to fend off her attacks, but he is speaking at the Chartered Institute of Housing in Manchester. I know that he would like to be here.

The Leader of the Opposition’s motion follows a pattern that is becoming wearily familiar to hon. Members. I find myself wondering whether it is even becoming a little trying for you, Mr Speaker, although I am sure that you would never let it show. The pattern unfolds like this. The Opposition begin by identifying some real problems affecting people in the communities we all represent. Every Member knows from their constituency surgeries that irresponsible landlords and rapacious letting agents do exist. Every Member wants to deal with them. The Labour party then proceeds to slander an entire industry by claiming that the problems it has identified are an almost universal experience and that irresponsible and rapacious behaviour is typical business practice. After years of policy commissions and conference debates in which Labour Members worked themselves up into a righteous lather denouncing the horrors of capitalism, they then disinter a mouldy old policy from the 1970s, spray a bit of shiny new paint over it and present it as a solution to all the ills of the modern market economy. We have seen them follow that script in relation to energy bills.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nick Boles: I will give way in a moment.

Now Labour Members are trotting it out for rental housing. It is difficult to say in which area their approach is more flawed.

Meg Hillier: This is not a throwback to an old era of problems; it is going back to an old era where there was security for tenants. Leaving aside the proposal of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), what are the Government doing to encourage long-term landlords who provide homes that are just for letting, not for future sale, so tenants can have a long-term future and have the security that my hon. Friend is talking about?

Nick Boles: In that old era, the amount of rental property in the country had fallen to 8%. It is now up at 18% because there has been investment in the sector; it is an environment in which people want to put their money.

Government Members recognise that there are some cowboys operating in the private rental sector. Some landlords are trigger-happy in terminating tenancies, using any excuse to turf out a responsible tenant who has just had the temerity to complain about some aspect of the property. Some letting agents and property management companies are greedy, gouging hard-pressed tenants for disproportionate fees without prior notice. That is why we are making letting agents publish all their fees in a prominent place and join an approved redress scheme, so that tenants can get a fair hearing and proper compensation. It is why we are developing a

model tenancy agreement that landlords and tenants can use if they want to enter into a longer tenancy agreement.

Luciana Berger: Can the Minister tell the House when this model tenancy agreement might be available for use and for our constituents to benefit from?

Nick Boles: Our approach in government, unlike that of the last Government, is to consult with the industry and with tenants before we produce things. Therefore, I am happy to tell the hon. Lady that some time this summer she will see this model tenancy agreement. That is also why we have published the well-received “How to rent” guide that will empower would-be tenants and why we are developing a code of practice to drive up standards in the industry.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Minister will have heard my intervention on my Opposition Front-Bench friend. Can he confirm that the Government are prepared to take action to prevent racist discrimination by agencies and to stop agencies simply banning anyone in receipt of any state benefit even applying for a tenancy?

Nick Boles: I am grateful for that intervention because I entirely share the hon. Gentleman’s outrage at the suggestion that these practices are taking place. As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) said, there are already powers to deal with that, but it is important that they are used and enforced, and I hope very much that local authorities and police forces around the country will look closely at any evidence presented to them by “Panorama” or anyone else.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The question from my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) was not just about race discrimination, but about discrimination against tenants who depend on benefits to pay their rents. Is there any remedy for that?

Nick Boles: The hon. Lady will understand that obviously private owners of properties have some rights to decide who they let their property to, but I feel that it would be very strongly in the interests of all private landlords to work closely with people who are in receipt of local housing allowance and ensure that they too can access properties in the private market.

We will do nothing to undermine confidence in the long-term prospects of the rental market and drive away the institutional investors we need to expand the number of rental properties and improve their quality, but that would be the precise effect of the rent controls that the Leader of the Opposition proposes.

I hope hon. Members will forgive a brief foray into basic micro-economics, but I do think it is important in this debate. Owners of properties have a choice: they can either sell them and invest the money elsewhere, or rent them out. The more institutions we can persuade to invest in owning and renting property, the more options will be available to would-be tenants and the more likely it is that those who want longer tenancies with predictable rent reviews will be able to find landlords who are willing to offer them.

If, however, investors in rental property think that their costs may increase while their rents are capped, they will do one of two things: they will either insist on a much higher rent up front, increasing the costs tenants face, or they will decide to sell the property into today’s buoyant housing market and invest the money elsewhere. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East is a highly intelligent woman and a much better economist than I am. She knows that this is the reality of the rental market, so why has she come to the House today with such an obviously idiotic policy? There are reasons.

Meg Hillier: Does the Minister not recognise that this growth in the number of individual landlords investing in the way that he has just described is one of the reasons why tenants have such insecurity? What are the Government doing—he is in government now—to encourage longer-term institutional investors to invest in properties that are solely for rent long term, so that tenants can get longer-term security?

Nick Boles: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her intervention, as it is what I think is known as a soft ball, because this Government have of course done a great deal more than previous Governments to pull institutional investment into this sector. We have already identified in excess of £10 billion of equity that people are looking to invest in this sector. We have a £1 billion Build to Rent fund. We have £3 billion of guarantees for the private rented sector. The precise point here is that we will have some chance of pulling institutional long-term investment into higher-quality rental property if such investors have confidence that the rules of that market are not going to suddenly change and they are not going to suddenly find themselves being faced with unpredictable costs and capped rents. That is how we get institutional investment in, and it is precisely the opposite of what the Labour party is proposing.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Minister is making a fundamental point: he is saying that rents are indexed to capital values. Is that correct?

Nick Boles: I am not saying anything as complicated as that. I am a bearer of a fairly simple brain, and I am simply saying that if someone cannot control their costs and is faced with capped or controlled revenues, that is a very risky environment and there are lots of other places where they can put their money, and we will see rental property returning to how it was until the housing legislation was changed: falling as a contributor to our economy.

Mr Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister said one of the factors that will give confidence to institutional investors is longer-term tenancies. However, the other issue, which he has not touched on at all, is of course reputational damage because of the difficult end of the rental market constantly receiving lots of very bad publicity. If he wishes to attract institutional investors, would it not be sensible to do more to deal with that reputational issue?

Nick Boles: I agree with the hon. Gentleman in that, as in any industry, this industry will want to drive out the cowboys because they undermine the industry and people’s confidence in it, but we do not do that by

[Nick Boles]

imposing blanket controls that apply to both good providers and those few who upset the whole thing for everybody else.

Mr Slaughter: Is the Minister's problem not that he sees this entirely from the landlord's point of view and does not see the power relationship here? The reality for tenants in my constituency is that they are paying a fortune, often for very substandard properties, and cannot complain because they might be evicted. Is not the game given away by the Minister's colleague the Housing Minister telling landlords "Well, if somebody's on benefit, just evict them."? Does the Minister support that?

Nick Boles: I do not accept anything that the hon. Gentleman says, but then I never do. The fact is that the interests of his constituents who are tenants are best served by having more investment coming in, to produce rental property of a higher quality supplied by professional companies that they then will be able to access.

We have to ask ourselves why the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East has come to the House with this policy today. The first reason is that her boss, the Leader of the Opposition, wants to be seen as the man who will stand up to business and impose his will on the unruly forces of the market. He is not much interested in housing, and, lucky fellow that he is, it is a very long time since he needed to find a flat to rent, so he does not much care if the policy will work; he just wants a policy that will beef up his brand as the scourge of British business, and on that at least he has definitely succeeded.

The other reason lies deep in the DNA of the Labour movement. It is addicted to compulsion and control. From Douglas Jay, who thought that the gentleman in Whitehall knows best, to Nye Bevan, who wanted to know if a bedpan dropped in a ward in Tredegar, to Ed Miliband, who wants to decide how much rent should be charged on every property in the country in three years' time, the instinct is the same: to make people do the things they want them do in the way they want them to do it. So they ignored the fact that, without Government intervention, average tenancy lengths have increased by 6% to reach an average of more than 21 months—without Government legislation. They block their ears to the majority of young people—still a very important group of tenants—who say that they value the flexibility of existing tenancies and do not want to be bound up in a three-year agreement. They draw a veil over the awkward truth that the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, which the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East claimed was helping her to devise a benchmark for her rent controls, is doing no such thing and opposes the policy.

Last year, the Communities and Local Government Committee, chaired by the ever-wise hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who is unfortunately not with us today, conducted a review into the private rented sector. It concluded that it did not

"support rent control which would serve only to reduce investment in the sector at a time when it is most needed. We agree that the most effective way to make rents more affordable would be to increase supply, particularly in those areas where demand is highest."

Perhaps the Chair of the Select Committee is not in the House today because he did not want to face the embarrassment of disagreeing so intensely with his own party's Front Benchers. The approach that the Committee suggests is the right one.

Frank Dobson (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you ask the hon. Gentleman to tell us whether he warned my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) that he would be mentioned in this debate?

Mr Speaker: It is the normal courtesy so to notify. A simple nod of the head will suffice if the Minister did notify the hon. Gentleman.

Nick Boles: I entirely apologise—I did not know that that was the practice, and I should have. I assumed that the hon. Gentleman would be here because he is the Chair of the relevant Select Committee. I will write to him straight after the debate to apologise for having referred to him without warning him.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I bring to the House's attention my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Is the Minister surprised that the Opposition's motion makes no reference to the supply of housing, an increase in which would transform the market for all sectors—privately owned, social housing and private rented?

Nick Boles: My hon. Friend is exactly right, and he brought that insight to the Select Committee review that led it to draw such intelligent conclusions. The Select Committee's approach is the right one. It is the core of the Government's strategy, and I would even go so far as to call it a central plank in our long-term economic plan. I therefore urge Members to oppose the motion.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues will have noted that, on account of the level interest, there is an 8-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

1.23 pm

Frank Dobson (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): We last debated private rents on 24 March, and at that time I and other London Members pointed out that ordinary Londoners were being priced out of the city. I do not mean the City where they play with money; I mean the great London conurbation. That is because there has been a total failure in the housing market, be it buying or renting. Increasingly, ordinary people can no longer afford either to buy or to rent in London, and the situation is still changing for the worse. Prices and rents are still going up and, if the *Evening Standard* is to be believed, according to a recent headline rents in London are rising eight times faster than wages. Rents are continuing to outstrip wages.

Meg Hillier: Nowhere is that truer than in my constituency of Hackney South and Shoreditch, where private rents are out of the reach of many people, who are unable to live in the borough. Does my right hon.

Friend agree that the resulting higher population churn causes real damage to the strength of our local communities?

Frank Dobson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend.

Things generally have been getting worse, but there has been one enormous change for the better: the Labour party's commitment to regulating rents and providing security of tenure in a way not proposed for a very long time. I am delighted to welcome this development, although personally I would go rather further. However, it is the right thing to do, it is popular, certainly with Londoners, and it is an approach that works.

We had the "less than GCSE" economics lecture a few minutes ago on the merits of encouraging investment in the private sector, and how it would be damaged by regulation. That ignores all the European evidence. Germany and Switzerland have a heavily regulated private sector, including rent regulation, and they have the highest proportion of people living in the private rented sector. They live, generally speaking, in rather good quality private sector flats and houses, certainly better than the average here. People in the Netherlands, where the first rent that anyone can charge is set, are better housed than most people in Britain. We simply cannot go on with the current situation—ruinously high rents—under this Lib Dem-Tory coalition.

Last year, the average weekly rent in London was 51% of average weekly pay. It is now 55%, which is clearly ruinous for tenants.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend share my disappointment that the CityWest Homes letting arm of Westminster Council recently advertised an ex-council flat for sale at £650,000, but in doing so mentioned that it has just been let for £500 a week? Does he think that tells us everything that has gone wrong with the central London letting market?

Frank Dobson: My hon. Friend—my good, long-term and hon. Friend—makes an excellent point, as usual.

I recently picked up a brochure advertising new apartments to rent in Bloomsbury. A two-bedroom flat costs £560 a week. That is £26,880 a year. Who can afford that sort of rent? A Russian oligarch, I am sure—even perhaps a Ukrainian oligarch—and perhaps a banker who spends their time advising tax swindlers on how to avoid paying more tax by investing in Luxembourg; and here I do not mention Mr Juncker. However, nobody who is contributing to the local community can afford £26,000 a year—no shopkeeper; no bus driver; no teacher; no research scientist at the shortly to open Francis Crick Institute; no nurse. As I said in my last speech on this issue, no new consultant surgeon at Great Ormond Street hospital or University College hospital can afford that sort of rent. As a new consultant, they get, at most, about £80,000 a year. After taking off their tax and national insurance, that leaves £40,000 a year. So somebody on £40,000 a year would have to pay £26,000 a year for a two-bedroom flat.

It is a ludicrous situation that is bad for tenants, obviously. People come into London, or go to their local hospital, relying on Great Ormond Street or University College hospital to get the finest treatment and care in the land, but the people providing it cannot afford to live near those great hospitals. The situation is intolerable.

But it is not just bad for the local community and tenants; it is ludicrously bad for taxpayers, because private sector landlords are getting a public subsidy from the taxpayer of between £9 billion and £10 billion every year—that is what is paid out in housing benefit. It does not stay in the handbags and wallets of the tenants; it goes to the landlords. The last time I checked, agriculture was getting a subsidy of only £6 billion a year, but apparently it is okay for the private rented sector to get a £9 billion a year subsidy.

The Mayor of London now says that when he wants an element of "social housing" in a new development, it will count as such if it is going to be asking up to 80% of market rents. Most people cannot afford to pay that, so his programme does nothing for badly off Londoners. What we need to do is build more homes—homes that ordinary people can afford. We have the ludicrous situation where people who are homeless and the responsibility of the local authority cannot be re-housed by the local authority, because it does not have enough flats and homes, and so it places them in the private sector, where they have no security of tenure and pay ludicrously high rents, which are being met largely by the taxpayer. No economic theory can possibly justify anything as daft as that. The worst thing someone can say about something these days is that it is daft, and that situation is extremely daft.

Clearly, we need to put more effort into getting new flats and houses built. I have a madcap scheme to create more land in London by decking over all the deep railway cuttings and either building housing on them or using them as green spaces in order to justify building higher-density housing next to them. That is the only way in which we will create more land in the area, and we need revolutionary ideas such as that. In the end, however, we have to get a grip on house prices and private rents. Unless we do that, we are ruining—

Mr Slaughter: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Frank Dobson: I have given way twice and I ought to sit down before my eight minutes are up.

1.33 pm

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): May I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests?

Let me start by saying that I strongly believe in both a bigger and better private rented sector. As with the housing market as a whole, as we heard from the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson), we need more homes in this sector and more homes to rent. That means securing substantial private investment into the sector, for the long term. As the Select Committee found, increasing supply is good not only for the market as a whole, but for tenants, as it gives them, finally, the opportunity to choose and that helps us to make sure that bad and mediocre landlords raise their game. Therefore, the argument for increasing supply is not just an economic one; it is a social argument on behalf of the existing tenants in the marketplace. That is why the Government were right in taking on and fully implementing the findings of the Montague report.

The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) asked what the Government were doing to get institutional investors in, so I should mention the £1 billion Build to Rent fund and the up to

[Mr Mark Prisk]

£11 billion in housing guarantees. They are crucial, not just because they involve large sums, but because they are long-term commitments to a sector that needs them. May I say to my former colleagues on the Front Bench that we could speed up the due diligence process on the Build to Rent fund? I have raised the issue with Ministers before, but if we are to get these homes under construction, we might speed up that process. I am sure that the Minister replying to this debate will want to set out where the Homes and Communities Agency has got to on this, because I know he shares my ambition to get those homes under way.

The Labour party is in danger of cutting off the very investment it claims it wants. The hopeless muddle—I am being polite—around the announcements from its leader's office on rents caused many investors real alarm. There are responsible long-term institutional investors who want to invest and provide the quality of home and the longer leases that the Labour party has rightly been calling for, but by muddling rent indexation with rent controls and by part of its leadership playing to the gallery, the Labour party has left a large question mark over its housing policy. If, heaven forbid, we were to find next May that we had a Labour Government, that party and its Front-Bench team—I think they know this, given their chuntering—would need to clear up the muddle or they simply would not get the necessary investment and therefore the necessary supply.

Labour's policy for a national register of landlords is just a gimmick. As we have seen in Scotland, such a policy would have little, if any, impact on standards, but we would see a rise in rents. The Labour Government checked what a national register would cost: it would be £300 million. Who would pay it? Would it be the landlords? No, it would be the tenants.

Graham Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman understand how long it takes local authorities, including his, to find out who a private landlord is and how much money would be saved by knowing who the landlord was through a register?

Mr Prisk: There is a case for registers in individual local authorities but, as the Select Committee agreed, a national register applied on a rigid basis is not the answer.

On standards in the sector as a whole, there is a case for a more professional rented sector. As several hon. Members have said, a minority of landlords and letting agents provide what is, at best, a shoddy service; in some cases, they flout the law and in others they have a wanton disregard for tenants' safety. More can be done, and I encourage the Minister to focus on houses in multiple occupation. That subsector is the source of some of the worst practices, as hon. Members may know from their constituents, and often people on the lowest incomes and students are caught in it. We have legal powers in place to deal with this, but perhaps a little elbow grease from Ministers, a little Whitehall direction, and a little support and encouragement from local councils could make a real difference. Let me highlight one aspect of this issue. We need to look not just at the urban, larger HMOs in places such as Headingley

in Leeds, but at some of the smaller HMOs—the two-storey houses. I am talking about the ones where, as I have discovered in the fens, HMOs are serving seasonal workers and are very often the source of dreadful practices and wider criminality.

On the letting agents issue, which the Opposition have flagged up in their motion, I am proud that it is this Government who are giving tenants proper powers of redress. The ombudsman scheme, backed by a clear code of practice, is long overdue and it will enable us to start to drive up standards of service. Let me remind the House that when in government the Labour party spoke against and voted against those redress measures for tenants. This House needs to remind not only itself but tenants whom we serve that that is where the Labour party stood for 13 years—it refused to support additional redress for tenants—and the party should be ashamed of that record.

Labour's proposals on banning fees are well intentioned, because we have seen some dreadful practices, but the measures do not deal with the root cause of the practice among letting agents; what they would do is help to tackle one symptom. As questioning from my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield North (Nick de Bois) highlighted, Labour's proposals contain nothing to prevent agents from then charging the landlords instead, which will lead to higher rents. So, by the back door, a well-intentioned piece of legislation would lead to an unintended consequence that costs tenants more. It is a very familiar story with the Labour party. What we need is a sector-wide agreement, one that sets higher standards for the quality of the homes provided, the type of leases offered and the level of customer service that tenants can expect. That is the way forward. We want a comprehensive approach and not a quick fix.

We have a great opportunity to put in place permanently a genuine and stable private rented market. For too long, this House has tended to divide blue and red on the issue of tenure. It is, "Home ownership is perfect" or "Social housing is perfect." We need to move on and recognise that we need more homes to rent, more subsidised homes to rent and more homes to own. Unless we focus on supply and play the game in terms of ensuring that the whole market works, we will fail. A modern economy needs a dynamic, open and competitive private rented sector, and it needs tenants who can rely on what is a professional standard. It should be a market in which the customer, and not the provider, leads.

We are, as a Government, making good progress. The policy direction is right, but I say to Members on both Front Benches that there is more that can be done.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Just before I bring in the next speaker, may I say that if a Member is declaring an interest in the subject, they should say what the relevant interest is rather than saying it just in passing? I say that to help Members in the future.

1.41 pm

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): We have heard today about London, but, along with Brighton, Southampton is the rented homes capital of the south. Something like half of the homes in the city are rented. There are some 25,000 private rented properties in Southampton—about a quarter of all properties in the

city—50% of which are homes in multiple occupation. The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk) mentioned HMOs in his contribution a moment ago, but I have to say that the first thing this Government did when they came to power in 2010 was to remove the regulations that the previous Government had put in place. Those regulations would have enabled that sector to be better regulated and organised. I hope that the hon. Gentleman supports my call for those regulations to be restored as soon as possible to ensure better regulation of the HMO sector, certainly in Southampton and across the rest of the country.

Private rented properties in Southampton are in the province of landlords with not just one or two properties, but hundreds of properties across the city. In my constituency surgeries, I regularly hear about the problems that arise from the sheer size of this sector. Families might have taken out a lease on a house, settled their kids in local schools, raised the often substantial deposit and tried to settle down only to be turfed out unexpectedly at the end of a six-month lease period. It might not necessarily be in the first six months, but later when they thought they were secure in that property. What are they going to do? Where will they go? They cannot get instant council points to rent in the public sector. Do they rip their children out of the schools and start somewhere else? Will they even get back their deposit, which they have often borrowed, to allow them to start again?

Single renters also come to see me. They are often faced with poor quality rooms in those homes in multiple occupation. They have to deal with letting agencies that sometimes just rip them off, loading charges on them so that they can squeeze out more money at that vulnerable point when the person is trying to obtain a rental. I am talking about people with very little or no recourse to protect themselves.

Just as is the case nationally, the problems in Southampton come from a minority of landlords and letting agencies. Many landlords are first class and provide a secure and decent home for tenants, and many agencies really look after the people who come to them for lets. The point is that the nature of the rented market at the moment, couched as it is in insecurity and the possibility that rip-offs and unreasonable behaviour by landlords and agencies towards their tenants will generally go unchallenged, means that there is always the fear among renters that that will happen to them. Sometimes it does quite unexpectedly, and that is often when I see them at my constituency surgery. It is fair to say that there is widespread fear of the insecurity in the private rented sector in Southampton. It does not matter that it is only a minority of landlords and letting agencies that feed that fear.

We need to reform the rented market to provide greater clarity and security for those who rent. Renters need to know what they can expect in their letting and how they can live subsequent to a letting being achieved. I understand that Southampton's housing statistics will not change, but we need to see a change in the way that renters gain and keep their tenancies. We want proper regulation of letting agencies and deposits and three-year security if needed, with flexibility for shorter lengths. That would make an incalculable difference to those people who live in the rented sector in Southampton.

Fiona Mactaggart: Does my hon. Friend agree that one reason why it would be incalculable is that Southampton, like Slough, has very full schools, and for many parents, the anxiety of moving a long way away from their children's school completely destroys their sense of security and their family life?

Dr Whitehead: My hon. Friend could almost have been on my shoulder during my constituency surgeries. I have heard from parents who have been forced to move homes across the city and to take two or three children to different schools. Through no fault of their own, they face disruption to their lives, and it is absolutely corrosive to family life.

Let me explain why I am so disappointed today. Last October, the Department for Communities and Local Government said that it would support longer-term tenancies with predictable rents. It said:

“Tenants will be able to request longer tenancies that provide stability for their families, avoid hidden fees when renting a home and demand a fair deal from their landlords and letting agencies.”

I had thought that that was about changing the market for the better, but what we hear today is that there is a series of proposals in the pipeline that will simply persuade good landlords to be a little better and good letting agencies to be a little kinder. The proposals will make no difference to those agencies that are beyond the pale when it comes to voluntary arrangements or to those landlords who simply do not play by the rules, so business as usual will continue.

Renters in Southampton also need to know that their homes will be of a decent standard. They do not want to be faced with massive fuel bills or leaky, draughty homes. All too often in constituency surgeries, I hear about those who sign up for a lease and then find out that their room or their home is not remotely what they thought it would be. This is yet another area where the Government started down the road of good intention and then stopped. The Energy Act 2011—the last Energy Act but one—stipulated that all properties to be rented from 2018 onwards should be above code F and G, which would ensure that they could be let only if they were reasonably warm and secure. However, such a measure requires secondary legislation, and three years after that legislation was passed, no regulations have been laid.

I have it on good authority that the DCLG is blocking the laying of those regulations. As they have to be laid by the Department of Energy and Climate Change, DCLG is saying that it would be too bureaucratic and costly to implement the legislation. Recent research has shown that landlords across the country would have to spend only about £1,500 to update their properties to meet that standard. If that information is correct, it is shocking. There needs to be a basic understanding that if someone rents a home it will be of good quality, the tenant will be secure in it and the transaction between landlord and tenant will be a fair deal. All the cards are stacked against tenants, and regulation is needed to make sure that the deal is fair. If DCLG is preventing the implementation of legislation that could make sure that homes were of a decent standard, it should get its act together and reverse the decision. I should like to hear from the Minister this afternoon that that is indeed what the Department will do.

1.50 pm

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD): It is a pleasure to have the chance to speak in this debate and to follow the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead). This is an important issue nationally and in my constituency. We have a huge number of people renting, and that is reflected across the country. For the first time there are more people in the private rented sector than the social rented sector, and there are still too many problems in the private rented sector. It is incredibly expensive, in many cases exploitative and in some cases unsafe.

Some people choose to rent because it suits their lifestyle, and that is something that we should allow and support. Others have to rent because they simply cannot find the deposit for a mortgage. The rented sector is now not much easier to get into than property ownership. I have been contacted during the debate by someone whose fees to rent a new, not particularly large, property come to £3,700 cash upfront. That is not atypical. It is a significant amount of money for many people to find. Many agencies also impose exit charges. I have also been contacted by people who face having to pay a large amount of money simply to leave a property. People can find themselves trapped in inappropriate or inappropriately priced facilities.

Many people have a fantastic experience with landlords. There are many decent landlords out there who behave correctly. The challenge is those who do not, and I welcome the focus that is being placed on that problem. I was delighted to be at the launch of the Generation Rent manifesto and have a chance to speak about how important this is to me and my party and to talk about some of our party policy proposals.

I introduced a private Member's Bill in the previous parliamentary Session, which sadly went the way of most private Member's Bills in this place. It dealt with many of the issues that we are talking about today such as the regulation of letting agents, accreditation of landlords, an ombudsman for the private sector, longer tenancies and getting rid of above-cost fees. There are disagreements about the details of how one could introduce such measures, but I hope that we can resolve them.

The heart of the problem is often just that rents are too high. The fees and everything else are a problem, but the overall level of rents is just too high, because demand is so much greater than supply. I see this in my constituency. The solution has to be to fix the supply—to make more housing available. Unfortunately, that has not happened. Everyone knows the figures. Under the previous Government, the amount of social housing went down by 421,000. We need those houses; we have to build many more. Hardly any council houses are being built, which is a huge problem.

Under the previous Government, council tenants were taxed and the money was taken away from Cambridge and could not be used to repair council houses or build anything new. The Liberal Democrat city council has worked to build many more houses. There has been a huge increase in the number of affordable homes and social homes, and existing council houses have been improved. There is also a scheme to build 2,000 more council houses—something I am incredibly proud of. Unfortunately, Labour took control of the city council at the most recent elections and one of its first acts was to scrap a scheme to improve council houses, many of

which are not wheelchair accessible and not fit for purpose. I hope that it will not also scrap our scheme to build 2,000 council houses because people want to get on with that.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Like my hon. Friend's, my constituency has a large number of privately rented homes. Does he share my disappointment that Leeds city council is not using its new powers to borrow to buy existing housing stock, which would be a much quicker way of delivering new social homes? Surely all councils should be considering that.

Dr Huppert: I do not claim to be an expert on the situation in Leeds, but my hon. Friend makes a good point. They should be doing such things. In Cambridge we charged higher council tax for empty properties instead of giving a discount, as was previously the case. People paid less if they brought a property back into use. It is hard for people who are desperately looking for a house to know that there are empty properties around.

I will not go through everything I spoke about in my speech on Second Reading of my private Member's Bill. I went into more detail about the need for an ombudsman and for accreditation schemes. I prefer accreditation schemes to a national register because they would be cheaper, more effective and less bureaucratic and would avoid problems with letting property on a more occasional basis. We are agreed that we need a better system, and accreditation could work.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) spoke about houses in multiple occupation. There are some good examples of HMOs, but others are a serious problem and do not comply with basic health and safety regulations. They are an essential part of the housing mix in a place like Cambridge. We rely on them to house people, and they do a good job. Yet Labour councillors have proposed to cap the number of HMOs and change the definition to any house with three people from two unrelated groups. Driving younger people out of HMOs would simply slash the supply and make it even harder to house people in my constituency.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Like me, the hon. Gentleman represents a university city with a great number of HMOs. Does he share my concern that the definition of HMO—that it has to have at least five rooms and more than three storeys—means that many properties are not licensed? The standards in many of them are very poor, and that is precisely why councils such as Nottingham City council have introduced additional licensing schemes that cover a wider range of HMOs than those covered by the basic legislation.

Dr Huppert: I am happy to accept that some places should be looked at more, and I am about to talk about some of the safety issues. The question is whether the council should introduce some sort of accreditation scheme, as Cambridge has, to make sure that HMOs are safe, or ban them. I hope that the hon. Lady would not suggest capping the number of HMOs in her constituency because she knows as well as I do the problems that that would cause for people looking for somewhere to live.

We have problems with safety in the private rented sector. There are far too many unsafe properties. In particular, we have problems with electric fires. There

are about 17,000 electric fires in the private rented sector and it seems bizarre that there are no requirements for them to be safety checked. We should introduce such a requirement; it is not excessive red tape, it is a simple safety measure.

We want a fair deal for tenants. One group that we also need to consider is people who rent from private landlords and pay their rent using the local housing allowance. This was touched on earlier. There have been shocking cases of people being told that they cannot rent because they are on benefits. That simply should not be tolerated. We should not let landlords exclude a large number of people who need to find housing.

We have a particular problem in Cambridge. The local housing allowance was introduced by the previous Government with broad rental market areas. One of the problems was that the rent levels for Cambridge were set by averaging places as far afield as Haverhill and Littleport, which are both much further out and have lower rents. It became impossible for anyone to find anything to rent in Cambridge on the LHA amount. My predecessor fought strongly against this when it was set up. It was highlighted by the Work and Pensions Committee, which emphasised the specific problems in Cambridge and Blackpool. Those problems were not fixed. The message that the Labour Government sent to people in Cambridge on benefits was, "You can't afford to live in Cambridge. Go somewhere else." They made Cambridge unaffordable and increased rents in places such as Littleport and Haverhill. It was a poor scheme and I am pleased that the Government have finally, after much effort, launched an independent review of the adequacy of LHA levels and increased the levels in Cambridge by 4%—well above inflation. That is a start.

There is agreement across the House that we should make it easier for people to have longer tenancies. The stability is worth while. Some time ago in our policy paper, we in the Liberal Democrats proposed mini-leases, with new fixed-term leases of at least three years after a probationary period.

John Stevenson *rose*—

Dr Huppert: I am sorry; I have given way twice so I am running short of time.

I hope we can go forward and find alternatives, with greater agreement between landlords and tenants, so that people can turn their houses into homes.

Another aspect that concerns me is the status of guarantors. When they rent, many people are told to find a guarantor who will apparently underwrite the cost of their rent. That is discriminatory for people who do not have somebody who has sufficient income to provide such a guarantee. I am aware of cases in Cambridge where people whose parents live in Scotland have been told, rather bizarrely, that a guarantee from somebody in Scotland is not acceptable because it may not be legally binding. I hope the Minister can clarify that that is not the case. There are a number of students from Scotland who should certainly be able to rent places in Cambridge.

Letting agent fees are a serious issue and makes people's blood boil. I agree with Shelter and many of the 9 million people who rent that fees are out of proportion. That is why I proposed ending any permission

to charge above-cost fees. They should not be allowed. I was interested in the proposal from the Opposition, and I voted for an amendment, but for reasons that I do not understand, the Labour amendment specifically excluded any controls on fees that could be charged for credit checks. I hoped to press the shadow Minister on that. It is a great flaw in the Opposition's proposal as it means that letting agents who do not wish to comply will charge vast amounts for a credit check and shift all the money on to that.

Emma Reynolds *rose*—

Dr Huppert: I will take an intervention, but it must be quick.

Emma Reynolds: I shall be brief. I am sorry I did not take the intervention earlier. The tenant would pay up front, otherwise they might be able to walk away, but they would be refunded if they agreed to the tenancy.

Dr Huppert: That still seems to be a recipe for letting agents wilfully to turn people down on the basis of their credit checks, or to be very difficult in order to make money. That is the problem I have with that proposal. Letting fees should be limited and capped, but I am happy to talk further to the hon. Lady about that. I expect that 15 seconds is not quite long enough to resolve the disagreement on that.

We should get rid of letting fees. Studies in Scotland by Shelter which have been mentioned found that the increases in rent that one might expect did not take place.

Transparency, to which the Government are committed, is welcome. I support that. There is such an imbalance in power between the tenant and the landlord—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Time is up. I call John McDonnell.

2.2 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I almost apologise to the House for the fact that, in every housing debate, some of us who represent London constituencies seem to say the same thing. Like many London MPs and perhaps others, every week I have a family coming to see me, begging for a property. It is one of the most distressing experiences that we have in our role as Members, because all we can offer is sympathy. Lobbying and letters to the council elicit the standard response about the waiting times, the lack of housing supply and so on. As I mentioned, I find it really distressing and I do not know how the colleagues who run my constituency office cope with dealing with such families.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. It is very distressing—not only the supply, but cases where people in precarious private sector rented accommodation are threatened with almost immediate eviction or a rent hike, which frequently happens in my constituency. The council—with much pushing from me—has introduced a licensing scheme to try to overcome this. What does my hon. Friend think of that as a way of resolving some of the problems?

John McDonnell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on achieving that advance. It is difficult in many other areas, where we do not have the co-operation of the local authority. I have started turning up at evictions now, to negotiate with estate agents and others and the bailiffs. As many hon. Members will know, that can be quite confrontational.

I have lived and worked in my constituency and represented it in different forms for nearly 40 years. When I arrived there 40 years ago, if someone wanted a house, they would go to the council and there would be council housing. There was a council housing waiting list, but it was not that long. Most of those council houses were sold off. Ironically, a letter went out from Hillingdon council two weeks ago seeking to lease back the council properties that it sold 20 years ago, to rent those out to people. It is bizarre how the cycle turns.

The other form of housing in my area was owner-occupation. There was little private rented accommodation at the time, but the level of wages was such that mortgages were available. Mortgages were also available through local authorities. The Greater London council a mortgage scheme with a relatively cheap rent. Now, unfortunately, even though my area has high levels of employment, the pay is such that people cannot afford owner-occupation. The average price of a property in my borough is £318,000, which is way out of the reach of people in my constituency on average pay—between £12,000 and £20,000. They are therefore forced into the private rented sector.

The private rented sector has expanded, but insufficiently. In my constituency, the cost of a family property in the private sector ranges from £1,200 to £1,600, and in some instances up to £2,000, a month. That is simply unaffordable. Even if people overcome the challenge of getting into the private rented sector, they are faced, as we heard earlier, with discrimination against anyone on benefits being able to rent a property. There is ghettoisation going on, organised by the landlords and the agents—“That area or that property isn’t suitable for you because you’re on benefits.”

People go through all the experiences about which I have expressed concern—having to find the money up front, the heavy charges imposed by the agents—and it forces some into penury. I have many constituents who go to payday loan agencies to borrow the money to try to get a roof over their heads.

Ms Buck: My hon. Friend is making a characteristically passionate speech. Does he share my concern that at the very time when the impact is being felt, as he describes, we are seeing a collapse in the provision of advice services, particularly for housing? This morning’s statistics on legal aid provision show, for example, that the number of housing cases for which legal aid was provided has fallen from 126,000 to 55,000, so at the time of greatest need, people are finding less advice and assistance available to them.

John McDonnell: I was going to come on to that, but let us deal with it now. Tenants are defenceless at present. They may well know their rights, but they are not able to exercise them. Because the law centre in my area is on a contract, it is limited in the work that it can do, and it is swamped. The citizens advice bureau is swamped continuously. There are lines of people on a

Tuesday morning queuing up to go to the CAB to book their appointment. In my constituency we have moved to an open door policy so that people can come to the office at any time. All the agencies that I am aware of are swamped.

Tenants cannot get into the system even to challenge what is going on. It is not just about getting access to a property; it is about defending themselves, once they are in that property, against abuse by landlords and threats of eviction. All this has resulted in the use of bed-and-breakfast accommodation in my constituency going up. The figure was 30 in 2012; the latest figures I have from the beginning of 2014 show that there were well over 200 families in bed and breakfast. I thought that on a cross-party basis we had committed ourselves to ensuring that no family would be in bed and breakfast.

The bed-and-breakfast establishments that I have been visiting are squalid. They are appalling. Because families are stuck in bed and breakfast for a long time, children are being brought up in squalid and often unsafe conditions.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the spiralling cost of rentals in London creates a problem for people in public sector occupations, such as firemen and teachers, being able to afford to live in London?

John McDonnell: Suitable accommodation is non-existent. Firefighters in the Hayes station were commuting from Devon and Cornwall. It is very difficult to find anyone in public service locally who can afford a property in the area.

This means that the overcrowding in my constituency is appalling. In the 40 years that I have lived there, I have not seen it on such a scale before. People tell me it is as bad as it was after the second world war. We complain about kids being out on the streets and joining gangs, but overcrowding means that kids are forced out on to the streets, and they become incredibly vulnerable. Think about a child going home and having to do homework in the room where the other kids are having tea, or having their bedroom in the room where they have to do their homework either on their knees or on the bed. The social impact is horrendous.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

John McDonnell: I cannot give way any more. I apologise.

There is also squalor in the private rented sector. In my constituency there are landlords, the majority of whom own one or two properties, who do not maintain them. This has been made worse by the economic recession. Walk down any street in my constituency and it will be clear from the standard of the properties and their maintenance which ones are the buy-to-lets. When the tenants complain, they are evicted. They have virtually no legal redress, because they cannot get into the courts; or they turn up at the citizens advice bureau or the law centre and it is difficult to get advice because they too are swamped. There is also an element of blacklisting of certain tenants who challenge particular landlords. The environmental health standards of some properties are appalling, yet obtaining enforcement by the council is

difficult. I do not blame the local authority, because with staff cuts it is difficult to provide cover for the scale of the problem faced and the enforcement required.

Houses in multiple occupation in my constituency have experienced all the health and safety risks, including fires and, unfortunately, some fatalities as well. There is a continuous churning process, with families in short-life accommodation, perhaps for 18 months or two years, being moved out. That disrupts the family, breaking down family relationships and undermining communities, and the long-term impact on children's education and social relationships is devastating.

The solution is a statement of the blindingly obvious: build more council houses. I was critical of the previous Government. We had debates such as this, but I think that the Labour party has learned the lesson that we now need to invest in social housing on a scale that we have not done in the last 20, 30 or 40 years. We need a massive council housing programme. Councils should be encouraged compulsorily to purchase empty land. We cannot wait around any longer while we negotiate with developers. The crisis is too large. In an area of desperate housing need, we still have empty properties. Homes are standing empty. There are 700,000 empty properties in this country, 300,000 of them long-term, beyond six months. We should be encouraging councils to use their compulsory purchase powers to take over those properties, and put homeless families in them.

I support everything in the motion, but, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) said, it will have limited effect, at least in my area. What we need are rent controls. We are accused of Chavezism, but I am quite proud of that. I am a Bolivarian. The only thing that would work in my area is control of rents, because at least in that way we would get back some form of affordable housing. If it is not the same in other areas, let us devolve the ability and the power to local authorities to determine in their area whether they want the power to control rents and at what level they should be set. That would at least give hope to families in my community that they might have a decent roof over their heads for their children.

2.12 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): At the heart of this debate is a chronic under-supply of housing, because for successive decades there simply have not been enough houses built of all types of tenure. That is the challenge that we have to face. It is not about singling out private landlords, although it is in the private rented sector that the consequences of the failure to tackle under-supply are to be seen. We also need to make sure that we are building more houses to buy and for social landlords to let, and that we continue to allow the expansion of the private rented sector.

There is no doubt that there are rogue landlords out there who are exploiting tenants, but there are also many good, decent landlords. Most landlords want long-term tenants in their properties. They want people who will treat their properties as their homes and look after them. It is simply not the case that an army of small landlords is engineering this churn.

There are also a number of reluctant landlords, particularly in constituencies such as mine. We have all talked about the challenges of affordability, particularly

for first-time buyers, so we have lots of people out there who are letting a room so that they can use the income to get on the housing ladder. Most of them would prefer to have their home to themselves, but it is the means for them to acquire a home. Those people need to be encouraged. They do not need a wealth of bureaucracy that stops them being good landlords. Equally, as a result of the economic challenges of recent years, we have seen a lot of turbulence in the housing market. We also see many family breakdowns, so people often sit on properties that they cannot afford to liberate to sell, for one reason or another, and they want the long-term security of long-term tenants. We should not be making it difficult for them.

I have been struck by the comments made by Members representing London where, again, the problems of under-supply are particularly acute. There are people who are taking advantage of that, and some letting agents also play the system and encourage churn in their properties: because every time they find a new tenant, they get a letting fee. I have witnessed that practice being encouraged in my constituency, although people would rather keep a tenant for as long as possible. However, when many people are entering the field, owners are always encouraged, with the promise of a higher rent, to change tenants. There is a lot to be said for educating the public about some of these bad practices so that they know how to avoid them. I take the view that educating the public is perhaps the best way in which to get higher standards generally. Regulations are usually a pretty poor tool because, as we have heard, they are often not enforced. We have heard about councils' failure to take enforcement action against rogue landlords. The best thing we can do is ensure that all tenants know their rights and what they can expect from their landlords.

We have heard a lot in this debate about security of tenure, and rather less about the quality of some of our private rented properties, which is my concern today. The quality of one's living accommodation can be good or bad for one's health. We have talked about some properties being poorly maintained, but poorly maintained rented properties are not the preserve of the private rented sector. In my constituency, the worst properties are those owned by the council.

Ian Mearns: Shocking.

Jackie Doyle-Price: It is shocking that Thurrock council is letting down its tenants.

Graham Jones: Surely the hon. Lady should be doing something about that. There is a decent home standard for socially rented properties, and they should be brought up to that standard. The private rented sector, of course, has no quality conditions laid on it.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I am not the local council, but if I were, I would be doing something about it. Let me give the hon. Gentleman some examples. A row of four terraced houses in Tilbury is subsiding. One of the tenants has been on the waiting list to be rehoused for nine years. The council is still putting people in those properties. There is a flat from which someone was rehoused because it was riddled with damp, only for a new tenant to come to me two months later about the same property because it had not been treated. The

[Jackie Doyle-Price]

post-1940 housing stock in my constituency has poorly installed central heating and double glazing units, which have led to real problems of decay. Yes, the previous Government did introduce a decent housing initiative, but it is useless if councils do not take advantage of it. I am doing my best to tell the council what its obligations are to its tenants. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could do the same. It might listen to him as it is a Labour council.

The real point is that some tenants suffer seriously life-threatening illnesses. Where properties are infected with damp and mould, which happens in poorly ventilated properties with cheap double-glazing, we see a rise in illnesses such as asthma. I also want to mention an illness that many hon. Members may not have heard of, aspergillus. Where tenants inhale mould in infected properties, the mould can start to invade their lungs. That condition can be terminal, and I am sorry to advise the House that in my constituency I have a number of cases of people with aspergillus, contracted from the houses in which they live. One lady who suffered from respiratory failure was not allowed home by hospital staff because they recognised that it was her living environment that was killing her—and, yes, that was a council house. We must all be vigilant and remind councils of their obligations in this regard.

I very much welcome the efforts made by Government to educate tenants about their rights, and we must do more, because it is the voice of the consumer that will make landlords of all types deliver on their obligations. We can do a lot more in this place to highlight good and bad practice, and we should name and shame the particularly bad cases. While there are powers for councils to take action against rogue landlords, the real weakness in the current system is that we cannot make them do so. I say to the Minister that we really need to look at this.

We can take action to remind private landlords of their obligations to their tenants and remind tenants of what they can expect from their landlords, but the real hole in the system is the obligations of council landlords to their tenants and how we force them to act. We need to look at toughening up the powers of the ombudsman or developing a charter so that we can tell tenants what they can expect from their council landlords. However, let us not pretend, as Labour Members do, that the problem with our housing is always rogue private landlords; it is much worse than that. Our biggest problem is a failure to invest adequately in supply, and there is a serious problem with the quality of a lot of our housing stock. We should stop playing politics and actually get some houses built.

2.21 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In Hull, about 23,000 families—one in five of all local households—rent privately, and this figure has risen over the past decade. Across my constituency, families who rent privately regularly report concerns about the instability of short-term lets and the high charges imposed by under-regulated letting agents. I therefore fully support the motion.

First, I want to draw attention to the problems faced by students living in Hull who rent in the private sector. Secondly, I will highlight a particular constituency case

regarding the failure of landlords who do not maintain their properties and thereby blight local communities. Students in Hull who do not live in university-owned accommodation end up relying on the private rented sector. Most student housing in Hull is provided through seven big companies that act both as landlords and letting agents. They own some of their own housing and provide it directly, but also act as letting agents for smaller landlords' properties. In Hull, as in many other university cities, student unions have raised concerns about these kinds of letting agencies, which often mount very effective marketing campaigns targeting students. In Hull, many of their offices are situated very near to the university, so most students go straight to them.

Most of these letting agencies are not accredited. Of the seven I mentioned, just one, which is a smaller company, advertises membership of the Association of Residential Letting Agents on its website, and just one—the same one—is signed up to the property ombudsman's code of practice for residential letting agents. The rest are not listed on their websites as being thus accredited. When my office rang to try to confirm their membership of these bodies, they were unable to comment. This shows that self-regulation is not working terribly well. I welcome the DCLG's moves towards a redress scheme, but I would be interested to hear from the Minister what representations have been received from students and universities about its use as regards student letting agencies. What good is a redress scheme if tenants do not know about it in the first place?

Many of these agents charge students up-front, non-refundable administration fees ranging from £50 to £150 per person. Sometimes those fees are not advertised on their websites and people will be told about them only when they ask specific questions. Hull is by no means the worst for student up-front fees, but I still find it curious that it apparently costs some Hull letting agents up to three times more to administer exactly the same transaction than it costs others. The National Union of Students estimates that, nationally, over a third of students enter into some kind of debt to pay these tenancy set-up costs. One could suggest that the lack of longer-term tenancies and letting agents' fees are interlinked, in that tenancies are so short, for students and non-students, because that can give letting agents more in fees. Many Hull students have said that they would like to enter into longer-term contracts with landlords while they are studying—that would also be far easier for the landlords to manage—but unfortunately this does not happen very often.

Under the standard assured shorthold tenancy, tenants can generally pull out of the contract if they give a month's notice, but I have heard from students in Hull that many students' landlords write tougher clauses into their contracts whereby there is no provision to pull out with a month's notice and students are often liable for all their rent for the full tenancy period, even if they drop out and lose their student finance. Because of aggressive marketing by landlords, some students end up signing contracts up to seven months in advance. That can cause problems as students' circumstances can change. When the Government finally get round to publishing their model tenancy agreement, will it apply to student housing, and what will it say about the provision for ending tenancies?

A lot has been said about substandard housing. In Hull, compared with other university cities, a high number of student properties continue to go unlet each year. One consequence of this is relatively low levels of investment in properties. A survey by Hull university student union of properties it inspects showed that nearly 40% had evidence of damp, mould or peeling paper. Those are just the properties that are signed up to the union scheme; nothing is said about the landlords who do not sign up. In the absence of proper regulation of the private rented sector, it is difficult for unions such as Hull's to ensure good standards for all student properties.

I must give credit to Hull's union for having brought in two additional arms of regulation. I particularly commend its excellent president, Richard Brooks, for the work he has done in this area. The union has introduced its own letting agency to compete with the others—HUU Homes—and brought in a student-run accreditation scheme for substandard houses called HullSTARS. Unlike the previous accreditation scheme, which gave only generic good or bad ratings to 10% of homes, this student-run scheme gives five-star ratings to 100% of the homes it covers and allows students individually to review each property posted. However, these local measures can go only so far. We need to deal with the problem of unaccredited landlords and letting agents.

Finally, I want to raise the case of Ms Daniels, an owner-occupier in my constituency who lives in a row of six properties owned by private landlords. Some of the properties hold seven-plus tenants, and they generate a lot of waste. Rubbish and food waste is often left outside the property when the tenants leave. This means that the street looks untidy, and it encourages fly-tipping and attracts vermin. As the properties are registered with the council as family homes, not as HMOs, the council has very little room for manoeuvre in dealing with them. Ms Daniels, in the spirit of wanting to keep the community looking as nice as possible, takes it upon herself to put out wheelie bins. She told me recently that she had a sit-in in one of the refuse collecting vans to ask the refuse collectors to take some action to remove all the rubbish. The council tells her that it can give the landlords 42 days to remove the rubbish but there is nothing further it can do. Some of these landlords own hundreds of properties but do not live in the city and do not care about them. They have no incentive to keep them clean and tidy, and they are a blight on the local area. Will the Minister see what further action we need to take to make sure that landlords keep their properties in a fit and proper state in local communities?

2.29 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I remind the House of my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I would like to start—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I mentioned earlier that Members should declare interests that are relevant to the debate, so we need to know the details.

John Stevenson: I am a landlord, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I will start with two general points on housing policy. First, the United Kingdom has three distinctive housing sectors: home ownership, social housing and the private rented sector. In many respects we have Government

policies for each sector. I acknowledge that they are different, but they are often seen in isolation, rather than as part of an overall housing strategy with policies that help all three sectors and create greater consistency and overlap between them.

Secondly, we have housing policies for the whole country. I accept that we need a national framework, but I believe that we need greater flexibility so that different parts of the country can adopt slightly different policies to reflect their particular circumstances. The reality is that we have many different local housing markets, and not just in the private rented sector, but in the social housing sector and, indeed, in home ownership. Compare my constituency of Carlisle with London, for example. Even within Cumbria, the lake district market is incredibly different from that of Carlisle. Prices in London and Carlisle are so different. The social housing requirements in Carlisle are very different from those of Manchester, and the same is true of the private rented sector.

I will turn now to the private rented sector. The Communities and Local Government Committee's report on the private rented sector states:

"The market is a developing one which we need to help edge its way towards maturity. This requires a careful balancing act which does not upset the market developing naturally."

It is a balanced report that drew support from both sides of the House. It was endorsed by Opposition and Government Members. It recognised that the market is relatively young and effectively immature, but that it has been and is developing. It acknowledged the rapid growth there has been in the market and the creation of a large number of accidental landlords, which brings its own problems. I commend the report to the House. I am delighted that the Government's response accepted many of its recommendations.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend and Select Committee colleague agree that when we were considering the evidence and constructing the report, we discussed in detail the suggestion that rent controls should be introduced, and our cross-party Committee agreed that they would be a disaster for that emerging market?

John Stevenson: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that that was the Committee's conclusion. We recommended model tenancy agreements—I am delighted that the Government will be introducing them over the summer, after a consultation—a redress scheme and transparency in letting fees.

Addressing the specific issues raised in the motion is remarkably easy. I believe that the Opposition are misguided in their approach to that market. In fact, their motion does not even mention the critical issue: the need for more housing of all types. It mentions stability and certainty, but there is actually a remarkable amount of certainty, combined with a large degree of flexibility. Leases can be for six months, which is the default position, but we often forget that they can be for any length thereafter. It could be five years, 10 years or 18 months; it depends on the relationship between the landlord and tenant and the requirements of both. Indeed, many tenants do not want a three-year tenancy. They might want six months because they are moving

[John Stevenson]

into an area to see whether it is the right place for them to live or because they are looking to buy a property or to rent long term.

The same applies to the landlord. The accidental landlord might not want to grant a three-year tenancy. They might want a six-month tenancy, with a view to putting the property on the market afterwards. The existing arrangements create a great deal of flexibility. It is also interesting to note that a large number of tenancies are brought to an end by the tenant, not the landlord.

Ian Mearns: As a member of the Education Committee, I often hear head teachers and governors talk about churn, mobility and turbulence in their school populations. A big factor in that churn and turbulence is undoubtedly the existence of a great many short-term, six-month tenancies in the private rented sector, but they are used as a matter of course in many neighbourhoods.

John Stevenson: I accept that six-month tenancies are used as a matter of course, and that is a cultural issue that I will touch on in a minute.

The English housing survey notes that the average length of residence for a tenant is 3.8 years and that 66% of tenants are in a property for more than a year. We have heard a lot about rapidly rising rents, but I must confess that I am slightly perplexed. Figures from the Office for National Statistics for the period 2005 to 2014 show that the consumer prices index has risen by 13.3% and rents have risen by 9.5%—12.5% in London. Indeed, tenants who remain in a property often see their rent increase more slowly. I will give a personal example. I mentioned in my declaration of interests that I am a landlord. I have rented out a property to the same tenant for over five years, and during that time the rent has never been increased. Yet the tenancy was not for three years; it has varied from six months initially to a year and then was renewed each year. With regard to letting agents, transparency is the key, not regulation. It is quite right that landlords will look to see their costs being met in a different way. It is transparency we need, not further regulation.

Ultimately, what we want is a vibrant, flexible and competitive private rented sector with quality housing. Therefore, I remind the House of the Select Committee's key conclusions. First, the present market is broadly working and will continue to develop. Yes, we need a cultural change on the length of tenancies. I think that having six-month tenancies is partly a habit developed by letting agents and landlords, but it has also been influenced by mortgagees, who are reluctant to see tenancies go beyond a year. Secondly, we clearly need much more housing of all types. Thirdly, to improve standards we need proper enforcement by local authorities of the existing laws. We need to allow the market to develop within the existing laws and the recent Government proposals. I believe that that, rather than further regulation and state interference, will lead to a successful private sector market.

2.37 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Forty years ago, I was one of those who organised the occupation of Centre Point, which was then empty. It was a protest

that caught the imagination. It dominated the headlines for several days. It was against the obscene combination of a housing crisis on the one hand, with rapidly rising homelessness and Rachmanism, and office block speculation by the likes of Harry Hyam on the other hand. We then saw some welcome changes under the 1974 Labour Government, who tackled office block speculation and introduced security of tenure. I never thought that 40 years on we would be debating the biggest housing crisis in a generation. It is a crisis that is deeply damaging. It dashes the hopes of millions of people, damages the life chances of a generation of children growing up and holds back our economy.

What we now require is the utter determination necessary to make a great generational change. That is why Labour has put housing centre stage. We have done so for three reasons. First, millions of people desperately want to rent or buy a house they can afford. The gulf between supply and demand is massive and growing. I see it in the city I am proud to represent, where we need 80,000 homes to meet demand and where 33,000 are currently on the council housing waiting list. Secondly, history tells us that there has never been sustained economic recovery—after the depression, through the war and in every recession since—without a major programme of house building, both public and private. Thirdly, there is the impact of bad housing and instability on our country and our community. At its most chronic, in the private rented sector, bad housing harms health. Instability, for example, if someone has to move home frequently—those living in the private rented sector are 11 times more likely to have to move home than owner-occupiers—is damaging, including to the life prospects of kids at school.

Ian Mearns: My hon. Friend is making a really important point. We are not talking about statistics; we are talking about the life chances of children being disrupted because the problems in the housing market are having a direct impact on their educational prospects. They are forced constantly to move schools because of the insecurity in housing tenure for their parents.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, not least because the evidence shows that if a child under five has to move home three times, that will impact on their educational attainment at school.

The wish of people to live in a house that is also their home is deeply rooted in the sense of aspiration and ambition in our country. It enables them to put down roots, contribute to their community and plan ahead, including where they send their kids to school, which is simply not possible for millions of people in the private rented sector.

To clear up what Government Members have said, Labour's focus is on homes of all tenure: homes to buy, including our ambitious objective of reaching 200,000 homes a year by 2020; homes to rent; a new generation of social homes; innovation in self-build, custom-build and co-operative build; and catering for an ageing society by helping people to downsize, rather than by using the obscene weapon of the bedroom tax, which will be one of this Government's first casualties when our Government come to power next May. We also want to bring all homes up to standard, including those in the private rented sector, and to complete one

of the Labour Government's greatest achievements, the decent homes programme, which brought 1.6 million homes up to a decent standard, so transforming the lives of those who lived in them.

The private rented sector is growing rapidly: it covers 9 million renters and 2 million children. In my constituency, 48% of the ward of Stockton Green is now in the private rented sector. The sector has an important role to play to meet housing need. Most landlords are good landlords, but—I repeat, but—the evidence is absolutely clear that there are problems of security and affordability, with typically 41% of average earnings being spent on rent. There are also problems of quality—35% do not meet the decent homes standard—and too many rogue landlords and letting agents. We have all seen evidence of that in our constituencies. For instance, one of my constituents, Cathleen, lived in appalling accommodation before finally, with the help of the council, getting her landlord to carry out some basic repairs, only for the landlord to then serve her notice to quit.

The situation must change. We need a different vision of the private rented sector by 2020. It should be a sector of choice, more akin to the continental model, and one that enjoys a higher reputation, with flexibility and security in equal measure: flexibility for the students on one hand, and security for families who want to plan ahead, including where they send their kids to school, on the other.

Crucially, the sector needs to attract investment big and small. My experience of institutional investors is that they are very positive about Labour's vision of the private rented sector that we want to create. The sector needs to work not just for tenants, but for landlords: longer-term tenancies with a reliable tenant paying the rent make for a better business model, because churn costs not just the tenant, but the landlord as well.

The sector needs to be no place for rogues. I pay tribute to Labour councils all over the country, particularly Newham council, that have vigorously pursued rogues, seeking to drive them out of the business. I remember going on a raid at 7 o'clock one morning with Sir Robin Wales: we saw accommodation the kind of which I did not believe existed in London.

The shadow Housing Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), is absolutely right to say that we need to tackle the problems with letting agents. Most letting agents are reputable, but there are too many rogues. No letting agent should be able to charge tenants up-front fees—that should be for the landlord. My hon. Friend is right to say that we need a sector characterised by greater stability and security.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend accept that municipalisation of these rogues might be a way forward? In fact, we did that in the 1970s and it worked very well indeed.

Jack Dromey: Indeed. Some Labour councils have done precisely that, by using their compulsory purchase powers to renovate homes and transform the lives of those who live in them.

The shadow Housing Minister is right about the need to bring all homes in the private rented sector up to a decent homes standard. She is also right to highlight the

importance of a potential national register. I was surprised to hear the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), whose contributions to debates on housing are usually thoughtful, pooh-pooh the notion of a register, because it would tell us who the landlords are; provide information on whether they pay their taxes, which is of benefit to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs; and communicate to landlords their rights, entitlements and obligations. If any landlord were found guilty of serious criminal behaviour, they could be deregistered, which would result in them not being able to operate as a landlord. A national register could make a significant contribution to what we are seeking to achieve.

Mr Prisk: I hate to recreate our old sparring moments, but I say to my former shadow Minister that the problem is that it is accreditation and standards that are needed. Registration—a set of names on a form—has not worked in Scotland, which has only got rid of less than half of 1% of agents after five years. It has not dealt with the rogues, but it has cost tenants more in rent.

Jack Dromey: A register would be a means to an end. It would not be sufficient in itself, but ultimately, this is about an effective approach to enforcement. I stress again that a register would be of benefit to good landlords because it would inform them of their rights and entitlements.

In conclusion, in my former being in the union, I used to say that, for all the problems, nothing is impossible. The scale of the housing crisis in this country is absolutely immense, but so too is the scale of our ambition. As our leader said last September, and as the shadow Housing Minister has said so often since, it requires the kind of determination that characterised the 1945 Labour Government. The 2015 Labour Government will have exactly that determination—homes for all at a price they can afford.

2.47 pm

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): The positive thing about the debate so far is that Members on both sides of the House want to tackle the problem of a housing shortage and we all recognise that supply is one of the key issues in doing so. Until shorthold tenancies were introduced in the Housing Act 1988, there was almost no private rented sector in this country. In fact, rent controls contributed to the collapse in the private rented sector from more than 55% of households in 1939 to just 8% in the 1980s, and I believe the figure dropped to 7% in the early 1990s.

Graham Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes the point that the private rented sector fell during that period, but so did the increase in the supply of social housing. The number of people on the social housing waiting list was not that significant in those days, so there was not exactly a surplus of tenants, but there was a much larger social rented sector.

Stephen McPartland: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point, but Library figures show that it has taken almost 30 years for the figure to increase to 16.5%. His point that there was no demand then but that, all of a sudden, there is now probably does not hold water.

[Stephen McPartland]

An estimated 89% of landlords are private individuals with one or two properties, which are, in effect, their pension funds. They are, in the main, responsible and proactive people such as my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (John Stevenson), who will keep his tenant in place for as long as he pays the rent on time, as has happened for a number of years.

Ian Mearns: The hon. Gentleman has given the interesting statistic that 89% of landlords are private individuals, but they do not cover 89% of the market. Would he care to inform the House what proportion of the market the other 11% control?

Stephen McPartland: The hon. Gentleman will be delighted to know that I am not someone who has all the statistics at his fingertips, but I am very happy to discuss that matter with him once I have had the opportunity to google it.

Moving swiftly on, the point I was trying to make is that a huge number of people in this country are among the 89% of landlords who are private individuals, and many of them have been encouraged to invest their family's future and their family's finances in what are, in effect, pensions. Those people are very important to our economy and their local communities, which we need to support. We should not attack them just because they have been able to purchase a property and give another family a home to live in. For me, those landlords often provide stability for their tenants. Landlords cannot afford to have any voids, because that might result in their losing their ability to repay their mortgage; many of them are buy-to-let landlords, whose numbers have risen—mostly under the previous Government—during the past 15 to 20 years.

The problem with three-year tenancy agreements is that many families want flexibility, and as a result the reality is that such tenancies will never be standard. There has to be a balance between flexibility and security, which the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) spoke about, but rogue landlords will provide flexibility by encouraging everybody to sign up for six months, while the 89% of landlords will provide security for three years, as do they already. For me, such agreements are not the answer, and the issue is not about regulation.

In addition, particularly for the 89% with just one or two properties, landlords whose tenants are not paying the rent or are damaging the property can get possession of the property only at the end of a tenancy. Other forms of recourse are often incredibly expensive. What that boils down to is that somebody with a buy-to-let mortgage whose tenant just refuses to pay the rent for two or three months is more than likely to have their house repossessed. In effect, they will lose their pension for their family's future. If somebody does not pay their rent for eight or nine months of a three-year tenancy, that will lead to huge legal bills and create huge problems, which is a balancing factor.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle made the point that tenancies are often ended by the tenant, rather than the landlord. Figures I have been given suggest that only 9% of tenancies in this country are ended by the landlord. Landlords have come to my

constituency surgeries very disappointed and upset because they cannot get possession of a property where somebody is just sitting in it and refusing to pay rent to go to their mortgage. Stevenage borough council informs such tenants not to let themselves be evicted because they will make themselves intentionally homeless, so the council will not house them. As a result, landlords have to take such tenants to court and go through the whole repossession process, which families often cannot afford. People who own just one or two properties therefore have a huge problem, and protections against that problem should be built into the system. I make that point because, for a huge number of people in all our communities, three-year tenancies without such protections might cause a huge problem for their family's future and finances.

A ceiling on rent increases sounds attractive and is no doubt incredibly populist, but one little detail that I heard earlier is that rents might increase every year during the three years.

Emma Reynolds: Rents would not necessarily increase. There would not be indexation; the Secretary of State has talked about that. In some areas, such as mine in Wolverhampton, rents are pretty stable. The ceiling would apply only if rents were going up. There would be a ceiling on any rent increase, but there would not necessarily be a rent increase. There would be protections, as there are now, in three-year tenancies, but I take the hon. Gentleman's point that many landlords with irresponsible tenants really struggle to get the tenants out and that those protections need to be strengthened.

Stephen McPartland: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her clarification. However, my issue is with rogue landlords because they will push for rent increases.

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors has said that

“we do not recommend that a government introduce a ceiling on rent increases.”

The Opposition will no doubt consult the RICS to discuss what flexibility to have on rent ceilings. The RICS does not want rent increases, but that is the organisation most likely to be consulted. For me, if interest rates are likely to rise because of the success of our long-term economic plan—we are now starting to see an economic recovery—landlords will want to ensure that they have some flexibility, because of potential interest rate rises and to protect their future finances. The RICS and other organisations will try to ensure that the band is as wide as possible, but if it was 10%, a rogue landlord could tell a tenant, “You're tied into a three-year tenancy with me, and I am going to increase your rent by 10% over the next three years.” For me, the issue is about how we prevent rogue landlords from taking advantage of vulnerable people.

We must tackle rogue landlords. The only way to do so is to increase supply and to enforce regulations. Hon. Members have spoken about additional regulation and legislation, but I have discovered that 100 Acts of Parliament and 400 regulations apply to private landlords at the moment. Those are huge numbers, and I am not sure that we need any more; we just need people to get out there and enforce current regulations.

I am very proud about the over-supply provided by Stevenage borough council. For the first time in more than 25 years, it has started to build council houses as a

result of this Government's wonderful investment in the town. Under a Conservative-led coalition Government, we have 30 new council houses in a Labour area—the borough council has been Labour for many years—and I am delighted that we have been able to push for them. Thanks to the Conservative Government, we will have new council houses in Stevenage.

In my view, letting agents' fees must be transparent. I am delighted that the Government will force letting agents to display any charges they make on tenants on online forms and, if they have any, in their shops. I am concerned that if letting agents' fees were abolished, the charges would be passed on in a new way, as a form of tenants tax. At the end of the day, rogue landlords will ensure that they get every penny they feel entitled to, so our vulnerable constituents will again be affected, unfortunately, if they have to pay such a tenants tax. Apparently, that has happened in Scotland, where rents have begun to rise a little.

I want a vibrant rental sector, with quality housing, in which local people have faith. I am very lucky that the majority of private landlords in Stevenage are local people who are investing in our local community. Therefore, we do not have many issues, and I do not have many constituents coming to my surgery upset about private sector landlords. However, Stevenage borough council is a large public sector landlord, with more than 8,000 properties in my constituency, and I get a huge number of complaints about it.

Hon. Members have talked about decent homes funding. Again, the coalition Government have provided most of the decent homes funding given to Stevenage borough council, which was very late coming to the show in improving council houses. It is increasing rents faster than anywhere else in the whole of Hertfordshire, which I find unacceptable, and it has the biggest number of evictions and eviction notices in my constituency and in Hertfordshire. It is not therefore possible to talk about the public sector as great and the private sector as bad; this is about getting a great deal for tenants, so that they can have somewhere to live and have flexibility and security.

2.58 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I very much welcome the fact that the Opposition have called this debate today. It is high time that those who form Generation Rent were given the high place on the political agenda that they have long asked for. I tabled an amendment because although the motion goes in exactly the right direction, I want a more ambitious response to the crisis and to the deep and growing unfairness and inequality faced by people in the private rented sector.

There are 9 million people in the sector, and the figure is expanding because of 30 years of housing policy failure. People on low incomes and young families—and, indeed, people on average incomes—have no chance of getting on the housing ladder, and most have only a slim chance or none of getting a council house or of getting to the top of a housing association list.

The cost of housing in my constituency is eye-watering. Prices have increased at an alarming rate, and a typical home in Brighton and Hove now costs about £350,000, if not more, which is about twice the British average. As

a result, the private rented sector—about a third of homes—is about double the national average, and it is expanding. I frequently hear from constituents who are spending between 70% and 80% of their income on their rent, and many people have simply been forced out of the city altogether. Many of those constituents come to my surgeries in desperation as they struggle with housing costs and fuel poverty. Many are living in damp, leaky, poorly maintained homes.

Generation Rent spans all ages and backgrounds. It includes the single mum from Hollingdean, who told me:

“I am not sure what to do when I am qualified. I will be a nurse living in Brighton who can't afford to live here. If we were able to get a council house this would change our lives.”

It includes the family who are worried about taking their children out of Elm Grove primary school because of an unexpected rent increase of £50 a month, which means that they can no longer afford to live in their present home. It also includes the student whose friends have warned him about the “Brighton paint job”, where landlords or agents paint over the penetrating damp before viewings, then retain the deposit at the end of the tenancy on the ground that the tenant has not properly ventilated the property.

Generation Rent also includes the young couple who felt enormous relief at finding somewhere to live, despite paying more than 70% of their income in rent, and then had to find an additional £480 in letting agents fees. To add insult to injury, on top of extremely high rents and large deposits there is the scandal of fees. These unwarranted fees reflect how the private rented sector is, in large part, out of control. Letting fees are a scandal; they are sometimes over £300, which is a huge amount to find on top of a deposit. That is why I agree that they should be banned.

I do not agree with the argument that the fees would just be passed on to landlords who would pass them back to tenants in higher rents. Agents would not be able to get away with hiking up fees to landlords in the same way as they do with tenants, as landlords are in a more powerful position. The landlord would just go to a better agent who was not trying to rip them off, because they had a property for rent, which is in very high demand, in Brighton at least. Tenants do not have that choice because of the huge demand for properties.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I do not know whether the hon. Lady saw the programme on benefits the other night. It showed families who could not afford to pay their private landlord and could not get council accommodation. They ended up living in temporary accommodation in caravans. Does she agree that that is a disgrace in this modern age?

Caroline Lucas: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I also want to add my support to the many other hon. Members who have talked about the scandal of agents not allowing people on benefits to rent properties. That is absolutely despicable.

We need a national register of landlords so that we can better protect tenants. That would also be good for the landlords out there who are not ripping people off. There are good landlords, and their efforts are tainted by those rogue landlords who are using the housing crisis as a way to make a fast buck. A national register

[Caroline Lucas]

would also help us to implement the minimum energy efficiency standard for private rented homes, which is essential to protect our most vulnerable citizens.

Hon. Members will be aware of early-day motion 95, which reminds the House that the Energy Act 2011 placed a duty on the Government to introduce a minimum energy efficiency standard for the private rented sector by April 2018. The regulations have been significantly delayed, which is totally unacceptable and shows the lack of priority being given to this issue. Ministers must also ensure that the regulations are made clear and enforceable by specifying band E as the minimum standard in all cases and by keeping exemptions to an absolute minimum. People looking for somewhere to rent need to know who they can trust and to be guaranteed minimum standards to ensure that properties are of high quality, safe and efficient.

It must be made easier for families and individuals to get secure longer-term five-year and 10-year tenancies. The norm of short-term contracts leaves private rented sector tenants without security in their homes, and at risk of eviction and unfair rent increases. That volatility is particularly harmful for families with children, who often have to move schools as a result. Shelter has done some excellent research in this area. Longer-term renting could work better for both renters and landlords, as the latter could reduce void periods and expensive re-letting costs. It really is high time that the Government took steps to ensure that people can get five-year stable rental contracts, if that is what they want.

One local resident told me of her heartbreak at being given one month's notice to leave the flat she had hoped to stay in for a few years, even though being given notice in that way was technically against the law. She had spent time planting strawberries in hanging baskets on the fire escape, re-grouting the old tiles in the bathroom and hanging pictures. She wanted that place to be her home, and I think she deserves better. That is why I have tabled an amendment to today's motion to give good tenants the choice of a five-year stable rental contract as standard. Five years as standard is what Shelter and the campaign group Generation Rent are rightly calling for, and I share their view on that.

One of the reasons why the private rented sector is expanding and rents are soaring is the decimation of our social housing stock through the right-to-buy programme. Enormous, unjustified discounts and the failure to replace the stock that was flogged off cheap have a large part to play in our current housing crisis. To begin to make a dent in our long-term housing crisis we must address the lack of affordable homes, too. One of the biggest cuts in Government funding during this Parliament has been the 60% cut in funds for social housing, which has pushed even more people into expensive, insecure places in the private rented sector.

This is a problem caused by successive Governments, who have simply not built enough houses, particularly affordable ones. A recent House of Commons Library note shows a long-term steep decline in house building in England in the past 35 years. Nearly 307,000 homes were built across all tenures in England in 1969-1970, but the number fell to just over 107,000 in 2012-13. There was a minor increase in housing association building over that period, although it amounted to less

than 15,000 dwellings. What is most striking is that the steepest decline was in the building of council houses, which fell from 135,000 to 1,360 over the same period.

My amendment seeks to remedy this scandalous missed opportunity with a call to start building council homes again. Done well, council housing works. It gives affordability and security of tenure. In 1980, under the Thatcher right-to-buy legislation, council housing stock was decimated and we were left with the scandalous situation of landlords receiving huge pay-outs in housing benefit for properties that were sold off cheap at the taxpayers' expense. I want a real central Government commitment to build council housing, so that individuals and families can stay in Brighton and Hove without being at the mercy of rip-off landlords, and so that they can put down roots and not be forced to move their children from school to school.

We need fully to lift the cap on local authority borrowing to allow councils to build new council houses. Councils are bound by prudential borrowing rules anyway, so the cap is unnecessary; it is just stifling the building of local authority homes. This measure needs to be bolstered by direct capital investment to allow for a mass programme of sustainable, warm council housing. We urgently need a commitment from the Government to replace all affordable homes lost through right-to-buy policies. Such a commitment was another candidate for inclusion in the housing Bill that was so conspicuously absent from this Government's programme, which is in large part sleepwalking us towards the general election.

Updating our housing infrastructure and giving people a way out of the crippling expensive private rented sector could also be a win-win. No one is suggesting that that is a silver bullet, but if we lifted the restrictions and allowed councils to borrow to build homes, and if they started to build on the necessary scale, we could start to pull people out of housing emergency. We could stop the expensive and distressing knock-on problems that bad housing creates, while at the same time creating a major boost to the provision of skilled jobs.

Generation Rent is getting bigger and being squeezed harder. That is why I support the call for smart rent controls, which would mean that rents could not increase by more than the rate of inflation. I am also calling in my amendment for a living rent commission. Excellent work has been done by the living wage commission, albeit not under the initiative of the Government. The Government need to follow that lead and do some work to determine what a living rent would really look like. We must have an official benchmark for fair rent levels and, to get that, we need major official but independent research into what a living rent would be and how it could be achieved. A commission would look at whether there were ways to bring rent levels into line with the basic cost of living, and take into account the impact on, for example, landlords' ability to pay their mortgages.

Graham Jones: Is the hon. Lady also suggesting that we should look at stock condition?

Caroline Lucas: I am indeed suggesting that we should look at stock condition as well.

A living rent commission could learn a lot from the living wage commission. It could set out how much a living rent might be, so that landlords could opt in, just as employers have opted into paying the living wage.

More broadly, I would be interested to hear what other hon. Members thought about the need for a royal commission on housing, with a strong focus on the private rented sector. I do not advocate that lightly, and I know that royal commissions happen only rarely, but this is arguably an issue of such importance that such a move should be considered. Housing policy is central to health and well-being and to our economy. Sky-high rents are a barometer of housing policy failure, which is why we need a living rent commission.

Graham Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Caroline Lucas: I am sorry, but no. Other people are waiting to speak.

There is still time for Ministers to admit that they have got this badly wrong, and to act on solutions to our housing crisis that would help people trapped in the private rented sector, tackle health inequality and disadvantage, create skilled jobs and, crucially, provide stable tenancies at rents that people really can afford.

3.8 pm

Angie Bray (Ealing Central and Acton) (Con): It is important to recognise the opportunities that the private rental sector offers in terms of choice for people and of benefits to the work force. To be able to move to a city for a new job with no worries about finding somewhere to live is hugely attractive and allows people to experience living in different places without the commitment of buying a property. The fact that a third of private tenants in London have lived in their property for less than a year should not be seen as a uniformly negative thing. In my constituency, we see a great deal of churn, with young renters coming and going. They like the flexibility. Moving around different areas and sharing with friends and colleagues is an interesting and formative stage for many young professionals. Not everyone considers three-year tenancies to be either desirable or the norm. For others with different needs, more supply providing more choice and more competition is surely the right way forward.

Of course there are cases of unscrupulous landlords, but there are ways of minimising the problem without wholesale state intervention in the market. The Mayor of London has introduced the London rental standard, aimed at accrediting landlords and bringing transparency to the market. Landlords with the accreditation will be more attractive to both renters and agents, and in a competitive market, the advantages of signing up to it are clear. Councils could, in some cases, do more to ensure that private landlords, to whom they pay housing benefit, do more to ensure their properties are maintained to a good standard.

Estate agent fees can be unpopular, but the agents are operating in the free market and will be paid for their service. It is unrealistic to think that the costs would not simply be passed on by increasing rents if the one-off charges were scrapped. Someone has to pay them for their professional time spent doing the admin work. In any case, estate agents are starting to reduce fees in many cases in order to be competitive. Many landlords will acknowledge the speed with which the marketing undertaken by agents can fill their properties, and similarly, agents make finding a property remarkably straightforward for the renters. Agents can fulfil a useful purpose.

The best solution to affordability of housing, whether rented or not, is to increase supply, as so many in the Chamber have said today.

Frank Dobson: In terms of fees paid, the hon. Lady surely cannot think it is right that some agents charge people £450 simply to change the name on an agreement, because one of the people sharing a flat has moved out and someone else has moved in.

Angie Bray: To my knowledge, in many cases, agents do considerably more than that. They check the credit details for people who are going to be renting the property, and there is often quite a lot of admin work involved in the work they have to do. As I say, I think they would expect to be paid for that.

Mr Prisk: On that point, I think sometimes Members of the House forget that we have consumer legislation with trading standards, which are able to challenge unreasonable charges and fees. Does my hon. Friend agree that rather than passing many more laws, we ought to get the current laws enforced?

Angie Bray: Predictably, that is a very sensible point from my hon. Friend. As I was saying, the best solution to affordability of housing, whether rented or not, is to increase supply. That is happening in London, with 100,000 purpose-built affordable homes being built—5,000 for rent for each year across the two mayoral terms. However, we must not get into a situation where private landlords are in some way viewed as a necessary evil. The Opposition's plans to flatten the market will simply mean it is less attractive to invest in property. Controlled rents in other capital cities point to how detrimental it can be for those seeking to rent. Properties are neglected and choice is limited. Waiting lists are long, and unrealistically high deposits can be needed simply to secure somewhere to live—I am thinking of places such as New York.

Until the 1960s, the private rented sector took care of a substantial part of housing need in this country. As I mentioned earlier, it was an important part of the mobility required to seek work wherever it could be found. Yes, there were bad landlords, and names like Rachman loom large in that regard, but slum landlords such as him could have been dealt with more effectively by law enforcement.

Instead, the Labour Governments of the '60s decided to bear down on the private rental sector in general, starting a long decline in the number of private properties available to rent. I remember well coming down from university to London in the 1970s—I am showing my age here—and finding it quite difficult to get a room. I was not in a position to go on a waiting list for a council property and I certainly could not afford to buy my own. Since then, the private rental sector has picked up again, providing a great deal more flexibility. If Labour were to win power and put some of its proposals on the sector into practice, I greatly fear that we would again see a decline in the private rented sector, and less flexibility with fewer properties available.

It is all very well to talk about controlling the private rental sector with increased regulation, but if we find there are very few properties available to be rented out,

[Angie Bray]

because the landlords have been disincentivised, those who need a property will suffer. How can that possibly be of benefit to anyone?

3.14 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Millions of people across the country are struggling to cope in a sector that is clearly not fit for purpose, leaving tenants and responsible landlords fending for themselves in an unregulated lettings market. That experience is all too familiar to many people in Nottingham, which has a large and growing private rented sector. There are now more privately renting households in the city than there are households renting from the local authority or housing associations.

In Nottingham, the growth in private renting has been seen across all age groups, but most markedly among the young. Over the past 10 years, home ownership among 16 to 34-year-olds has fallen significantly. Back in 2001, 39% of the city's homeowners were in that age group, but by 2011 that had declined to 27%, and those figures exclude students. People renting privately in my constituency tell me that they desperately need security so that they can build their lives in one place, become part of a community and live without the threat of eviction if they make a complaint about conditions or the management of their home.

In Nottingham, substantially fewer homes have been developed since this Government came to power, despite new affordable homes being built by our councils arm's length management organisation, Nottingham City Homes. According to the Department for Communities and Local Government's own figures, in the last three full years 630 homes have been built in Nottingham by a mixture of private and housing association builders. That compares with 1,520 in the preceding three years and 3,680 in the three years before that.

Demand for housing in the city is increasing, but Ministers are doing nothing to address local supply, and the banks continue to withhold finance from the smaller construction companies that know the market and could make a huge difference. The Government seem to be passively reliant on developers to bring forward planning proposals, even in inappropriate locations, when too many brownfield sites lie empty. It beggars belief that for all the talk of localism, under this Government a developer is able to ride roughshod over the views of many hundreds of local residents in Wollaton and the local authority, who all oppose plans to build new houses on local allotments.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend made a very compelling point about the banks not lending to small and medium-sized builders. Does she share my concern that two thirds of homes used to be built by small and medium-sized builders, but that has declined to one third? That is at the heart of a chronic problem of capacity in the industry. If we are to build on the scale at which we intend to build—200,000 homes a year—their role will be key, and that includes the banks lending to them.

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We do of course need to unlock the ability for small and medium-sized enterprises to get access to finance and to be building the houses that we want.

Many of my constituents, particularly those under the age of 35, would love to buy their own home, but they simply cannot get a foot on the property ladder. Young people who manage to buy often do so only with help from their parents, but in cities such as mine most parents simply do not have the level of savings that would be needed to help their children in that way. The Government's failure on housing means that an entire generation in Nottingham could be locked out of home ownership entirely, left to cope with the insecurity offered by the private rented sector and facing rents that are expected to soar by an average of 39% by 2020. The Opposition are clear: if the private rented sector continues to make up an ever-increasing proportion of the market, we must ensure that it is fit for purpose, provides good quality, affordable homes and offers tenants the security they so desperately need.

Frank Dobson: In a great university city such as Nottingham, large numbers of people are graduating with phenomenal debts because of the massive increase in fees, and in many cases they have very little chance of getting what might be described as a graduate job. That adds to their problems in raising the money either to rent or buy and provide services to the people of Nottingham.

Lilian Greenwood: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. One of the things that we would like to do in our city is ensure that more graduates stay in Nottingham and do graduate-level jobs, but their ability to buy a home is really important part of that offer. Ministers should come to Nottingham and see for themselves the misery that is being caused by the status quo before attacking Labour's plans to take action and tackle the issue head-on.

There are excellent professional landlords in Nottingham who take pride in the standard of accommodation they offer, but some do not, and it is important to stress that the management of the private rented sector is not simply a good landlord versus bad landlord issue. The sector is complex, and landlords come in many guises. In particular, there is an emerging need to target so-called "accidental" or "amateur" landlords who are new to the sector—those renting out an inherited family home, letting a property whose owners are in long-term care, or who have bought a house for a family member to live in with others. According to Rightmove, home owners letting out their property as a result of circumstance make up as much as 30% of all landlords, and many are casualties of the recession. Those landlords are often inexperienced and can be naive about the standards and management needed to provide quality, well managed accommodation. With better advice, guidance and—yes—better regulation, we can help those people become responsible landlords who provide decent accommodation for their tenants.

Nottingham city council recently completed a review of property conditions in the city's private rented sector and assessed the effectiveness of voluntary accreditation as a way of driving up standards. I agree that there should be greater national recognition of accredited landlords and the superior management and service they provide, but our local review concluded that although accreditation is an effective tool in driving up standards, on its own it will always leave a significant part of the market unprotected.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) spoke about the way accreditation has been used in her city, particularly for students, and that is also the case in Nottingham. For other parts of the market, however, accreditation does not seem to work as well, and it remains a challenge to get landlords to join such schemes. That is why in Nottingham we have introduced an additional licensing scheme under an article 4 direction to manage the private rented sector better, especially in parts of the city with a high concentration of homes of multiple occupation.

Nottingham is a young city with almost a third of its residents aged 18 to 29. That high rate of young people can in part be attributed to the large number of students studying at our popular universities and colleges. The city's growing student population has been the predominant driver behind the private rented sector's wish to convert properties into HMOs, particularly in the Dunkirk and Lenton area of my constituency, but also in Radford, the Park, Wollaton Park and Lenton Abbey, which are close to the main campuses of the university of Nottingham. Uncontrolled development of HMOs has put pressure on the number of affordable rented properties suitable for families, and HMOs in high concentration have had an enormous impact on the resilience, balance, stability and sustainability of the neighbourhoods in which they sit.

People in my constituency who have campaigned on HMO-related issues believe that article 4 directions are still enabling HMO creation to take place, but in a controlled manner that benefits tenants as well as other residents in the neighbourhood. Accreditation and licensing are not mutually exclusive—they are complementary tools to improve standards.

The Nottingham experience indicates that the private rented sector, while needing to provide a professional service, is still not professional enough in its approach to rented accommodation, especially for students and other under-35s. In Nottingham that has contributed to the issues our city faces, but Labour's plans would seek to address such concerns by providing more certainty, more stability, and greater protection for tenants and landlords alike.

Too many tenants and potential tenants face rip-off fees from letting agents. Landlords are being charged for services provided by the agent, and tenants are charged again for the same services. Despite facing fees averaging £355 every time they move, tenants continue to report difficulties in contacting their agents, and serious delays in getting repairs and maintenance completed. It is simply not good enough.

We need better management of the private rented sector, an end to rip-off agents' fees, action to make three-year tenancies the norm, predictable rent rises, and more homes built to tackle the crisis in supply. Labour's proposals have the potential to transform life for individual tenants and parts of my constituency that are suffering from the worst effects of the Government's policies. It is astonishing that Ministers continue to oppose those proposals. Have they simply forgotten the thousands of people in Nottingham who are experiencing the greatest housing crisis in a generation? Well, we have not, and we will not.

3.24 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am pleased that we are debating the private rented sector. I suspect there will be many more such debates between now and the general election, because the situation requires urgent intervention, and in many respects a change in the law.

Like some of my colleagues who have already spoken, I represent an inner-London constituency, and we are facing the most acute housing crisis that I can remember, both in my time as an MP and before that as a councillor in a neighbouring borough. When I hold a constituency advice surgery—as we all do—I am frequently there for five or six hours, and 90% of the cases are about housing. Such cases are desperately sad: it is frightening to hear about what people are going through and the trauma of families being upheaved and forced to move out of the borough from one private rented property to another and another and another, with all the disruption that causes to their children's education, their health and family relationships, and the damage it does to the community as a whole.

The ward where I live has a population turnover of almost 30% per year, which makes any kind of community cohesion much more difficult and voluntary organisations less well populated, and affects all the social infrastructure that is so important in our societies. We must consider the desperate housing need, not just in inner-city areas but in the country overall.

Frank Dobson: Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the biggest problems is that these constant moves often involve children? It is clear from the research that a child having to shift from one school to another—sometimes two or three schools in one year—is about as damaging to their educational opportunities as can be imagined.

Jeremy Corbyn: My right hon. Friend makes a strong point with which I absolutely concur and which I understand well. It works like this: a family is in receipt of local housing allowance, and the landlord puts the rent up way beyond what the allowance enables them to pay; they do not have enough other income—either from a low-paid job or from other benefits—to make up the difference, so they have to move. There is no possibility of their getting another private rented property in the same community, so the council is forced to do its best by hassling various agents all over the place to try to find somewhere for them to live—my council does that all the time, and Camden council does much the same thing. The family is perhaps found somewhere to live in Enfield, Barking or wherever. They are there for six months, they have the temerity to complain about the conditions, the tenancy ends, and they get moved again. The children either have to be uprooted from one school to another in another borough, or make a long journey to return to their original borough—such as Camden or Islington—and try to maintain themselves at the same school. What kind of life is it for a seven or eight-year-old child to be dragged on a bus or train for an hour every morning to get to primary school and has to change time and again? Ask the teachers how the kids suffer because of that.

My borough is doing its best to provide as much council housing as it can. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) kindly

[Jeremy Corbyn]

visited our borough last week, and she will have seen the excellent quality of our new build. Indeed, it is rather better quality than the current private sector new build: larger rooms, better accommodation, and more energy efficient—very good quality stuff. It is difficult to find land to build it on and expensive to do, but the social investment is enormous, as is the return for the whole community.

The message from the Government is that we should increase council rents to 80% of market value. That would be totally unaffordable for people who live in our existing council properties, and would mean that they could not accept even if they were offered them. We must maintain the social rented model and address the problems of housing in this country, essentially by building a lot more council houses.

Some 200,000 or more new households are created every year, and the number of new properties being developed in the country is around 100,000 per year. We are all into the science of managing shortages. Councils are doing that, as is everybody else, and the only safety valve is the private rented sector. The only safety valve in that is ever-increasing rents and the huge profitability that exists within that sector. We therefore need to do two things; the first is to support local authorities to build council housing.

I do not support the sale of council houses or big discounts on their sale, particularly in areas with enormous housing shortages, not because it makes a lot of difference to residents, if they remain living in them, but because later the properties might be sold on or rented in the private rented sector. The highest rent I have come across so far—there might be more in the pipeline—for a former council flat is £660 per week. For the person living next door in an identical council flat—possibly even in better conditions, because the council tends to look after things quite well—the rent would be about £100 to £120 per week. How can anyone possibly justify that discrepancy?

I support the Opposition Front-Bench team's proposal for the regulation of letting agents and for the enforcement of much better conditions and much longer tenancies. In areas of very high housing demand—in London and other cities such as Oxford and York and in the centres of other cities—rent rises are huge. I have no idea where the Residential Landlords Association gets its figures from, but it claims that in the 12 months to March 2014, the rent increase in London was 1.4%. I tried this figure out on people in my community, but I only got as far as "1.4" before they started laughing. They said, "That must have been last week's increase." I have no idea where these figures come from, but these things are very important.

We seem to be presiding over a cowboy mentality among some, although not all, letting agents who think it okay to stick some scruffy piece of paper in a window saying, "No DSS allowed here"—they are a bit out of date: the Department of Social Security was abolished a long time ago and is now the Department for Work and Pensions; perhaps they should be educated about that. However, should anyone be allowed to say, "If you're on benefits, you're a second-class citizen and you cannot even apply"? Also, the "Panorama" programme has exposed the racial profiling that goes on, presumably under pressure from landlords saying they do not want

any Muslims, blacks, Jews—or any other group they care to identify. To his credit, the Minister correctly agreed with me that this is criminal activity, completely wrong and has to be outlawed. I hope there will be serious prosecutions where it can be proved, as a lesson to others that we will not accept race discrimination in the housing market.

I hope that the House will support the motion. I do not know whether the Government will support it—I seriously doubt it—but I hope we can have not just the regulations outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East but even longer tenancies. I also think there is a case for rent controls, particularly in areas of very high housing demand such as London. If we do not manage the private rented sector, control rents and build more housing in London, it will become a totally divided city: a city divided between those lucky enough to get social housing through councils or housing associations, those rich enough to buy and become owner-occupiers, and the rest, who will be spending all their earnings and savings on excessive rents. It will lead to labour shortages and economic decline in our big cities. We need regulation and a determination that we, as a nation, will solve the housing crisis and give all our kids somewhere decent and safe to live.

3.33 pm

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): In the short time left, I want to address a couple of points that seem to be central to the argument from Government Members: that rent controls have destroyed the private sector over the past 50 years; that rents have not risen recently; and that there is no need for any of the proposals from Opposition Members and the shadow Minister.

I shall deal first with the claim that the private rented sector was destroyed by rent controls. I remember my great granddad living in a rented property, as many people did on Grange lane in Accrington, but as in many areas and cities across the country, his house was demolished under the post-war clearance scheme, and he was moved into social housing—a bungalow. Many thousands of people were moved out of private rented accommodation; it was simply slum clearance. The properties were not fit to live in, so in the post-war period, people were moved to new builds, which, in those days, only local authorities could build. The transition of people from the private rented sector pre-war to social housing post-war, and the reduction in the percentage of people in the private rented sector, was primarily down to slum clearance and the expansive building of social housing by local authorities. It was not the post-war rent controls that destroyed the private rented sector, but the quality of the housing stock, and that still applies today. With the rise of the private rented sector, we see a deterioration in the quality of the housing stock, which leads us, in a roundabout way, to the proposals from the Opposition Front-Bench team, which I welcome.

I also want to take on the claim that rents have not risen. I think the Minister said that earlier, but when I intervened on him, he quickly reeled back from that. He made it clear that the reason rents have not risen is that they are indexed to the capital value of property. He said that people have a choice between realising their assets in property or investing elsewhere. The reason rents have not risen that much is that the value of

properties has not risen. The housing market has been stagnating for some time, which caps rents, because naturally if someone has £100,000 in property, they will look for where they can get the best value, and if they can get it elsewhere, they will shift that investment. So rents are inextricably indexed to capital values, and when we see house prices rise, we will see rents rise, as we are now seeing in London. The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is no longer in her place, said that in Brighton rents and house values are twice the national average, which clearly made the point about indexation.

Neither claim is true, therefore, which is why we need to do what my Labour colleagues have proposed: to put in place rent controls, to cap rents and to provide assurance to tenants. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said, we cannot have young children and families being put on short-term tenancies and then being moved out. It destroys children's education and it destroys the lives of families. We have to deal with that so longer-term tenancies are also vital.

It is claimed that the public can get redress, but they cannot. We have seen legal aid cuts to housing, and it is very difficult for people in the private rented sector to get any form of redress. Our local citizens advice bureaux have seen a reduction in staff numbers, the so-called big society is shrinking rapidly and people are finding it increasingly hard to get redress on housing issues. It is not as easy as is made out—if someone has a housing problem with a landlord, everything will be all right because they can get legal redress. Actually, I do not think that that was possible at the start of this Government, and the situation has only been made far more difficult by changes to government funding.

It is said that there is choice and that private landlords do their best. The problem with the private rented sector in many areas, including mine, is the stock condition. No matter how many landlords or what type of landlord, 20% of properties in my area have category 1 hazards and 40% have category 2 hazards. Landlords are operating in a very difficult environment and with very poor housing stock, and they are not improving that housing stock. That is an issue, and choice does not come into it when there is an endemic problem of stock condition. The problem needs to be addressed in other ways. We cannot just say there is choice out there.

Finally, I return to the housing stock in Hyndburn. Post-war and pre-war, roughly one third of the housing stock was rented, and the same is true today. All we have seen is a shift between the different rental types of social housing and the private rented sector. That reinforces the point that one third of people in my constituency will always want to rent and that two thirds will always be owner occupiers. That is likely to carry on. It is a question of how we provide the one third of accommodation that needs to be rented. It is not about saying the private rented sector is better than the social rented sector. Given the time, I shall sit down and allow the Front-Bench speakers to wind up the debate.

3.39 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my quarter share in a residential rental property, as recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

We have had a wide-ranging and, at times, very moving debate today on a subject that is at the centre of family life for many households in the country. The unprecedented growth in the private rented sector over recent years takes us into new territory. The politicians and policy makers—and, I think, us collectively—need to update the regulations and the expectations that we have of this sector.

The most insecure sector is the private rented sector, and many tenants in it are among the lowest paid. They are without resources and often face the biggest challenges. In many areas, rents are still rising faster than our pay packets, with some industry estimates indicating that rents have risen more than 10% since 2010. In his well-researched speech, my right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) spoke with real knowledge about the ruinous hikes and much greater than 10% rises in central London. As he rightly said, this is bad for tenants, bad for communities and bad for the key workers on which this city depends.

Almost 4 million households—around 9 million people—now live in the private rented sector, and the majority are let through an agent rather than directly through the landlord. My hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) and for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) spoke with great knowledge of the problems caused for students by the letting agents in their areas. I listened with real interest to the action of the Hull student union to counter the difficulties caused by letting agencies and substandard landlords.

As we have heard throughout the debate, the problems associated with letting agents include rip-off fees, and we have heard of Shelter's survey, which found that 94% of agents charge additional fees on top of rents and deposits—and additional fees can total over £700. That is why, given that the landlord is the client of the letting agent, we propose to ban fees charged to tenants. The lack of safeguards, including no right to a written contract or a guaranteed code of conduct, is another problem, while there is no proper accountability. Despite 8,000 complaints to the ombudsman about letting agents in 2012—50% higher than just four years ago—there have been very few prosecutions.

Mr Prisk: Perhaps the hon. Lady could answer the question posed earlier but not answered. In banning fees to tenants, what will Labour do to try to ensure that there are no increases in rent? After all, this can often happen at the beginning of a tenancy. Is Labour going to ban those fees, or not?

Lyn Brown: There is no evidence from Scotland that that has happened. I genuinely believe that people out there who are listening to this debate, many of whom will be experiencing these fees, will not understand the hon. Gentleman's argument today.

Short-term tenancies are now the norm. Shelter's mystery shopping of letting agents found that 29 out of 30 of them told landlords that they would offer the property on only a six or 12-month assured shorthold tenancy. As a result, 30% of private renters worry about their landlord or letting agent ending the contract before they are ready, and two-thirds would like to have the option to stay in their tenancy longer if they wanted to.

[Lyn Brown]

Living in uncertainty and being forced to move on regularly is not just a nuisance and expensive; it has other costs, too. Families are unable to settle or put down roots, and, as my hon. Friends the Members for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Hyndburn (Graham Jones) reminded us, children often have to change schools a number of times or face long journeys and they lose any friends they make. They are rootless and their education faces massive disruption. These are the families who are not on doctors' lists and not accessing preventive health care; it is members of these families who are turning up at A and E and being diagnosed with stage four cancers.

We have heard that families in the private rented sector are nine times more likely to move than those who live in other tenures—and often forcibly through eviction, as movingly described by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell). That is why Labour has set out our proposals to legislate for longer-term tenancies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) rightly said, Labour's proposals to make longer-term tenancies the norm and to set a ceiling on rent increases would give families the support and the security they need to budget.

John Stevenson: Providing a three-year tenancy may be great for the tenant, but what about the landlord, particularly the accidental landlord, who does not want to have to give away a three-year tenancy?

Lyn Brown: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman was in his place when my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East answered that question during the debate. She talked about how we need to ensure that there are protections in place for the short-term landlord. Believe me, I have a quarter share in a property, so I understand what it is to be an accidental landlord.

Lack of security of tenure means that tenants in the private rented sector feel less able to complain about poor standards. A third of these homes are “non-decent”, and we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) the story of Kathleen who lost her home after complaining about its poor condition. I want to talk about some of the conditions that people experience in my own borough of Newham.

Newham is an area in east London that has seen a startling change in housing tenure over the years, as similarly and ably illustrated by my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) in respect of his home town. Over the last decade, the private rented sector in Newham has doubled from 20% to 40% of the housing stock, so it now stands at double the national average for England. Labour-led Newham council understood that the unprecedented growth in the largely unregulated private rented sector and increasingly poor housing conditions—not to mention income tax and council tax evasion—meant that something needed to be done. The council listened to the community it serves and showed real leadership by implementing a licensing scheme to tackle those who refused to play by the rules, whose poorly run properties ruin neighbourhoods and blight family lives through unsanitary, squalid, overcrowded and insecure tenancies.

Let me provide just one example of what Newham's licensing scheme has uncovered. Seven adults and two children living in a small three-bedroom house were paying £2,300 in rent each month. The kitchen window was cracked with sharp edges in places and the bathroom window could not be closed. Fixtures, fittings and appliances were in such poor condition that they presented serious health and safety, fire and electric shock risks—and they did not even have a smoke alarm. Those tenants, afraid of losing their home, felt unable to complain. I am sure that Members will agree that those are terrible conditions for a high and unpredictable rent. High rents, low wages, the shortage of housing supply and insecurity of tenure all exacerbate conditions in which exploitative practices flourish.

I do not think that we have heard anything from the Government today to suggest that they understand that this housing crisis—and it is a crisis—is a major driver of the cost of living pressure on hard-working families. We are building less than half the number of homes that we need to build in order to keep up with demand. That creates conditions in which families can be ripped off by letting agencies, and can find themselves in exploitative, insecure, short-term tenancies, experiencing unpredictable rises in their rent bills. Our families deserve so much better, and I urge Members to vote for those families today. I commend the motion to the House.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Stephen Williams): I welcome the opportunity to debate an incredibly important issue, and to do so in a largely good-natured and constructive way, as the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has just done. She showed real passion on behalf of her constituents, as she was quite entitled to do. I shall return to that shortly, but first let me also welcome the Labour party's new-found interest in this issue, which they have developed four years after entering into opposition and, perhaps more significantly, 17 years after entering into government. They had a 13-year window of opportunity in which to tackle all the issues raised in their motion, along with all the additional issues that have been raised by Labour Members today, but they did not take that opportunity.

This coalition Government recognise that the private rented sector is playing an increasingly important role in the housing market. It has doubled to serve more than 3.8 million households, and many of those people value the flexibility that it offers them and choose, positively, to live in it. That is especially true of young people. The phrase “Generation Rent” was used by a number of speakers, including my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert). I have spoken on a platform with the excellent people who are organising the “Generation Rent” campaign, and I recognise that the position of young people will be a serious issue in the run-up to the general election. I am proud of the fact that the Government are tackling many of the problems identified by that group and by other campaigning groups such as the National Union of Students.

The status of the private rented sector is extremely important, and it is actually performing very well. As I said earlier, the supply of private rented housing has grown to serve nearly 4 million people. As many Members have pointed out, during the current Parliament rents

have increased more slowly than inflation, by an average of 1% a year. Overall, the quality of accommodation in the sector, which has been mentioned several times today, has improved. It is more energy-efficient, and there are fewer non-decent homes than in the past. The satisfaction levels reported by tenants themselves are high: 83% of tenants are satisfied, according to the most recent surveys. That is a higher percentage than reported following similar surveys of the public sector. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price): I too find, as a constituency Member, that many constituents come to me—sadly—with problems relating to the public sector.

The vast majority of people in the private rented sector move of their own volition. That is an aspect of the flexibility that the sector provides people, particularly during the early stages of their lives. I went through exactly that process myself. When I graduated from Bristol university, I spent one year in a one-room bedsit. I then spent three years in an attic; I had my own kitchen but had to share a bathroom. When I could afford it, I rented a one-bedroom flat, and then, when I could afford it, I entered the housing market.

Some Opposition Members will have had rather different social experiences. Nevertheless, we recognise that there are challenges that we need to tackle. The biggest challenge of all was mentioned by several Members. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Mr Prisk), the former Housing Minister, we need to expand supply in this sector and, indeed, in all other sectors. We need to build more. The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) acknowledged that the Labour party needs to have a good look at its past record, although perhaps, belatedly, it is learning some lessons in this regard.

We also need to look at the professional status of landlords and ensure that there is good management practice. We need to tackle rogue landlords, while not penalising the vast majority who provide a good service for their tenants. We need to make letting agents' fees more transparent, and we need to meet the growing demand from families for longer tenancies. Those are the challenges, and the Government are taking action to meet them all.

We want the private rented sector to grow. We want more purpose-built accommodation in the sector, and we want it to attract institutional investment. We want more large-scale, professionally managed, high-quality, well-designed accommodation. My hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford asked what had happened to the £1 billion Build to Rent scheme that he launched when he was the Housing Minister. We believe that we are still on course to deliver 10,000 new units by 2015, and 16 projects are already under way. Due diligence is being done by the Homes and Communities Agency, and we hope to make further announcements soon.

We need regulation—smart regulation—only when it is appropriate. We do not want to adopt a blanket approach that would deter investment, add to cost pressures and increase rents. We want to crack down on rogue landlords but not to add to the burdens on ordinary landlords, such as the shadow Minister, who I am sure are providing a decent service.

Local authorities have a critical role in the sector, and we expect them to use the powers that are available to them to tackle the bad practice that sadly exists. Last

year, we announced that £6.7 million would be made available to local authorities that suffer particularly complex problems with rogue landlords. We have provided £125,000 to Leeds city council to tackle the problems that it has identified. I am glad that the shadow Minister who wound up for the Opposition mentioned the problems in her constituency of West Ham. I am sure that she will want to thank the Government for the fact that they have provided £1 million to Mayor Wales in her borough to deal with the problems there—far and away the biggest investment we have made out of the £6.7 million.

Graham Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Williams: I will take only one intervention, as I am up against the buffers.

Graham Jones: The Minister talks about rogue landlords. Can he tell us what specific legislation exists to deal with rogue landlords who manage housing stock that is in a poor condition?

Stephen Williams: There is a whole suite of legislation that local authorities should be using. The basic duty is to provide accommodation that is in a fit and proper state to be let. That covers all sorts of things, including electrical safety. That is why we have provided these resources to local authorities. The powers are there. Where there are particular problems, we have given the resources to deal with them. Already once in this Parliament, in 2012, we updated the guidance—I am answering the hon. Gentleman's question—to local authorities and we will update it again this year, so that everyone is clear what powers are available to deal with and prosecute, if necessary, rogue landlords. We have removed the cap on the £5,000 fine, so that if local authorities find that there are problems, magistrates have the freedom to ensure that they can issue the strongest possible penalties to root out bad practice in the sector.

On letting agents, we have already announced that they will be required to join an ombudsman scheme. In April, we approved three schemes. Secondary legislation is going through to ensure that all letting and property management agents belong to such a scheme. Just a couple of weeks ago, we published the "How to rent" guide to empower tenants with better information, so that they know their rights. That publication has been warmly received in the sector. We are working, genuinely, with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors to update the code of practice on that area.

Rent control was mentioned several times. Earlier this year, the shadow Housing Minister said to Cathy Newman on "Channel 4 News":

"Rent controls are not going to work in practice."

I assume that she has changed her mind since that time.

Emma Reynolds: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Williams: I have only two minutes left, so I will finish my points.

As we all know—the evidence is there—before the Housing Act 1988, the private rented sector shrank to just 9% of households. Since then, it has doubled to 18% of households. Evidence from Britain and around the world shows that rent controls always lead to fewer properties on the market and higher rents.

[Stephen Williams]

We have also been working on a model tenancy agreement, which will be published soon. To answer the question asked by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), that will indeed address the issues that students face.

On letting agents fees, we have announced that there will be a requirement to belong to an ombudsman scheme. In the Consumer Rights Bill, which went through this House last week, we outlined provisions to deal with that. There will be transparency on fees. That will root out the practices that we all deplore and agree are wrong: double charging for credit agreements and changes to tenancy agreements. That should not be happening. We think that transparency and the fine for not belonging to the ombudsman scheme will largely root that out.

We all agree that we need to build more housing of all tenure types, but the Labour party presided over a bubble and a crash in the private rental sector and a huge contraction in the number of social houses available. The coalition has seen strong growth and the most ambitious affordable housing programme in a generation.

The motion shows Labour is playing catch-up with the Government. We have published a guide to renting, and we are about to publish a model tenancy; Labour failed to do both while in office. We have introduced an ombudsman scheme for letting agents; Labour failed to do that. We are introducing transparency over fees and a fine for non-compliance; Labour failed to do that. We are giving guidance and resources to tackle rogue landlords; Labour failed to do that.

The private rental sector is important and growing. The Government want it to provide an attractive, purpose-built investment for landlords, but also, crucially, a safe and secure home for tenants. The motion ought to be a lament about the lack of Labour action over 13 years. As with the economy, however, there is no apology and no credible remedy, and I urge colleagues to reject it.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 226, Noes 276.

Division No. 21]

[4 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Brown, rh Mr Gordon
Abrahams, Debbie	Brown, Lyn
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Brown, Mr Russell
Alexander, Heidi	Bryant, Chris
Ali, Rushanara	Buck, Ms Karen
Allen, Mr Graham	Burden, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan	Burnham, rh Andy
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Byrne, rh Mr Liam
Bain, Mr William	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Balls, rh Ed	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Barron, rh Kevin	Caton, Martin
Beckett, rh Margaret	Champion, Sarah
Begg, Dame Anne	Chapman, Jenny
Benn, rh Hilary	Clark, Katy
Berger, Luciana	Clarke, rh Mr Tom
Blackman-Woods, Roberta	Clwyd, rh Ann
Blears, rh Hazel	Coaker, Vernon
Blenkinsop, Tom	Coffey, Ann
Blomfield, Paul	Cooper, Rosie
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Cooper, rh Yvette
Brennan, Kevin	Corbyn, Jeremy

Crausby, Mr David	Irranca-Davies, Huw
Creagh, Mary	Jackson, Glenda
Creasy, Stella	James, Mrs Siân C.
Cruddas, Jon	Jamieson, Cathy
Cryer, John	Jarvis, Dan
Cunningham, Alex	Johnson, rh Alan
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Johnson, Diana
Cunningham, Sir Tony	Jones, Graham
Curran, Margaret	Jones, Helen
Dakin, Nic	Jones, Mr Kevan
Danczuk, Simon	Jones, Susan Elan
Darling, rh Mr Alistair	Jowell, rh Dame Tessa
David, Wayne	Kane, Mike
Davidson, Mr Ian	Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
De Piero, Gloria	Keeley, Barbara
Denham, rh Mr John	Kendall, Liz
Dobson, rh Frank	Khan, rh Sadiq
Docherty, Thomas	Lammy, rh Mr David
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.	Lavery, Ian
Donohoe, Mr Brian H.	Lazarowicz, Mark
Doran, Mr Frank	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Doughty, Stephen	Llwyd, rh Mr Elfyn
Dowd, Jim	Love, Mr Andrew
Dromey, Jack	Lucas, Caroline
Dugher, Michael	Lucas, Ian
Durkan, Mark	Mactaggart, Fiona
Eagle, Ms Angela	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Eagle, Maria	Mahmood, Shabana
Edwards, Jonathan	Malhotra, Seema
Efford, Clive	Mann, John
Elliott, Julie	Marsden, Mr Gordon
Ellman, Mrs Louise	McCabe, Steve
Engel, Natascha	McCarthy, Kerry
Esterson, Bill	McClymont, Gregg
Evans, Chris	McDonald, Andy
Farrelly, Paul	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
Field, rh Mr Frank	McDonnell, John
Fitzpatrick, Jim	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Fleelo, Robert	McGovern, Alison
Flint, rh Caroline	McGovern, Jim
Fovargue, Yvonne	McKechin, Ann
Francis, Dr Hywel	McKenzie, Mr Iain
Gapes, Mike	McKinnell, Catherine
Gardiner, Barry	Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Gilmore, Sheila	Mearns, Ian
Glass, Pat	Miliband, rh Edward
Glindon, Mrs Mary	Miller, Andrew
Godsiff, Mr Roger	Mitchell, Austin
Green, Kate	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Greenwood, Lillian	Morden, Jessica
Griffith, Nia	Morrice, Graeme (<i>Livingston</i>)
Gwynne, Andrew	Morris, Grahame M.
Hain, rh Mr Peter	(<i>Easington</i>)
Hamilton, Mr David	Mudie, Mr George
Hamilton, Fabian	Munn, Meg
Hanson, rh Mr David	Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Murphy, rh Paul
Harris, Mr Tom	Murray, Ian
Havard, Mr Dai	Nandy, Lisa
Healey, rh John	Nash, Pamela
Hendrick, Mark	O'Donnell, Fiona
Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Onwurah, Chi
Hermon, Lady	Paisley, Ian
Heyes, David	Pearce, Teresa
Hillier, Meg	Perkins, Toby
Hilling, Julie	Qureshi, Yasmin
Hodge, rh Margaret	Reed, Mr Jamie
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Reed, Mr Steve
Hoey, Kate	Reeves, Rachel
Hopkins, Kelvin	Reynolds, Emma
Howarth, rh Mr George	Reynolds, Jonathan
Hunt, Tristram	Ritchie, Ms Margaret

Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Roy, Lindsay
 Ruane, Chris
 Ruddock, rh Dame Joan
 Sarwar, Anas
 Sawford, Andy
 Seabeck, Alison
 Shannon, Jim
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheridan, Jim
 Shuker, Gavin
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Mr Andy
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Nick
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Straw, rh Mr Jack
 Stringer, Graham

Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walley, Joan
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, Chris
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, David
 Wright, Mr Iain

Tellers for the Ayes:
Bridget Phillipson and
Phil Wilson

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Amess, Mr David
 Arbuthnot, rh Mr James
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Norman
 Baker, Steve
 Baldry, rh Sir Tony
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Barker, rh Gregory
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Beith, rh Sir Alan
 Bellingham, Mr Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bingham, Andrew
 Birtwistle, Gordon
 Blackman, Bob
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brake, rh Tom
 Bray, Angie
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, James
 Brooke, Annette
 Browne, Mr Jeremy
 Bruce, Fiona
 Bruce, rh Sir Malcolm
 Buckland, Mr Robert
 Burley, Mr Aidan
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Mr Simon
 Burstow, rh Paul
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Byles, Dan
 Cable, rh Vince
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil

Carswell, Mr Douglas
 Cash, Sir William
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crockart, Mike
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davey, rh Mr Edward
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 de Bois, Nick
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Dorries, Nadine
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Farron, Tim
 Featherstone, Lynne
 Field, Mark
 Foster, rh Mr Don
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freer, Mike
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 George, Andrew
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Glen, John
 Goldsmith, Zac
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James

Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Hames, Duncan
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Heald, Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Hemming, John
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendry, Charles
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoban, Mr Mark
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Horwood, Martin
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Hughes, rh Simon
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kelly, Chris
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamb, Norman
 Lancaster, Mark
 Lansley, rh Mr Andrew
 Latham, Pauline
 Laws, rh Mr David
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Leech, Mr John
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Dr Julian
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Sir Peter
 Macleod, Mary
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Maude, rh Mr Francis
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, rh Esther
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Maria
 Mills, Nigel

Milton, Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moore, rh Michael
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mosley, Stephen
 Mulholland, Greg
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Newmark, Mr Brooks
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 O'Brien, rh Mr Stephen
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Ollerenshaw, Eric
 Opperman, Guy
 Ottaway, rh Sir Richard
 Paice, rh Sir James
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Pery, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Pickles, rh Mr Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pugh, John
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Randall, rh Sir John
 Reckless, Mark
 Rees-Mogg, Jacob
 Reevell, Simon
 Reid, Mr Alan
 Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
 Robertson, rh Hugh
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, Amber
 Ruffley, Mr David
 Russell, Sir Bob
 Rutley, David
 Sanders, Mr Adrian
 Sandys, Laura
 Scott, Mr Lee
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, David
 Simpson, Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Sir Robert
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mr Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel

Stuart, Mr Graham
 Stunell, rh Sir Andrew
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swales, Ian
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thornton, Mike
 Thurso, John
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrrie, Mr Andrew
 Uppal, Paul
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Ward, Mr David
 Weatherley, Mike

Wharton, James
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Roger
 Williams, Stephen
 Williamson, Gavin
 Willott, Jenny
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wright, Simon
 Yeo, Mr Tim
 Young, rh Sir George
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr Sam Gyimah and
Mark Hunter

Question accordingly negatived.

Office for Budget Responsibility (Manifesto Audits)

[Relevant Documents: Oral evidence taken before the Treasury Committee on 12 March 2014, on the costing of pre-election policy proposals, HC 1151. Written evidence to the Treasury Committee, on the costing of pre-election policy proposals, reported to the House on 12 March 2014 and published on the internet, HC 1151.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.15 pm

Ed Balls (Morley and Outwood) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House believes the role of the Office for Budget Responsibility should be enhanced to allow it to independently audit the spending and tax commitments in the general election manifestos of the main political parties, and calls for legislative proposals to enable this to be brought forward at the earliest opportunity.

Over the past four years, the Office for Budget Responsibility has become an established part of the framework for British economic policy-making with broad-based and cross-party support. It is vital that the OBR's impartiality and independence is preserved. That was a point made by Members from all parts of the House when the OBR was established, and it is why there remains a consensus, which is reflected in the Budget Responsibility and National Audit Act 2011, that the OBR should not be drawn into party politics by commenting on the merits of individual policies or examining alternative policy scenarios.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt my right hon. Friend so early, but I have just realised that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury are not here for this debate. Will he perhaps tell the House where they are today?

Ed Balls: I believe that the Chief Secretary to the Treasury is on a visit to the United States. It may be that the Chancellor is engaged in rather more immediate and urgent matters that have cropped up in the past 24 hours, or it may be that he will arrive in the next few minutes to respond to this debate. I had assumed that the Chancellor would respond to this debate. I do not know whether you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have had any other guidance. Anyway, let us hope that he turns up.

In the meantime, and fully consistent with that consensus, it is our view that now is the right time to take a further step to enhance the role of the OBR. I will come on to explain our strategy and seek the views of the Chancellor, so he has about 10 minutes to get here.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ed Balls: Sure. If the hon. Gentleman is playing for time in order to facilitate the arrival of the Chancellor, I will take as many interventions as is needed for the Chancellor to wing his way over from whichever lawyer's office he is sitting in at the moment.

Jesse Norman: I think the Minister present is fully capable of discharging any function required to see off the shadow Chancellor. A statement from the Institute for Government said:

“More feasible than making any hasty change to the OBR remit at this point would be to consider this option in detail during the five-year review of the OBR’s operation due to take place in 2015.”

How does the shadow Chancellor respond to that?

Ed Balls: I am making a speech in an attempt to build a cross-party consensus. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that the Chancellor, or whoever is in his place, will see me off, that might say something about their approach to this important matter.

Mr Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con) rose—

Ed Balls: In a second. Perhaps not at all. *[Interruption.]* Go on then. I will come to the matter of the Institute for Government’s views in a moment, when I get to the issue of timetabling. I want to set out my approach to the law, timetabling and modalities, and I will do so in that order.

Mr Newmark: While the shadow Chancellor is outlining his proposals, it would perhaps be helpful if he could explain why he opposed the OBR getting involved in auditing these sorts of things in 2010, and why he has suddenly changed his mind now. Is it because he is concerned that the public have decided that he has no economic credibility whatever?

Ed Balls: The hon. Gentleman will obviously struggle ever to have anything that might achieve a cross-party consensus in the national interest, but I will come to the political point he is making in a second. First, let me return to the serious matter that is before the House.

The OBR’s charter states that

“The Government is responsible for all policy decisions and for policy costings, i.e. quantifying the direct impact of policy decisions on the public finances. Subject to receiving sufficient information from the Treasury to do so, the OBR will provide independent scrutiny and certification of the Government’s policy costings. The OBR will state whether it agrees or disagrees with the Government’s costings, or whether it has been given insufficient time or information to reach a judgement.”

It is our proposal that the OBR play that role for the next election, not just for current Governments but for prospective Governments.

I said in my letter to the head of the OBR of 22 September last year—this is not a proposal I am making today—setting out the detail of our proposal:

“The reform I am proposing would mean the Opposition would submit costings for proposed manifesto commitments on spending and tax—obtained from, for example, the House of Commons Library, Parliamentary Questions or the Institute for Fiscal Studies—and the OBR would ‘provide independent scrutiny and certification’ of those costings.”

Those are the exact words currently in the OBR’s charter.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Why does my right hon. Friend think that the Government do not welcome this cross-party consensus that the OBR should look at the Opposition parties’ proposals for Government?

Ed Balls: I have not given up, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am hoping that if the Chancellor turns up he may end up welcoming this proposal, overwhelmed by the clarity and objectivity of the analysis that I am about to put before the House. Let us wait and see.

I accept that this reform, which I first proposed last September and has been widely discussed and debated since, is a radical change. This is the first time that any political party in Britain has said that it wants this kind of independent audit of its manifesto, but it is not without precedent. Countries that have adopted a version of this approach include the Netherlands, Australia, Canada and the United States. For the UK, while it is a radical change from what has gone before, we believe that it is the right thing to do to help restore trust in politics.

When whoever wins the next election is set to inherit not a balanced Budget, as the Chancellor promised in 2010, but on current forecasts a debt set to be £75 billion, it will be important for my party and for all parties to show that all our manifesto policies and commitments are properly costed and funded and independently audited.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I am pleased that the shadow Chancellor is trying to build a consensus, and of course he did write his letter in September last year. However, Robert Chote wrote to the Treasury Committee on 15 January this year saying:

“If Parliament wished us to play this role in the 2015 election, we would need a very clear steer in the very near future to have any hope of putting the necessary practical arrangements in place to deliver a smooth process.”

Why has the shadow Chancellor waited for fully six months before doing anything about it?

Ed Balls: I spoke to the head of the OBR last Friday, and I will come to my conversation in a moment. I appreciate the serious way in which the hon. Gentleman is engaging in the debate, and timing is one important issue that we need to discuss today. It is important to understand that if we choose not to go ahead we do so in a full understanding of the choices we have, the steps we would need to take and the actions that would be required on the relevant timetable. If we choose not to go ahead, it is important to understand why we are not going ahead. I will come to the hon. Gentleman’s point in a moment.

Owing to its importance, I have set out from the outset to forge cross-party agreement on this important reform. The House will know that the Chair of the Treasury Committee has been a long-standing advocate of this reform, as is the current head of the OBR, Mr Chote, who said at the beginning of this year:

“I believe that independent scrutiny of pre-election policy proposals could contribute to better policy making, to a more informed public debate.”

It is true that when the OBR was initially established there was caution on both sides of the House about this proposal. In the early days, when the OBR was establishing its reputation—I think it has established its reputation now for independence and objectivity—to be fair to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, when asked about this in October 2010, he said that this was

“a legitimate matter for the House to debate and to decide.”

Mr Newmark: Will the shadow Chancellor give way?

Ed Balls: No—once was enough. That was an encouraging thing for the Chancellor to say.

I have raised the matter in the House a number of times over the past nine months and each time I have urged us, in the spirit set out by the Chancellor, the Chair of the Select Committee and Mr Chote, to try to put politics aside and do the right thing. I am pleased to say that the Chief Secretary told the House, at Treasury questions a few months ago:

“The idea is well worth further consideration.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2014; Vol. 577, c. 173.]

We have not yet managed to achieve that cross-party consensus, but we still have a couple of hours.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): All Members on both sides of the House regard Robert Chote as an outstanding head of the OBR. Has the shadow Chancellor not seen his comments that it is better to consider the issue at the beginning of the next Parliament, rather than rush into it for 2015 and risk undermining support for the idea, which we all think is important, in the longer term?

Ed Balls: Either we find reasons not to proceed or we proceed. I spoke to Mr Chote last Friday. I will come to our conversation in a moment. It deals directly with that matter.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Given the cross-party approach and the interest, which my right hon. Friend has set out clearly, does he think that one of the reasons why the Chancellor and the Government have not agreed to the measure may be that they want to make misleading claims about the Opposition’s policies in the run-up to the election?

Ed Balls: Were the Chancellor to say that the proposals in our manifesto were uncosted and simultaneously try to block our manifesto from being independently audited by the OBR, that would look as if he had a political motive. But as I said, I am still hoping that cross-party consensus will break out in the course of my speech. My hon. Friend is being too pessimistic. Let us give it another 10 minutes.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ed Balls: I will talk about legislation first, then I will take two more interventions.

Of course, there are a number of detailed issues to resolve. To that end, over the past eight months, I have had a series of discussions with the permanent secretary to the Treasury, with the head of the OBR, and in the normal course of parliamentary business with the Chair of the Treasury Committee and others, and I want to update the House on where I think we are.

First, on the question whether primary legislation is necessary, in the letter that I originally wrote to the head of the OBR, which I quoted a moment ago, I cited the previously declared view of the Chair of the Select Committee, who said that he was not fully convinced that the current legislation would not allow such a role for the OBR. It was uncertain, but he was not fully convinced.

However, the head of the OBR replied to me in October, saying that he had taken legal advice from the Treasury Solicitor’s department and that the view of the Treasury Solicitor was that a change in the law was required—that there would be a need for primary legislation. To that end, I wrote to the Chancellor on 15 October to confirm that we would support any changes needed to the OBR’s charter and primary legislation, and would seek to help him build a cross-party consensus to achieve that. I wrote to the Chancellor and to the Chair of the Select Committee with a proposal for the amendment of the law, with the clauses set out for discussion. I regret to say that so far the Chancellor has not replied to my letter or engaged in that discussion, but as I said, it is not too late for him to do so.

At that time, the Clerks of the House of Commons informed us that with the Chancellor’s support and an amendment to the long title of the Bill, one option would be to table an amendment to the Finance Bill. It is just two clauses, so this change could be made well in advance of the 2015 general election. Regrettably, because there was no engagement on this two or three months ago, that change to the long title did not happen. If there was a way to table those clauses for Report stage next week, we would support a Government amendment to that effect. If not, and the Government wanted to bring forward primary legislation in the autumn, for example through a one-day Bill, we would give such legislation full support.

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): During the recent elections, we saw a lot of public dissatisfaction about what happens in and from this place. Some of that is to do with the lack of transparency and consensus on matters such as this. Would it not send an important message to the public if we had cross-party consensus on openness about manifestos and the figures within them?

Ed Balls: I agree with my hon. Friend, and that is why we support the role that the OBR plays. The Government proposed an independent OBR, a reform that we supported, and in that spirit we want to extend its role, as happens in other countries. It is not unreasonable, and it would exactly help with the issues of trust to which my hon. Friend refers.

Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I am not entirely unsympathetic to what the right hon. Gentleman asks for, but is not the fundamental problem that even a shadow Chancellor as powerful and influential as he is does not have complete control over the shadow Cabinet, or even of his Leader, who make spending promises that are not part of the finance and budgeted proposals made by the shadow Chancellor?

Ed Balls: I could ask the hon. Gentleman why on earth he thinks I want to have this independent audit: to make sure it is all done through the proper process. Perhaps I should say that. Actually, the shadow Cabinet has been exemplary in not setting out uncosted promises that cannot be delivered. We have made no claim to abolish inheritance tax. That is not a commitment in a manifesto that we have to renege upon. Nor have we made a commitment to abolish tuition fees. So the hon. Gentleman raises some issues here.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): The shadow Chancellor has informed the House how long he has been working on obtaining consensus on this policy with the Government. Did I hear him say that he wrote to the Chancellor back in October asking for a meeting and consultation and the Chancellor has still not replied?

Ed Balls: That is correct. I sent him draft clauses with an offer to reach a cross-party agreement around those. There are two ways in which we can approach these things. We can try to see off each other, or we can try to forge that consensus, and it is not too late. So let us give it another go.

The timetable issue has been raised by several hon. Members. The head of the OBR has told me that if we can reach cross-party agreement on the details of how we can take forward this role for the OBR during the summer, he would be content for the underpinning legislation to be put in place in the autumn. It is commonplace for Governments to move forward on a policy, to agree the details and modalities, while putting the legislation in place. He would be content with that, which brings me to the key timetabling issue.

A number of detailed procedural issues will clearly need to be worked through if the reform is to go ahead this year. When we met in February, following his discussions with the Select Committee, the head of the OBR told me that in his view we would need to have the discussions on the details concluded by the end of the summer. He said that that would be possible only if we could achieve in-principle agreement to proceed by the early summer, by the end of June.

I know that the head of the OBR is pessimistic that it will be possible to get that in-principle agreement, as we heard from the hon. Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) a moment ago. If there is no in-principle agreement to do this, it will not be possible to proceed in this Parliament. But I told the head of the OBR that we were having this debate today and that we still sought to achieve that consensus, and I asked for his view. He confirmed to me last Friday that his view at the beginning of the year is still his view today: that if we can reach agreement in principle to proceed by the end of June—in the next few days—we can work out the details over the summer, complete those discussions by the end of the summer, and put in place the legislation in the autumn, during which time the work of the OBR could commence.

I understand the view of the Institute for Government, which says that perhaps we should give up and do this in the next Parliament, but I do not want to do that because we owe it to the public to do the right thing. The head of the OBR's view is that if the Chancellor and those on the Treasury Front Bench are willing to come along today and agree in principle to proceed, we can go ahead. There is no issue of timing and timetable to get in the way.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): May I get to heart of the point about timing and consensus? We have already heard some quotes from Robert Chote. This is what he said when he gave oral evidence to the Select Committee and was asked whether this could be done by the next election: "It would be difficult but by no means impossible. The key thing that you would need to have is agreement in principle across

the parties that it was a good idea to do it. At the end of the day, if Parliament wants us to try this, we will do it to the best of our ability given the resources and the time we have available." Given that those statements are on the record, does my right hon. Friend agree that if this does not happen, it is because there is not a political consensus? I hope that the Minister will not say that this is about timing but will be up front about why the consensus is not there, and admit that she and her colleagues are blocking it.

Ed Balls: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we, as a House, decide to proceed in a cross-party way today, and in the coming days, this reform can be agreed over the summer, the legislation to back it can be put in place, and we can have independent audits of manifestos at the next election. It is not a matter of timetabling, because the head of the OBR says that it can be done: it is only an issue of political will. If, in the end, the Chancellor—who has not turned up—does not want to do it, it is not going to happen. It is not going to happen not because the OBR will not do it, because we will not do it, or because it cannot be done, but because Government Front Benchers do not want it to happen.

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I have some sympathy with what the shadow Chancellor is trying to achieve. While he is right that the OBR should be beyond partisan politics, it is the case that it has not been beyond reproach in relation to its predictions and continues to be well out of line, given what we expected our deficit to have come down to. Does he recognise that this process is not going to draw a line under any disputes over matters to do with economic programmes? Ultimately, it will be a judgment by the voters rather than the OBR, and this process should not be allowed to take it out of their hands come election time.

Ed Balls: Of course, none of us is beyond reproach, including the OBR and including the Chancellor. The OBR has had a few rather sharp things to say about some of the Chancellor's practices over the past few months as regards fiscal decision making. In the end, of course the voters have to decide; they have to look at the manifestos and make their judgment. In our view, if an independent body—the OBR—scrutinises the costings of individual proposals to check that they have been done properly, that can only be to the benefit of the public debate. Ultimately, it does not take away the voters' choice, but why would we choose to have them misinformed or uninformed when we could have them properly informed? That is the choice before the House.

John Thurso (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Like the Chairman of the Treasury Committee, I fully support the principle, and if we can arrive at political consensus, I would be delighted. At the session from which my colleague on the Committee, the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), quoted, Mr Chote put quite a lot of barriers and difficulties in place. At the end, he said that we should not rush this to arrive at an imperfect solution. Does the shadow Chancellor accept that if we cannot get it right, that is worse than doing nothing at all?

Ed Balls: That is why I wrote to the Chancellor last October seeking to begin discussions and putting the draft clauses on the table. I have had a number of discussions with the head of the OBR, who has made exactly those points. He wants to know that the resources will be there and what the rules of engagement will be. He wants to know that this will be done properly. He wants to know, in particular, that the Government and the Treasury will engage in good faith with the process. Of course it is difficult, because so far the Chancellor has not been willing to engage with these discussions. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns. However, I spoke to Mr Chote last Friday, and if we can reach agreement this week—by the end of June—he is content to proceed this year. If we are all in favour of the proposal in principle and enter into it in good faith, it can be done. Of course, if either side puts up impossible barriers in the discussions with the OBR, it will not happen. But I am up for it, and if the Chancellor was here, we could ask him whether he was too.

David Rutley: I understand what the shadow Chancellor is trying to say, but there are clear timing issues and a clear implementation risk. The OBR is an embryonic, independent body whose credibility we must maintain. We need to focus on the implementation risk.

Ed Balls: All I can say, once again, is that the head of the OBR is content to proceed. If the hon. Gentleman supports this reform, I shall share his frustration about the many months that have been wasted. I could have made this an issue of party political combat or criticism seven, eight or nine months ago, but I have said repeatedly at Treasury questions that I hope the Government will change their mind and engage. He is right that we will be timed out if we cannot make those agreements. If we can agree in the next week, we will have a full two months to work out the details. From my experience, I think that two months would be sufficient to agree on that if there is good faith on both sides.

David Rutley: If the shadow Chancellor is so enthusiastic, why has it taken him three and a half years to bring this proposal to the House in the first place?

Ed Balls: There are moments when the hon. Gentleman engages seriously in these issues, but then he reverts to the Whips' brief and the kind of behaviour that we expect from others. The truth is that we have been trying to engage on this for nine months. We have been serious, but the Chancellor has been absent. That is the problem.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ed Balls: I will make a little progress before giving way again.

In addition to primary legislation, which we need, and a timetable, because there is still time, the third issue is resources and modalities. In particular, who would the reform apply to? The head of the OBR is rightly concerned to ensure that this is a manageable process and that the resource implications can be taken into account. I have proposed that it should apply to governing parties and prospective governing parties. To that end, the legislation I delivered to the Chancellor in October proposed that the OBR should provide

independent scrutiny and certification of the policy costings of any political party that has at least 5% of seats in the House of Commons, at the request of that party and subject to receiving sufficient information from it.

I should emphasise that my view has always been that that should be voluntary and that no party should be forced down that road, and that remains my view. Let me be clear that tough, rigorous and independent scrutiny of Labour's election manifesto is important. I believe that it should be important for Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos, too. In tough times we must all ensure that all our policies are properly costed and funded, because people rightly want to know that the sums add up.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Would this new-found desire for consensus not be strengthened if the shadow Chancellor and the rest of his Front-Bench colleagues admitted that the previous Labour Government played a central role in causing the problem we are dealing with?

Ed Balls: We are trying to have a discussion about an important reform for the future. There have been moments in the life of this House when consensus have been formed. The Conservatives voted against Bank of England independence in 1998, but in the end they joined the consensus. They voted against the move from self-regulation to statutory regulation in our financial services, but in the end they joined the consensus. I think that there is now a consensus that we should not join the euro, but I wish there was a consensus that we should stay in the European Union, which would be a good thing. On this matter, however, we should be able to form a consensus.

I can agree that regulation of financial services under the previous Government was not tough enough, but I also say that, if he were here, the Chancellor of the Exchequer would agree that he criticised me at very stage, as did the Exchequer Secretary, for being much too tough on financial regulation, rather than too soft. The issue is whether we can form a consensus for the future.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to the shadow Chancellor for giving way; he is being very indulgent. First, has Lord Eatwell joined his consensus or is he still opposed to it? Secondly—this is more relevant to the issue of party manifestos—the reality is that had we done this for the last election it would have been irrelevant, because we ended up with a coalition Government. Elections can have different outcomes, so has the shadow Chancellor thought through how the OBR would be able to make estimates in the event of a coalition Government?

Ed Balls: It would be a bit unfair to ask Lord Eatwell, who has returned to academic life and is no longer on our Front Bench in the Lords, for ex-post agreement, although if I had to hazard a guess, I would say that he could join a strong consensus in this House that included a number of Conservative Members, as we have sort of heard today and read elsewhere.

Coalition is an important issue. Going into the last election there was no OBR, but there were costed proposals in manifestos, and, after the coalition was formed, costings for proposals put before this House

through the Budget process were audited by the OBR. I do not think the OBR should be drawn into coalition negotiations after elections and manifestos, because it would probably be a mistake to draw it into the political process in that way. I understand the hon. Gentleman's point, but I do not think it is an obstacle to proceeding.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In his letter to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the chair of the OBR referred to this process facilitating coalition discussions, if needed, after an election.

Ed Balls: In that case, the head of the OBR is even more supportive of the proposal than I had thought. My hon. Friend makes a helpful contribution.

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): I hope that in the final part of his speech, my right hon. Friend will come to the same conclusion as me, which is that the only reason Government Members could be against this proposal is that they are frightened that they will no longer be able to say that our plans are no good.

Ed Balls: My hon. Friend, who regularly advises me on my speeches, can obviously see where this speech is going. I have worked hard to try to secure consensus. Despite the support of many influential figures, I have not yet managed to succeed in making it a cross-party consensus. The reason for that is that, so far, the Chancellor has not engaged. He has refused to co-operate with the discussions. He has not responded to my proposals and letters. He has not even turned up today.

The question is: why is the Chancellor so reluctant? The reason cannot be the need for primary legislation, because we will support it. It cannot be the timetable because, despite the protestations of Government Members, the head of the OBR confirms that there is time to get this done and to get it done properly. The Chancellor says that he wants to protect OBR independence, but so do we, and the head of the OBR says that this reform need not jeopardise that independence.

Jesse Norman: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ed Balls: No, the hon. Gentleman has already had one go.

What is the issue? What is going on? I am afraid that it is not hard to conclude that the Chancellor sees this as an opportunity to play political games. *[Interruption.]* The more that Government Front Benchers laugh, the more we see the political games they want to play.

We know from the head of the OBR that if an agreement to proceed is reached by the end of June and we can conclude its details by the end of the summer, the OBR can independently audit all our tax and spending commitments for the next general election. It is just a matter of political will. The Chancellor wants to place political traps—through his aides, he very often tells people that he is setting them here and setting them there—but he is not willing to back an important reform in the national interest. What is going on?

Why is the Chancellor so keen to prevent Labour from having its manifesto independently audited, and so reluctant to put his own party's manifesto through the same scrutiny? Might it be that, as the head of the

Institute for Fiscal Studies said at the last Budget, the Chancellor is “getting into bad habits” by making tax changes that appear to bring money into the Exchequer in the short term but have a long-term permanent cost to the public finances; or that, as the IFS said at the last autumn statement, he

“continues to make specific promises on spending increases while stating that he will keep total spending at the same level”

and that he “can't keep doing that”? The risk for the Chancellor is that people draw the conclusion that he wants the freedom to make promises in his manifesto that he knows he cannot afford and will not deliver, while making claims about Labour's manifesto that he knows to be false, and blocking our desire for proper independent audits.

I have to tell the Chancellor and other Ministers that we remember the Conservatives' uncosted promise to abolish inheritance tax last time around; and as for the Liberal Democrats' promise to end tuition fees—enough said. My advice to the Chancellor, if he had turned up, and to the Chief Secretary, if he were here, would be that if they do not want to be reminded again and again of those mistakes, they should support our proposal and help us to forge the cross-party consensus we need.

It is hugely disappointing that the Chancellor seems determined to oppose this reform. I have tried hard to persuade him to put politics aside and to do the right thing. Our proposal would be the first ever such independent audit. We believe that it is essential to restore public trust in politics and to improve the nature of our political debate. It is not too late for him to come to the House to say, or to tell his Front-Bench colleagues, that he has changed his mind. I urge the House to vote to persuade the Chancellor to do just that—to change his mind, to stop playing politics and to stop blocking this important reform. If he fails to do so, people will rightly ask: what are they so scared of?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Minister to move the amendment, I must inform the House that a great many hon. Members obviously wish to speak in the very limited time available. I will therefore put a limit on Back-Benchers' speeches of six minutes, which may well be reduced later if they take many interventions and speak for much longer than six minutes. I hope that hon. Members will behave with courtesy to others and keep their speeches short.

4.53 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Nicky Morgan): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “House” to the end of the Question and add:

“recognises the important role of the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) in producing independent forecasts for the economy and the public finances, and the value this has had in restoring trust in official forecasts; notes that the OBR is a newly independent institution and judges that it would not be appropriate to involve it in party political matters at its first election; notes the comments made by the Chairman of the OBR, Robert Chote, in a letter dated 15 January 2014 to the House of Commons Treasury Committee that ‘to embark on this exercise in a rush, or with insufficient resources, could be very disruptive to the parties and very damaging to the OBR’; and supports the view expressed in that letter that it is ‘better to consider these issues at the beginning of the next Parliament’.”

[Nicky Morgan]

I am sorry that the shadow Chancellor is disappointed that I am opening for the Government in this debate. I must say that I have only been in this House for just over four years, but it is always true in politics that there is a first time for everything. This afternoon, the shadow Chancellor accused the Government of playing political games and called for cross-party consensus, so there is a first time for everything and we heard it here first. The most sensible thing that he said in his speech was to offer the hon. Member for Bolton West (Julie Hilling) a job as his speech writer, so let us hope that his future speeches are dramatically improved.

The shadow Chancellor made his views on this matter very clear to the House, so I will begin by answering him with equal clarity. The Government do not believe that the OBR should cost the Labour party's, or indeed any Opposition party's, manifesto commitments for the election next year.

Mr Andrew Love (Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op): In an effort to keep the tone of consensus so admirably set by the shadow Chancellor, will she accept that the amendment she is currently moving is selective in the quotes that it gives from the OBR, giving the strong impression that it is opposed to this, when clearly, it is in favour?

Nicky Morgan: As I will come on to say, I do not think that the quotations in the amendment or the amendment itself are in any way selective. The amendment sets out the reasons why the Government are not supporting the Opposition's motion. It does so very clearly, and the OBR, in its letter, sets out very clearly the reasons why it is not at this stage ready to cost the Opposition parties' manifestos in the way that is wanted.

Mr Love: The reality is that the Government are trying to hide behind the OBR. The OBR is clearly in favour of the move, and although the Government are at liberty to say what they truly feel, let them be honest when we are trying to have a consensus in the debate.

Nicky Morgan: Let me assure the hon. Gentleman that I will keep to the consensual tone that the shadow Chancellor, often with great difficulty, tried to strike during this debate. The letter from Robert Chote makes it very clear that these issues would be better discussed at the start of the next Parliament. The reality is that, actually, the Opposition are looking for a fig leaf for their lack of an economic plan. That is the reality of the motion.

Ed Balls: I spoke to the head of the OBR last Friday, who told me that if the House agrees to proceed, with Government support, by the end of June, he would be content, comfortable and pleased to proceed with the reform this year. So when the Minister says that he is against this reform, could she just correct the record, because I believe that to be incorrect?

Nicky Morgan: It is all very well for the right hon. Gentleman to have a conversation with the head of the OBR, but we do not know the details of that conversation; if he is going to release a transcript, I would be very interested to read it. In fact, the letter dated 15 January makes it very clear that

“To embark on this exercise in a rush, or with insufficient resources, could be very disruptive for the parties and very damaging to the OBR.”

Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that he wants it to be damaging to the OBR? I do not think that he does.

Jesse Norman: On the topic of misinformation, does the Minister share my surprise that the shadow Chancellor should have misrepresented the position of the Institute for Government on this, when he suggested that it was giving up on the idea of a reform of this kind in this Parliament? In fact, what it said—it was an expert judgment—was that:

“More feasible than making any hasty change...would be to consider this option...during the five-year review...due to take place in 2015.”

Does she not share my view that the shadow Chancellor should be invited to correct the record on what he said about that?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for that very good point. He has eloquently set out the misrepresentation by the shadow Chancellor of what was said by the Institute for Government. I am sure that perhaps through later speakers and in the winding-up speech the Opposition will have a chance to correct the record.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nicky Morgan: I am going to make some progress.

As our amendment makes very clear, we are not suggesting that the issues that the shadow Chancellor's proposals present are insurmountable, but we do believe very firmly that the independence and operation of the OBR is critical. We need to make sure that independence and impartiality is preserved, and as such, Parliament would need time to scrutinise the proposals properly and the OBR still needs time to establish itself fully as an independent fiscal watchdog before being drawn into the political heart of a general election.

Let me turn to the situation that the Government inherited in 2010. First, it is worth reminding the Chamber of exactly why and when the OBR came into existence. Hon. Members will need no reminding of the economic inheritance left to this Government by the Labour party, and on taking office we recognised the need to act quickly in the short term to establish our country's economic credibility for the long term. The creation of the OBR was vital in that respect.

Back in 2010, our country urgently needed a full and independent assessment of just how bad the problem was because, again and again, the possibility of fiddling figures was tempting, and some would argue that that temptation had been responsible for some of the greatest fiscal policy mistakes of the past 40 years.

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): One of the slightly odd things about the Minister's line of argument is that in its initial reports the OBR predicted that growth would be much faster than turned out to be the case, which suggests that the situation then was not quite as dire in the OBR's view as the Minister is trying to suggest. What happened, surely, was that Government policies then crushed growth.

Nicky Morgan: I listen to the hon. Lady in debate after debate trying to reinvent fiscal history as we have seen it over the past four or five years. The motion before the House and the moves of the shadow Chancellor, are a desperate attempt to do that. As we have seen in the Labour party political strategy 2015, which was recently leaked to a Sunday newspaper, Labour has to rebuild its credibility on the economy. This debate is a blatant attempt to do just that.

Mr Newmark: I asked the shadow Chancellor this question but perhaps my right hon. Friend will answer. Does she find it strange that the shadow Chancellor, who said that he does not want to politicise things, did not see fit to bring this matter up for three and a half years? Suddenly the polls are saying that the Opposition have no economic credibility whatsoever, and he tables this motion and says, “Gosh. Why don’t we have all of our manifestos audited?” Is that a little strange?

Nicky Morgan: It would be a little strange, but the shadow Chancellor and the Opposition have woken up to the need to rebuild their fiscal credibility as the election approaches. Of course they had 13 years to introduce an Office for Budget Responsibility, but no move was made.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm how much more the Government are borrowing compared with what they planned?

Nicky Morgan: A lot less than the Labour party would have done had it been in government—*[Interruption.]* I thank the shadow Chancellor for the applause; that is very kind.

The creation of the OBR has meant that for the first time we have a truly independent assessment of the state of the nation’s finances. As the Chancellor noted in his Budget this March, it is to its credit that

“we now take it for granted that the figures presented at this Dispatch Box are not fiddled but fair and independent.”—*[Official Report, 19 March 2014; Vol. 577, c. 781.]*

By giving the OBR power to produce the official forecast, we have managed to remove many of the risks of the past and put the UK’s fiscal policy at the cutting edge of international best practice. The IMF said that

“strong fiscal institutions can enhance the credibility of consolidation plans”

and the shadow Chancellor wrote to Robert Chote affirming:

“Over the last three years, the Office for Budget Responsibility has become an established part of the framework of British economic policy with broad-based and cross-party support.”

I am sure that—it is not often I say this—we all agree wholeheartedly with the shadow Chancellor. It is also worth reminding right hon. and hon. Members that when the OBR was set up four years ago, it was deliberately designed to ensure that it would be independent and could steer clear of political wrangling. That independence and impartiality is crucial.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): My right hon. Friend is talking about the credibility that the OBR is building. Bearing in mind the political knockabout we have had today, the bogus calls from the shadow Chancellor,

and the clear party politics being played, does she think that it would damage the OBR’s credibility if we entered into the plan that the shadow Chancellor is offering?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One big issue that the Opposition have not addressed is that if this change were to be brought in without proper consideration, it would mean changes to the way civil servants work. That is something we value greatly in this country, and we would have to consider that issue when scrutinising any legislation.

Mr Jones: Is it not telling that the shadow Chancellor gave no commitment to carry on with this, should, God forbid, we get a Labour Government and a Labour Chancellor?

Nicky Morgan: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend, who, as usual, talks complete economic sense, unlike the Labour party.

As academic evidence noted at the time of the OBR’s creation, it is vital that there should not

“even be a scintilla of doubt...about the OBR’s independence and impartiality, as negative perceptions may undermine the OBR’s reputation, requiring a major effort at changing such perceptions”.

Unfortunately, the Opposition’s proposal not only presents a risk to that impartiality, but raises several difficult practical questions, which I shall go through briefly.

Clive Efford: The right hon. Lady will be aware that the shadow Chancellor wrote to the Chancellor last October. How many meetings have Ministers had with the chair of the OBR to discuss this issue in the intervening period?

Nicky Morgan: As the hon. Gentleman will know, meetings held by Ministers are published in the normal way. I cannot give him a specific number, but a list of meetings is published in the usual way.

Clive Efford: In that case, the right hon. Lady is indicating that these discussions have taken place and that there have been meetings at which this issue has been discussed. If so, did the chair of the OBR indicate whether, if a consensus could be reached before the end of June, he could deliver these budget assessments before the general election?

Nicky Morgan: I certainly did not indicate that. It is to be expected that Treasury Ministers will meet the head of the OBR and that various matters will be discussed, and we received a clear letter from him about the motion and the proposals before us today.

I want about to talk about the practical questions that would require much greater scrutiny in the future. First, as I mentioned, the Opposition do not seem to have assessed how their proposal might compromise the OBR’s ability to avoid being drawn into political debate or the real danger that such a change could undermine its perceived independence and, by extension, the credibility of the UK’s official forecasts.

Mr Love *rose*—

Nicky Morgan: I will make some progress, because I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman twice.

Secondly, the Opposition do not seem to have acknowledged that think-tanks such as the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the National Institute of Economic and Social Research already have a long and distinguished track record in providing costings to parties in the run-up to elections. This, then, is another example of the Opposition asking the public—hard-working taxpayers—to stump up for something that already works effectively.

Mark Garnier: The Minister raises an important point about the cost, and it is worth bearing in mind that the Dutch Central Planning Bureau, which does this for nine political parties in Holland, has about 350 members of staff. Has the Treasury estimated how much it would cost to resource it properly?

Nicky Morgan: I am not aware that we have done any estimates, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right about the Dutch Central Planning Bureau—the figure I have is 170, but he says 350—and the American Congressional Budget Office has 250 members of staff. The point is that the Opposition are asking hard-working taxpayers to pay more money to staff up the OBR quickly so that it can certify and sign off their economic plan, such as it is.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The Minister mentions the experience in the Netherlands, so I draw her attention to the comments of Peter Riddell, the director of the Institute for Government:

“As experience in the Netherlands shows, such a system has helped improve the quality of policies and encourages a more informed public debate as parties become more open about the costs of their proposals.”

What is wrong with that?

Nicky Morgan: I will come to the overall principle of having the OBR look at parties’ manifestos, but how long has it taken the Dutch Central Planning Bureau to get to that stage? If the hon. Gentleman has the answer, I would be interested to hear it.

Thirdly, there are genuine practical considerations that must be weighed in the balance. The Opposition do not seem to acknowledge that rather than producing costings of Government policies, the OBR certifies the costings already produced. The OBR, which currently employs only 19 members of staff, plus three members of the Budget Responsibility Committee, would need significant additional resources and a range of specialist skills in order to take on such a role. Have the Opposition considered where it would recruit from?

Ed Balls: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. I have discussed every issue she has raised with the head of the OBR, whose view is that they do not provide a reason not to proceed, so long as the Government support the proposal. The Minister is setting out why she and the Government do not support it, but they should not hide behind the head of the OBR. He is happy to proceed; it is she who is blocking it.

Nicky Morgan: As far as Government Members are aware, the letter of 15 January put the comments of the head of the OBR on the record. The right hon. Gentleman

has not made any transcript of any such conversation available. We do not know what was discussed or what reservations were expressed by the head of the OBR.

Ed Balls: I spoke to the head of the OBR last Friday, in preparation for this debate. The right hon. Lady, who has stepped in for the Chancellor, is quoting a letter from January. Surely, to prepare for this debate, she would have spoken to the OBR in the days before. If he has changed his views since last Friday and contradicts what he told me then, I will withdraw my comments. Did the Minister speak to him; is he content to proceed, or has she not bothered to have the conversation?

Nicky Morgan: It is not a question of not bothering to have the conversation. If the right hon. Gentleman has had a conversation, where is the transcript and why has it not been released to the House? If he has a transcript, we would like to see it. We would like to know what the head of the OBR said about—*[Interruption.]* If I allow the shadow Chancellor to stand up again, will he tell us how many additional staff the head of the OBR said he would need to recruit, where he is going to find them from and how quickly they can be appointed? That is the premise of the right hon. Gentleman’s argument.

Ed Balls: Is the right hon. Lady really saying that I am misleading the House? I spoke to the head of the OBR last Friday, and he said to me that if the Government agree by the end of June, we can proceed and these obstacles can be overcome. In his view, the issues that the Minister is raising about resourcing and independence can all be resolved if she chooses to do so. Is she really saying that I am misleading—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Dawn Primarolo): Order. Interventions must be brief; the point has been made. I call the Minister.

Nicky Morgan: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We are back to old social government: no notes, no transcript, nothing. If the right hon. Gentleman has exchanged correspondence or if he has a transcript of the conversation, he should put it before the House if he wants to bring it into the debate.

Mr Love rose—

Nicky Morgan: I will give way briefly to the hon. Gentleman, but then I want to make some progress.

Mr Love: I thank the right hon. Lady. There is a transcript. After the production of the letter of 15 January, Robert Chote appeared before the Treasury Committee, where we interrogated him on all these issues. He confirmed that if all these issues could be resolved, he would be content to go ahead.

Nicky Morgan: I prefer to take notice of comments that are on the record, such as the following from Robert Chote. On 4 April 2014—*[Interruption.]* The shadow Chancellor should listen. This is what the head of the OBR said:

“The Chancellor perfectly reasonably has said he doesn’t think this is the right time to do this... The reasons he has cited are it’s

the first general election we've existed...you don't want to throw the OBR as a relatively young body into a politically contested territory now."

David Rutley: Having recruited teams—very sizeable teams—in the past, I know it takes time to recruit talent. These are not unskilled people—[*Interruption.*] No.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

David Rutley: May I ask the question, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman should make his intervention and ignore anything else, rather than trying to answer it all. A brief intervention will do, Mr Rutley.

David Rutley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your guidance.

I was making the point that it takes time to recruit skilled individuals, particularly in economic forecasting.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend is entirely right; it will take time to recruit skilled members of staff to carry out the project that the Opposition say the OBR should be able to do within a matter of months.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that Mr Chote also made it very clear that his job would be made additionally complicated by the run-up to a general election? Is she surprised that the shadow Chancellor comes here to present his views with no form of back-up, official record, transcripts or anything on which this House might properly rely?

Nicky Morgan: Nothing in politics surprises me any more, so I am not surprised that the shadow Chancellor has done that. I am just surprised that he thinks that the House is going to buy it.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way yet again; she is giving up a great deal of her time. Robert Chote appeared before the Treasury Committee, and, while he did say that if he were pressured to an unbelievable extent the work would be possible, he made very clear that he was not happy with the idea of having to press it too quickly. Moreover, the resources required would be astronomical, and it would be made up of temporary members of staff—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions are not opportunities for speeches. They are supposed to be brief, and Members in all parts of the House should adhere to that convention.

Nicky Morgan: Both my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (David Rutley) and the member of the Treasury Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), have eloquently described the reservations expressed to the Committee by the head of the OBR. On page 7 of his letter of 15 January, paragraph 4 states:

"Resource constraints in the OBR and responsible departments would argue for a longer process than that undertaken ahead of Budgets and Autumn Statements, so proposals might be required two or three months ahead of manifesto publication."

Mr Chote went on to say:

"a May election date with April manifesto publications would imply that the work of certifying manifesto costings would need to be undertaken alongside the Budget and preceding Autumn Statement, when the OBR and responsible departments are at or near their peak workloads."

In that part of the letter, he was referring mostly to resources.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Nicky Morgan: I want to make some progress.

Ed Balls *rose*—

Nicky Morgan: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, for the last time.

Ed Balls: I spoke to the head of the OBR. He believes that if he is to cost manifestos in time, he will need to start in the autumn, he will need agreement by the end of June, and he will need the details to have been worked out by the end of August. The Minister is obfuscating. It is she who is blocking this, not the head of the OBR.

Nicky Morgan: Let me say for the last time that if the right hon. Gentleman wanted to pray in aid evidence from a conversation that he had last week, he should have put it in writing and presented it to the House, or placed it in the Library.

If we ask the OBR to recruit additional staff, what will they do between elections? I do not know whether Labour Members have considered the fact that what they propose would involve a radical change in the rules governing civil service contact with the Opposition. I do not know whether they have fully explored the primary legislation that would be required to make this happen, just as I do not know whether they have considered how the demands of Opposition parties would be balanced against other Government priorities.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nicky Morgan: Yes, of course I will.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I am extremely grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way, because I think that the shadow Chancellor has just proved the Government's case. These references to private conversations are politicising the OBR in exactly the way that frightens the Government. I think that the shadow Chancellor is hoist with his own petard.

Nicky Morgan: As always, my hon. Friend has summed up the position brilliantly and eloquently. I was particularly impressed when he intervened on the shadow Chancellor and forced him to admit that the purpose of the Opposition's proposal was to stop the shadow Cabinet making spending commitments left right and centre.

I was referring to other Government priorities. I am thinking of, for example, Budget preparations. The time when those preparations are being made is one

[Nicky Morgan]

of the busiest times of the year for the OBR, during which specialist and other staff resources are already occupied.

As I have already said today, what I will not do is stand here and say that the problems are insurmountable, or that a solution could not be found in future. However, if we want to ensure that the OBR's independence and influence are preserved, the issue merits much fuller and much more careful consideration than is represented by the Opposition's proposals. That brings me to one of the most important points. We need to remember that the OBR is a very young organisation. We believe that it is doing an excellent job—as, clearly, does the shadow Chancellor—but it has not, as yet, been subject to any major review.

It was announced in last year's autumn statement that, as required by legislation, the OBR would launch an external review of its publications during the current year, and that its findings would be published in September. The Government have also announced that following the outcome of that review, and following the general election, they will hold their own review of the OBR. I think—I am sure other Members will agree—that until those reviews of the OBR's current responsibilities have been completed, we should not throw extra responsibilities at it. I consider it sensible for us to wait until after the OBR's review, our review, and the OBR's first general election before considering this issue further.

Unlike the Labour party, I do not want to pre-empt the OBR's review, but I think it safe to say that, through its creation, the coalition has changed the way in which Budgets are made for ever and has created an independent office that has restored public confidence in the numbers that underpin the Budget. In its first four years, the OBR's independent forecasts have supported the credibility of our long-term fiscal plans. Between now and the general election, the OBR should remain focused on doing that job. It should remain focused on ensuring that, as we fix the mess left to us by the Labour party, the numbers underlying our long-term economic plan are correct. That plan is making a real difference.

Mr Love: Will the Minister give way?

Nicky Morgan: No.

Inflation is at its lowest level in four and a half years. Employment is at its highest level ever. Just as our deficit is shrinking, our economy is growing, with the recovery balanced across all the main sectors, because of a long-term economic plan being taken forward by the Government and being properly scrutinised by an independent, impartial body. That is how it should stay for the next year. That is why I ask hon. Members to support our amendment.

5.20 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): Perhaps it would be correct for me to state at the outset that, in view of the six-minute limit, I do not intend to take any interventions. I hope to confine myself to fewer than six minutes. I will not take an intervention, even from the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), whose interventions so far have been a waste of time. Time is at a premium. On that basis, I will make some progress.

I do not think that I have heard a more blatant party political set of arguments, electorally inspired, from any Government since I have been in the House. The Government are going against the grain—

Jesse Norman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Robinson: No, I am not giving way. I have made that clear already, although not out of any fear of what the hon. Gentleman might say. The Government are afraid, though. They are afraid that, if our proposals before the election were properly and independently costed, as they will be—we will probably try to get it done independently in some other way if we have to—it would give them the credibility that the Government seek to deny them by being misleading and by obfuscating, at which they are experts—the Chancellor in particular, who is not here.

When we look at what individuals have said about the proposal, it is clear that it is possible—no one has tried harder to secure this than my right hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls), the shadow Chancellor—to achieve consensus across the House if right hon. and hon. Members on the Government Benches want it. The hon. Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), who chairs the Treasury Committee, said on 15 October 2013, around the time that my right hon. Friend was writing to the Chancellor on these points:

“I made clear in the Commons that this should include examining, at their request, the fiscal policies of opposition parties at election time.”

The whole point is that election time and the run-up to the election is the appropriate time to do this. That is why my right hon. Friend started this in October—nine months ago. It is a complicated, difficult process, but why have we had nothing from the Chancellor since? Why has he refused to engage in that?

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Robinson: I did mention the hon. Gentleman. For that reason, I will take this one intervention.

Mr Tyrie: Curiously for an Opposition day debate, a bit of consensus seems to be emerging that at least in principle this work should be done, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that, although of course the work needs to be done at election time, the preparatory discussions to discover what the ground rules should be need to take place in a quiet political climate, not in the run-up to a general election? Therefore, given that for three years both parties have objected to this, the time to get that done would be immediately after a general election.

Mr Robinson: The most useful thing I can do for the hon. Gentleman and the House is to read out in full, to get it on the record, what the head of the OBR has said. In March, just a couple of months ago, he said:

“I think the key thing that you would need to do would be to ensure that by, say, the early summer”—

exactly where we are now—

“you were in a position”—

he is speaking to Members who are involved in the decision—

“where even if you did not have the full legislative framework for this sort of thing in place”—

I think we have that, largely—

“you would need to have, first, agreement in principle across the parties”,

which we are striving for, and it is only because the Government perceive it to be against their electoral interests that they are resisting it. It is the most blatant, obvious Government ploy that I have seen since—well, I will not say since when. He said

“that it was a good idea to do it and, secondly, fairly detailed agreement on what you might think of as the rules of the game: which parties should be involved”—

my right hon. Friend dealt with that—

“what scope of policies should you look at; what is the timetable; what would be the involvement of civil servants, and so on.”

The quotation continues:

“I think you would need to get that sort of thing in place in the early summer in order for us, for example, to be able to set out and recruit the necessary people over the course of the summer and have all that in place ready to be welcoming customers, so to speak, maybe after the party conferences in the autumn.”

There is timetable, therefore, but Government Back Benchers are trying to deny it, and they are not playing their role at all. Why are they doing it? There is only one reason, and I shall come back to it in a moment.

David Rutley rose—

Mr Robinson: I am not giving way.

I was quoting comments made by Robert Chote on 12 March this year. It is quite clear that this can be done. There is only one obstacle standing in the way: the Government do not want it to happen. It is not that they want it to happen but find it difficult; it is that they do not want it to happen.

Why do the Government not want it to happen? Let me read what the Chancellor said a couple of years ago when he first set out on this path:

“I propose to have discussions with Opposition party leaders about whether that is the appropriate thing to do”—

to have the parties’ election proposals vetted by the OBR—

“and it would be a legitimate matter for the House to debate”,

which we are doing today,

“and decide.”—[*Official Report*, 12 October 2010; Vol. 516, c. 142.]

I say, with no disrespect to the two distinguished Ministers on the Treasury Bench, the Exchequer Secretary and the Financial Secretary, that it is a matter of great regret that the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary are absent because, having promised that, the Chancellor has refused to engage with my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor. He has refused to come to the House and debate this with us on the one occasion when we can decide on it, and decide on doing it in the run-up to the election, which is the appropriate time, as Robert Chote himself said: I am reciting his words not in the quotation that I read out, but in another one.

It is quite clear that this can be done, therefore; Robert Chote has said that it can be done. It is quite clear that the only art left to the Government is sophistry to try to create problems that just do not exist. If they can answer any one of the charges—any of the points made by Robert Chote or my right hon. Friend—then

let us hear them, because I say, with great respect to the Financial Secretary who opened the debate, that she did not tackle any of that. She said, “Let me put on the record what we inherited.” This is not about that at all, and it is not about the fact we were not satisfied with the OBR in the early years. I was the Member who was most critical of its ability in those years.

The fact is that the OBR is established now, however, and it is clear from Robert Chote’s comments that he wants to do this. He believes he can do it and he thinks it would be good. It would be good for public debate, for transparency and for politics in this country, yet the Government are denying the public that right and that opportunity to submit parties’ proposals, which are always in the centre of the election debate, for scrutiny. They are denying the public that, and the public will ask why the Government are doing that and they will read between the lines and see that it is a blatant, deliberate attempt to hide from the public the fact that the Labour party’s proposals are coherent, costed and convincing.

5.27 pm

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): I want to bring a different point of view to this debate, and a point of principle. I am against this motion in principle, and I hope to clearly set out why. First, however, may I gently say that if I were compiling a list of colleagues in this House who had the skills-mix to bring together a cross-party consensus, I am not sure the shadow Chancellor would be top of my list, in the same way as I would not want to invite King Herod to babysit my children. [*Interruption.*] I apologise if that is a little harsh, but that idea did not ring true on the Government Benches.

This debate is about restoring the British electorate’s lost credibility and trust in the political classes, and certainly after our disastrous decision—as I now see it—in 2003 to go to war on a false premise, and after the expenses scandal of 2009, there is no doubt that credibility and trust do need to be restored. I have to say that I do not think this motion is the way to do it, however, because we will never restore trust in ourselves if we are constantly contracting-out to a third party our credibility and integrity. If we are not careful, we will simply become elected go-betweens buying in ideas and policies from independent sources. We have to build up a track record of trustworthiness in our own right.

The message the motion sends to the British electorate is that we do not trust ourselves in the run-up to next May’s elections to tell them the truth about our financial plans. That is what we are saying; the message we are sending out is that we do not trust ourselves. If we do not trust ourselves to send out a message of credibility and integrity, why on earth should we expect the electorate to have any trust in us? We may have access to the finest brains in the country, who can help to shape our spending plans; none the less, we still cannot be trusted to ensure that those plans are accurate, so we have to get them independently verified. The motion edges us towards accepting that nobody can ever trust a politician on anything without independent verification. I do not want to go there. That is a very slippery slope that I do not want to go down.

The trouble with subcontracting out to independent organisations is that it undermines the very essence of our democracy: accountability. If my electorate do not

[Mr Gary Streeter]

like me, they can remove me. They might well do so next May—we will see—but at least I am accountable to them. I am afraid that the OBR is not accountable to them. So the answer to the lack of trust in British politics is not to subcontract out our veracity. The answer—it will take a lot of hard work—is simply to tell the truth and stick with it; to make promises and keep them; to check our figures again and again before we set them out, and to make sure they are accurate.

Mr George Mudie (Leeds East) (Lab): I am listening intently to the hon. Gentleman. He is saying that the House should not subcontract out; is he saying the same of the Government? If he is saying to the Opposition parties that the OBR cannot vet economic policies, presumably, the same goes for the Government. Is he confirming, therefore, that he would do away with the OBR?

Mr Streeter: I was about to make the point that I hope the OBR will be only a temporary institution. I am probably the only person who thinks that. I was first elected to this House in 1992—not a million years after when the hon. Gentleman was first elected—and my recollection is that, 22 years ago, Treasury figures were trusted and taken almost as gospel. I am not pinning the blame on any particular Government, but the history of certain previous Governments massaging figures and forecasts and announcing the same money over and over again as though it was new money has completely undermined confidence in Treasury forecasts and credibility. Of course, we have also had the 2007-08 crash.

There is no doubt that the OBR has helped to restore confidence in and the credibility of Treasury figures, not among our electorate, most of whom have never heard of it—they would not know what it was if it hit them in the face—but among opinion-formers and commentators. However, I hope that it is a temporary solution and that we can in due course work our way back to good old-fashioned professional Treasury trustworthiness, like welcoming back an old friend.

The second reason why I will oppose the motion is that doing this right now would probably mess up the OBR. Changing its mandate would undermine the important work it is already carrying out. Other experienced groups—the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Institute of Economic Affairs—pore over our manifestos in the run-up to an election, and they will communicate their findings to the electorate, as they always have done. Why not ask this question? Why stop at the OBR and our financial plans? If we are to subcontract out our veracity, why stop there? Why not ask the Electoral Commission to verify our constitutional proposals? Why not invite NHS England to review our health policies? Why not invite the United Nations to oversee the section in our manifestos on foreign policy? Where will all this end? There is no point in continuing down this road, unless we are saying that although we are elected to do a certain job—to take decisions and to make ourselves accountable to the electorate for the promises we make and the decisions we take—we do not wish to do it any longer.

If I am saying that this is not the right way to restore lost confidence and trust, what is? Most of us recognise over our lifetimes that when a reputation is lost, it takes

a long time to put it right and a long period of penance. But there is no short-cut: it is about doing the right thing and sticking with it. In our case, it is about saying one thing and doing it: delivering on our promises, testing our figures before we release them—transparency is the key to this—collectively showing our workings and not just the end policy. There is no short-cut. We have to slog our way back to respectability.

I understand the reasons behind the motion, but I really believe that it is ill-conceived and would not help us to restore credibility and lost trust and confidence among the British electorate.

5.34 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I have been listening to the debate and I really do wonder what the Government are afraid of. We are talking about the democratic process. The most important people in this debate are the general public: the people who vote. What can possibly be wrong with making them better informed about the economic policies of the parties that would be in government? Opposition Members hear a lot from the Government about economic policy and the “long-term economic plan”. The Minister mentioned it four times in her speech—she may be reprimanded for not mentioning it enough. That is more than a hint about what is going to be at the heart of the debate at the next general election; we know that the economy is going to feature prominently. We also know that many people find the economic arguments put forward during an election period very complex. Some people like bits from one side and bits from the other side of the argument. They may like the idea of tax cuts but prefer their public services to be kept intact. They may like the idea of a national insurance reduction but they love their national health service. So how do they decide who is telling the truth and whose sums add up?

The Tories have been making outrageous claims about Labour’s spending commitments. We say that they are misleading people, and to prove it we are prepared to put our proposals to an independent audit by the OBR in order to say whether or not the sums add up. That is the simple element of this argument. The crux of it is: are the Government prepared to put their economic policies to an independent audit so that they can be put before the public at an election and the public can be better informed when they make up their minds? The time has come for the major parties, particularly those that might wish to take part in television debates and be taken seriously, to have their proposals independently audited by the OBR.

The OBR scrutinises Government tax policies and expenditure policies on behalf of the public, so why would we not do this for would-be Governments when there is a general election? Surely the public have a right to be as well informed as possible. The chair of the OBR agrees with that. In his letter to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, he said:

“As we have discussed, I believe that independent scrutiny of pre-election policy proposals could contribute to better policy making, to a more informed public debate, and could help facilitate coalition formation when party programmes need to be reconciled.”

So he is clear that considerable benefits would come from going through this process.

I do not think that my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor would mislead the House—I know he would not. He has had discussions with the chair—

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Clive Efford: No, I am trying to be disciplined because I have been in here too many times when people have taken loads of interventions and others have not had a chance to speak.

The Government have had plenty of time to have meetings about this issue over a long period of time. We have challenged Ministers about this, asking whether they have discussed it during any meetings. They have said in the past that they are committed to audits, so it is extraordinary that the Government cannot refer to any meeting where they have discussed this issue with the chairman of the OBR. That is an absolute disgrace; this is about having a better informed debate at a general election and they should be ashamed of themselves. Clearly, they have completely ignored this issue because they do not want to go through the process. As for the arguments about specialist skills, the chairman of the OBR is saying that he can deliver on this if we can get an agreement in principle now and if we can start to go through the details by the end of the summer. He is the first person we would go to if we were trying to set this up, so if he is saying—

David Rutley *rose*—

Clive Efford: I will not give way, and I have explained why. If the chair of the OBR is saying, “I can do this if you make this decision now”, who is to question that? It should not be the Government, who have an ulterior motive in not having their economic policies and, more importantly, the misinformation they put out about their opponents scrutinised. If the Opposition’s budgets were examined, the Government would no longer be able to misinform people about those budgets. That is the truth of why the Government are ducking out of this. It is incredible for the Minister to stand there as an elected Member in this House and question the veracity of evidence that has been given to the Select Committee. The chairman of the OBR has been before the Select Committee and clearly indicated that he is favour of the proposal, and that has been questioned in this House. I find that absolutely incredible. It just shows us how much the Tory Government are wriggling on a hook to try to weasel out of this proposal.

The public will make up their own minds from a better informed position if we were to take this proposal forward. Only a Government who is up to no good could oppose the proposal. The time has come for this proposal to be taken forward, the OBR should be given the legal power to audit our plans, and the Government should get out of the way and allow it to happen.

5.40 pm

Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The Government are absolutely right to be cautious about allowing the Office for Budgetary Responsibility to be caught in the middle of a political trap. The virtue of the OBR is its political impartiality. It was wonderful to hear the shadow Chancellor—it is always wonderful to

hear the shadow Chancellor in his marvellous speeches—explaining how cross-party he was. I looked up a quotation in which he said how terrible it was to brief against fellow MPs. He said that it was snake-like politics in which he would never indulge. That created a wonderful image of him as this purer-than-the-driven-snow gentlemanly creature who would never indulge in underhand party politics and who solely has the national interest at heart. How maligned he must feel when he reads newspapers that sometimes suggest otherwise. It is one of the great tragedies of modern politics that that should be allowed.

Unfortunately, underlying the shadow Chancellor’s speech was sheer party politics. The OBR is there to deal with that which is entirely governmental: that is to say with the Budget, which is passed through a Finance Bill that is a matter of fact, and with an autumn statement that also deals with facts. Against that, we have a series of promises, propositions and theories that do not come out at two clear points of the year, but dribble out, sometimes in draughty halls in obscure parts of the country, as shadow Ministers go off and make spending commitments to meet the latest demand of a newspaper article or a difficult question asked by a journalist. Depending on who we ask, the bankers’ bonus tax has been spent 11 times.

Mr Love: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that no one has the good order of the OBR—its credibility and independence—more at heart than the OBR itself, and it is in favour of this proposal? Will he therefore accept that it is Government opposition that is stopping it happening?

Jacob Rees-Mogg: That rather proves my point. Once again, we see the OBR immediately being drawn in to political controversy, and I want to free it from that.

Mr Newmark: My hon. Friend is a great wordsmith, but I want to lance the boil of what the Opposition keep saying. The OBR is not in favour of the proposal. The OBR used the word “could”; it said not “it would”, but “it could”. It is the word “could” that is of importance here, and the OBR has not supported what the Opposition are saying.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend is extremely wise in his observation. The OBR, which is a non-party political body, has said in response to a request from the shadow Chancellor, a man of the greatest dignity who should be taken seriously by Members from all parts of the House, that if that is the will of Parliament, it will do it.

Ed Balls *rose*—

Jacob Rees-Mogg: How could I refuse?

Ed Balls: I shall test the hon. Gentleman’s support for my integrity. In March, the head of the OBR told the Select Committee that if the proposal was agreed across parties by early summer, he would be content to proceed, which he confirmed to me last Friday. Is the hon. Gentleman, unlike the Minister, content to accept my word that the views of the head of the OBR in March are still the same today?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Dawn Primarolo): Order. The hon. Gentleman's time is being used up. In fairness, interventions must be brief.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Of course I accept the shadow Chancellor's word without question, but it is a conditional. If there were cross-party support, then a statutory body would do what a statute required of it. That is the simplest expression of the constitutional position that would apply to any statutory body. The idea that a statutory body would say, "If the whole of Parliament tells us to do something, we will blow a raspberry," is so absurd as to be a point beneath the dignity of the right hon. Gentleman, who is far too clever to make so childish a point.

So let us come back to the real issue, the real curse of asking the OBR to do this. The spending plans of the Opposition are moveable feasts. They vary as circumstances vary. When I challenged the right hon. Gentleman, I thought the first part of his answer may have had some truth in it—that he wanted to be in absolute charge of where his party was. That may be the case, not only for him but for all shadow Chancellors at all times, and not just shadow Chancellors but whoever is responsible for economic policy among the Liberal Democrats, which is even more debatable than who is in charge in the Labour party. I am not entirely sure whether it is the President of the Board of Trade or the Chief Secretary to the Treasury; I am not sure that the Lib Dems have decided, or, if they have decided, whether this has been accepted by the brethren.

A number of people make spending promises. If we ask the OBR to audit them, we make the OBR a matter of political debate because it would be approving expenditure promises that would not necessarily be part of the Budget if the party making them were elected. Are you to say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that only promises made by a shadow Chancellor count? Are you to exclude the leader of the party, who has recently made certain promises to reform the benefit system? Or should you do it on the basis of GP appointments, which the leader has promised will occur within 48 hours? Has this been approved by the shadow Chancellor? Is it official policy or was it the whim of the Leader of the Opposition when he was caught out in a television studio? How are we to know? Are you so to restrict the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary or Education Secretary when they make statements? The shadow Chancellor is nodding. Perhaps this is not the bipartisan approach that we were led to believe in during his marvellous speech but a power grab by the right hon. Gentleman within his own party.

This House of Commons, this noble House, this honourable House, is debating whether the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) should be in charge of the Labour party. This is really a debate about his leadership ambitions. They may be a good thing. Members of the Labour party ought to decide that, better than I possibly could. *[Interruption.]* I am grateful for the support. I do not know whether I would get many votes if I stood for leader of the Labour party, but never mind.

Mr Love: You never know.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: I don't think they are that desperate yet, although the time may come.

The nature of opposition—and it is as true of Conservatives in opposition as it is of socialists—is that the pressure of events means that spending commitments and taxation commitments change. Oppositions are not in command of events, so the proposals that they make cannot be as solid as those enunciated by a Government. That would fatally undermine the position of the OBR because it would be dealing with day-to-day political controversy, and inherent in forecasting is the inaccuracy of forecasting. The OBR is respected more because it is independent than because it is right. Few economists manage to make forecasts more than one year out with any consistent accuracy, so the idea that the OBR were giving an imprimatur or even for that matter a nihil obstat to Opposition policies would create false certainty. It would politicise the OBR and it would have the sole advantage of making the right hon. Gentleman leader of the Labour party.

5.49 pm

Mr George Mudie (Leeds East) (Lab): Before Members make their address, they should answer this question for the general public to hear—do they agree to use the OBR to examine the tax and spending policies of the major political parties? If Members are against that, they should tell the public. That is seen by the OBR, the Treasury Committee and the House as the main purpose of the exercise. The hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) said he would do away with the OBR, but that is what the OBR does for the Government. If Members are moved by the non-existent Chancellor and the speeches from the Government Front Bench, they should ask what they are being talked into. They are being talked into reducing the ability of the general public to take informed decisions on the economic policies of the political parties—all political parties—at general election time.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is speaking with his typical eloquence. Is it not the case that for all the arguments that we have heard about what Mr Chote may or may not have said and all the arguments about timing and what Bills can or cannot be brought before Parliament, Tory Front Benchers do not want the proposal to be implemented because they put Tory party interest ahead of the national interest?

Mr Mudie: I follow my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor in not wishing to inflame matters or become party political. We are speaking about an issue that is very important to the general public and a first step to giving Back-Bench Members an input into Budgets, as the Americans, the Dutch and other Parliaments do, whereas we are simply used as voting fodder when a Chancellor presents a Budget. This is a first step and it is an important step.

It is outrageous that we are turning the motion down to protect the OBR. Members should not allow the Government to hide behind the OBR or to besmirch and lessen the reputation of Robert Chote. Robert Chote and his colleagues have carried out extremely important work. Their forecasts are not always right, but they make them sincerely and within the finite probabilities. The OBR is a very important institution. When it was first established, I thought the Chancellor had taken an extremely significant step, though not a big enough one.

Sadly, the Minister and some of my colleagues on the Treasury Committee have taken quotes out of Robert Chote's letter of January and the minutes of the March meeting of the Treasury Committee. That should not be done. Robert Chote was asked by the distinguished Chairman of the Select Committee:

"Can I begin by asking you, do you in principle support the OBR having a role in the costing of political parties' manifestos in the run-up to an election?"

Robert Chote replied:

"Yes, I do."

He went on to say that this route

"does offer the prospect of improving the quality of policy development for individual parties and it potentially improves the quality of public debate in the run-up to an election".

The Chairman, putting his finger on the real issue, which is time, asked Mr Chote:

"Do you think that you could get this job done between now and the general election?"

Mr Chote replied:

"It would be difficult but by no means impossible"

and he spelled out that the decisions to enable the OBR to do that must be taken by this summer.

John Glen: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Mudie: No. I shall finish my point. I have quoted what Mr Chote said, but Back-Bench Members do not necessarily have a full picture of all the details and discussions that have gone on. For the Minister to say to the shadow Chancellor, "I will only believe this if you put it in writing" is quite disgraceful.

Twice, to my knowledge, Robert Chote was asked in the Committee whether he wanted to go ahead with this idea, whether he thinks it would harm his reputation and whether he has time to do it before the election—we have gone through the whole gamut—and the answer on each occasion was yes.

The Minister used the word "insuperable", which she got from Robert Chote's January letter, but Mr Chote did not say that the problem was insuperable: he said that the issues that she has spelt out "are certainly not insuperable". The distinguished Chair of the Treasury Committee lured out of Robert Chote the information that tells us what is going on. He said:

"As you know, Mr Chote, I have been very keen on this idea for 20 years",

and that was accepted; he has been. He then said:

"Have you...spoken to the Chancellor"

on this, and Robert Chote said that he had, but the Chancellor was not in favour of it for this or that reason. But then—and this goes to the core of why we have a space on the Treasury Bench—the Chair said:

"Given my enthusiasm for this idea, George's position has been consistent but always unsupportive."

We are not talking about there being no time to do it this year; the Chancellor of the Exchequer does not want it to happen, full stop. In other words, he does not want the public to go into a general election having the full, objective, independent assessment of all the political parties' economic policies, and that is a disgrace.

5.56 pm

Mike Thornton (Eastleigh) (LD): Knowing that every poll, every doorstep inquiry in May, and every e-mail that I get shows that the public feel unable fully to trust Labour with the economy, and knowing that the OBR believes it would be difficult and time consuming at the moment to do what the shadow Chancellor proposes, I hope that it is not the shadow Chancellor's sole concern today to bolster his uncertain economic credibility.

I understand that the shadow Chancellor likes to copy eminently sensible Lib Dem policies such as the mansion tax, the fact that we published the costs and savings on our proposals in 2010—for example, showing how we would afford our eminently sensible increase in the tax allowance—

Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the Lib Dem proposals on the mansion tax and the further extensions of the personal allowance have been roundly rubbished by the Resolution Foundation and the Institute for Public Policy Research?

Mike Thornton: I do not know those details. I will take the hon. Gentleman's word for it that they have been rubbished, but I personally support an increase in the tax allowance, so that no one on the minimum wage would pay any income tax. It seems silly to me to have a minimum wage and then charge people tax on it. But that is my opinion, of course.

I also agree with the Chief Secretary, who unfortunately is not here today, that auditing manifestos is well worth further consideration. But as the OBR said, although possible it would be difficult to do in a timely and sensible fashion before the next election. I remember that in 1997 the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown) successfully persuaded the electorate of his prudence. Despite this latest attempt to do so, I feel that the right hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) will not follow in his right hon. Friend's footsteps, so let us commit ourselves to honestly publishing proper and well worked out costings for the proposals of all parties in the House, doing it ourselves, and spending the money ourselves, but follow that up—

Mr Love *rose*—

Mike Thornton: I was just coming to an end, but I will give way.

Mr Love: I am sorry; I did not realise the hon. Gentleman was coming to an end, but I thank him for giving way. In the context of the competitive and confrontational elections that we have, where Opposition policies are always rubbished and called into question, does the hon. Gentleman think there is a role for an independent, credible organisation at least to shed some light on those policy proposals?

Mike Thornton: That suggestion certainly has some merit. After the next election, when we have given—

Stephen Mosley (City of Chester) (Con): It is not true that there are no independent organisations. The IFS and the Institute of Economic Affairs will already carry

[Stephen Mosley]

out independent audits. There is no need to give the job to a statutory body, because independent bodies already exist to do it.

Mike Thornton: The IFS costed our proposals in 2010, and that is an eminently sensible approach. It can be argued, however, that the OBR is seen as very successful. I am glad that now all parties, instead of just one, think that it is a useful independent organisation.

We should look to do this after the next general election, when the OBR will have plenty of time and resources to do it properly without having to rush the job and hire people quickly. As we have noticed from what is happening to our IT today, when one tries to rush something and does not do it properly, it does not work properly. I commend the idea and philosophy to the House, but this needs to wait until after the next general election.

6 pm

Sheila Gilmore (Edinburgh East) (Lab): Having listened to this debate, there seems to be confusion, or perhaps a conflict of views, on the part of Government Members. The hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) was at least consistent in his position, which was not that it is a bad time to do this but that it is a bad idea altogether. Indeed, he did not seem to be all that keen on having an OBR at all. The position of Government Front Benchers, not just today but when this has been raised before, has generally been to say, “Yes, it probably could be quite a good idea and it should be done at some point in the future”—it is always “at some point in the future”. Those two positions do not hold together.

A lot of the reasons that have been given for not doing this now do not stand up to scrutiny. The Minister told us that it is a difficult time of year because it would run into the autumn statement and the Budget. If we are going to continue to have fixed-term Parliaments with May general elections, that will be a problem every single time, not just now. Another argument is that it is too difficult because there is not enough time to recruit people and get something like this off the ground. When the OBR was set up on an interim basis, it got off the ground very quickly. We were told, even at that stage, that we should accept its ability to produce a report, as it did in advance of the emergency Budget in 2010, that was a good and credible piece of work. That happened between May and June. The arguments about there not being enough time to get people in place do not stand up.

Much as I always enjoy the mellifluous tones of the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg), who can get carried away with his own rhetoric, what he said was not correct. He suggested that we would be asking the OBR to look at every single proposal that came up over a period of time and any changes to it. That is not what the motion says. It asks for the auditing of proposals included as part of a general election manifesto. That is not the same as looking at policies that may change because there has been further debate or, as he suggested, through force of circumstance because there are changes out there in the real economy. By the time we are coming to the eve of an election, parties will be producing manifestos with specific proposals. Some of the things that have been debated and proposed

by Labour will make it into the manifesto, while perhaps some will not. It is important that those proposals are audited so that there can be some judgment on them.

Despite all the protestations we have heard from the Government Benches about how the OBR must in no way be compromised or brought into the political fray, I have no doubt that as we get closer to the general election campaign, if we are not already in it, we will hear Government spokespeople say, “The OBR says this”, “The OBR says that” or “The OBR has audited our figures.” On that basis the OBR will already have been brought into the political fray, so why not do it properly and have it audit the manifestos of the parties that can form a Government? If Government Members do indeed think that that is a good idea in principle, let us just get on with it.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Dawn Primarolo): Order. The time remaining for contributions to this debate is very tight. In order to ensure that all Members who wish to speak can contribute, it is necessary to reduce the time limit to five minutes. I hope that it will not be necessary to reduce it further, but that will depend on interventions.

6.5 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I speak in part as a member of the Treasury Committee and as a member of the council of the National Institute for Economic and Social Research and a senior fellow of Policy Exchange.

One of the tragedies of modern politics is that so many issues are no longer discussed soberly and on their merits but are viewed purely through the prism of party politics. The present subject of debate—whether, and if so how, manifesto policies should be costed by the OBR—is one of potentially great importance that could shape political debate across many years and many future Parliaments.

The shadow Chancellor, who is no longer in his place, despite his strictures about the Government Benches, has attempted to politicise this debate and drag Robert Chote’s name into it. Let us simply say that expert opinion on the issue is divided. The Institute for Government has described the pre-election timing as “hasty”, and the IFS has questioned the very idea of the OBR undertaking this role. As I will show, there are several crucial issues of principle as well as practice. They must be addressed before legislation can be considered.

First, there are practical matters of funding and staffing. Let us not forget that the motion states that manifestos should be costed. Manifestos are very long and their policies are often described very briefly and vaguely, so there would be an enormous amount of work. When Mr Chote and others appear before the Treasury Committee, they refer to individual clusters of policy, not whole manifestos.

John Glen: Is it not also significant that there is room for great interpretative range? There is a massive number of think-tanks and analysts out there who will all draw different conclusions. The idea that one entity

could somehow create a reliable and completely authoritative conclusion about any single manifesto is totally unrealistic.

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will move on to that point shortly.

The OBR is a new institution. Would it be right to put its recently created reputation at risk by inserting it into the political process in the run-up to an election? The answer is obviously no. These issues need to be calmly and soberly addressed, not patched together late in a Parliament. The proposal would require primary legislation, which will take time and consideration. It should not be rushed into on this timetable. The Institute for Government was perfectly clear that it should not be adopted as a hasty change to the OBR's remit at this point in the Parliament.

The second question is this: would such a new role compromise the OBR's key functions? There is an obvious danger that it might. The remit would require careful amendment. Clear rules would be needed on how many policies could be costed, if not a full manifesto, and on which political parties would be eligible. The OBR could not be expected to invigilate in hard cases or act as judge on these issues. It would undoubtedly be attacked by parties that were ineligible to have their policies costed.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): My hon. Friend has referred two or three times to policies being "costed" by the OBR. In fact, the motion refers to auditing, which has a precise meaning. I think that is the weakness of the Opposition's case. What does an audit opinion mean? It would be qualified, true and fair, and in reality there would be several caveats, which we would end up arguing about.

Jesse Norman: That very important point speaks better than I can to my hon. Friend's expertise. I suspect what the Opposition mean is "costed," so their failure to understand the difference is reason alone to reject the motion. "Costing" was the word used by the Treasury Committee and that is what I would call it, too.

There is some risk of bias against insurgent parties that were growing in public support but did not have many MPs, or in favour of declining parties for the opposite reasons.

I remind the House that there are deeper questions to be addressed. Is it actually possible to have all policies costed in a genuinely authoritative and independent way? The answer is far from clear. Many policies are non-financial, many are vague and many have complex interactions with other policies that may themselves not have been costed, and many have implied costs that will not be captured by a direct costing exercise. It may be that the OBR will not enjoy the relative immunity from political controversy enjoyed by the civil service when it ends up costing Government and Opposition policies. Parties may try to gain the OBR, as they have attempted to do in Holland.

My final question is this: is it wise for the state to be pushed further into the political process? My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) has made this point, but let me reiterate it. It is a far bigger question than we have time to debate today, but just as there are perfectly proper concerns about the

state being dragged into funding political parties or into press self-regulation, so there are proper concerns that the state should not be pulled into costing party policies. After all, parties have been producing policy ideas, themes and, indeed, platforms, if not manifestos, for more than 200 years, ever since the time of Burke, Fox and Pitt. The British public have found themselves able, *mirabile dictu*, to make judgments for that period, even without the wisdom of the Office for Budget Responsibility.

This very debate shows how this topic has already become bogged down by partisanship. Why does the Labour party now seek to have manifestos audited? The reason is that its polling data overwhelmingly demonstrates that Labour is hopelessly short of economic credibility. The shadow Chancellor himself is specifically responsible for—indeed, he incarnates—that lack of economic credibility. He was a key figure in the previous Government, who left our country so vulnerable to financial crisis. He had to be dragged kicking and screaming to accept his mistakes in office as a soft-touch regulating City Minister. He is still in denial over the success of plan A. The irony is that his performance on this very issue perfectly exemplifies the reasons for his diminishing authority: first, he was against costing policies, but now he is for it. For naked short-term advantage, he is prepared to politicise the OBR and its head, amid a lot of pious words about cross-party consensus from one of the most divisive figures in politics of the past two decades.

In conclusion, this is an important issue, but the shadow Chancellor embarrasses himself twice over: first, by placing it in such a party political context, and secondly, by ignoring the real problem for him, which is the catastrophic failure of trust in politicians and political parties today—a failure to which he himself has been no small contributor. The causes of that loss of trust have little to do with politics. They run much deeper to the decline in Britain's influence around the world; the loss of standing of Parliament over so many recent scandals; feelings of powerlessness among the general public; an apparently increasing sense of outrage fanned by parts of the media; and a general unwillingness to grasp the complexity of Government or to give those in power the benefit of the doubt.

The time has passed when the shadow Chancellor could expect to be heard on this or any issue. He has thrown that right away. He has lost what authority he ever possessed. Today's debate shows precisely why he will never, and should never, regain it.

6.13 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I agree with some bits in the speech the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) has just made.

David Mowat: The last bit!

Debbie Abrahams: Certainly not the last bit. Last month's elections were a wake-up call for all of us, and if we do not heed it, the future of politics will not look good. Far too many people feel completely disfranchised from politics and do not trust politicians. Too many people either stayed at home or cast their vote for a protest party. That is why I fully support the motion for the OBR to independently audit the spending and tax commitments of the main political parties in next year's general election.

[Debbie Abrahams]

Undertaking that analysis would be a major step forward to help increase openness and transparency in politics. It would enable proper scrutiny and debate on the spending plans of all political parties, and enhance the democratic process. Ultimately, it would contribute to informed decision making, which is surely what we should all want. We are here as public servants to reflect issues in our constituencies and to develop policies that respond to those issues. Communicating our policies is part of our job. That is certainly the form of politics that Opposition Members want to develop.

This proposal is part of a process of addressing the major power imbalances and associated inequalities in our country, and we are absolutely determined to tackle it. We will continue to stand up to powerful vested interests, from media barons to the big energy companies. Information is power, and having information about how the Government or political parties intend to spend public money is very powerful.

Simon Kirby (Brighton, Kemptown) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: I am sorry, but I do not have time.

To deny information to the public is absolutely shameful, and that is where the problem lies. Other parties do not want to change; they want the status quo. They want to preside over a country where there is growing inequality. The average person will have £1,600 a year less in their pocket next year compared with 2010, and the average family has lost £974 since 2010 because of the tax and benefit changes, but bank bonuses have soared and the top-to-bottom pay ratio for FTSE 100 companies stands at 300:1. The Government are presiding over such inequalities.

Sheila Gilmore: If we propose policies, as the Leader of the Opposition did last week on the provision of training opportunities for young people, it is clearly important for the public to understand that the policies will cost what we say they will cost, and surely this proposal would help.

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. That is my major argument. I cannot understand any party not wanting to provide information to enable people to make informed decisions.

Simon Kirby: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Debbie Abrahams: Go on then. The hon. Gentleman has enticed me to give way.

Simon Kirby: Why does the hon. Lady suppose that we did not have an office for budget responsibility during the 13 years of the previous Government to provide the very transparency and credibility that she is now so keen on?

Debbie Abrahams: I am very grateful that we have an OBR now, but we should focus on how we use it.

To return to the current and growing inequalities under this Government, recent research on life expectancy has shown that people in Manchester are twice as likely

as people in Wokingham to die early, and the figures are getting worse. My right hon. Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Frank Dobson) famously said:

“Inequality in health is the worst inequality of all. There is no more serious inequality than knowing that you’ll die sooner because you’re badly off”.

That is what is happening under this Government.

This Government are grossly unfair and unjust: they protect their own self-interest, they are out of touch and they are out of time. Should we be elected in 2015, we have said that we will not borrow more for day-to-day spending. In stark contrast to this Government, our decisions on how we spend resources will be based on fairness, justice and evidence.

We want our spending plans to be independently verified to make sure that they are robust. After all, that is what happens not just in the US, but in Canada, Australia and the Netherlands. I invite those who wish to enhance the democratic process and not to stifle it, as well as those who want a Britain for the many and not for the few, to join us in the Aye Lobby.

6.19 pm

Mr Robert Syms (Poole) (Con): I spent 13 years in opposition in this House, and I sat through several Budget speeches under the Labour Government. They were interesting, to say the least, because it usually took some weeks to find out, having read the small print, what they actually meant. At that time, we were told that boom and bust had been abolished. I very well remember the debate we had when it was revealed that the deficit was £164 billion.

This Government had a very tough economic inheritance. We would not be in coalition if we had not, because normally, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives enjoy fighting each other all the time, but the problems of the country were so damn serious that we had to get together to try to sort them out. That is the legacy of how the last Labour Government managed our economy.

One of the important things in 2010 was credibility. Confidence in the markets was very shaky, and the OBR was part of a range of policies that the Government introduced to add some degree of independence, so that people had more confidence in what the Government were going to do and in the figures and, indeed, so that the City and forecasters could see the direction of British policy. It was a limiting factor, because no longer could the Government adjust the growth factors or the tax take to show a rosier scenario, so that they could cut taxes. They had to live within the framework set by the OBR.

But I do not think the OBR is some kind of magic bullet. All forecasters are, by their nature, wrong. What we have seen throughout the last four years is forecasts from the OBR go up and go down with the economic cycle, and the Opposition, on many occasions, have accused us of having large deficits and putting up the national debt on the basis of OBR forecasts. As the economy is now growing and they are going the other way, no doubt we are praying in aid the OBR that things are getting better and we are getting on top of the problem.

The reality is that the OBR is a small body of public servants who do their best to give some independent

credibility to Government policy. If I were to focus additional money or resources, it would be on having a few more people in the OBR rooting around in what our Government are doing, rather than in what the Opposition might do. Even today, when we look at budgets and financial statements, the reality is that there are still a lot of figures about tax avoidance and Swiss agreements to bring in more taxation that ought to be rooted around in by the OBR to see whether or not the Government forecasts are robust, because the OBR is dealing with matters of fact. It is dealing with the Government, with public spending and with how a country is being run.

I do not think that focusing on what the Opposition may or may not do is a terribly good way of spending money. Would it have been a good use of money for civil servants to spend a lot of time looking at what the leadership plans of my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) were for the country? Simply on the basis of the 2001 election, no. Would there have been a lot of benefit in looking at the plans of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) or of Michael Howard? The only time when there might have been some benefit would have been before 2010, when it looked like there would be a change of Government.

John Glen: Is the other lesson not that in government, decisions are made as a consequence of actions that are being taken in other parts of the Government and, in fact, the costs of delivering some programmes are very different when those decisions have to be taken? Therefore, any judgment would be somewhat qualified.

Mr Syms: Yes, and lots of assumptions would still have to be made. Clearly, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr Tyrie), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, made some very good points about ground rules that ought to be discussed in peace time. If this is an idea worth exploring, it is better to explore it in a relatively more peaceful political time post the 2015 election to see whether it has some merit.

I think that the greater benefit for public debate in this Chamber between the parties is a greater focus on what the Government are doing with their plans. That would give more information to the Opposition and Back Benchers to question and hold the Government to account, rather than focusing on the hypotheticals of what may or may not happen if, indeed, the Government change. Not least, if the focus is on manifestos—they come out in March before an election, at the last possible moment, so that there are nice surprises for the newspapers—how on earth could the OBR look at those and objectively give any kind of costing before the election?

Looking at the future programme, in the autumn, we have the autumn statement and all the spending plans. We are then immediately into the Budget, and just beyond that, we are into a general election. It is bad enough trying to predict what the Government are doing, let alone what the Labour party are trying to do at that time. As I said at the start of my speech, any kind of forecast is bound to be wrong, so the OBR would be wrong about what the Government are doing and wrong about what the Labour party is doing.

Jesse Norman: Might it be worth my hon. Friend sharing my view and correcting the record? The OBR was set up by transferring existing civil servants from the Treasury into a new entity. It is therefore not right to say that it was set up quickly and could therefore be expanded quickly. It already had those civil servants, which was why it was allowed to succeed and start so quickly. Growing it is an entirely separate matter.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Dawn Primarolo): Order. Before the hon. Member for Poole (Mr Syms) replies, I point out that Government interventions are having the consequence of talking out any Members who are still waiting to speak, and there are quite a number. We will start the wind-ups at 6.40 pm.

Mr Syms: I conclude my contribution by saying that the OBR has a role. We should stick with its current role and perhaps look at changing it after the general election, but I do not think that this proposal has much merit. If it did have merit, would we be kicking it around on an Opposition day? I do not think so.

6.25 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Let me start with the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg). He is a very clever man—he went to public school, I believe—but he was being deliberately obtuse. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore) pointed out, the hon. Gentleman suggested in his intervention that somehow the OBR would have to take account of every possible nuance and potential spending commitment that a shadow Minister might make at an obscure public meeting in a village hall in some obscure little village, perhaps in North East Somerset. Perhaps he has not had time—he is a very busy man—to read the motion tabled by the Labour party, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East pointed out, we are asking the OBR to audit the manifesto, not inadvertent comments that may have been made off the cuff at an obscure meeting in a village hall in North East Somerset.

The Minister had the temerity—I will put it like that—to suggest that my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor was using this proposition as a fig leaf. How dare she! If anybody is responsible for indulging in trying to use a fig leaf, it is the Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Government Front-Bench team. They suggested that somehow the OBR could not manage this proposal and that it would be unable to scrutinise things as an independent body. They said, “It is a new organisation, it is very young and it couldn’t quite manage it; let’s get the general election out of the way first.” However, members of the Treasury team know full well that our propositions are properly costed and would be doable. This is about the sort of country and society we want, and perhaps about the ideology and values that underpin Labour, compared with those that underpin the Government.

The truth—this is no coincidence—is that the Chancellor is not here because he is frightened. If I may quote the words of the late Margaret Thatcher, he is “Afraid? Frightened? Frit? Could not take it? Cannot stand it?”—[*Official Report*, 19 April 1983; Vol. 41, c. 159.]

[Chris Williamson]

That would be especially so if the Labour proposition was actually subject to an independent audit by the OBR. That is the real reason why the Government are opposing the Labour motion.

Debbie Abrahams: Is this not also about wanting to maintain the status quo, and is it not revealing what that says about the Government and their political priorities?

Chris Williamson: Very much so. For all the great talk about a different approach to politics that the Prime Minister suggested he wanted to herald in, this is the very worst of the old politics.

The hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) thought the proposal a bad idea in principle, but the British people deserve better than what they have had, and they certainly deserve better than what they get from the Conservatives. Routinely, what we see from Conservative Members, with their friends in the right-wing media, is a hysterical outpouring of misrepresentation of Labour manifesto proposals.

I remember Labour's "double whammy" of tax and spend that the Conservatives used in 1992, and the VAT bombshell and all that nonsense, when we had actually gone to some lengths to be straight and honest with the British public and produce a shadow Budget. Yes, it was clear there would have been some tax increases, but they would have been for the richest people in society; eight out of 10 people would have benefited from Labour's shadow Budget, but that was not what the Conservatives said or what was portrayed by the right-wing media. Had we had the opportunity of an independent audit of that shadow Budget, it would have been clear that the Conservatives were misrepresenting—or not, as the case might be—Labour's proposals.

I understand why the Government are trying to resist the motion, but I want to see our proposals audited. On housing, for example, instead of giving billions of pounds to private landlords, it would be better value to invest that money in building houses for people. Surely, that would be a better use of money. It would be good—would it not?—for the OBR to scrutinise and audit that.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a great job of getting rid of some of the misrepresentations and nonsense that we talked about earlier. The shadow Chancellor made it clear earlier that he was proposing that the OBR would only provide independent scrutiny and certification of the policy costings of political parties with at least 5% of the seats in the House of Commons. That is an important point. We are not referring to every draughty hall or every party, however few seats it holds. Those points should be made clear, and I hope that he agrees that this shows that Government Members were just not listening.

Chris Williamson: I very much agree. It is pretty clear that Government Members have closed minds and closed ears. Nobody is so deaf as those who refuse to hear. It is an inconvenient truth—is it not?—that our proposal would take the partisanship out of election campaign to some extent and ensure that the British people get a clearer picture of the respective merits of the Conservative

offer and of Conservative values. It is perfectly legitimate for the Conservatives to say, "We want to look after and enrich the wealthiest people in our country." They are perfectly entitled to do that—perfectly entitled to impoverish the vast majority of people and force down wages—and we are perfectly entitled to propose our alternative.

We want to ensure that the vast majority of the British people—ordinary working people—actually benefit from the economic growth that, thankfully, we are seeing now, but most of the economic growth in the country today is going not into the pockets of ordinary people, but to the top 1% of society. I want to take away the opportunity for us to misrepresent each other's policies and limit the opportunity for negative campaigning. A lot of people are turned off by negative campaigning, but it can be very effective. Our proposal would be a force for good. It is what the British people deserve, and the British people will make up their own minds if the Conservatives and their Liberal Democrat poodles vote against this motion tonight.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would like the Front-Bench winding-up speeches to begin at, or very close to, 6.40 pm. One hon. Member, with a stunning lack of self-regard, has just given way, in the interests of colleagues, both of whom I would like to accommodate.

6.33 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker.

There are arguments in favour of the proposal and of doing it in time: it could help to ensure that only realistic proposals are put in front of the electorate; also—the shadow Chancellor made this point jokingly, but it is a serious one—within parties it could help to strengthen the hand of those seeking to impose fiscal discipline against those who wish to offer the earth, of whom his own party has more than its fair share; and it could open a dialogue early on between the OBR and a group that might soon be in government; but there is one big argument against it, and it was alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg). I am talking about the danger of a false sense of security being attached to a party's programme for government.

It is right, and it happens, that independent and respected organisations make appraisals of parties' proposals. We need extreme caution, however, if we seek to institute a single gold-standard appraisal with a sort of state licensing behind it which could be attached to a manifesto. It would be extremely difficult for the organisation involved to avoid political controversy, and there would also be a danger of closing down further debate and additional scrutiny from elsewhere. With tax and spending, it is never as simple as saying, "Oh, cost the proposals" because behavioural assumptions are, of course, relevant as well.

When it comes to forecasting, J. K. Galbraith said there were two types of people:

"those who don't know, and those who don't know they don't know".

Fortunately, the OBR is in a group that knows it does not know, but unfortunately it has to deal with other people who have a hunger for simple binary answers

and do not deal in “don’t knows”. Forecasting is a series of fan charts, an examination of assumptions, an appraisal of the risks and upsides—and, crucially, seeking ways to mitigate those risks. The media, however, will look for a simple yes or no, and we can bet that any party going through the process will find a way to say that the organisation concerned has said yes, which makes it dangerous. The OBR knows that, and it knows that it is a nuclear option to say “No, the official Opposition’s proposal for government does not get our seal of approval”. That is not a power it would use, so the implicit yes is not worth a huge amount either.

I am in favour of there being wider capability for analytical scrutiny of political parties’ proposals, and that could be done either through the OBR or through Parliament itself via the Select Committee system. To be reliable and to avoid politicisation, an institution should not be making forward-looking projections relating to individual proposals. They should be either backward looking or generic—backward looking in the sense of “what did happen with the changes to the top rate of income tax?” or generic in the sense of “what is the evidence from this country and around the world relating to elasticity of tax rates?” If such things are to happen, they should happen gradually, but it is very risky to have a single state-licensed, gold-standard approval mechanism for any party’s manifesto.

6.36 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds). It will be a surprise for the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) to know that I found a Conservative on a Select Committee who was actually in favour of Labour’s proposals. I refer to the Treasury Select Committee of 2010, which said in its fourth report of the Session:

“Legislation should leave the OBR able to conduct work on fiscal policies of political parties along the lines proposed by Robert Chote in evidence on 16th September”.

At that time, then, there was a different viewpoint in the House. It is interesting that the shadow Chancellor has managed to develop a political consensus that now includes, but did not at the time, the viewpoint of the shadow Business Secretary when he was a member of the Treasury Select Committee. At the time, he and other Labour Members were opposed to this idea—for reasons I cannot possibly imagine, but I am sure they can speculate on that.

I would like to pose one or two questions suggesting why I think this proposition is completely unworkable at this stage of the Parliament, and why I think that if we are to have a serious debate about this topic, we should have it in the next Parliament. My first question is: who will qualify for appraisal by this type of process? The shadow Chancellor has said that it would include the main political parties and those that have more than 5% of the seats in the House of Commons—not a completely unreasonable proposition. As we know in connection with the debate we hope to have in the run-up to the general election, other parties, including some who polled reasonably well in the European elections, feel that they should be involved in those debates. They would come forward and argue—probably quite powerfully—that they should be allowed to do so. I do not necessarily think they should, but they may well do.

What, too, about the nationalist parties? The Scottish National party would probably not want its budget proposals debated ahead of the Scottish referendum, but perhaps we would like to have a close look at that and assess what would happen with Scotland. That is my first point—who is involved? It will be much more complex than suggested.

The second question is: how do we achieve this? Let us stay with the two main parties and the Liberal Democrats—I am sorry for not including the Liberals as one of the main parties. The reality is that only two parties are seeking exclusively to govern this country. The Liberal Democrats have said, quite fairly, that they will act in coalition with one or other of the main parties. That is a reasonable proposition, but their proposals are not “govern alone budget policies”; they are “modification of other parties’ policies in coalition”. Are we proposing that the OBR should reassess the costs of the policies in the Conservative and Labour manifestos as if they were in a coalition? It gets very complicated.

Finally, on a practical level, how on earth can the OBR be expected to do this? We know that manifestos come out incredibly close to the election, so there will be very little time for the OBR to carry this out. It would need to have advance sight of the manifestos, and possibly publish the figures at the time of their publication. If the parties involved then felt uncomfortable, they would simply say “Actually, that was a bit of work in progress, so please ignore it. We did not really mean to give away huge amounts of money to your pet charity.”

My point is that too many impracticalities need to be solved, and that they need to be solved at a much more leisurely rate. Let me return to my starting point. In 2010, when the Treasury Committee was considering setting up the OBR, it was perfectly happy to recommend this action. However, there was more or less a consensus in the House of Lords that it should absolutely not be taken, and Labour members of the Select Committee were very reluctant to put their name to our report.

The position is difficult. There is too much to be done. I am convinced that the time to do this properly is the beginning of the next Parliament, when we have plenty of time to think about it in a clear, measured and cool-headed way.

6.40 pm

Cathy Jamieson (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab/Co-op): We have had what could best be described as a very interesting debate. Let me begin by picking up a point made by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), who said that the sums done by the Scottish National party and the Scottish Government did not add up. The Scottish Government’s child care proposals provide a good example of that. The Scottish Parliament Information Centre has studied the figures, and has demonstrated that the SNP’s sums do not add up and its policies do not make sense. However, that is not the subject of today’s debate.

I think that the debate has been useful, although, like others, I was a bit disappointed that the Chancellor had not seen fit to come to the House and defend the Government’s position. As for the Financial Secretary, I know from previous debates that she generally seeks to build consensus. Perhaps she was simply given a

[Cathy Jamieson]

script and told to make the best of a bad job, but I was nevertheless surprised that she did not adopt her usual tone. It seemed to me that her heart was not in the argument that she was presenting, and that, given the opportunity and a slightly different setting, she might have adopted another approach.

We heard a number of thoughtful and considered contributions, not least from my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson), for Eltham (Clive Efford), for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore), for Leeds East (Mr Mudie), for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), and for Derby North (Chris Williamson). I have already mentioned the hon. Member for Wyre Forest. He too made a thoughtful speech, although I did not agree with everything that he said. We made one interesting discovery, namely that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg) has not ruled out standing for the leadership of any political party. I look forward to observing his progress in the coming weeks and months.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Ed Balls) explained our proposal very well, in his usual careful, considered and consensual style. I found it difficult to understand why Government Members took such exception to the way in which he set out what I thought was a very good case. The OBR already scrutinises the Government's spending and tax policies and assesses whether they are reasonable, and we are merely asking for what is, essentially, a logical extension of that. We are suggesting that the OBR should perform the role that we propose not just for the current Government, but for prospective Governments.

As a number of my hon. Friends have pointed out, it would be sensible to require the OBR to audit only the manifestos of parties with 5% of the seats in the House. We need not involve it in every party manifesto. Ultimately, what the public want to know is that someone has looked at the sums of the parties that are likely to be in government to ensure that they add up.

Some Members on the Government Benches spoke as if the OBR would suddenly have to have a raft of civil servants and new people to do costings all over the place, every day of the week, for months and months. Let me again put on the record what my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor said in his letter in September to the head of the OBR:

"The reform I am proposing would mean the Opposition would submit costings for proposed manifesto commitments on spending and tax—obtained from, for example, the House of Commons Library, Parliamentary Questions or the Institute for Fiscal Studies"—

it was interesting to note the number of times that Government Members referred to that; I hope that they will take account of the findings of that august body as the debate continues—

"and the OBR would 'provide independent scrutiny and certification' of those costings."

Therefore, it is not the case, as seemed to be suggested, that the OBR is being expected to do all the costings. It is being expected to certify those.

Ian Swales (Redcar) (LD): The hon. Lady mentioned the Institute for Fiscal Studies. A look at its remit shows that this kind of work falls squarely under its banner. It

also receives more than half its funding from the public purse, directly or indirectly. Does she not think that it could fulfil the role that the motion describes?

Cathy Jamieson: The IFS's role is slightly different from the one that has been proposed. This is about scrutinising and certifying the policies and plans for government. One hon. Member mentioned the difference between costings and audit. We are saying that the costings should be looked at. That role is slightly different from the one that the IFS fulfils.

We are confident that our policies will stand up to that scrutiny. We are confident enough to say that we want the OBR to run the rule over all the spending commitments in our manifesto. As Members have rightly said, we recognise the need to restore trust in politics. The public want assurances that our policies add up. They want the OBR, having done the work, to be in a position to give them the quality assurance that they seek. We strongly believe that the other major parties should be prepared to do the same thing. That will enable the electorate to make an informed decision based on facts. That is important.

David Mowat: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Cathy Jamieson: I am very short of time, unfortunately.

It is important to recognise that a number of people—Members have referred to this—have shown support in principle. The Government's argument is twofold. First, they want to preserve the independence of the OBR. My hon. Friends have advanced a number of arguments as to why the Government seem to be the only people at this stage who are bringing party politics into the debate on the OBR. It is not Members on the Opposition Benches who are doing so. Secondly, it is important to recognise that the Government's other objection is that there is insufficient time. However, we have the information and discussions have taken place with the head of the OBR. If we do not make a decision quickly and put measures in place, we will run out of time, but there is still a window of opportunity.

I hope that when he sums up the Minister will be able to answer some of the questions that the Financial Secretary to the Treasury was unable to answer earlier. What discussions have Ministers had with the OBR since the plans were first mooted? Our integrity, why we are making the proposal and what we have done about it has been questioned, but it is also the responsibility of Government to take these matters forward. I hope that the Minister will be able to give us information on that.

As far back as 2010, the Chancellor himself said that this was a

"legitimate matter for the House to debate and decide."

It is unfortunate not only that in the intervening years he has not seen fit to address the issue, but that he has not seen fit to turn up today to give us any more information. That leaves us on this side of the House with no option but to draw the conclusion that the only reason why the Government do not adopt a consensual approach today and embrace the opportunity to take this proposal forward is that they have no wish to do this whatsoever, and I am sure the public watching will also draw that conclusion. The public will then also draw the inference that those of us on the Opposition

Benches draw: that the Government do not wish to have their policies put under the same scrutiny as we are prepared to have our policies put under.

6.50 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): We have had a lively debate this afternoon, with a number of contributions. The hon. Member for Coventry North West (Mr Robinson) made a forthright speech. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) made an important point regarding concerns about subcontracting all matters to outside bodies. He also drew a comparison between the shadow Chancellor as a consensus-builder and King Herod as a babysitter. To be fair, my hon. Friend did say he thought he might have been a little unfair, although it was not entirely clear to whom.

The hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) reminded me to use the expression “long-term economic plan” in my speech, which I had not originally intended to do, but I am grateful for that reminder. My hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg) described this as a power grab by the shadow Chancellor, and he drew out what I think is an important point about the shadow Chancellor trying to instil some discipline into the Labour party. My hon. Friend also mulled over the prospect of the shadow Chancellor becoming leader of the Labour party. I think that is an unlikely career move—but the Labour party could certainly do worse.

The hon. Member for Leeds East (Mr Mudie) highlighted the fact that the OBR is an important institution. He objected to members of the Treasury Committee quoting Robert Chote, and then quoted Robert Chote. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Mike Thornton) said there is a case for doing what is proposed but that we should wait until after the election, by contrast with the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Sheila Gilmore) who said we should get on with it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) made a thoughtful speech, drawing on his knowledge and experience of the Treasury Committee, Edmund Burke and polling data, and argued that the reason for this motion is Labour’s lack of economic credibility. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) made an impassioned speech, which I have to say I did not agree with—but it was impassioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr Syms) set out some of the practical difficulties of the proposal in the motion. The hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) referred to hysterical outpourings. I think he used that phrase, and certainly the expression “hysterical outpourings” springs to mind when thinking of his speech. He spent four minutes accusing the Conservative party of all sorts of things, and then said the advantage of this policy is that it would end negative campaigning. We shall see.

In an excellent and short speech, my hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) raised concerns about politicisation of the OBR. My hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) also made an excellent speech setting out some practical questions.

I think it is worth just taking a few moments to remind the House of why the OBR was set up in the

first place. The best evidence for this is the book published after the last election by the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Mr Darling), and in particular his chapter describing the events of the 2009 Budget, which was very clearly a negotiation on the position that the Treasury and the then Prime Minister took on economic growth. This was not about searching hard for the truth, therefore; it was a negotiation. That is worth bearing in mind when we hear about the shadow Chancellor being a builder of consensus and a zealot in the cause of independent oversight of fiscal forecasts, because what is also clear is that the shadow Chancellor was part of those negotiations.

Ed Balls: Not true.

Mr Gauke: The shadow Chancellor says that is not true, but let me quote from page 226 of the previous Chancellor of the Exchequer’s book. He talked about discussions “rarely” reaching conclusions, and said:

“Sometimes there would be just two of us”,

meaning just him and the Prime Minister. He refers to the current shadow Chancellor being

“there on a few occasions”.

Ed Balls: I was the Education Secretary at the time. The accusation was that I was involved in a discussion of the growth figure. Can the Exchequer Secretary substantiate that?

Mr Gauke: I again refer to page 226. The right hon. Member for Edinburgh South West refers to the negotiations on the growth numbers. He says that the shadow Chancellor was “there”.

We have had a thoughtful debate, and arguments have been made on both sides about whether it is right that the OBR should be able to oversee Opposition party policies. However, there is a question about timing. The shadow Chancellor explained why the position of his party when the relevant legislation was taken through was to oppose that. He said earlier today that in the early days it was cautious about protecting impartiality; now, he appears to be incautious. There is an issue here, and Lord Eatwell made the point on 8 November 2010 about embroiling the OBR in “political controversy”.

The next point to make is a practical one. The shadow Chancellor has long experience of involvement in policy matters and Budget matters. He will also have read the letter from Robert Chote of 15 January 2014 setting out the process. It involves a “preliminary ‘scorecard’ of measures”, and there is a detailed costing to note. It is an “iterative” process and during it, policies are refined and in some cases significantly amended. The important point is that this is

“a time consuming and resource intensive exercise, both for the OBR and for the analysts in the responsible departments”—

the likes of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and the Department for Work and Pensions. This is not a minor change. It is not about recruiting just a few more OBR staff; it is a fundamental change in the way the civil service operates with the Opposition.

The question we have to ask ourselves is why Labour is proposing this. As some Members made clear today, it is essentially about Labour’s lack of credibility on the economy. As Lord Prescott has said, Labour gets “smashed

[Mr Gauke]

on the economy”. As the Leader of the Opposition’s former speech writer said, he fell out with the shadow Chancellor because

“Labour’s economic policy is nonsense.”

And as the shadow Chancellor’s old friend Charles Clarke has said:

“We rested a great deal on assuming...that plan A would not work, and that proved to be an unwise judgement.”

Ed Balls: The head of the OBR told the Treasury Committee in March that if this was agreed in a cross-party way by early summer, by which he meant the end of June, we could proceed. If the head of the OBR is willing to proceed and there is agreement today, why will the Government not agree?

Mr Gauke: The head of the OBR also made it clear that there were risks involved, and that those advocating this step would find it would be better not to rush into it, but to do it after the next election, and that is the position we take. This issue should be looked at again after the next election.

The reality is that Labour does not have economic credibility. It borrowed too much in the good times when it was in office, and opposed our measures to reduce the deficit in recent years. Only a year ago, the shadow Chancellor said:

“The problem with austerity is that it chokes off jobs and growth”.—[*Official Report*, 17 May 2012; Vol. 545, c. 717.]

Well, we are getting new jobs and we are getting the growth. The truth is that Labour is making a long list of unfunded spending pledges. Today the shadow Chancellor said, “We have been exemplary”. I could give him a long list to show that they have not. I will give Labour one answer: if they want to restore fiscal credibility, their first step—change their shadow Chancellor.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)), That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 218, Noes 289.

Division No. 22]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Brennan, Kevin
Abrahams, Debbie	Brown, Lyn
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob	Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Brown, Mr Russell
Alexander, Heidi	Bryant, Chris
Ali, Rushanara	Buck, Ms Karen
Allen, Mr Graham	Burden, Richard
Ashworth, Jonathan	Burnham, rh Andy
Austin, Ian	Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Bain, Mr William	Caton, Martin
Balls, rh Ed	Champion, Sarah
Barron, rh Kevin	Chapman, Jenny
Beckett, rh Margaret	Clark, Katy
Begg, Dame Anne	Clarke, rh Mr Tom
Benn, rh Hilary	Clwyd, rh Ann
Berger, Luciana	Coaker, Vernon
Blackman-Woods, Roberta	Coffey, Ann
Blears, rh Hazel	Cooper, Rosie
Blenkinsop, Tom	Cooper, rh Yvette
Blomfield, Paul	Corbyn, Jeremy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Crausby, Mr David

Creasy, Stella	Johnson, rh Alan
Cruddas, Jon	Johnson, Diana
Cryer, John	Jones, Graham
Cunningham, Alex	Jones, Helen
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Jones, Mr Kevan
Cunningham, Sir Tony	Jones, Susan Elan
Curran, Margaret	Jowell, rh Dame Tessa
Danczuk, Simon	Kane, Mike
Darling, rh Mr Alistair	Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
David, Wayne	Keeley, Barbara
Davidson, Mr Ian	Kendall, Liz
De Piero, Gloria	Khan, rh Sadiq
Denham, rh Mr John	Lammy, rh Mr David
Dobson, rh Frank	Lavery, Ian
Docherty, Thomas	Lazarowicz, Mark
Donohoe, Mr Brian H.	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Doran, Mr Frank	Llwyd, rh Mr Elfyn
Doughty, Stephen	Love, Mr Andrew
Dowd, Jim	Lucas, Caroline
Dromey, Jack	Lucas, Ian
Dugher, Michael	Mactaggart, Fiona
Eagle, Ms Angela	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Eagle, Maria	Mahmood, Shabana
Edwards, Jonathan	Malhotra, Seema
Efford, Clive	Mann, John
Elliott, Julie	Marsden, Mr Gordon
Ellman, Mrs Louise	McCabe, Steve
Engel, Natascha	McCarthy, Kerry
Esterson, Bill	McClymont, Gregg
Evans, Chris	McDonagh, Siobhain
Farrelly, Paul	McDonald, Andy
Field, rh Mr Frank	McDonnell, John
Fitzpatrick, Jim	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Flelo, Robert	McGovern, Alison
Flint, rh Caroline	McGovern, Jim
Fovargue, Yvonne	McKechin, Ann
Francis, Dr Hywel	McKenzie, Mr Iain
Gapes, Mike	McKinnell, Catherine
Gardiner, Barry	Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Gilmore, Sheila	Mearns, Ian
Glass, Pat	Miliband, rh Edward
Glindon, Mrs Mary	Miller, Andrew
Godsiff, Mr Roger	Mitchell, Austin
Goodman, Helen	Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Green, Kate	Morden, Jessica
Greenwood, Lilian	Morrice, Graeme (<i>Livingston</i>)
Griffith, Nia	Morris, Grahame M.
Gwynne, Andrew	(<i>Easington</i>)
Hain, rh Mr Peter	Mudie, Mr George
Hamilton, Mr David	Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Hamilton, Fabian	Murphy, rh Paul
Hanson, rh Mr David	Murray, Ian
Harman, rh Ms Harriet	Nandy, Lisa
Harris, Mr Tom	Nash, Pamela
Havard, Mr Dai	O’Donnell, Fiona
Healey, rh John	Onwurah, Chi
Hendrick, Mark	Pearce, Teresa
Hepburn, Mr Stephen	Perkins, Toby
Heyes, David	Phillipson, Bridget
Hillier, Meg	Qureshi, Yasmin
Hodge, rh Margaret	Reed, Mr Jamie
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Reed, Mr Steve
Hoey, Kate	Reeves, Rachel
Hopkins, Kelvin	Reynolds, Emma
Howarth, rh Mr George	Reynolds, Jonathan
Hunt, Tristram	Rotheram, Steve
Irranca-Davies, Huw	Roy, Lindsay
Jackson, Glenda	Ruane, Chris
James, Mrs Siân	Ruddock, rh Dame Joan
C.	Sarwar, Anas
Jamieson, Cathy	Sawford, Andy
Jarvis, Dan	Seabeck, Alison

Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheridan, Jim
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Mr Andy
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Straw, rh Mr Jack
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, Ms Gisela
 Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
 Tami, Mark
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Twigg, Derek

Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Walley, Joan
 Watson, Mr Tom
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Williams, Hywel
 Williamson, Chris
 Wilson, Phil
 Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, David
 Wright, Mr Iain

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Julie Hilling and
 Nic Dakin**

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Amess, Mr David
 Arbuthnot, rh Mr James
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Norman
 Baker, Steve
 Baldry, rh Sir Tony
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Barker, rh Gregory
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Beith, rh Sir Alan
 Bellingham, Mr Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Bingham, Andrew
 Birtwistle, Gordon
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brake, rh Tom
 Bray, Angie
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, James
 Brooke, Annette
 Browne, Mr Jeremy
 Bruce, Fiona
 Bruce, rh Sir Malcolm
 Buckland, Mr Robert
 Burley, Mr Aidan
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Mr Simon
 Burstow, rh Paul
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Byles, Dan
 Cable, rh Vince
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Carswell, Mr Douglas
 Cash, Sir William
 Chishti, Rehman
 Clark, rh Greg

Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colville, Oliver
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crockart, Mike
 Crouch, Tracey
 Davey, rh Mr Edward
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 de Bois, Nick
 Dinenage, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
 Dorries, Nadine
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Farron, Tim
 Featherstone, Lynne
 Field, Mark
 Foster, rh Mr Don
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr
 Mark
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 George, Andrew
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gilbert, Stephen
 Glen, John
 Goodwill, Mr Robert
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris

Green, rh Damian
 Greening, rh Justine
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hames, Duncan
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hayes, rh Mr John
 Heald, Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Hemming, John
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendry, Charles
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoban, Mr Mark
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Horwood, Martin
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Hughes, rh Simon
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Huppert, Dr Julian
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kelly, Chris
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lamb, Norman
 Lancaster, Mark
 Lansley, rh Mr Andrew
 Latham, Pauline
 Laws, rh Mr David
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Jessica
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Leech, Mr John
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, Dr Julian
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lopresti, Jack
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Sir Peter
 Macleod, Mary
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Maude, rh Mr Francis
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen

McVey, rh Esther
 Menzies, Mark
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Maria
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, Anne
 Moore, rh Michael
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mosley, Stephen
 Mowat, David
 Mulholland, Greg
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Newmark, Mr Brooks
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Norman, Jesse
 Nuttall, Mr David
 O'Brien, rh Mr Stephen
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Ollershaw, Eric
 Opperman, Guy
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Ottaway, rh Sir Richard
 Paisley, Ian
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Phillips, Stephen
 Pickles, rh Mr Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pugh, John
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Randall, rh Sir John
 Reckless, Mark
 Redwood, rh Mr John
 Rees-Mogg, Jacob
 Reevell, Simon
 Reid, Mr Alan
 Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
 Robertson, rh Hugh
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, Amber
 Ruffley, Mr David
 Russell, Sir Bob
 Rutley, David
 Sanders, Mr Adrian
 Sandys, Laura
 Scott, Mr Lee
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Sir Robert
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Soubry, Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mr Mark

Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Mr Graham
Stunell, rh Sir Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Swales, Ian
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Syms, Mr Robert
Tapsell, rh Sir Peter
Teather, Sarah
Thornton, Mike
Thurso, John
Tomlinson, Justin
Turner, Mr Andrew
Uppal, Paul
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles

Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Ward, Mr David
Weatherley, Mike
Webb, Steve
Wharton, James
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williamson, Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wright, Simon
Yeo, Mr Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Claire Perry and
Mark Hunter

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
That the proposed words be there added.

The House divided: Ayes 284, Noes 215.

Division No. 23]

[7.12 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Amess, Mr David
Arbuthnot, rh Mr James
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Norman
Baker, Steve
Baldry, rh Sir Tony
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Barker, rh Gregory
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Beith, rh Sir Alan
Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Bingham, Andrew
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brake, rh Tom
Bray, Angie
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, James
Brooke, Annette
Browne, Mr Jeremy
Bruce, Fiona
Bruce, rh Sir Malcolm
Buckland, Mr Robert
Burley, Mr Aidan
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Mr Simon
Burstow, rh Paul
Burt, rh Alistair
Byles, Dan
Cable, rh Vince
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil
Carswell, Mr Douglas
Cash, Sir William
Chishti, Rehman
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crockart, Mike
Crouch, Tracey
Davey, rh Mr Edward
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Philip
de Bois, Nick
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey
M.
Dorries, Nadine
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael

Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Evans, Graham
Evennett, Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Featherstone, Lynne
Field, Mark
Foster, rh Mr Don
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, Mr David
George, Andrew
Gibb, Mr Nick
Gilbert, Stephen
Glen, John
Goodwill, Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, Mr James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hames, Duncan
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, Matthew
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Hayes, rh Mr John
Heald, Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Hemming, John
Henderson, Gordon
Hendry, Charles
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, Damian
Hoban, Mr Mark
Hollingbery, George
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Horwood, Martin
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Hughes, rh Simon
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Huppert, Dr Julian
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kelly, Chris
Kirby, Simon
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamb, Norman
Lancaster, Mark
Lansley, rh Mr Andrew

Latham, Pauline
Laws, rh Mr David
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Jessica
Lee, Dr Phillip
Leech, Mr John
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Lewis, Dr Julian
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lloyd, Stephen
Lopresti, Jack
Loughton, Tim
Macleod, Mary
Main, rh Mrs Anne
Maude, rh Mr Francis
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McIntosh, Miss Anne
McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Esther
Menzies, Mark
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, Anne
Moore, rh Michael
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Mosley, Stephen
Mowat, David
Mulholland, Greg
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Newmark, Mr Brooks
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
O'Brien, rh Mr Stephen
Offord, Dr Matthew
Ollerenshaw, Eric
Opperman, Guy
Osborne, rh Mr George
Ottaway, rh Sir Richard
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Phillips, Stephen
Pickles, rh Mr Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pugh, John
Randall, rh Sir John
Reckless, Mark
Redwood, rh Mr John
Rees-Mogg, Jacob
Reevell, Simon
Reid, Mr Alan
Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm

Robertson, rh Hugh
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, Amber
Ruffley, Mr David
Russell, Sir Bob
Rutley, David
Sanders, Mr Adrian
Sandys, Laura
Scott, Mr Lee
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Smith, Sir Robert
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Soubry, Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mr Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Mr Graham
Stunell, rh Sir Andrew
Sturdy, Julian
Swales, Ian
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Syms, Mr Robert

Tapsell, rh Sir Peter
Teather, Sarah
Thornton, Mike
Thurso, John
Tomlinson, Justin
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, Mr Andrew
Uppal, Paul
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Ward, Mr David
Weatherley, Mike
Webb, Steve
Wharton, James
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Roger
Williams, Stephen
Williamson, Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wright, Simon
Yeo, Mr Tim
Young, rh Sir George
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Claire Perry and
Mark Hunter

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, Heidi
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Mr Graham
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bain, Mr William
Balls, rh Ed
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Begg, Dame Anne
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Blackman-Woods, Roberta
Blears, rh Hazel
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Brown, Mr Russell
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burnham, rh Andy
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Caton, Martin

Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Clark, Katy
Clarke, rh Mr Tom
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Crausby, Mr David
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Curran, Margaret
Danczuk, Simon
Darling, rh Mr Alistair
David, Wayne
Davidson, Mr Ian
De Piero, Gloria
Denham, rh Mr John
Dobson, rh Frank
Docherty, Thomas
Donohoe, Mr Brian H.
Doran, Mr Frank
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria

Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Engel, Natascha
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Mr Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flello, Robert
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Francis, Dr Hywel
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gilmore, Sheila
Glass, Pat
Glendon, Mrs Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Hain, rh Mr Peter
Hamilton, Mr David
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Mr Tom
Havard, Mr Dai
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Heyes, David
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Irranca-Davies, Huw
Jackson, Glenda
James, Mrs Siân C.
Jamieson, Cathy
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Graham
Jones, Helen
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Jowell, rh Dame Tessa
Kane, Mike
Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, rh Sadiq
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lazarowicz, Mark
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Llwyd, rh Mr Elfyn
Love, Mr Andrew
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian
Mactaggart, Fiona
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John

Marsden, Mr Gordon
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McClymont, Gregg
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McGovern, Jim
McKechin, Ann
McKenzie, Mr Iain
McKinnell, Catherine
Meacher, rh Mr Michael
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morrice, Graeme (*Livingston*)
Morris, Graeme M.
(*Easington*)
Mudie, Mr George
Murphy, rh Mr Jim
Murphy, rh Paul
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Nash, Pamela
O'Donnell, Fiona
Onwurah, Chi
Pearce, Teresa
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Qureshi, Yasmin
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rotheram, Steve
Roy, Lindsay
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, rh Dame Joan
Sarwar, Anas
Sawford, Andy
Seabeck, Alison
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheridan, Jim
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Mr Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Mr Gerry
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walley, Joan
Watson, Mr Tom
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel

Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Winterton, rh Ms Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, David

Wright, Mr Iain

Tellers for the Noes:
Julie Hilling and
Nic Dakin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the important role of the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) in producing independent forecasts for the economy and the public finances, and the value this has had in restoring trust in official forecasts; notes that the OBR is a newly independent institution and judges that it would not be appropriate to involve it in party political matters at its first election; notes the comments made by the Chairman of the OBR, Robert Chote, in a letter dated 15 January 2014 to the House of Commons Treasury Committee that ‘to embark on this exercise in a rush, or with insufficient resources, could be very disruptive to the parties and very damaging to the OBR’; and supports the view expressed in that letter that it is ‘better to consider these issues at the beginning of the next Parliament’.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

FAMILY PROCEEDINGS

That the draft Crime and Courts Act 2013 (County Court and Family Court: Consequential Provision) Order 2014, which was laid before this House on 9 April 2014, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Mr Foster.*)

Question agreed to.

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

REHABILITATION OF OFFENDERS

That the draft Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (Exceptions) Order 1975 (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2014, which was laid before this House on 6 May 2014, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Mr Foster.*)

Question agreed to.

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

HEALTH CARE AND ASSOCIATED PROFESSIONS

That the draft Health Care and Associated Professions (Indemnity Arrangements) Order 2014, which was laid before this House on 6 May 2014, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Mr Foster.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Development of Earls Barton Village (Daventry)

7.25 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 400 petitioners in Earls Barton—a beautiful village in my constituency that has an emerging neighbourhood plan, stewarded by the wonderful Councillor Robert Gough, and is in a borough that has a five-year land supply. The petitioners are concerned about over-development of their village.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the Petitioners object to the overdevelopment of Earls Barton Village. The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that national planning policies afford appropriate protection for rural communities.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P001361]

Cycle Safety (Buses)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mr. Foster.)

7.26 pm

Chris Heaton-Harris (Daventry) (Con): It is a pleasure, Mr Speaker, to get lucky and get this Adjournment debate tonight. I am glad to have been given the opportunity to hold this debate, as it raises an important and emotional topic not only for some of my constituents but for far too many families affected by fatal cycling accidents up and down the country.

I was first contacted by my constituents, Peter and Barbara Helliwell, in February 2012. They wanted to raise the circumstances around the case of their daughter, Jayne, who was tragically killed having being struck by a bus while cycling in Oxford street in April 2010, aged only 25. At that time, Jayne lived in east London and worked as an artist, photographer, graphic designer and music video director. She studied at Kingston university, cycled regularly, and had a specially adapted bike for city riding. In fact, she was on her way to a photo shoot when she was tragically killed, just a week before her 26th birthday. As a testament to her character and the impact her life had had on so many others, Jayne's friends recently held a 30th birthday party for her in London, which her parents attended, to celebrate what was such a bright and promising life, taken far too soon.

In my largely rural Daventry constituency, fatal bus collisions are very rare, thankfully, so speaking to Peter and Barbara was the first time that many issues surrounding cycling in cities and cycle safety around buses had been raised with me. Peter and Barbara, Jayne's parents, are an unbelievably strong and level-headed couple, especially given the horrific situation that they have been through. They pointed out to me many pertinent points and reasonable arguments about how to improve the safety of cyclists in cities and around buses, and I hope that I will do them justice here.

Many of those points are echoed in the high-profile Cities Fit for Cycling campaign led recently by *The Times*. In February 2012, the newspaper launched an eight-point manifesto for its cycling campaign. It said that heavy goods vehicles entering city centres should be fitted with sensors, audible turning alarms, extra mirrors, and safety bars. It suggested identifying the 500 most dangerous road junctions and redesigning them accordingly with added safety measures. It pushed for a national audit of cycling. It asked the Highways Agency to earmark 2% of its annual budget for next-generation cycle routes. It called for improved training of cyclists and drivers, including cycle safety becoming a core part of the driving test. It proposed a mandatory default speed limit of 20 mph in residential areas where there are no cycle lanes. It said that businesses should be invited to sponsor cycle schemes, and that every city in the country should appoint a cycling commissioner.

In the light of their own experience, the Helliwells had additional important points they wanted to raise. They pointed out, for example, that there remains ambiguity about the legal position on the appointment of bus drivers with known medical conditions that could suddenly spark and cause an accident, such as a history of sciatica. Sciatica is the cause of much concern. Medical

opinion states that this condition can result in sudden leg movements, potentially causing the driver to hit the wrong pedal. Alas, in Jayne Helliwell's case, that is exactly what happened—on one of the busiest roads in the United Kingdom.

Should bus drivers be allowed to drive with sciatica, and should the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency include sciatic pain as a reason not to drive unless a driver undergoes regular medical checks? CTC, the national cycling charity, has said that

“in the Helliwell case, the driver had a long-term illness which his employers were not aware of. Better medical testing must be carried out on drivers to avoid this sort of incident occurring again”.

In Jayne's case, the Crown Prosecution Service opted to offer no evidence because

“it is not now sure that the prosecution could reach the high standard of proving, so that the jury would be sure that (The Driver) drove far below the standard expected of a competent and careful driver given those medical circumstances in which it has already been shown that he would not have been able to foresee the sciatica coming on in the way in which it did, causing him to press the accelerator rather than to press or try to press the brake”.

We must therefore ask questions about the medical condition of sciatic pain and its continued impact upon serious and fatal collisions. I would like to hear whether the Minister thinks that his Department's current guidance on these matters is sufficiently strong.

It is also important to consider the policies on how bus drivers are retrained when returning to work after having a road traffic incident while working. In Jayne's case, the driver in question had been involved in a number of previous incidents and had received “corrective training” years before Jayne's death, which still counted as “current”. Actually, Metroline, the bus company involved, considered “corrective training” to be “current” for five years.

To be fair, Transport for London has done a lot to improve cycle safety around buses recently. The Helliwells, who have travelled down to listen to this debate, have already remarked on the number of buses they have seen displaying the extra large yellow stickers on the back to alert cyclists to their proximity. Transport for London should be commended for examining the issues that many cycling campaigns have raised on promoting bus driver training. However, there remain a few questions on how robust its policy review has been in practice. There is a concern that best practice is starting in London but not being spread to local authorities across the rest of the country. As CTC has said,

“bus drivers should have to undergo cycle safety training similar to that which has been carried out by Transport for London, particularly in areas like Oxford and Cambridge, where the aggression cyclists face from bus drivers is at its worst. Training is particularly needed in places where bus lanes are less than 4.5m wide”.

I should add that cycle lanes that are less than 3 metres wide are common across the country. To improve road safety, councils, in particular, should be proactive in tackling the danger presented by buses, which is very much within their jurisdiction.

Unfortunately for Peter and Barbara Helliwell, the issues that arose in 2010 involved not only road safety itself, but the conduct of the transport companies in London. After the collision, Metroline did not contact the Helliwell family until August 2010—four months

[Chris Heaton-Harris]

after the event—even though it had completed its own internal disciplinary procedure on 27 April, which had resulted in the dismissal of the driver at fault. Alas, Mr Helliwell told me that not only did the company take that amount of time to make contact, but when it eventually did it showed no remorse whatsoever. Following that experience, I think it is fair to say that all transport companies should heed the words of the Helliwells and examine how they communicate with and support collision victims and their families. They should aim to work alongside police support officers, and all involved parties should clarify what their roles are in these circumstances. Importantly, they should identify what support is available to families and victims.

Another point that Peter and Barbara have raised with me concerns the compensation claims procedure. It is a long and stressful process that essentially involves a complicated negotiation over a long period of time. That is the last thing a family needs when trying to gain some closure after losing a loved one. I simply cannot imagine how impossible it must seem to have someone put a figure on the cost of a family member's life. In Jayne's case the compensation system created anger and confusion. The family were offered a sum of £3,000 for expenses, but, when they indicated that it would go to a charity, it rose to five times that amount—£15,000—with no explanation given for the vast difference or the quick change of mind.

The Helliwells have suggested that bus companies, or their insurers, should set up a fund to remove the need for such a long, enduring compensation process, and that it should be modelled on other compensation funds that deal with similar situations. That would certainly ensure that the detached, impersonal nature of Mr and Mrs Helliwell's experience with Metroliner would be addressed, because people would have a direct line of compassionate contact. As such, the companies should offer more trained support staff to work with victims, families and drivers affected by the trauma of a collision.

I also want to address the legal case, although I am aware that the subject is not within the remit of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill). My constituents would like the role of the Crown Prosecution Service to be examined, as they had no contact at all with the appointed barrister until minutes before the Crown court trial. They would have liked to have had the option to meet the appointed barrister long before the trial, to find out what was being done and why—in the same way that a defendant has meetings with legal representatives beforehand. In addition, the Helliwells have spoken about how impersonal and faceless the legal process was at times. Certainly, in such a situation, some humility would have gone an awfully long way.

Since this debate went on the Order Paper, I have been contacted by various other people and organisations that have either been affected by the issues I am raising or that are campaigning on them. Although one charity has said that it commends the work of Transport for London in trying to learn lessons from the past and improve things, one individual who was put into a coma following a bus collision in 2009 has told me of the fight he has had to get Transport for London to start publishing

its casualty data each quarter. This individual's campaign has led to data being routinely published, following his hard work and that of some Conservative London assembly members. The data show that, on average over the past five years, Transport for London buses have killed or seriously injured a person every day.

It is surely in the interests of Transport for London, as the sole contractor of London's bus services, to do more and go further to ensure that that number decreases. In highlighting that number, I have to ask: what lessons have Transport for London and the Department for Transport learned following Jayne Helliwell's death, and what further steps do they plan to take to try to prevent similar deaths in the future?

Having spoken to the Helliwells, I know just how grateful they are for the support continually offered by family and friends, but they have particularly highlighted the excellent support that the charity Brake has given them since Jayne's accident. Brake is a fantastic road safety charity that exists to stop the needless deaths and serious injuries that happen every day on the roads of the United Kingdom. It promotes road safety awareness, safe and sustainable road use and effective road safety policies. Importantly, it offers care for families where a loved one has been seriously or fatally injured in a road collision. To not use today's debate to highlight that work and to thank Brake for the support it has given the Helliwells would be a wasted opportunity, so I thank it now.

I invite you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and, indeed, all Members to take an active part in road safety week, which will run from 17 to 23 November. This year's theme is "Look out for each other", emphasising that drivers, especially those of large vehicles, need to be aware of other, vulnerable, road users—a rather poignant campaign, given the subject of today's debate.

Although I am a recreational cyclist, I am not one of the tens of thousands of people who get on their bike to go to work or to study. I understand that it is impossible to guarantee all the country's cyclists complete safety, but I really do not think it is too much to ask that we learn from the tragic death of Jayne Helliwell and try to ensure that bus drivers are correctly trained and aware of the dangers they can pose to cyclists on our increasingly busy streets.

Jayne's accident was the most horrific of tragedies. Let us hope that learning lessons from it can prevent others like it in the future.

7.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris) on securing this debate. Let me say at the outset that I am aware of the tragic death of his constituents' daughter, Jayne Helliwell, who sadly lost her life four years ago, following a collision involving a double-decker bus while she was cycling in London. Of course, any death is one too many, and I extend my sympathies to her family and friends.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to bring cycle safety around buses to the attention of the House. The Prime Minister has said that he wants a cycling revolution in this country, but that will not happen unless people feel safe cycling on our streets. We have seen a sharp

increase in cycling in London in recent years. Although the rate of casualties has declined, we are absolutely determined to do more to improve cycle safety.

A range of issues are pertinent to my hon. Friend's constituents' tragic incident—cycle safety, the training and licensing of bus operators with medical conditions and support for victims who have lost a loved one. There are three critical central pillars to our approach to cycle safety: first, we are investing in infrastructure; secondly, we are cracking down on dangerous drivers; and, thirdly, we are offering cycle training.

We have already made it easier for local councils to put in place high-quality cycling infrastructure. For example, we have made it simpler for councils to introduce 20 mph zones and to install Trixi mirrors to improve the visibility of cyclists at junctions. We have just finished consulting on the update to the Traffic Signs Regulations and General Directions 2002, which is the bible used by engineers when planning signs and road markings. We expect the final regulations to include many measures developed in discussion with cycling groups, including low-level signals for cyclists, new types of crossings for pedestrians and cyclists and new designs of the advanced stop line. We will also trial new dedicated cycle streets, which will give councils the opportunity, by banning overtaking, to put cyclists on an equal footing with motorists on popular cycle routes.

We are absolutely determined to stamp out the kind of dangerous driving that ruins people's lives, which is why the Government have introduced a new offence of causing serious injury by dangerous driving. Those convicted will face up to five years in prison, which is significantly more than the previous maximum.

The third pillar is improving the training of all motorists, so that they know how to use roads as safely as possible. My Department's cycle safety forum brings together the main interested partners, including the Association of Chief Police Officers and motoring and freight organisations. With Transport for London, we have established a taskforce to raise awareness of safety among drivers and to take targeted enforcement action against a small minority of potentially dangerous operators, drivers and vehicles.

We have encouraged behavioural change and raised awareness on the safety of cyclists with the Think Cyclist campaign. We are funding the widely recognised Bikeability training scheme. By March 2013, more than 1 million children had been trained, and between April 2013 and March 2015, we expect more than 616,000 further training places to be delivered. The House will want to be aware that Bikeability is not just for children, and some councils already providing free or subsidised training for adults.

I will turn to the legal position on the licensing of bus drivers with sciatica or other medical conditions. We operate high medical standards for all drivers. They are set out in the second and third European Union directives on driving licences, which came into force in Great Britain on 1 January 1997 and 19 January 2013. Annex III of the third directive sets out the minimum standards of medical fitness to drive that are to be applied by all member states, but member states may set higher standards if they so wish.

There are stricter medical standards for drivers of lorries and buses, and rightly so. Such professional drivers must have a medical examination when they first

apply for a licence, and then every five years from the age of 45 and every year from the age of 65. From 19 January 2013, new applicants are required to renew their bus or lorry licence every five years and provide a self-declaration about their health. Section 92(2)(a) of the Road Traffic Act 1988 only requires licence holders to inform the DVLA about a medical condition that may affect fitness to drive if that condition is likely to extend beyond three months in duration.

Sciatica is a well-known problem, with intermittent symptoms, but not a disease as such, and for this reason, it is not currently a condition that the DVLA would need to be informed of in the interests of road safety. However, it is for the driver to ensure that where they are suffering from a medical condition that is temporary in its duration, they are fit to drive.

I will now turn to the process of training for professional drivers. The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency has created a national standard for drivers of buses and coaches that sets out the knowledge and skills required to be a safe and responsible driver. The standard includes advice on how to react to vulnerable road users, including cyclists. The competences described by the standard underpin our bus-driving test.

The theory test for bus drivers includes questions relating to vulnerable road users, including cyclists. Professional drivers must also hold a driver certificate of professional competence, which involves most drivers undertaking 35 hours of training over a period of five years. We have had calls from Transport for London and others that this periodic training should include mandatory elements specifically about vulnerable road users, and we are actively considering how a voluntary scheme to include driver safety training could work. We do not have the power to specify individual hours of training that must be taken, but we will work with training providers to encourage the inclusion of this issue in the courses that we approve.

On the subject of justice for families of victims, despite our efforts on training and medical standards for professional drivers, accidents can occur and the consequences, obviously, can be fatal. It is important that we have the right support systems in place for the families of victims of road traffic fatalities. The Crown Prosecution Service is an active member of the justice for vulnerable road users group, which is chaired by the Department for Transport and has representatives from non-governmental organisations, voluntary groups and various ministerial agencies.

The CPS recognises our obligation to victims of crime, and road traffic crime is no exception. The latest guidance on victims is in a document entitled, "Homicide Cases—Guidance on CPS service to bereaved families". Road traffic crime victims and their families are placed on the same footing as those families suffering in the aftermath of a homicide. The CPS works across various Government agencies, providing practical guidance to making improvements in prosecuting such cases. The CPS has been working with my Department on the proposed drug-driving offence and with the Ministry of Justice on its recommendation to create a new offence of death by disqualified driving.

I also note the point surrounding the communications from the company, and although I would not wish to make excuses for the company, I know that lawyers representing insurers can often caution operators not to

[Mr Robert Goodwill]

speak to anyone else involved in such cases, but there is no similar excuse that the CPS could extend for not keeping people in the loop.

My hon. Friend asked what lessons have been learnt and what actions are being taken following the tragic incident to improve the safety of cyclists around buses. The Department strongly supports improving the safety of cyclists and welcomes initiatives to gather intelligence on the effectiveness of innovative technology. TfL is planning to test two different camera or radar-based detection systems in the summer, designed to improve the safety of cyclists.

Earlier this month, the bus operator, First West of England, started trialling, for the first time, state-of-the-art cycle safety technology on three of its buses on a busy route in Bristol. That is part of an ongoing trial funded by four West of England local authorities that has also involved Wessex Bus. CycleEye technology developed by the Bristol engineering company Fusion Processing Ltd, was created to reduce the growing number of cyclist collisions and casualties across the country involving large commercial vehicles. It cleverly uses radar and

camera sensors to identify when the risk for the cyclist is increased by being in the vehicle's blind spot, and it gives an audible alert to the driver's cab. A preliminary trial in London is in progress, and we will consider its implications when there are more data.

In summary, I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that the Government are committed to cycle safety and to doing more to improve the safety of vulnerable road users—among whom I include myself, since I cycle every day when I am working in London. In total, we are spending more than twice what the previous Administration spent on cycling. In addition, the Department for Transport's local sustainable transport fund is providing £540 million for local authorities to prioritise sustainable transport projects, of which 28%—£151 million—is being allocated to cycling projects. However, we will not become complacent, and as I have said already, one death is one too many. That is why I conclude by thanking my hon. Friend once again for securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

7.50 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 25 June 2014

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

Burma (Persecution of Minorities)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(*Mr Gyimah.*)

9.30 am

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): It is good to appear before you today, Mr Howarth. I thank the Minister for also appearing today. His portfolio covers many difficult issues, not least of which is the one we are discussing today. I do appreciate that. I also thank other hon. Members who have been involved in raising this issue. I have spoken to some of them this morning. They are genuinely interested in the issue and concerned and have previously initiated various debates in their own right, which gives an indication of their support for raising the issue, but they could not be here today.

Let me explain why I continue to want to raise this issue. The little secret is that seven or eight years ago, I had to google “Rohingya” to find out what the group was and what its background and history was. That arose when I was approached as a Bradford councillor, which I was then, through a housing association that had been contracted to provide accommodation and support to a group of Rohingya who were coming or wanted to come to Bradford through the Gateway programme, and we did provide a lot of support. There are certainly no votes in this, but there is now an important group of people, whom I consider to be Bradfordians and constituents, who regularly raise with me appalling stories of what is happening. The new arrivals originally came from Bangladesh. We campaigned hard on some of the issues faced by the Rohingyans in the camps in Bangladesh, but obviously in the last few years a new issue has emerged in the public’s awareness—the issue was not new in itself, but it was new in terms of public awareness. I refer to the activities that were taking place in Burma or Myanmar, and those are the ones that I want to talk about today.

The UN special rapporteur, Mr Quintana, produced a report back in April, and I will need to quote from it at some length, because this is someone who knows the issues. He has been to Burma many times—nine times, I think—and has visited some of the most difficult areas in Kachin and Rakhine. He reported back a sombre tale of his time in Myanmar.

The good news, at the beginning of Mr Quintana’s report, was about the release of many prisoners of conscience—more than 1,000—but some of his other comments make pretty worrying reading. In particular, he raised the ongoing issue in Burma of human rights. Despite the release of political prisoners and other reforms that are taking place, he had to conclude that he saw

“no improvements in the human rights situation.”

Indeed, he believed that the situation was getting worse, from what was “an already dire state.” He found that the practice of separating or segregating communities

“continues to have a severe impact on the Muslim populations in Rakhine...and in particular the Rohingya community.”

The discriminatory and really quite strict restrictions on freedom of movement for Muslim populations remain in place, as the Minister is well aware. Mr Quintana concluded that part of the report by saying that that continues to affect

“a range of other human rights including”—
sadly—“the right to life.”

So serious are some of the issues that Mr Quintana identified and experienced that he went on to conclude that the extrajudicial killings, rapes and other forms of sexual violence—

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. He will be aware that since 2011 the Christian community in Burma has been persecuted dramatically, with 64 women and girls raped, 66 churches destroyed, 200 villages burnt down and more than 100,000 people displaced. Right up to 2013, there were gang rapes, as he has mentioned. Surely more pressure should be brought to bear on the Burmese Government to stop this horrendous activity.

Mr Ward: That is absolutely right. The fact that many of my comments, because of issues raised by my constituents, refer to the Muslim Rohingya in no way minimises the atrocities that are committed against other groups as well.

These issues are very serious. I started to mention some of them. Others include the lack of due process, fair trials and rights; forcible transfers; and the deprivation of liberty for so many people. These are not isolated incidents; they are happening on a large scale and are directed, in many cases, against the Rohingya population. So serious is the situation that the special rapporteur concluded that they amount to “systematic human rights violations”. They are so serious that they should be referred to the International Criminal Court as crimes against humanity. They are crimes against humanity as defined under the Rome statute and need to be elevated to that level in the public consciousness. We are talking about the worst of the worst.

I know that the Minister is aware of the report, and other hon. Members may want to pick out specific points, but it contains a whole series of recommendations, many of which the British Government could contribute to. I will come to specific actions that I and others believe the Government could and should take. More recently—again, the Minister will be aware of this—there has been a report back to the United Nations by the Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Ms Kyung-wha Kang. If anyone has not seen the video of the interview and questioning that took place, I recommend that they watch it. The report back to the UN was made only two weeks ago—I think it was 17 or 18 June; it was very recently. She points out that this is the second anniversary of the inter-communal violence in Rakhine and the third anniversary of the terrible conflict in Kachin.

The UN Assistant Secretary-General found that there were severe issues in providing access to international humanitarian aid. It is restricted, although in different ways, in the two states to which I have referred. In Kachin, there are up to 100,000—the point about the scale of this has already been made—displaced people in camps. Half are in Government camps, where some aid, of a limited nature, is possible and available. However,

[Mr Ward]

half are in IDP—internally displaced people—camps, which are under independent army control and where access is simply unobtainable.

The level of suffering is indicated in the comments of the UN assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, who said that in Rakhine she witnessed “a level of human suffering in IDP camps that I have personally never seen before”.

Men, women and children are living in appalling conditions, with severe restrictions on their freedom of movement, in camps and isolated villages. In Rakhine, there are estimated to be 140,000 displaced people, 90% of whom are Muslims, although there are some of other faiths. The problems are made worse by the fact that Rakhine is the poorest state in Myanmar. We can take it as a common state of existence that there is no electricity, no schools, no toilet facilities and no freedom of movement. Many people have been living in those conditions for years, although such accommodation—if we can call it accommodation—was supposed to be temporary.

In theory, humanitarian aid can be provided in those areas, but in practice it is much more difficult for a whole host of reasons. The first of those is travel; the Minister, who has visited the area, will know far more about that than I do. The UN assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs pointed out that a two-hour boat ride was required to reach one of the camps, let alone to transport any aid. There are also administrative barriers to obtaining authorisation. Often, the local community are at best distrustful and at worst hostile towards aid workers, whom they believe favour the Muslim community. We are talking about people who are in desperate straits. Humanitarian aid workers, who are incredible human beings who risk their own safety and put their lives at risk, are treated with hostility because they are thought to favour a particular group.

The real concern, as the Minister knows, is the continued statelessness of the Rohingya, on which there seems to be very little progress. It is telling that Ms Kang was advised not to refer to the Rohingya as Rohingya, because to do so would be controversial and might trigger tension, which might provoke a violent reaction. Considering the awful past in Burma, it appears that relationships with other states, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, have improved—although they could not really have been much worse. Notwithstanding Ms Kang’s comments about the negative aspects of the situation, to which I have referred to, she pointed out that huge strides had been made in political and economic reform, but little progress seems to have been made on the question of the Rohingya in Rakhine. She echoed Mr Quintana’s comments about the need for a change in culture. Pressure is being applied for constitutional change, but a fundamental reconciliation and a change in culture are the most important things. What is the point of a constitutional change if it is not supported by a change in attitude and culture in the region?

There are some points that I would like the Minister to respond to. Ms Kang refers in her statement to the Government action plan on Rakhine. Does the Minister know anything about that, and what progress is being made on it? There is also an opinion—I would like to know whether the Minister is aware of it—that the UK Government’s criticism of the Myanmar Government is

mutated because foreign Governments do not want to disrupt the progress being made and are therefore taking a softly, softly approach. We want reforms to continue, but that cannot happen at the cost of providing much-needed support for the Rohingya. Defending the Rohingya cannot be seen as contrary to a desire to support changes and reform in the country.

There is also a view that the reforms to date have simply been a smokescreen—that the President is carrying out limited reforms with a view to trying to get the international community to remove or reduce sanctions. As I understand it, some sanctions have been removed, so the strategy is working. It does not seem to be of any benefit to the Rohingya, however. I am grateful to the Burma Campaign UK, which has supplied me and other Members with briefing material over the last several months. The campaign has raised some specific concerns, to which I would like the Minister to respond. One is the census in Burma, to which the UK contributed £10 million. As the Minister knows, however, the promise that the Rohingya would be allowed to register as Rohingya was not kept. That is a broken promise. There is also a view that the Minister was somewhat snubbed and was banned from making a planned speech at Rangoon university; I do not know whether that is true. In addition, within hours of his visiting Kachin state and calling for peace, the Burmese army attacked two civilian villages.

There is also the issue of the limitations being placed on the numbers of children that Muslims can have and the restrictions on non-Buddhist men that prevent them from marrying Buddhist women. I find the whole question of the Buddhist faith difficult, and it is not something I have a great deal of knowledge about. Some time ago, however, I saw a BBC report—I think it was—of a Buddhist monk who was justifying the slaughter of children. When he was asked how he could possibly justify that and be a Buddhist, his response was: “It’s a bit like weeding a garden: if you want to get rid of the weeds, you have to get right down to the roots.” The killing of children was therefore justified on the basis of destroying the roots of a plant to prevent it from growing and becoming a problem later. It was sickening and appalling, and if that is Buddhism, I have a completely wrong perception of what that religion is.

There is also the question of political prisoners. More than 1,000 political prisoners of conscience have been released, but I understand that the number of political prisoners is increasing again. The number of people being held has doubled this year. Many prisoners were released with the intention of removing sanctions, but we now have another escalation in the persecution of political prisoners. I do not know the details of the Andy Hall case, and I do not know whether the Minister has any comments. Does he know of that case? If Andy Hall is convicted, he could face many years in prison, but I am not too aware of the case.

The other issue is military training, which I and others have raised in parliamentary questions. Military training, like many of the other things to which I have referred, could have been used as a lever to try to bring about improvements, particularly for the Rohingya.

David Simpson: I have seen research showing that young Christian adults and teenagers have been threatened with conscription to the army if they do not give up

their faith. They are told to shave their head, as the Buddhists do. If not for charities such as Barnabas and others, which provide shoes and clothing to Christians in Burma, they would be in a very bad state.

Mr Ward: That echoes the familiar pattern that emerges. Burma is almost like two nations. Good news stories continually come out about the progress that is being made, and on the other side there are horrendous atrocities and abysmal behaviour towards large sections of the ethnic minority communities. It is almost like two parallel worlds that exist alongside each other. I can understand why we want to encourage one side to improve and become part of the international community and—if we want to be cynical—to develop trade. We know the benefits of international trade and how it can bring about political reform, but what about the other side? What about the daily reports of behaviour that would be unacceptable in any other part of the world?

Burma Campaign UK has produced eight steps that it believes the British Government could take to improve human rights in Burma. First, the Government should put human rights—not trade or political reform, but human rights—at the top of the agenda, elevating human rights as the Government's policy priority in Burma. Secondly, the Government should support an international investigation into human rights violations against the Rohingya. We hear about various internal investigations, but an international investigation is required into what the UN special rapporteur believes to be crimes against humanity.

Thirdly, the Government need to consider the use of aid as a lever. I believe that twice as much aid—£20 million—is spent on building Government capacity and moving towards democracy than is spent on helping civil society and relations between the different ethnic groups across Burma. Is that the right balance? As I said earlier, there seems to be a view that if we can bring about political reform and constitutional change, everything else will follow. That view is contested by those who believe that cultural change is required as well as constitutional change.

Burma Campaign UK also calls for a global summit on countering hate speech. The Minister may want to say something about that, as it has been well documented. Hate speech is becoming a severe problem, and such a summit should not be a talking shop, but should lead to a clear action plan with significant—it would have to be significant—international funding and technical expertise provided to address hate speech. Further, the campaign recommends that the UK Government should make any future training of the Burmese military conditional on the ending of Burma's tactics in ethnic states. There is clearly a lot for which the Burmese Government are either responsible or to which they turn a blind eye.

Burma Campaign UK also recommends that the UK Government should support the establishment of an international investigation into rape and sexual violence in Burma, which has continued unabated since Thein Sein became President. No steps seem to have been taken and impunity seems to be a major problem. Human rights violations are committed on a regular basis, with impunity for the perpetrators.

The campaign calls for support for an internal, cross-departmental investigation into the decision to fund the census. Again, was that another lost opportunity to

provide something that would lever the changes we seek? Finally, the campaign supports a new independent review mechanism for political prisoners in Burma. We welcome the number of prisoners who were released, but it seems that, after the international acclaim and praise for those actions, the Burmese Government simply reverted back to their old ways. The review mechanism has to be lifted out of the internal investigations and appraisals within Burma and be done by the international community.

There are quite a few things there, and I hope others want to contribute, but the main message that I bring to the debate is the frustration felt by everyone who understands the issues, particularly those from within the Rohingya community, which I now know very well. The Rohingya community has fitted into our own community, but it feels totally powerless about what is happening so far away. The Rohingya community believes that its cause is not forgotten, but is not considered a top priority compared with other important international diplomatic measures.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Does he agree that some of the Rohingya in Burma have not even been counted in the census?

Mr Ward: I thank the hon. Lady for that question. The census was supported by UK funding, but the Rohingya are not only not counted, but are not allowed to describe themselves as Rohingya, so we are not aware of the scale of the problem. We can only conclude that the problem is greater than is publicly known. That, among many others, is an issue that I hope the Minister will address.

9.58 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate and to see the Minister back in his usual spot; as always, we look forward to a very good response from him. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) on securing the debate and giving us this opportunity to participate.

In this House, we are charged with the responsibility of looking after our constituents—in my case, the constituents of Strangford. But the people of Strangford, along with all the other constituents across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, have an interest in what happens in the rest of the world. They are interested in what happens to ethnic minorities. They are also interested in those who are being persecuted for their faith, and I would like to comment on that.

The topic of this debate is the situation in Burma and the persecution of the Rohingya and other minorities. I will comment on the Rohingya minority and how they are being persecuted for their faith, and also talk about those who are persecuted because of their Christian faith, which is equally important.

It is very sad that we should again be discussing tragedies in Burma, which concern Members here, those who would have liked to be here and those who have raised the issue in Adjournment debates both in the main Chamber and here in Westminster Hall. Burma, as we all know, is a troubled region with a troubled past.

[*Jim Shannon*]

We become aware of that when we read the history and observe what has happened. Decades of military dictatorships have wreaked havoc in the country, and ethnic people, especially those in resource-rich areas and areas of armed conflict, have paid the highest price—with their lives, both in deaths and in injuries. In the past 13 years, more than 3,500 ethnic villages have been destroyed in Burma.

I am conscious of the background information. In particular, I take note of the comments made by United Nations Assistant Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, Kyung-wha Kang. She said that the level of suffering that she saw in Arakan was something she has never seen before anywhere in the world. That puts into context the issue before us. Such devastation and malice are incomprehensible.

The UN listed the crimes by the state of Burma as including forced relocation, forced labour and sexual violence, which both the hon. Member for Bradford East and my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) mentioned. The calculated rape and murder of women and young girls are completely unacceptable. That they are being carried out by the Burmese army on some occasions is even more incomprehensible, and that underlines the need to do something about it.

We saw extrajudicial killings, torture and the recruitment of child soldiers on our television screens last week—not in Burma, but in Iraq, where children as young as 10 were carrying weapons. How can that be? It is happening in Burma as well. All that is bad in a conflict zone has taken place in Burma.

I shall quickly comment on the issue of war crimes. Our background information mentions that a massacre of Rohingya Muslims took place in January this year. I am a Christian, but I believe strongly in freedom of religion for everyone. I believe strongly that those who want to practise other religions should be able to. The massacre of Rohingya Muslims occurred in the northern part of the Rakhine state in that month. Some 48 Rohingya men, women and children were brutally murdered and slain in the village of Du Chee Yar Tan, and they included the local police sergeant. The Government have flatly denied that there have been any killings. Thousands of people have been killed and injured, with between 120,000 and 140,000 displaced. There clearly is an issue, and we cannot close our eyes to what is happening around us.

For those people in Rakhine state and the north of Burma, I put this point: what is happening in Burma that we as a Government can respond to? I have every faith in the Minister; I genuinely mean that. I know that when he responds, he will do so with research and compassion.

David Simpson: My hon. Friend may be aware that recently—I think on 27 or 28 May—a draft religious conversion Bill was introduced in Burma. Anyone who wants to marry in or convert to another faith, or marry inter-faith, would have to ask for permission through some specially set-up local authority. That is an absolute nonsense, but it is how people are being treated over there. Any violator of the legislation could, I understand, receive at least a two-year sentence in Burmese prisons.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend is right. How wrong can it be? We are confronted on many occasions with examples where human rights and the freedoms of expression and religion are denied to people. The Government there are apt to introduce legislation that restricts those rights. I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that to the attention of the House; I was going to comment on that further on in my speech.

Speaking of such crimes, the website Burma Partnership says that documentation

“demonstrates that attacks on civilian populations are not isolated, but are widespread and systematic tactics of the regime”—

that is, the Government—

“used to secure their economic and political control. As such, they constitute not only human rights violations, but are crimes against humanity and war crimes.”

When we talk about war crimes, we are talking about something that needs accountability for those involved. It is time that those who think that they can carry out, in their own countries, crimes that are unspeakably brutal, violent and evil know that a day of reckoning is coming in this world.

Valerie Vaz: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, even earlier this year, a priest was murdered in Kachin state, and that a 17-year-old girl was raped? While on the face of it, things look as though they are going well, there are still people who are arrested arbitrarily.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady. I will comment on that particular incident, which clearly illustrates what we need to address.

Burma Partnership continues:

“And yet, the military regime has not been held accountable for these acts; impunity prevails in Burma.”

In other words, people do it and get away with it, if they are a part of the Government. There is no accountability.

I would like to know clearly from the Minister what discussions have taken place and what the response has been from the Government. Is there accountability in this process? If not, we have to find ways to make them accountable. Why has the military regime in Burma not been held accountable for such acts? What pressure, if any, have the British Government put on Burma so that it desists and takes action to stop those acts?

It has always been known that Burma was religiously intolerant, but that is becoming clearer as an increasing number of stories about the treatment of the Rohingya emerge. The UN believes that, since mid-2012, when sectarian violence broke out, more than 86,000 Rohingya have attempted to flee Burma to neighbouring countries. In 2013, 615 people died during the flight for freedom. It is believed that the outbreak of pogroms against the Muslim Rohingya has left around 140,000 people in squalid displacement camps, a point well illustrated by the hon. Member for Bradford East.

What steps have the British Government taken to help and protect the Rohingya? Are we providing aid to Burma's neighbours to help cater for the influx of asylum seekers? What medical help is available to those in displacement camps? Is there sufficient help for them in relation to housing and temporary accommodation? There is a risk of disease breaking out; that is bound to happen, in confined places. Have we been able to assist? If not, what can we do?

Another issue that has come to our attention is the theft of land. I said at the beginning that there are large veins of minerals in the country. What international economic pressure has been put on Burma? Ordinary, good peasants who own a bit of land are victimised, pushed and discriminated to hand it over. What is happening about that?

On Friday the 20th of this month, the Burmese Government closed the consultation window on its proposed religious conversion law, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann referred a few minutes ago. It would require Buddhist women to seek permission from their parents and the authorities before marrying outside the Buddhist faith. The law states that those people found to be applying for conversion

“with the intent of insulting or destroying a religion”

can face imprisonment for up to two years. Clearly, this is a human rights and an equality issue, and the Burmese Government must respond to it. This law is a poorly disguised form of religious persecution and it will affect those from all religions who are not Buddhist.

Have the British Government had discussions with the Burmese about this proposed law? What steps have been taken to ensure that it is not ratified? What pressure are we applying? When it comes to applying pressure, it is not only the Minister who can do it but all the European countries, as well as the US, by acting together. We must combine and use our collective power to influence the Burmese Government.

This issue has been discussed in Parliament before and it has now raised its head again. Would the Government care to give more information about how British taxpayers' money is being spent on training the Burmese army? In introducing the debate, the hon. Member for Bradford East mentioned that subject—the training that the British Army gives the Burmese army. We find out through reports and other information that the Burmese army have subsequently been involved in atrocities—vile, evil, wicked atrocities—against the ethnic groups across Burma. We get annoyed that our Army has trained their army in tactics and that then their army uses those tactics against their own people. There has to be a system whereby we can make the Burmese army accountable for that. Whether such training is for warfare or not, do the British Government intend to continue working alongside this brutal regime?

In her intervention, the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) talked about the allegations of systematic war crimes. Burma Campaign UK, a human rights group, has produced a report called, “Rape and Sexual Violence by the Burmese Army”. Within the Burmese army, there is clearly a systematic and orchestrated campaign of attacks on women and young girls, such that rape and sexual violence are the norm rather than the exception. This Parliament has taken a strong stance on this issue. Through early-day motions and other contributions, we have urged that more action be taken right across the world to combat such violence.

I will give an example of what has happened in Burma. Since January, there have been fresh allegations of rape against the small number of Christians in the Kachin province; Christians there are being brutally denied their rights, too. The hon. Lady referred to the case of the 17-year-old girl who was raped by two Burmese army soldiers. Again, there is no accountability

for that. Such people seem to have immunity from prosecution and from accountability for their actions, and I certainly feel strongly about that.

Christians are one of the other minorities who face severe persecution in Burma. Release International reports that many Christians there still have to engage in forced labour, that huge numbers of them have been removed from their homes, and that rape is used as a weapon of war against minorities. Christians in Burma have had to deal with the Burmese Government's catchphrase, “To be Burmese is to be Buddhist”, and Christianity is commonly referred to as the “C-virus”. Christians are denied the right to maintain and build places of worship, as my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann said earlier. When they do maintain or build places of worship, the buildings are often burned down. In Karen state, Buddhist propaganda is played during Christian services and Christians in the military or Government are denied promotion. Clearly, we have many concerns about all of that.

In Kachin province, some people practise Christianity; it reflects their language and culture in what is predominantly a Buddhist country. Kachin province is rich in jade and timber, but Christians there have stated that they are fighting for their culture and history. They are also fighting for their lives against a Burmese army focused on trying to destroy them.

The Burmese army broke a 17-year-old ceasefire on 11 June and since then up to 1,000 people have been killed or injured, while another 120,000 people have been displaced from Kachin province. Some have fled to China; others have sought shelter in refugee camps elsewhere throughout the region. Clearly, there are a number of places in Burma where there are abuses of human rights, which affect not only the individuals involved but their families.

The Kachin leader is General Gun Maw, who is also the chief negotiator. He had a meeting in Washington with President Obama. Talks were held, with great hopes for peace, but peace did not materialise. The uncertain peace was broken by the junta, and that has cast a dark shadow over Kachin province and the way forward.

There have been multiple recordings of the issues in Burma. I will quickly quote Human Rights Watch:

“There have been long standing and well documented reports for many years that the Burmese army perpetrates widespread sexual violence against women and young girls in ethnic conflict areas, often with utter impunity and denials. The Burmese government's admission that it had investigated and punished eight perpetrators”—

just eight—

“from the military is obviously a fraction of the scale of this repugnant practice, and the Burmese military has a long way to go in tackling this problem and reigning its rampant troops in to accord to the rule of war.”

They also have to teach their troops what is right and what is wrong. Human Rights Watch continued:

“Even Ban Ki-moon recently called for an investigation by the Burmese government into sexual violence in conflict.”

When a country's army is engaged in something as odious as sexual violence, it is time that its troops were held accountable too. The issue also brings into question our relationship with Burma, particularly in relation to

[*Jim Shannon*]

our training of their troops. Action has to be taken in all cases of sexual violence and reports of prosecution of offenders in courts should be published.

Burma Campaign UK has said that last year 133 Burmese civil society organisations wrote to our Prime Minister about Burma, but they have not had the response that they had hoped for. I hope that today the Minister can give us some indication of the way forward.

In conclusion, this abuse that I have talked about is just the tip of the iceberg. We are greatly troubled by it, and we seek the Minister's response and thoughts on how we can go forward in a constructive fashion. What can the EU do to assist us to help the Burmese people? What is the United States of America and its Government doing to ensure that we can address these issues together? What are the Burmese Government doing to protect Christians and other minority groups in Burma? What steps can be taken to ensure that Burma complies with international standards of human rights?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): It might help if I point out that a considerable amount of time is available to the two Front-Bench spokesmen. They are not obliged to use it all, because there is a provision for me to suspend the sitting until 11 o'clock if we happen to finish early. It is their decision, not mine, whether to use the time.

10.17 am

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Howarth, for calling me to speak. As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I thank the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) for securing this debate today. Although it is undeniable that Burma has made considerable progress in recent years, many Burmese civil society representatives who I have met have made the point that the hon. Gentleman made. That point is that in some ways the narrative has been established that there has been so much progress in Burma—it is moving towards democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest and elected to Parliament, and, I think, 42 of the 43 seats in by-elections were won by her party—that everything is well and good in Burma. However, people have expressed their anxiety to me that that narrative has allowed some of the real concerns that have been highlighted today to be overshadowed by it, almost to the extent that there is a degree of complacency about Burma's progress. Obviously, we have to be vigilant that that is not the case.

We have discussed the plight of the Rohingya on several occasions in the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) has had to leave to attend another meeting, but she and my hon. Friends the Members for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) and for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) have a particular interest in this topic, mainly because their constituents have raised it with them, as was the case with the hon. Member for Bradford East. Sadly, however, there is little sense that much has changed since we started talking about this issue.

Since the outbreak of inter-communal violence two years ago, hundreds of people have lost their lives, as we have heard, while 140,000 internally displaced persons are living in camps, where their freedom of movement is restricted.

Following a visit to Burma earlier this month, the UN deputy humanitarian chief described conditions in one camp as

“appalling, with wholly inadequate access to basic services including health, education, water and sanitation”.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East quoted, she witnessed

“a level of human suffering in IDP camps that I have personally never seen before”.

We have also heard that aid workers came under attack in March. It is not just the local community that is impeding the efforts of aid workers; the Burmese Government suspended Médecins sans Frontières' work in a number of states and were alleging bias towards the Rohingya community.

Such is Burma's rejection of the Rohingyas that they are commonly referred to as Bengalis and, as we heard, there are disputed reports that UNICEF had to apologise for using the word “Rohingya”. The Government have yet to bring the perpetrators of the attacks on NGOs and the UN to justice and aid workers continue to put their own safety at risk.

Questions have been raised about whether the treatment of the Rohingya and the systematic denial of basic rights amount to genocide. Human Rights Watch has previously warned of ethnic cleansing in Rakhine state and the UN special rapporteur on the human rights situation in Burma voiced his alarm at the deteriorating crisis, warning that,

“recent developments in Rakhine state are the latest in a long history of discrimination and persecution against the Rohingya community which could amount to crimes against humanity”.

These are allegations of the utmost severity, yet the gravity of the situation does not seem to be matched by the response from President Thein Sein and it is not matched by the international community's response, which lacks urgency. Concern has been expressed, but expression of concern is simply not enough to deal with the situation.

Our concerns are, of course, not only confined to Rakhine state. The Kachin conflict has been ongoing for three years after the breakdown of the 17-year ceasefire, and there are continuing troubles in northern Shan state. The UN special rapporteur estimates there are 100,000 internally displaced persons in Kachin and Shan, and reported to the Human Rights Council in March allegations of sexual violence against Kachin women and the arbitrary detention and torture of young Kachin men. He continues to receive allegations of

“serious human rights violations accompanying military offensives” in those areas, including reports that more than 100 women and girls have been raped by army soldiers since 2010; 47 cases of gang rape; and 28 women dying from their injuries.

Between March and October 2011 alone, the Women's League of Burma documented 81 rapes in six months in Kachin and Shan states. The Minister will know that there are great difficulties documenting such atrocious crimes, not least because many victims or witnesses have been intimidated into silence by the army, so the real figures may well be much higher. The Kachin Women's Association Thailand looked at 34 cases of rape in the Kachin conflict between just June and August 2011 and found that 44% of the victims were killed by their rapists. Such attacks have been perpetrated

with impunity, as we have heard. Ethnic women's organisations are concerned that President Thein Sein's Administration is reluctant to work with women's groups to stem the sexual violence, while the Burmese constitution protects military officers, who can only be tried in military courts. It is difficult to achieve prosecutions either in the usual criminal courts or the military courts.

Women's organisations have also emphasised to me how land grabs, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned, are increasingly a concern in Shan state. It is not only the military who are responsible. If the military seize land in an area, the rate of sexual violence increases, too; it seems to accompany their presence. Mining companies are also responsible. Burma seeks to open its country and economy to overseas businesses, which the UK Government have been keen to support. I will return to that in a bit more detail later. As mining companies come in, there is a real issue—as we have seen in so many other developing countries—with land being confiscated from the people who have sustained a living from it for many years.

It is known that Thailand wishes to return refugees from the Thai-Burma border. It returned 1,300 Rohingya refugees last year. I understand that, with the military coup in Thailand and the new regime there, this demand for refugees to be returned and the lack of consideration for refugees is exacerbated. China has returned refugees, too. The continuing conflict and difficulties in providing humanitarian assistance mean that it is by no means safe to return. It is no longer clear where the refugees would return to, given what I have just said about land grabs: the land belonging to the IDPs has been confiscated.

It had been hoped that this year's census could provide a breakthrough in upholding the rights of ethnic minorities. DFID contributed £10 million for the census, as we heard, making the UK the leading donor, among contributions from the UN and other states, which obviously puts the onus on us to ensure that the census is conducted fairly and properly. The Burma Campaign was among those to warn that Burma was not ready for its first official census in 30 years, highlighting ethnic groups' concerns that it could exacerbate inter and intra-communal tensions. It has also been reported that 23 civil society groups wrote to the parliamentary Speaker to ask for the census to be postponed, amid heightened tensions and objections to the categorisation of ethnic groups and sub-groups.

It was notable that the census did not use the preferred names of the ethnic groups themselves and was only produced in Burmese, except for some English copies for foreigners. So from the outset it was not an inclusive process that recognised and respected the language and heritage of Burma's many ethnic groups. The UN special rapporteur observed that,

“the Government has approached the census without sufficient or meaningful consultation with all affected communities”.

As we have heard, the UK received assurances that the Rohingya would be able to self-identify, but Burma's Government failed to honour that commitment. As the UN special rapporteur highlighted, the decision to prevent self-identification

“is not in compliance with international human rights standards”.

I understand that the FCO subsequently summoned the ambassador, but it is not clear whether any conditions were attached to UK funding for the census or what

precautions were taken by DFID and the FCO to reduce the likelihood of further violence caused by publication.

As I have said, I have on a few occasions met women from ethnic minority groups in Burma, most recently meeting women who visited for the summit on ending sexual violence in conflict. I congratulate those who participated in that initiative and, in particular, I congratulate the Foreign Secretary on his work. When I met those women we talked, obviously, about sexual violence, particularly in respect of ethnic minority women in Burma. They told me that there are no specific legal protections for women and children, most particularly in the ethnic and rural areas; that Burma's rape law is based on a penal code from the 19th century and it is, for example, legal for a man to rape his wife; and that domestic violence is not taken seriously.

The thing that struck me was that, right through the chain of trying to take action against sexual violence, there are obstacles in the way. It is partly to do with a culture that treats domestic violence and attacks on women as acceptable. But the police officers are all male, so when investigating rapes and talking to victims, that is obviously a problem. There is little in the way of rape support services and certainly no official rape support services; it is difficult to obtain a prosecution; victims are intimidated, as hon. Members have said; and prosecutions against military officers have to go through the military courts. At every step there are problems achieving prosecutions.

One outcome of the recent summit was that the Foreign Secretary said that prosecutions have to be the way forward, but it is much easier to say things than achieve them, and so much needs to be tackled. I urge the Government to consider working specifically with women's groups, particularly from the ethnic minority communities in Burma, to see how we can address some of these issues.

Women have fewer than 5% of the seats in Parliament. That is exacerbated by the fact that 25% of the seats are reserved for the military, although there are now two female representatives in the military section. Women are even more under-represented in the Government. The Global Justice Center cites Burma as an example of the failure of the UN resolutions on women, peace and security and there are particular concerns that women are not involved in the talks to end the ethnic conflicts. I urge the Minister to talk to colleagues in DFID about what further work can be done on capacity building with women's groups.

It is encouraging that the President has now agreed to sign the declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict, but, as I have said, that can only be the start of the process. The women I met who had been to the summit displayed a degree of scepticism, saying, “It is good that we have got this far, but it shouldn't just be about the summit. The action has to be matched by words and a detailed plan for implementation.”

I shall, as the hon. Member for Strangford and my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East did, mention the role of the Ministry of Defence and the British Army in offering training to the Burmese military. This gives the UK a certain degree of leverage, as does the aid funding that we have put towards the census and other programmes. The UK needs to use that leverage to challenge the constitutional role of the military—as

[Kerry McCarthy]

I have said, it has 25% of the seats in the Burmese Parliament—and, more specifically, the human rights violations, sexual violence and land grabs for which the military are responsible, as well as to question the culture of impunity. Very few military officers have been prosecuted.

Finally, it is important to highlight other recent worrying developments, including the President's reported support for laws preventing inter-religious marriage and religious conversion. Those would constitute serious breaches of international human rights, which I trust the Foreign Office is discussing with its Burmese counterpart. Human Rights Watch has reported that the electoral commission has tried to intimidate Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, and to restrict comments on military and constitutional reform, while Amnesty International has cited the recent arrests of human rights defenders and new prisoners of conscience in detention.

The Government's cross-departmental paper "UK Activities in Burma" focuses on encouraging responsible investment in Burma. It is welcome that Burma is opening its doors to foreign investment, and there is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations free trade agreement as well. That is important and needed, but efforts to promote the GREAT Britain campaign, run by the Foreign Office, must not overshadow work to promote democracy and human rights in Burma. Last September, the Government published their business and human rights action plan, and I hope the Foreign Office is ensuring that British businesses are aware of the human rights situation in Burma and, in particular, the need to respect land rights when they seek to invest in that country.

"UK Activities in Burma" states:

"We are well positioned to have a positive impact in Burma."

I urge the Foreign Office to use that position to push for the constitutional reforms that Burma needs for free, fair and inclusive elections next year, including the removal of the barrier to Aung San Suu Kyi perhaps taking on the mantle of President; for basic political and human rights to be respected; for the opening of a country office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights; and for an end to the conflict. I realise I have focused on the negative; I am not underestimating how far Burma has come—the progress is welcome—but it is a grave danger to underestimate how much further the country still has to go.

10.32 am

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Hugh Robertson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) on securing this debate on an important issue. Having said that, I start by apologising to him, because I do not have ministerial responsibility for Burma. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), holds that responsibility, and he is travelling. I am merely standing in for him. I have had a crash course in Burmese politics overnight.

One of the things that has struck me in listening to this debate—there have been extremely good contributions on all sides—is that there is a classic Foreign Office dilemma here. I think everyone would agree that the country is in transition. There is therefore a very difficult judgment on whether to stand off it and criticise it or get involved in it and try to influence and affect that change. Doing that, however, can open one up to many of the criticisms that are levelled at the UK Government—that we take too rose-tinted a view of the situation or that we are not tough enough. These are complicated diplomatic matters, and I absolutely understand many of the concerns that have been expressed. I will try to pick them up and answer them.

It is fair to say—I think everyone has acknowledged this—that the last three years in Burma have been a period of remarkable change. The country is undertaking an extraordinarily complex transition. It had an authoritarian military regime and is trying to move to a system of democratic government. The economy was centrally directed and, as the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out, is moving to be market-oriented—hence the Foreign Office guidelines. The country has come out of literally decades of conflict, and the good news is that there is peace in much of the country. As the hon. Member for Bradford East said, more than 1,000 political prisoners have been released and there is greater freedom of expression, but neither of those is in itself enough. The judgment is that the 2012 by-elections were credible, but there is clearly an awful lot more to do. The initial ceasefire agreements that have been signed between the Burmese Government and 10 of the 11 major armed groups appear to be holding.

I can sense that some will say that that is typical of the Foreign Office's complacent approach, but it absolutely is not. Let me recognise at the outset that serious challenges remain. There are political prisoners who are still in jail and more activists have been detained in 2014 as repressive laws have failed to be amended in line with international standards. Small-scale conflict continues in many ethnic areas and there are worrying reports of incidences of sexual violence, which all Members have highlighted. The UN and other agencies struggle to gain unhindered humanitarian access to Rakhine state, where the humanitarian and political situation remains deeply concerning. I would not for a moment pretend that everything is rosy in this garden, and I would not want people to think that we have a rose-tinted view of the matter. We really do not; we absolutely recognise many of the issues that have been highlighted this morning.

There is a view, which I understand, having spent last night looking into this in some depth, that the parliamentary elections in 2015 are the watershed moment for Burma's transition. It is absolutely incumbent on us here to try to create the conditions for credible elections to take place that involve all the minorities in Burma. I hope that will enable the Burmese people to take part in a democratic process where all their views count. We will be doing everything we can to build and reinforce Burma's electoral network.

Before I talk about Rakhine, I will try to answer the various questions that the hon. Member for Bradford East and others asked. He first asked me about the Government's action plan. It might help if I try to

address his criticism that the UK's approach to Burma has been too soft. We have consistently raised the importance of the reform process and human rights at the highest level. It was at the top of the agenda at the Prime Minister's meeting with the Burmese President last year, and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon has consistently raised his concerns directly with the Burmese Government, including during his most recent visit to Burma in January. During that visit, he met separately with leaders of the Rohingya and Rakhine. The Foreign Secretary raised our concerns again in a call with his Burmese counterpart. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon did so again with the Burmese deputy Foreign Minister as recently as 12 June. As the hon. Member for Bristol East said, the Burmese ambassador—this happens relatively unusually—was summoned to the Foreign Office so that we could express our concern about the conditions in Rakhine state. I hope that gives Members confidence. I cannot think of a country in the portfolio that I directly look after where there has been that level of pressure. It is unusual, and I hope it gives Members some comfort that we are taking the matter seriously.

The hon. Member for Bradford East asked about the Burmese Government's action plan. We have constantly called on them to share that action plan with us, and I regret that they have not yet done so. It is therefore difficult to form an impression of exactly what is in it. He raised the question of war crimes, and the hon. Member for Bristol East generously paid tribute to the Foreign Secretary's initiative on that. Not in every area are the answers to many of these problems easy, but at least with crimes of sexual violence we have had the largest global initiative. The hon. Member for Bristol East was good enough to say that she had met the Burmese delegation that came over. I cannot remember, but I think some 140 Governments were represented in that initiative in some way, shape or form and enormous numbers of people have signed the declaration that came out of it. We are all clear that signing the declaration is one thing, but action and delivery are the crucial test.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is right that it is all very well to make verbal commitments, which are a good start, but the message has to get to perpetrators at every level—lower ranks, sergeants, officers—so that it filters down. Anyone who commits a crime must know that they will be accountable under law, which is not currently happening.

Hugh Robertson: The hon. Gentleman, who has extensive military experience, is absolutely right. He would have been interested to hear the absolutely spellbinding speech made by the Australian Chief of the Defence Force on exactly that issue and what needs to happen to ensure success. All those who were there for that speech heard that message loud and clear. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right—I would not say anything else—that making it happen will be the real challenge. It is an extraordinary achievement to have signed the declaration, but that is the easy part and making it happen is different.

The hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned the census, which the British Government, along with other members of the international community, did indeed help to fund because we believed that it would be crucial

to the development of Burma as a whole. Reports from international observers suggest that, with the exclusion of Rakhine and parts of Kachin, the process was largely carried out effectively. The Government are deeply disappointed, however, that the Burmese Government simply reneged on their long-standing assurance that all individuals would have the right to self-identify their ethnic origin. That remains a point of dispute and a disappointment, which leads to a judgment of whether it was right to support the census. Looking at Burma as a whole, it is a better country for the delivery of that census, but the decision to prevent the Rohingya from self-identifying is a straightforward contravention of international norms.

The hon. Member for Bradford East asked whether I felt "snubbed". I am not aware that the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, who was there, did feel snubbed.

Political prisoners are a matter of great concern that was key during the Prime Minister's discussions. We have urged both the Burmese Government and Parliament to repeal all existing laws that allow the Government to imprison political prisoners, and all laws that are not in line with democratic standards. We will continue to put pressure on the Government to ensure that democratic activists are able freely to voice their opinions without fear of arrest.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East asked about military engagement, which was also raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The focus of our defence engagement is on democratic accountability, international law and human rights. Aung San Suu Kyi has made it clear that the Burmese military, for better or worse, is a core political force in Burma and will be key to the process of political reform, which again returns to the judgment of whether to stand back and criticise the reform if it does not succeed or to engage with it and try to affect the situation for the better. We have tried to do the latter and will continue to use our leverage over the Burmese military to get them to tackle issues, such as child soldiers, and to bring sexual violence to an end once and for all. I should just add that the EU arms embargo on Burma remains in place following the majority of sanctions being lifted in April 2013.

I was asked about an international investigation. It is absolutely our view that all allegations of human rights abuses must be dealt with immediately through a clear, independent, transparent investigation and, crucially, a prosecutorial process that meets international standards. We have made and will continue to make those concerns clear to the Burmese Government. It is absolutely the Government's approach to seek an end to those violations and to prevent their further escalation irrespective of whether they fit the definition of specific international crimes.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not being here at the beginning of the debate. We should pay tribute to our Speaker, who has visited Burma on several occasions and has helped to draw attention to the problems. Nearly 30 years ago when I was a Minister, I went out to meet Sir Nicholas Fenn, the then ambassador, who made the claim, which the Minister kindly repeated today, that to be engaged with

[*Sir Peter Bottomley*]

people is better than to be disengaged. We should pay tribute to the progress that has been made and make it clear that the Burmese people will benefit if Burma pays attention to international norms and applies them to allow its people, including the Rohingya, to prosper in their own country.

Hugh Robertson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention, with which I entirely agree. The longer I spend in the Foreign Office, the more I begin to realise that engagement with countries that do not accept our norms and standards is uncomfortable; there is no doubt about that, but I am absolutely convinced that engagement is the correct approach. If we fail to engage and simply stand off from a problem and criticise, we will lose both moral authority and the authority to try to influence. Sometimes, even when engagement does occur, influence does not come from making a lot of noise. Change is often effected by years of quiet diplomacy and initiatives such as those mentioned by the hon. Gentleman and those undertaken by the Speaker and others, which play an important role.

Mr Ward: Most people would understand the dilemma to which the Minister refers. The frustration, particularly for the Rohingya, is that when they say that things are going badly for them in Rakhine, they are constantly told that things are going well elsewhere. They say, “Violations and murders are taking place,” but the response is, “Yes, but things are going well over here. Be patient.” It is difficult to be patient when crimes are being committed against a number of ethnic minority groups. The continual message is, “Put up with it, because we are making progress in so many other areas.”

Hugh Robertson: I entirely understand that frustration. The hope is that a policy of constructive engagement will help to move the whole piece along. I acknowledge that the situation may move much more slowly than we all would want, and that those who are affected will be annoyed and frustrated by the pace of change and will wonder why more is not happening internationally. I understand all the frustrations that my hon. Friend properly articulates, but I am not saying that progress is fast enough; it is far too slow and the situation has not moved at the desired pace.

I hope that those who arrive at my hon. Friend’s surgery will be given some comfort to know that the matter is being raised in a balanced and sensible way in today’s debate. I hope that he will be able to point to the Government’s actions and the assurances that I have been able to give him, and to the fact that we recognise that a huge amount of work still needs to be done. In a sense, this covers the last point in his excellent speech, which was about the sense of disempowerment and frustration at the pace of progress. I understand and acknowledge that the affected must feel that way, but I hope that I have provided some assurance that we are taking the matter seriously. If we consider the list of responses, including those from the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State, and the summoning of the Burmese ambassador, that is quite a catalogue of actions, and I do not think many other countries receive such a high level of diplomatic attention.

The hon. Member for Strangford raised, as he always does, the plight of Christians, with his customary attention to detail. He also mentioned Kachin province. During his recent visit, the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, made a particular point of asking to see members of the Kachin Baptist Convention, which is the largest religious organisation in Kachin state, and he discussed a large range of issues with them. He raised our concerns about the Christian community and other human rights issues with senior members of the Burmese Government. He made a particular point of calling for religious tolerance and dialogue during his speech at the British Council. Earlier this month, we also welcomed Archbishop Bo to London for the preventing sexual violence initiative summit.

As I have told the hon. Member for Strangford in our many conversations about my area of responsibility, the Foreign Office gets an enormous number of letters on the treatment of Christians around the world. We take the issue seriously, and it is definitely moving up the agenda. He knows from debates we have had—indeed, we had one yesterday—that I have particularly prioritised the issue. I am off to Lebanon on Sunday, and I will make a particular point of seeing members of the Christian community on Monday. This really is something that we take very seriously.

We have talked a bit about the preventing sexual violence initiative summit. As a specific result of the summit, funding of £300,000 is earmarked for projects in Burma offering greater support and protection to survivors of sexual violence.

In her speech, the hon. Member for Bristol East highlighted many of the issues that have been raised this morning. She said there is a danger that the narrative of progress will breed complacency. I hope my response has given her some assurance that that is absolutely not the case, and that we realise the problems we face.

The hon. Lady talked briefly about the intermarriage laws. The issue is very much on the radar, and she is right to highlight it. We are concerned about the possible implications of the proposed legislation, and we are following the ongoing discussions through the embassy in Rangoon. We have already raised our concerns with the Burmese Government, and we want to make sure all draft laws are in line with international standards. We want to make it absolutely clear that respect for the rights of women and for the freedom of religion and belief must be guaranteed. To give the hon. Lady further reassurance, let me add that the EU also raised concerns at the recent EU-Burma human rights dialogue.

I hope I have covered the various points that have been raised. Let me finish by returning to where I started half an hour or so ago and thanking the hon. Member for Bradford East for raising this issue; he and other Members are absolutely right to raise it. The Government know that much remains to be done and that progress is not guaranteed; there is an enormous way to go. However, it is worth reflecting—this goes back to a remark made earlier—on a comment made by the International Development Committee in March:

“Progress will not happen by standing back, adopting a cynical attitude to change.”

It really is important to have a constructive agenda if we are to try to force the changes we all want to see. The best way to help achieve our vision of a democratic Burma that enshrines freedom and human rights for all

is to engage with the parties there. I understand that that will be a frustrating process, and that progress may well not seem quick enough for representatives of minority groups. However, engagement is the key to helping Burma embed reform and to encouraging further meaningful progress towards peaceful and democratic government.

10.53 am

Sitting suspended.

History Curriculum: North American War, 1812-14

10.59 am

Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Until June last year I had no knowledge of the North American war of 1812-14. Britain's education establishment has throughout my lifetime and—I am under no illusion—probably for the entire period of state education in the UK, from the latter decades of the 19th century, airbrushed that war from the history curriculum. Why? I do not have the answer, but perhaps the Minister has.

Totalitarian states are notorious for rewriting history, but they are not the only ones that do so. I am appalled that Britain is equally guilty on this occasion of not telling people about all their nation's history—choosing to ignore parts of it. I hope that this morning's debate will lead to the putting right of an unacceptable omission in the school history curriculum. I was aware that at some point in history British forces had burned down the White House, but I did not know when or in what context. I did not know either that among those who probably torched that and other public buildings in Washington were soldiers from the 1st Battalion the 44th East Essex Regiment, which had spent the previous years fighting the French in the Mediterranean. I wonder if any of those troops were from Colchester. That will require more research.

History taught in schools includes the Romans and Saxons, 1066 and the Norman conquest. It features the battle of Trafalgar of 1805 and the battle of Waterloo in 1815—two great British victories in the European conflicts against France and Napoleon. Those British triumphs changed the history of Europe; of that there is no doubt. The North American war of 1812-14 also changed the course of history—Britain's and that of the USA. Had the fledgling United States of America, which had been in existence some 30 years, following its war of independence from Britain, been successful in its wish to annex British North America—today's Canada—and had it not been thwarted by the British Army and Navy, ably supported by loyalists who wished to live under the British Crown rather than a US President, that would have changed the history of the world.

Why, then, has Britain ignored the war? It is clearly a forgotten war when it comes to the school history curriculum. It is buried away somewhere and certainly not given equal prominence with the battles of Trafalgar and Waterloo on either side of it. It was not taught to me at either primary or secondary school. Quizzing my two eldest grandsons at the weekend, I found that neither of them knew of the war, although the one who is at secondary school had heard of Trafalgar and Waterloo. Those were British victories, but so, I would say, was the North American war. In my book, the USA was the aggressor when it invaded British North America, and if it had been victorious, there would not have been a Canada. Arguably, the 10 provinces and three territories of that great Commonwealth Dominion would today be states of the United States of America.

Former American President Thomas Jefferson boasted that conquering what we today know as Canada would be a "mere matter of marching." His successor as President, James Madison, declared war on Britain in June 1812. The Upper Canadian capital of York—now

[*Sir Bob Russell*]

Toronto—was burned by the Americans in the spring of 1813. Parliament buildings were reduced to ashes. At the time of the 1812-14 war, that part of the continent included two British colonies: Upper Canada and Lower Canada. They united in 1841 to become the British Province of Canada, and upon confederation in 1867 with Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, following the passage of the British North America Act 1867, became the Dominion of Canada. Today the country is known as Canada.

As we prepare for the centenary in August of the first world war of 1914 to 1918, it is worth reflecting that in the same month 100 years previously, British troops invaded Washington. It was the last time the mainland of the USA had unwelcome foreign troops on its soil. Canada played a major role in the first world war from the outset. What if it had not existed as a country loyal to the British Crown, as would have been the case had the outcome of the North American war been different? The course of the war would have been different without the Canadians. It was to be another three years before the USA entered the war, in 1917.

What of the second world war? A quarter of the planes, pilots and air crew came from Canada and Britain's battles in the skies would almost certainly have had a different outcome—it could be argued that there would have been defeat—if it were not for the bravery of the Canadians, long before America joined the second world war. We have just commemorated the 70th anniversary of the D-day Normandy invasion. Canadian troops bravely fought there at Juno beach. Will the Minister confirm that the two world wars are part of the history curriculum? As a result of ignoring, in the history curriculum, the North American war of 1812-14 and its outcome, which led to the emergence of what is now Canada, our pupils and students are not being taught why there were Canadians fighting against the Kaiser and Hitler in the two world wars.

I first became aware of the North American war of 1812-14 when in June last year I had the good fortune to accompany the Colchester military wives choir to Hamilton, Ontario, where they sang at the Canadian international military tattoo. It was the first of our now 80 or so military wives choirs to sing overseas. Between the various acts, there were cameo scenes re-enacting various clashes that occurred in 1813 between loyalist forces in British North America and those from the then 15 states of the USA. The same was scheduled for this year's tattoo in respect of 1814. That got me interested in finding out more and asking our Canadian hosts about a war of which I was ashamed to admit I had no knowledge. I left Canada better informed.

That summer, by coincidence, a fantastic book was published, entitled "When Britain Burned the White House: The 1814 Invasion of Washington". I recommend it to all who have an interest in our nation's history. The author is Peter Snow, the highly respected journalist, author and broadcaster, perhaps best known for presenting BBC's "Newsnight" from 1980 to 1997 and for being an indispensable part of election nights. The first words are:

"In August 1814 the United States Army is defeated in battle by an invading force just outside Washington DC. The US President and his wife have just enough time to pack their

belongings and escape from the White House before the enemy enters. The invaders tuck into dinner they find still on the dining room table and then set fire to the place."

Mr Snow observes that 200 years ago Britain was America's bitterest enemy. Today, the two countries are close friends. He describes the invasion of Washington DC as

"this unparalleled moment in American history"

and remarks on

"its far-reaching consequences for both sides—and Britain's and America's decision never again to fight each other."

The events in question were no small retaliatory incursion into the US by Britain. British forces—soldiers and sailors—totalled 4,500, including many who had fought Napoleon. The Royal Navy had some 50 ships in battle readiness. In the book's introduction, Mr Snow states:

"The British invasion of Washington is not an episode in their history that Americans recall with much relish—any more than the French do the Battle of Waterloo. In Britain, very few people know it happened or even that there was a so called War of 1812."

That confirms what I mentioned earlier in my speech: that the war does not feature in the history curriculum in our country. That wrong needs to be put right. It is not as if the war was a brief affair. It was spread over three years, culminating officially in a treaty on Christmas eve 1814, but with a further battle on 8 January 1815 because news of the treaty, signed in Europe, was not known to either side. Mr Snow says of the war:

"It was actually one of the defining moments in the history of both countries"

and describes Britain and the USA as

"now inseparable friends, then bitter enemies."

The White House bears the burn marks to this day and, on visits to it, former Prime Minister Tony Blair and our current Prime Minister—in March 2012—referred to the historic event of 24 August 1814 when British forces set fire to the White House. As an historic footnote I will mention that the White House was staffed largely by slaves.

Mr Snow's book concentrates on the final three weeks of the war, the scene for which he summarises as follows:

"The fierce struggle of August and September 1814 was one of the last bouts of fighting between two nations that later became the closest of allies. It defines the strengths and weaknesses of each: the British empire—overstretched and arrogant, but fielding a navy and army of experienced veterans who could sweep all before them; the young American republic, struggling with internal divisions but infused with a freshness of spirit and patriotic fervour. And underlying this often bloody conflict is the grudging respect that often marked dealings between the two sides. This was after all a battle between two supposedly civilised nations who spoke the same language, shared family ties and were neither of them bent on the other's outright ruin."

Why is such an historic point in our nation's history not taught as part of the history curriculum? If it is okay for a single battle in 1805 and another single battle in 1815 to be on the curriculum, why not the entire North American war of 1812-14?

As perhaps we might expect, the Americans claim that they won the war—well, they would, wouldn't they? The truth, of course, is that if they had won and taken over British North America—a vast area of the continent—as states of the USA, there would not today be a proud, independent Commonwealth country called Canada, with Queen Elizabeth II as its Head of State.

But as Peter Snow writes, the events of 14 September 1814, with the British decision neither to continue the naval bombardment at Baltimore nor to proceed to put troops ashore, were interpreted by the Americans

“as a glorious triumph...transformed by American myth-makers into a resounding victory that would become an emblematic moment in US history.”

After Baltimore, Britain and the USA sought to bring the war to a close. Back in Britain, the cost of a foreign war and severe economic pressures at home helped to convince the Government of Lord Liverpool to seek a peace settlement, and the treaty of Ghent was signed on 24 December 1814. Mr Snow observes:

“Both sides abandoned territorial ambitions. Britain renounced any claim to places like Maine, America scrapped any claim to Canada.”

Sadly, it took a month for news to cross the Atlantic. Not knowing of the signing of the treaty in Europe, only two weeks later the armies of Britain and America faced each other just outside New Orleans. The battle that followed was a resounding victory for the Americans, but even if Britain had won, it would have counted for nothing. The compelling words of Mr Snow explain why:

“New Orleans was an utterly futile waste of life: even if the British had triumphed, captured the city and plunged deep into Louisiana, they’d have had to hand every inch of it back under the peace treaty signed a fortnight earlier 5,000 miles away.”

I offer a brief footnote on the war of 1812-14 and Anglo-American relations. While researching my speech, I learned that the words of the national anthem of the United States of America, “The Star-Spangled Banner”, come from a poem written about a battle towards the end of the war. American Francis Scott Key wrote “The Defence of Fort McHenry” after he witnessed British forces bombarding the American fort at Baltimore.

Shortly afterwards, the poem was set to existing music that had been written in Britain. Thus, it is British music that the Americans took for their national anthem. The music was written for words originally known as “The Anacreontic Song”, later as “To Anacreon in Heaven”, which was the official song of the Anacreontic Society, an 18th century gentlemen’s club in London named after the 6th century BC Greek poet Anacreon. The music is attributed to the composer John Stafford Smith, from Gloucester—it is believed he composed it in the mid-1760s while still a teenager—and was first published by *The Vocal Magazine* in London in 1778.

For a good 100 years “The Star-Spangled Banner” was a well-known patriotic song throughout the United States. It was officially designated as the US national anthem on 3 March 1931. Mr Howarth, when you next see Americans, hand on heart, singing their national anthem, give a smile in the knowledge that it is British music that accompanies their patriotism.

To conclude—and to set this matter in the context of teaching British values—the war of 1812-14 was as important to Britain as the battles of Trafalgar and of Waterloo in 1805 and 1815 respectively. It should thus be given equal prominence in the history curriculum.

11.14 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Mr Edward Timpson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

“Just imagine foreign troops invading London, defeating the British Army in Hyde Park then marching on Buckingham Palace.

The Queen and Prince Philip order their most precious belongings piled into a lorry and are whisked off to safety before the enemy break in and burn the place down.

Unthinkable? Well, that’s just what the British did to the White House in Washington nearly 200 years ago.

What’s more, in the expectation that their army would beat the British, the American President and his wife had ordered a slap-up meal prepared for 40 guests. They’d been counting on celebrating a victory. Instead they found themselves fleeing for their lives.

When the British invaders in their blood-stained uniforms burst into the White House, they found the table elegantly laid for dinner, meat roasting on spits and the President’s best wine on the sideboard.

Delightedly, they tucked in. One young officer said of the President’s Madeira wine: ‘Never was nectar more grateful to the palates of the gods...’ Afterwards he nipped up to the President’s bedroom and swapped his sweaty tunic for a smartly-ironed presidential shirt.”

Those fine words are not mine, but my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Sir Bob Russell) may recognise them, as they are also by that great man Peter Snow—not from his book, “When Britain Burned the White House: the 1814 Invasion of Washington”, but from an article that he wrote, I suspect to support the book’s publication. What those words do is what my hon. Friend has done this morning: they bring to life that period of Anglo-American relations—if we can say they were relations at that time.

I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on raising awareness of the North American war of 1812-14, which included that extraordinary event, and of its impact on national and international history, as well as its deep relevance to Essex, which has its own rich heritage. I am sorry that there were not more hon. Members present to absorb the detail of the history lesson available for free to all parliamentarians this morning.

The date 1812 will make many of us think of Tchaikovsky’s overture, or perhaps of other British events at that time. But my hon. Friend made a clear case for ensuring that all those periods of British history that reflect directly on our current place in the modern world are more readily known to many more members of our society.

The Government believe that, as part of a broad and balanced education, all young people should acquire a firm grasp of the history of the country in which they live, and how different events and periods relate to each other. The history curriculum that we published in September 2013 sets out within a clear chronological framework the core knowledge that will enable pupils to know and understand the history of Britain from its first settlers to the development of the institutions that help to define our national life today, as well as understand how that history relates to key events in world history. In doing that, however, we have given teachers more freedom over the detailed content that should be taught.

Of course, there will always be a wide range of views about what pupils should be taught in history lessons. So that everyone could have their say on that, we held a public consultation on the content of the history programmes of study, along with the other reforms that we proposed for the national curriculum. The consultation ran between February and April 2013 and attracted over 17,000 submissions.

[*Mr Edward Timpson*]

The majority of the new national curriculum will come into force from September 2014, so schools will have had a year to prepare to teach it. To help the transition to the new curriculum, and to give schools more flexibility over how they prepare for it, we have disapplied the majority of the outgoing national curriculum for the academic year 2013-14. Disapplication means that schools still have to teach the subjects of the national curriculum, but they do not have to follow the programmes of study or attainment targets.

The new history curriculum has been well received, and is supported by some of our country's most eminent historians, including Jeremy Black, David Abulafia, Robert Tombs and Simon Sebag Montefiore—Peter Snow is not on my list, so I cannot give his view, but he will clearly be taking a keen interest in the matter. Indeed, Professor Jeremy Black of the university of Exeter has said:

“You can't debate our sense of national identity and our national interest unless you understand our national history. This curriculum puts British history first as well, which I think is right. It kicks out the woolly empathy in favour of giving children more of a sense of where we are at that moment between the past and the future.”

Professor Robert Tombs of St John's college, Cambridge, has said that

“the new History curriculum provides a new coherence for the study of history. It properly focuses on British history, while including a breadth of topics from other parts of the world. It is sufficiently flexible to include local studies, and it gives the opportunity to draw together material over a long period to illustrate change over time.”

Sir Bob Russell: Pupils are being taught about the two great European battles of 1805 and 1815, but those occurred while another war involving Britain was happening on the other side of the Atlantic. Surely that other war is part of the total story of the first 15 years of the 19th century.

Mr Timpson: One reason why we reviewed and changed many aspects of the national curriculum is that too often, particularly at primary school level, children were being taught about events without the context in which they took place. That emphasis has changed in the new curriculum and the great array of teaching talent we now have to teach history enables children to have deeper knowledge of the circumstances in which these events took place.

I commend my hon. Friend on his deep and passionate knowledge, albeit that he admitted today that it has been more recently acquired than he would have hoped. I am sure, Mr Howarth, that you grasped from my opening description of events that the 1812 war was a two-and-a-half-year military conflict between the United States of America and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, its North American colonies and its Indian allies. It was a wide global war, the outcome of which resolved many of the issues that remained from the American war of independence. The war was clearly of lasting significance and many historians argue that it was a defining moment in the establishment of distinct national identities for the United States and Canada, which my hon. Friend made great play of in his speech.

The war has particular resonance and interest in Colchester and Essex for the reasons my hon. Friend gave, not least because of the involvement of troops from the East Essex Regiment in the attack on Washington, and the occupation and burning down of the White House in 1814. August this year sees the 200th anniversary of that event, and I am sure there will be celebrations in Colchester.

Sir Bob Russell: I do not think there will be any celebrations, but I am hoping that there will be a commemoration.

Mr Timpson: We can argue about how we go about recognising such events. Sometimes they are termed a celebration of our deep history and heritage, but at the back of our mind we should always remember those who fell in battle and their sacrifice for our country.

My hon. Friend asked that the war be added to the history national curriculum, and that is at the centre of this debate. Our new curriculum sets out in a clear chronological framework the core knowledge that will enable pupils to understand the history of Britain from its first settlers to the development of the institutions that help to define our national life today. However, it does not set out every event, person or institution that pupils should be taught about, and there is flexibility for a range of different approaches. Indeed, there is much scope for schools to study the events of the 1812-14 war. Under the statutory requirement for schools to teach about ideas, political power, industry and empire under “Britain 1745-1901” at key stage 3, pupils may be taught about the American war of independence and the subsequent war of 1812-14. I trust that any teacher who can find the time will read *Hansard*, take that on board and consider it for September.

My hon. Friend asked whether the two world wars were included in the curriculum. They are included in the new history programmes of study and part of the statutory unit on challenges for “Britain, Europe and the wider world 1901 to the present day”. He will know that the Government are providing the opportunity for two students from state-funded schools to visit the first world war battlefields during the commemorative period.

One of the aims of the new curriculum is to allow pupils to gain historical perspective by placing their growing knowledge into different contexts and to understand the connections between local, regional, national and international history; between cultural, economic, military, political, religious and social history; and between short and long-term time scales. That is why the new curriculum also requires the study of history in a local context and suggests that that may be a study in depth linked to an area of national or international history that students may have covered.

For example, in my constituency, many schools teach their pupils about the battle of Nantwich on 25 January 1644, fought between the parliamentarians and the royalists. It was a turning point in the first English civil war. Every year on Holly Holy day, the Sealed Knot troops come to Nantwich in droves to re-enact the battle when the royalists under Lord Byron besieged the town but were overrun and destroyed by the parliamentarians led by Sir Thomas Fairfax—a victory that halted the royalists' advance and was a major blow to King Charles I. That should, of course, be taught in

the context of the wider ramifications of the English civil war, but it is a good example of how a local event may be enriching in education, particularly history, in our schools.

Similarly, the North American war and the significant role played by members of the East Essex Regiment is an excellent example of how Essex schools can explore the impact of people from their own local area on national and international history. Having had a history lesson from my hon. Friend, I have no doubt that he will be in great demand in his constituency to give up some of his time to go into schools, albeit as an unqualified teacher, to share the pearls of wisdom he has taken on board since June last year.

The issue is important because it touches on the very heart of what the Government are seeking to do: to give every child the best possible start in life. Education is essential to achieving that aim. I know that view is shared not just in the coalition, but across the House.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. Schools can and should look at it as part of a broader, balanced curriculum. Having had to research it for this debate, I have become more knowledgeable about and interested in the 1812-14 war. I hope that that will spur other hon. Members to go back to their constituencies and find out about local historical events, and use them as a catalyst. History is becoming more and more popular at GCSE, thanks in part to our EBacc performance measure, with an increase of more than 16% in the last year. I hope that more budding historians will want to take up the subject in future.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

British Values: Teaching

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): The sitting is resumed and we start with a very interesting debate on the teaching of British values.

Mr John Denham (Southampton, Itchen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone, particularly as you have rightly said that this is a very interesting debate. I hope that everyone will still feel that it is an interesting debate when I have finished speaking.

I am grateful for the chance to have this debate on teaching British values. I have been engaged in this issue for a long time and certainly at least since I became a Home Office Minister in 2001, but obviously I asked for today's debate following the Government's recent announcement that all schools will be required to promote British values. In the wake of that announcement and the issues in Birmingham that seem to have provoked it, media coverage has tended to be polarised between supporters of the Government's proposition and those who treat the whole idea of promoting British values with some derision or concern. I wanted this debate because I do not fit easily into either of those camps. I believe that nation building—the conscious attempt to create a strong cohesive society with a strong national story and shared values—is now a national imperative. It follows, for me, that schools should be in the business of nation building. I do not agree with those who have argued quite recently that talking about Britishness is really rather un-British. That includes, in fact, the Secretary of State for Education.

However, I have real concerns that the Government's approach is ill judged and may be counter-productive. It is of concern that within days the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister were taking diametrically opposed positions on this issue in the media. That rather suggests that both were more concerned about forthcoming elections than about the promotion of British values, but this issue is too important for the Government to handle it in such an unco-ordinated and disorganised way. I will end my remarks by making a few proposals for an approach that is more rounded and more constructive, but still designed to promote British values.

This is a critical moment. Three years ago in Munich, the Prime Minister ended support for what he called "state multiculturalism". He did not just say that multiculturalism was dead; he put nothing in its place, even though Britain at that time was continuing to experience rapid social and economic change with large-scale if unplanned immigration.

From the 1960s, Governments had done their best to make an increasingly diverse society work, tackling racism and discrimination, unfairness in public services and disadvantage in education. From 2011, for the first time in more than 50 years, we have had no clear state policy and no clear Government philosophy about how we are all to live together successfully. Of course today's problems do not start or end with this Government, but this was an unfortunate time to leave the field of play—to

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abandon attempts to set out how a strong and cohesive society could be built. There was a desultory little document on integration from the Department for Communities and Local Government—it was little more than a list of local examples of good practice—and that was it.

For all the strong bonds between people of different backgrounds that exist, not for decades has this country felt so ill at ease with itself and so uncertain about where it is going, so a new initiative to promote British values is significant. It may, in my view, be poorly designed, but rather than dismissing it, we should welcome any sign of renewed interest in how our country works in the future.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on putting in for and securing the debate. I represent the most diverse city in Europe. The ethnic minority population of Leicester has now passed 50%. Does he agree that British values may mean something different in Leicester from what they mean in Southampton, London or, for example, the Forest of Dean, and that we should take on board all those differences before we get to a position where we define what British values are?

Mr Denham: That is a very important suggestion. I think we have to find a way to find, actively and consciously, the common ground and the common story, and that includes Southampton, Leicester, the Forest of Dean and many other places. It is not enough to say that we should all just go on in our own ways in our different places; nor is it possible to say that British values will mean just one thing and that everyone has to agree exactly the same thing. I want to talk this afternoon about how we go through a process of finding what that common ground and common story is, so that rather than some people feeling that they are part of it and others feeling that they are not, everyone feels that they share in it.

I am clear about a few things. I believe that a diverse but sometimes divided Britain needs more than a hope and a prayer that we will all rub along together. Young people need a shared sense of our history and how we came to be sharing this land, and they need that in Southampton, the Forest of Dean and Leicester. They need to understand how our past has shaped our values and, crucially, they need the chance to debate and shape the values that they will share in the years to come.

Those who dismiss the whole idea of promoting strong national values are wrong. In the future, we need a conscious focus on nation building, and schools must play an important role. Multiculturalism has not, in my view, been the failure that some say. Promoting respect for difference and acceptance and tolerance for new communities has worked well and, in general, more successfully than in many other European countries that took a different path. However, in promoting respect for difference, multiculturalism failed to emphasise or develop what we hold and value in common. It was clearer about what new communities could expect from established communities than about what was expected from the new communities. The limits of what we could call value-neutral multiculturalism are clear. We need

more emphasis on what we share, while continuing to value our differences, so I argue that nation building, emphasising what we share as well as valuing difference, must now fill the gap where multiculturalism has been found wanting.

Some have argued in the past that we do not need to share that much. The Parekh report, about 15 years ago, reflected the idea that, provided that we all saw ourselves as citizens under the law or even as communities under the same law, not much else mattered. The Goldsmith report, “Citizenship: Our Common Bond”, was based on a similar, legal view of citizenship. Of course respect for the law is vital and our society would be stronger if everyone understood and respected the laws that currently exist to promote equality, freedom of speech and the right to vote, or to oppose discrimination, incitement and female genital mutilation, but saying that we are simply citizens under the law is not enough. That is just not how anyone feels about a real country. It is nation building that helps us to forge the common national story—the sense of shared identity alongside the many other national, faith, ethnic, cultural or local identities that we hold—and we need those things for a cohesive and successful society.

In 2001, I was a Home Office Minister. That summer, serious riots took place in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham. The conflict was between white working-class young people and young people, overwhelmingly British born, of Pakistani Kashmiri origin. I was asked to lead the response and I appointed a commission headed by Ted Cattle to look into what needed to be done. The Cattle report painted a depressing picture of communities that led “parallel lives”, never mixing or speaking and educated in separate schools. People enjoyed less interaction between communities than their parents had done, because the big factories where everyone worked together had been closed.

I want to refer to what that report said about citizenship and common values. Talking about parallel lives, the report concluded:

“In such a climate, there has been little attempt to develop clear values which focus on what it means to be a citizen of a...multi-racial Britain”.

The report went on to say:

“In order to develop some shared principles of citizenship and ensure ownership across the community, we propose that a well resourced national debate, heavily influenced by younger people, be conducted on an open and honest basis...The resulting principles of a new citizenship should be used to develop a more coherent approach to education, housing, regeneration, employment and other programmes.”

I cannot stress enough the importance of that emphasis on young people’s role, not just in being taught something, but in being able to shape their future and the values they wanted to share together.

Mr David Ward (Bradford East) (LD): This is like a journey back in time. I understand the link between the Cattle report, British values and bringing people together, but is it not the case that this debate has been prompted by what is taking place in schools? The bigger issue that we need to decide is what constitutes a secular education in this country and what limits that places on the activities of parents and governors in that school who probably want to run the school in a different way.

Mr Denham: I understand what the hon. Gentleman is saying. The issues that have arisen in Birmingham are important, and I will come to them in a moment. If the debate was simply about a few schools—the issues that we have seen in Birmingham are not common across the country—that would be an issue to deal with in those few schools. The Government's response has opened up a bigger debate about how we promote a national story and shared British values, which I think is important and has been neglected for too long. There has been an attempt not to deal with some very difficult issues.

I turn to the Cantle report; I am deliberately going back in time. The report did not meet with universal acclaim. Established racial equality organisations said that its diagnosis was the wrong one and that the problem was poverty and racism. Some Muslim organisations rejected any criticism of how communities had evolved. Liberal—that is, with a small l—voices, as now, rejected any idea of shared British values. Some felt, wrongly, that the problems arose only in a few places. Subsequently, public policy was diverted after the terrorism of 9/11 and 7/7. The riots took place before 9/11 and the report was published just afterwards, so although Cantle had some real influence, the big national debates about shared values that he talked about never took place.

One real legacy was the responsibility placed on all schools in 2005 to promote community cohesion, with Ofsted required to report on how well that was being carried out. That was probably much less ambitious than Cantle had wanted, but it was at least a start. Crucially, however, such work is difficult. Even though the Cantle report said:

“Schools should not be afraid to discuss difficult areas and the young people we met wanted to have this opportunity and should be given a safe environment in which to do so”,

the evidence was that most schools found that difficult. The Select Committee on Home Affairs has said that few teachers felt comfortable with dealing with issues related to terrorism or the wars that were fought in Iraq or Afghanistan. A review of diversity and citizenship in the curriculum found that few pupils had had experiences of talking about things that people in Britain share.

Today, some of those old issues still exist and new ones have arisen. Many schools have seen rapid social and demographic change, so classrooms contain students who have been part of that change and students who come from families who have been disconcerted by it. If our schools, particularly our secondary schools, cannot provide a safe space in which to discuss such issues, that does not mean that students will not talk about them; it just means that they will talk about them in isolation in their own separate groups and communities, and in dangerous places off and online.

Alok Sharma (Reading West) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is talking about creating a value system that we can all live by. As he knows, a few days ago the Government published a consultative report on independent school standards. They have talked about the fact that we should be promoting the fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs. Is that not exactly the sort of common value system that we can all unite around?

Mr Denham: I will come precisely to that point in due course. I hope that hon. Members in the Chamber will bear with me. I have been through the history, because it is important to understand that we have debated some of these things before. If we do not understand what went wrong in the past, we will not get it right in future. The key point I am trying to make is that unless we support schools and teachers to do such work, none of the regulations or the speeches we make will make any difference to anybody. As Sir Keith Ajegbo's review of diversity and citizenship reported, such work is not possible without support for teachers and the teaching methods that they need. He made this crucial point:

“In order for young people to explore how we live together in the UK today and to debate the values we share, it is important they consider issues that have shaped the development of UK society – and to understand them through the lens of history.”

Mr Andrew Smith (Oxford East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this important, timely and interesting debate. Following the earlier intervention, I put it to him—I do not say this tritely—that there is a problem in all this, because the right not to share some British values or some part of those values can, in itself, be argued to be a British value. The very act of trying to define this too narrowly can accentuate, rather than lessen, a sense of difference.

Mr Denham: How we handle difference is undoubtedly one of the British characteristics that students need to understand. I will talk about doing it in the right way and doing it in the wrong way in a moment.

Having said that teachers need support, the second point that I need to draw from history is that values mean little without an understanding of the history that has shaped them. Students need to be able to debate and explore values rather than simply being taught them. The Prime Minister spoke recently about Magna Carta. To get from Magna Carta to where we are today, we have to go through quite a period of burning bishops, cutting the heads off kings, fighting civil wars, invading other countries, being invaded and calling it a Glorious Revolution, trade union campaigns, women's suffrage and all the rest of it. We can make no sense of our British values without understanding the history of how we came to be where we are.

Let me set out my concerns about what the Government are proposing. Hon. Members will have gathered that I agree with and support the idea of promoting British values; my concerns are these. First, the Government have spent much of the past four years undoing the good work that was going on in schools. Secondly, they are expending far more energy on constructing a legal basis for intervening in schools than they are on helping teachers to promote British values. There are simpler ways of dealing with the sorts of problems we have seen in Birmingham. Thirdly, the legal definition of British values leaves too many contentious questions unresolved and carries too many risks. Fourthly, all attention has been focused deliberately on one community—the Muslim community—and not enough on addressing all those who will share in shaping Britain's future. Fifthly, the Government have neglected the fact that we have multiple identities. I am English every bit as much as I am British. British values, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester

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East (Keith Vaz), has said, are seen through the prism of many other identities. Finally, there is too little practical support for schools, as I have said.

For four years, the Government have actively undermined good work in schools. Citizenship education has been weakened and Ofsted's legal duty to inspect school promotion of community cohesion was ended in 2011. The Government promoted schools with greater autonomy to set their own curriculum and determine their own intake. The Government have funded free schools such as the Al-Madinah school in Derby, and they should not be surprised if their rhetoric encouraged the idea that schools could be narrowly tied to one part of the community or one set of parents. Faced with the consequences, the Government are now scrambling for new powers to intervene.

In current law and in the Government's proposals, British values are set down as democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect, and tolerance of those of different faiths and beliefs. No one will argue much with those. However, twice recently the Prime Minister has given different lists. He has spoken, for example, of accepting personal and social responsibility and of respect for British institutions, but in neither case did he say what he meant. Those are not in the Government's proposals, and such sloppiness does not bode well for the future. British values cannot mean whatever the Prime Minister of the day, or a Secretary of State, means them to be. British values are crucial, but they are not unchanging. The Britain I was born into was commonly racist and deeply homophobic. Much has changed today.

None of the values listed explicitly challenges racism, sexism or homophobia. We have to dig into the draft regulations to read that British values are to be interpreted as meaning the Equality Act 2010. I wonder how many commentators, or indeed Government Members, realise that the Act is now the legal baseline for British values. I welcome the Act, but even I would hardly describe it as a timeless British value. What that tells us is the importance of students understanding where such statements of values come from and what they mean today. Students have to know the history, the arguments, the campaigns and the political disputes that have led to changing attitudes. It is better to see the Act as a snapshot of where our national debate had reached in 2010. Not everyone will support the Act's values, which is the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Mr Smith).

This Parliament has sanctioned gay marriage, despite the opposition of England's established Church. Upholding the law means respecting gay marriage, but where does that leave the millions of people, of many faiths, who believe that gay marriage is wrong? To me, a key part of Britishness is the principled and practical compromises we reach to handle such differences. Those compromises are complex, subtle, ever-changing and democratic. Those of us who have met concerned constituents will agree that, in the best sense of the word, Britishness does not lend itself to law, but I will make this point: once the Government's regulations are challenged, as they will be when they are used as the basis to intervene in schools, it will be the courts that define what British values mean. Instead of being dynamic and constantly evolving, judges will say what British values are. Given

how many Government Members are exercised by what judges have done with the European convention on human rights, I am surprised that the Government want to give judges the power to decide what it is to be British.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have massive sympathy with the right hon. Gentleman's central point that promoting positive values in schools will be difficult because they are always changing and evolving, but does he, in return, have some sympathy with what I think prompted the Government to approach the matter in the first place? Does he recognise that there are certain extreme and intolerant views that must actively be kept from being promoted in schools?

Mr Denham: If the hon. Gentleman will bear with me, in a few moments I will directly address what I think the Government should be doing to enable themselves to address situations such as those in Birmingham.

Alok Sharma *rose*—

Mr Denham: I will take one more intervention.

Alok Sharma: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for being so generous in taking interventions. I agree that the world has changed and society has, in many ways, become much more tolerant. I remember sitting on public transport in Reading when I was a youngster and being subjected to casual racist abuse. That would not happen in a town such as Reading now, or at least people would not get away with it. On the subject of changing values, does he not agree that values such as individual liberty, tolerance and democracy are timeless?

Mr Denham: They are timeless, but our understanding varies. Forgive me for using a trivial example, but when I first came into this House, non-smokers were expected to respect the right of smokers to smoke in Committee Rooms, tea rooms, dining rooms and bars. Today, smokers are expected to respect the liberty of non-smokers not to breathe in their smoke. Liberty has not changed, and this is a silly example, but our understanding of what those values mean changes over time. That is crucial. The idea that our understanding of those values is fixed in time is wrong.

One of the reasons for pursuing that point is that the Government are about to legislate on some of those values more strongly than ever before. We need to anticipate the potential problems. The Government want schools to promote active participation in democracy, and I have no doubt that the Government wish to be able to address schools in which, for example, aggressive advocates of an Islamic caliphate are undermining democracy, but where in law will that leave communities, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, the Brethren and others, that do not vote, do not advocate the vote and do not bring up their children to vote? We, in a rather British and tolerant way, have never felt the need to bother ourselves with those communities before. The Minister should be careful that we understand what we are getting into when we use the law, rather than the promotion of good practice in schools, to promote British values.

Some of the activities in Birmingham schools that have been described, including the harassment of able teachers, the imposition of narrow dress codes, restricted curricula and the use of racist stereotyping and gender

segregation, are unacceptable, but we do not need complex regulations on the promotion of British values to address those activities. The hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) raised this question earlier, and let us say that all publicly funded schools, of any intake or designation, should be required to maintain an environment that is genuinely welcoming to all students of all backgrounds. If we made that our test and our principle and said that failure to maintain such an environment should be the basis of intervention, it would be much clearer, it would be easier to inspect and it would be a proper foundation that respects the fact that there are faith and non-faith schools, and schools with different intakes, while stating that no school can be run in a way such that other children would not wish to go there.

Mr Ward: I accept that point, but the difficulty is in the definition of a secular school, which means that the meaning of “welcoming” is disputed. It is easier to say what “welcoming” means within a faith school, but in a secular school there will be parents who say, “This school, unless it is doing these things in this way, is not welcoming to our children.” That is where the debate becomes very difficult.

Mr Denham: The hon. Gentleman and I probably do not disagree. My father was the head teacher of a Church of England school and my son goes to a Church of England primary school, but I am not a person of faith. I can see a school that is welcoming to children who do not come from a faith background but that has a distinct faith ethos. It is possible to get the right balance between the two.

There are limits to the extent to which anyone can insist that a school follows a narrow practice such that other parents and other children do not feel welcome. We can do much better than the incredibly complex regulations on the promotion of British values that the Government are pursuing. My wording might not be right, but this is the approach I want to take. I do not think there should be any publicly funded school to which any reasonable person would say, “That school would not welcome my child.” Those are the constraints on how far people can demand particular practices, approaches to the curriculum and the promotion of faith, and so on.

I will now make some progress. I have taken longer than I wanted, although I have taken several interventions. I will quickly address the question of British values. Are Education Ministers in Wales, Scotland and, indeed, Northern Ireland advocating a similar message? I hope the Minister will answer that question. If not, why is it that British values will be promoted only to the English? Have we recognised that people in England are more likely to put their English identity first? Have we recognised that in some areas white students are more likely to describe themselves as English, according to the polls, and black and minority ethnic students are more likely to describe themselves as British? Those are not trivial issues for a teacher having discussions in the classroom about the nature of being British. I see no sign in any of the Government’s guidance or discussions that those issues have been considered at all.

The nation building I want must recognise that we all have multiple identities—faith-based, nation-based, ethnicity-based and locality-based—and should not assume

a single homogeneous whole, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East said. The nation building we need must include many people who currently have widely differing views about the state of Britain. If we think about the challenge that faces us, we all have constituents who feel insecure because they feel that their British or English identities are under threat. They need to accept that the clock cannot be turned back, but they must be reassured and feel that they have a voice.

We all have some constituents who will be among those who recently admitted to rising levels of prejudice. Fail to address that and our society will be strained. We all have newer communities yet to find their full place in our society—here but not yet fully here. We all have those who are happy with the way things are and who welcome change. They can actually be part of the problem if they are likely to dismiss the concerns of their neighbours in their local communities. Nation building means finding common ground and common values that can bring those people together. It does not help if just one community is singled out as the problem, but that is what I fear the Government have done.

Alok Sharma: The right hon. Gentleman is making some interesting points, and I want to go back to this one: he suggested that the Government want us to be homogeneous. I am sure the Minister will respond, but that certainly is not the impression that I have. He talked about what someone is. Well, I am British, but I have an Indian heritage. At the end of the day, the matter is about people integrating into mainstream society and being tolerant—all those common values that we have mentioned before, which I continue to believe are timeless.

Mr Denham: I believe that the hon. Gentleman is right, but I am worried that some of the legalistic ways in which the Government are going about doing it could end up producing a narrow set of legal definitions that push schools, in their interpretation of Britishness, to precisely the narrow, homogeneous view of the way things are that we do not want to see.

I am also worried that the way in which the Government have handled and responded to Birmingham has tended not to identify the issue as one of bringing together the whole country and people from many different backgrounds, including that of the hon. Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), but to single out one particular community. *The Mail on Sunday* screams out on its front page: “Cameron tells UK Muslims: Be more British”—I rather fear that some spin doctor somewhere was rather pleased with that story. I do not think that is healthy or helpful. There are real and current concerns about extremism and radicalisation, but the promotion of British values should not be about one community or one faith.

Of course, given the conflicts involving Muslims around the world; the links of faith and family to some of those conflicts; and the pernicious activities of radicalisers and recruiters, there are dangers and challenges for some young Muslims that young people from other communities do not face, but it is all the more important to get such issues right. I fear that Ministers have equated conservative theology with anti-British values and the promotion of extremism. Yet the Government’s own extremism task force concluded:

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“As the greatest risk to our security comes from al-Qaeda and like-minded groups, and terrorist ideologies draw on and make use of extremist ideas, we believe it is also necessary to define the ideology of Islamist extremism. This is a distinct ideology which should not be confused with traditional religious practice.”

We have yet to read Peter Clarke’s report, but I fear that that is the very confusion that Ministers and the Prime Minister have introduced into the debate.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way in his most insightful speech. However, his reference to the conflation with conservative religious views concerns me. Some of the media coverage of the Birmingham issue has said that there is a difference between extremist ideology that might breed terrorism and conservative religious values taking hold, as if the latter were acceptable. The latter may be acceptable in theory, but in practice, in those Birmingham schools, it led to girls being excluded from their right to participate fully in the life of the school. To that degree, I would contest that conservative religious values, practically applied in that way, are fundamentally at odds with British values of equality and freedom.

Mr Denham: I would agree. I made it clear that I am not here to defend the practices that were uncovered in Birmingham schools. I was actually going on to make the point explicitly in my speech; if I lose concentration, I will probably end up reading it out anyway.

Here we go—on the next page. As I have said, knowing the difference between religious conservatism and extremism does not mean that we do not tackle unacceptable problems in schools. The hon. Member for Stourbridge (Margot James) got there before I did. She is absolutely right. As I made clear when I was talking about the need to intervene if things go wrong and schools become exclusive, I accept that point.

However, by conflating conservative theology with political radicalism and extremism, the Government have not helped to take the debate forward. It has undoubtedly fuelled fears and concerns in the wider non-Muslim community and alienated the majority of Muslims, who do not support what was going on in the Birmingham schools. It has made that necessary discussion about how we educate young Muslims in our British society probably more difficult. I do not think that the Government have got the issues right, because it comes across as though the challenge is to get one particularly disloyal community into line, when the real challenge is bringing together people from many different communities into a cohesive society with a strong national identity. That is a big enough challenge.

I want to end with five, I hope, constructive and practical proposals. First, I would like to see the Government fill the gap left by their opposition to multiculturalism by endorsing the idea of nation building. It should be public policy to create a strong, cohesive society with a strong national story and shared values.

Secondly, I would like to see the Government shift the emphasis of their approach from constructing legal powers to intervene, based on legal notions of British values, to providing teachers and schools with the powers and resources they need to do that job well.

Thirdly, the Government should set out a simple test for all publicly funded schools—faith, community, academy or free—that they should be required to maintain an environment that is genuinely open and welcoming to all students of all backgrounds. That, rather than the tortuous test of promoting British values, should be the basis for inspection and intervention.

Fourthly, citizenship and the promotion of strong national values should be restored to their proper place in the curriculum and made part, once again, of Ofsted’s normal inspection regime. As part of that, the Government should take a fresh look at how we ensure that students in mono-cultural or mono-faith schools enjoy wider opportunities to meet, work, study and socialise with those from other schools and other backgrounds.

Finally, the Government should recognise the importance, not just of teaching national values, but of involving young people in debating, exploring and shaping them. Just as British values commonly understood are different today from when I was born, so they will be different in 60 years. It is today’s young people who will, together, decide whether our country works or not.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): It might be helpful for hon. Members present to know that I intend to have the shadow Minister on his feet no later than 3.40 pm.

3.7 pm

Sir Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Mr Bone, I am not sure how long each of us has—about five or six minutes?

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Yes.

Sir Tony Baldry: Well then, the full version of my speech will be found on my website, www.tonybaldry.co.uk. This is the abridged version.

We are grateful to the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham) for introducing this debate. I do not think we agree with his analysis.

The inscription on the second world war memorial in my school reads: “Whatever hope is yours, Was my life also”. Later this year, we commemorate the centenary of the start of the great war. A good starting point for defining British values would seem to be exactly what our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers considered to be the values they were fighting for in those wars.

I think the first value, which I am sure we have learned over the centuries, is that of tolerance—the need to tolerate others and the need, in particular, for religious tolerance. That is perhaps not surprising, because there was a terrible legacy of religious intolerance in this country during the Reformation and the counter-Reformation, which led to our recognising that we needed to get along with and tolerate each other. Unlike some other countries in Europe, in Britain we have generally never had hang-ups about religious emblems, such as crucifixes, being displayed in schools or public buildings.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Tony Baldry: Come on. The hon. Gentleman has 10 minutes; I have only five, for heaven’s sake.

Of course, tolerance is not absolute. One of the great challenges for liberal democracies that has to be learned is what the acceptable boundaries of tolerance are. In the first week of sixth form at my school, my contemporaries and I were set an essay by our head master, John Ounsted, entitled, “To what extent should the tolerant tolerate the intolerant?” It is good for schools to consider the appropriate way not only to promote tolerance, but to deal effectively with intolerance.

Closely related to the need to understand and learn tolerance is the understanding of mutual respect, or what Quakers have traditionally described as “finding that of God in every man”. I have visited primary and secondary schools in my constituency for more than a third of a century, and my impression is that schools are extremely good at seeking to promote mutual respect among pupils.

Tolerance of others, a belief in freedom and the importance of democracy are, therefore, all fundamental British values. And they are British values—these are not lists. Some of those who have described British values have simply described lists. When John Betjeman was asked to describe Britishness, he wrote of

“Books from Boots’ and country lanes”,

but such things are not values; they are games of word association about things people at any time might associate with Britain, and the word associations are constantly changing. What we need is a focus on values.

In the short time I have, I would like to make a point that it is easy for me, as Second Church Estates Commissioner, to make. Nothing in what the Government propose should be seen as being in any way intended or likely to be anti-Muslim because it seeks to promote British values. At the start of her diamond jubilee year, the Queen made a visit to Lambeth Palace to meet faith leaders. I was fortunate enough to be present in my capacity as Second Church Estates Commissioner. Her Majesty the Queen made a short, but moving speech, which I have no doubt she wrote herself. This was a personal comment. She said:

“This gathering is a reminder of how much we owe the nine major religious traditions represented here...Our religions provide critical guidance for the way we live our lives, and for the way in which we treat each other...Here at Lambeth Palace we should remind ourselves of the significant position of the Church of England in our nation’s life. The concept of our established Church is occasionally misunderstood and, I believe, commonly under-appreciated. Its role is not to defend Anglicanism to the exclusion of other religions. Instead, the Church has a duty to protect the free practice of all faiths in this country.

It certainly provides an identity and spiritual dimension for its own many adherents. But also, gently and assuredly, the Church of England has created an environment for other faith communities and indeed people of no faith to live freely. Woven into the fabric of this country, the Church has helped to build a better society—more and more in active co-operation for the common good with those of other faiths.”

In other words, part of British values is about having the tolerance and mutual respect to respect and, beyond that, protect the free practice of Islam in this country. However—to go back to my earlier comment about the tolerant not tolerating the intolerant—that does not mean protecting the teaching of Islam if that teaching perversely seeks to suggest that Islam is opposed or hostile to other faiths or values.

Her Majesty went on to say:

“Faith plays a key role in the identity of many millions of people, providing not only a system of belief but also a sense of belonging. It can act as a spur for social action. Indeed, religious groups have a proud track record of helping those in the greatest need, including the sick, the elderly, the lonely and the disadvantaged. They remind us of the responsibilities we have beyond ourselves.”

That is perhaps another important British value: loving one’s neighbour as oneself, accepting personal responsibility and accepting responsibilities to oneself, one’s family and the community in which we find ourselves.

That advice from Her Majesty the Queen was very sensible, and I see no reason why it is not possible to ensure that all schools promote fundamentally decent British values. Those values bring us all together.

3.14 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Bone. I congratulate my fellow Hampshire MP, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham), on securing the debate and on his interesting and challenging speech, in which he made a number of important points. It is also a pleasure, of course, to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry).

I welcome the debate on this issue, both here today and more generally, and I welcome the consultation that the Government have launched. The debate would be useful and important even without what we have learned through the Trojan horse revelations. Clearly, there are some shared British values, but in a time when young people can be exposed to all sorts of influences, particularly as a result of technological change, it is important to restate—or, in some cases, just state—what those values are.

We have a more diverse society than we have ever had, and I think all of us here welcome the richness that that has brought. However, we also need to think about the word “multicultural”, which means different things to different people. We need to think about its positive connotations, but also about its drawbacks.

On the great seal of the United States is inscribed “E pluribus unum”, a compelling phrase. However, the United States has had a lot more time to think about what it means and to put it into practice. We, in our country, need to address what can be—indeed, what we love being—“pluribus” and what we need to be “unum”, and how wide that list should be.

We tend to be quite reticent about discussing Britishness. We are patriotic, but we tend to be reserved about expressing that. In America, people occasionally have debates about the pledge of allegiance to the flag, but our schools often do not have the flag to pledge allegiance to. Today’s debate turns on three important questions. First, what is in the core set of British values? Secondly, how should we express them? Thirdly, should we teach them, and, if so, how should we teach people about not just their existence, but their primacy in British life?

There are at least four—possibly more—different expressions of Britishness, which should not be conflated, although they sometimes are. The first relates to true core values: things such as tolerance, freedom of thought, freedom of religion, respect for the law, and a belief in the democratic ideal and the equality of citizens. Just because those are British values, that does not, of course, mean they must be uniquely British values; we

[*Damian Hinds*]

share them with a number of other countries. It is also true that how they are manifested is not immutable. The values stay constant, but, as the right hon. Gentleman said, how they are expressed and what they imply changes over time.

Secondly, there are the principles that underpin our society and its operation. I will come back to this, but it includes things such as representative liberal democracy and an organic constitution, and the role of independent institutions, a free media and the rule of law. Those are fundamental, but they are not necessarily that widely understood; indeed, aspects of them are not even always entirely welcome—for example, the way in which liberal democracy, as opposed to pure majority democracy, can work.

Thirdly, there are things that are clear majority views, which are sometimes talked about as British values, such as a belief in our national health service and in public service broadcasting through the BBC. However, those are beliefs, not core values, and people's views on them can change. I would suggest that just thinking that the Belgian health care system is worth looking at does not make someone un-British.

Fourthly, there are all manner of traits and characteristics, such as a sense of humour; a distrust of power; respect, but not undue respect, for others; and a love of a rich and permeable cultural base in music, film and food. We cannot promote those things in school, and nor should we try to, but they are still an important part of being us and of our shared destination.

What, then, should we do in schools? The first and most important thing to say is that it is a journey, rather than a destination. We can all easily agree about the negative side: we can agree about keeping extremists out of schools and about girls not being disadvantaged in their learning in class. We can also agree that public funds clearly should not be used on school trips available only to members of one faith.

What we do on the positive side, however, to promote British values is a lot harder. I have found no better description than that in the academy model funding agreement, which talks about

“respect for the basis on which law is made...support for participation in the democratic processes...equality of opportunity...liberties for all within the law...and tolerance of different faiths and...beliefs.”

I welcome what the Government propose to do to strengthen what is called the “spiritual, moral, social and cultural” standard and actively to promote such values. However, there remains the big question of how. At the sharp end, I certainly welcome what the Government are doing on no-notice inspections, removing school leaders who fail to protect their pupils and strengthening the rules on barring teachers who have knowingly brought extremism into school.

More generally, turning to the idea of positive promotion, there is a need for a big national conversation. That will not happen overnight. There is a debate to be had about the extent to which such things can be taught rather than caught. Personally, I am a bit of a sceptic about the idea that someone can stand at the front of a class and say, “Today we are doing British values.” Those are things that permeate in other ways.

Mr Andrew Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Damian Hinds: I am very short of time—very quickly.

Mr Smith: In implementation, is it not crucial for children and young people to be helped to develop their critical ability to question what they are taught, wherever it comes from?

Damian Hinds: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and one should not underestimate the importance of space in class for discussion, as well as more formal debates in schools, and other things of that kind.

There is much more that I want to say, but I will just talk about history in the curriculum. What I say will echo, a little, what the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen said. We should tell the great British story and face up to the parts of it that we are not so proud of, but I would like more appreciation of the development of the institutions in and of our democratic system. Those are not British values per se, but they reflect and reinforce them. I am less bothered about young people learning about the mechanics of voting or which competencies are reserved for the devolved Administrations versus the UK Parliament, but I am bothered about a greater, broader understanding of the nature of representative liberal democracy and its superiority not only to autocracy—which is pretty obvious to everyone—but to the tyranny of the majority. With it go the freedom of the media and independent institutions, the protection of minorities and the rule of law. Those things need not be dealt with as an add-on; they can be understood through history taught in a rigorous academic way.

I have two concerns: the first is that we should not conflate the issue with a general debate about secularism. The “Trojan horse” schools were not faith schools. Faith schools in general get above-average results and are popular with teachers. Having attended one, I can confirm that its ethos and what we did there did not inhibit my inquiring mind or stop me appreciating and valuing the differences in others; if anything, it enhanced those things. Faith schools can also be incredibly diverse. There is a Catholic primary school a mile from here and 95% of its pupils are of one faith, but they speak, between them, 32 different mother tongues. More than nine tenths of them have English as an additional language. It is fine to have a debate about faith schools, but it is a different debate from today's.

There is a second concern on which I would like reassurance from the Minister, and that is the inherent danger in having someone—anyone—in charge of defining British values, not just now but 10 years from now. I call this the Semmelweis question. If anyone present does not know who Semmelweis was, it is because we are all over 40. Our children all know, because he is taught in every school in the country. I will not go into it now, but he was an Austrian who found out that hand washing would stop infections from spreading in hospitals. Someone decided that that would be taught in every school in the country; but it is not on the national curriculum. Whoever that person is, they have an awful lot of power. We need adequate ways to make sure that it is not the courts or politicians who are left to deal with such matters.

I welcome the debate and the swift action of the Secretary of State, but we must also allow an approach to evolve, and be alive to the dangers.

3.22 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Like the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham), whom I congratulate on giving the Government a chance to think in advance about some of the more complex aspects of what they propose, I am not a particularly religious person, but I come from a Jewish immigrant family background.

I have two stories to tell, about by late father, Sam. One happened more than 50 years ago when I came home from my junior school and mentioned, without any sense of trauma or discrimination, that we had been asked in class how many of us were English. Several hands went up. Then we were asked how many of us were Welsh, and most hands went up—the school was in Swansea—including mine. At that point, the teacher said, in all innocence, “Oh, but Julian, I thought you were Jewish.” When I mentioned that to my father he was outraged. He said, “What on earth was she talking about? What on earth was she thinking of? Of course you are Welsh. Being Jewish has got nothing to do with it. Our religion has got nothing to do with it.” I know that that story is true. I can vouch for it, because I remember it.

The second story—[*Laughter.*] That must have been funnier even than I intended. The second story is one that I can remember my father telling me, but I have never yet managed to research it so I do not know for certain whether it is true and will not name the country from which the community concerned came.

My father told me that a large number of people were displaced from central and eastern European countries as a result of the war, and they were allowed to settle in various communities around Britain. One of those communities started something that had been known before the war in their country—a degree of anti-Semitic propaganda—in the United Kingdom. My father said, although I have never been able to check or verify it, that when that started the Attlee Government made a firm public pronouncement warning the community that its members were welcome to come to this country and make it their home, but they were not going to bring anti-Semitism with them because the Labour Government of the day would not tolerate it.

I hope that the House can see why I told those stories and where they are leading. As I said earlier, in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen, I have a lot of sympathy with his proposition that it will be very difficult to promote positive values in schools because positive values evolve. However, I think it would be possible to promote what one might call negative values in schools—in other words, to make sure that some things are ruled out as unacceptable. I have a firm belief that in most communities, including the Muslim community, the majority of people are moderates and a small minority are extremists. I believe it is essential that extremism should be kept out of schools. The sort of extremism that provoked the present initiative is on a par with the fascist or Nazi, and Marxist or communist, extremism or totalitarianism of the past. It is an Islamist totalitarianism of the present. That must not be allowed to proceed.

We should therefore be careful about what we are trying to do. I hope that the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen will agree with the distinction

that I am about to draw: between preventing extremists from taking over schools, and using schools that have not been taken over to prevent, through the promotion of a positive narrative, the radicalising of children. The truth is that nothing that can be done in a state school will insulate young, impressionable children if they are being radicalised outside the school.

Finally, I want to supply the attribution for the paradox of tolerance that my right hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) alluded to earlier. It will come as no surprise to the massive total of 98 people who, according to the wonderful website theyworkforyou.com, are assiduous followers of my parliamentary speeches, because I have mentioned many times that the words are those of the late, great conservative-oriented philosopher Sir Karl Popper, who in volume 2 of “The Open Society and Its Enemies” laid down the wonderful maxim called the paradox of tolerance: we should tolerate all but the intolerant, because if we tolerate the intolerant the conditions for toleration disappear and the tolerant go with them.

3.29 pm

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham) on securing this timely debate. It is as always a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

When it comes to teaching British values, the clue is in the title. We are all British; we are all one nation and it should be so basic that we do not need to say it. Yet everywhere we look there is no shortage of people seeking to divide us from each other. North of the border, in Scotland, there are those who seek to divide that nation from Britain. In Wales, devolution tends to deepen, with advocates for more devolution, which could be a through-train in the direction that Scotland has gone. In Cornwall there are those who seek to separate that area too, and in Northern Ireland. In Dover we are simple souls. We do not want any particular devolution; we just want Calais back, and we would like Boulogne back as well in due course. [*Laughter.*]

We need to sound a warning against all those who seek to divide regions from the nation, because wherever there is division or separation or where people are divided from other people and separated, we rapidly get a lack of trust and the those sorts of problems we have seen. If we tell someone that they have to go and live in a castle and we tell someone else that they have to live in a different castle, sooner or later they will start to raise the drawbridge and go to war with each other. There will be separation, division and a lack of understanding. The best way to counteract that is to say we are all one people—we are all in it together, we are all integrated, we are all one community and one nation, and we should all stand together.

That is why the whole idea of multiculturalism was such a massive error, because it feeds on division. It creates division and a sense of separation—a sense that we are not all the same, not all in it together, not all joined together and not integrated; a sense, rather, that we are disintegrated. Poor pity that they did not think multiculturalism through or see that it would lead to the distrust that we see in some areas and some nations of

[Charlie Elphicke]

our country. What we need is a greater sense of unity, a greater sense of shared identity and a shared mission as a country.

I think we have deeper values, beyond the value that we are one nation, and they are the values of what that means and what our history teaches us. In saying that, I am very aware that I am the Member of Parliament for Dover and Deal, the representative of the white cliffs. So much of what our nation is about is tied up in that land, which is hallowed, like Gettysburg, not by any special holiness, but by the acts of the people—our forefathers—and the values they fought for. We should not shirk from underlining that, first and foremost, they fought for freedom—for what the Americans think of as first amendment rights: freedom of religion, freedom of association, freedom of the press and freedom of speech. Those freedoms, so dearly won, are so easily lost and so often under siege. We should be valiant and strong in standing up for them and ensuring that we can talk and communicate with respect. I do not accept the word “tolerance”; I think that “live and let live” is a better way to explain our understanding of different thoughts in our communities.

There is also the rule of law and the flexibility of our constitution, which bends like a reed in the wind. As times change, we change; our laws, customs and mores change. Finally, there is our fighting for the underdog—our sense of justice and our sense of going to war, as we did back then to defeat the gnarled hand of tyranny that crept across Europe, casting a deep shadow. We were responsible for turning it back and for leading the charge against it. That is an important part of what it is to be British. We should be proud of what we have achieved as a nation and we should be strong and very clear in saying that we are one people. Make the case for integration, do not go for multiculturalism and talk about how we draw people together, because that way lies hope, whereas in division lies fear and mistrust.

3.33 pm

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): A democratic state surely has a duty and a vested interest in ensuring that its citizens are aware of their rights and responsibilities, and in that respect schools are the obvious place to start. They should be a place of learning and understanding, where naivety is met with guidance and questions presented with answers.

The subject of this debate, which I congratulate the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham) on securing, has long been an issue—it has been an issue for generations. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) spoke eloquently, and it will be no surprise that, with names like Sharma and Opperman, neither of our families were at the battle of Hastings repelling the French. We arrived not a thousand years ago to repel the French but, in his case, approximately 50 years ago and, in my case, approximately 100 years ago. You can imagine, Mr Bone, the difficulties that my ancestors had through two world wars with a name like Opperman, fighting their German cousins—and fighting with distinction—for the British Army.

Integration is something that we are all seeking. This is an issue that has not suddenly popped up in the last year, five years or 10 years; it has been an issue down the

generations for different cultural identities. When we ask ourselves this question, I believe that it is right that the Government are promoting the consultation on British values in schools. I am certain that the Minister will outline the details of the consultation, but the strategy that sets it out seeks

“democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance for those with different faiths and beliefs”.

One would hope that those are universal values, but we know that the reality worldwide is that they are not universal values, but are particular values of this country. In that respect, these purportedly universal values are, in fact, very British and their promotion must be a very good thing. One must not forget that promotion is not the same as teaching something or having respect for it. One can respectfully disagree with an idea that is promoted—one may take a differing view—but one is definitely much better informed for it, and that is surely the point we are trying to make, so I welcome the consultation.

Like many hon. Members, I will make my full speech available on my website, guyopperman.blogspot.co.uk. While my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) may have 98 followers on theyworkforyou.com, my 17,000 followers will, I am sure, greatly enjoy this particular speech.

Dr Lewis: You need them more than I do. [Laughter.]

Guy Opperman: It is rare that one gets barracked by one’s own side, but one has to get used to it.

What are British values? Sarcasm may be one value that we would particularly wish to identify. We are—are we not?—good at queuing, and we are bad at football. As everyone knows, we are the inventors of football, a game we play for 90 minutes before the Germans win on penalties—unless we are not even making the further rounds. We are the creators of proper breakfasts, the world’s finest sauces—everything from ketchup to HP—and all the best boy bands that could possibly exist.

Many of our constituents—returning to a serious point—are British Muslim, British Indian, British Chinese, Scottish and British, and Welsh and British. Some would argue that the likes of Monty Panesar are way more British than Kevin Pietersen, and I think that they would be right.

Do we take advice from the French? It is a rare thing and I know it is something you would never do, Mr Bone, but you will recall that Jacques Chirac said: “One cannot trust people”—that, by the way, is the British—“whose cuisine is so bad”.

However, we would surely reply that our national dish is not roast beef any more; it is, of course, curry.

On that point, I would like to make my contribution to the debate, which is to ask whether we need to consider introducing, as the Canadians have, a Minister for integration. In Canada, he is the famous Jason Kenney, who has been so successful at formulating and promoting integration of people of many different faiths. His portfolio includes citizenship, multiculturalism, immigration and integration. It is the unification of those strands of Government Departments and the difficulties faced that we genuinely need to address.

I take the view that this process is about creating a stronger society, not splitting it. Surely the purpose of promoting British values is to ensure that by doing so

we are not being counter-productive, because any person in this country can uphold their religious, national and cultural identity as well as their British identity. In that respect, surely we should be supporting this debate, this dialogue and this discussion.

3.39 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): I welcome this debate and congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham) on securing it and on his, as ever, thoughtful speech.

We have had quite a lot of discussion about British values, but not perhaps as much about the teaching side of things—perhaps we will get more of that in future debates. Nevertheless, it has been a fascinating debate and I congratulate all the hon. Members who contributed to it. I will mention the right hon. Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) in a moment. The hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) used the phrase “*e pluribus unum*”, but of course it was much later that that was interpreted as bringing together different peoples from different parts of the world. In its original sense, it was more about the states coming together and forming a union. However, there was much to agree with in his remarks.

As ever, the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) made a thoughtful, intelligent speech. He said he was brought up in Wales. I was brought up in Wales, with a Welsh mother and an Irish father. My father always insisted that I was Irish, but I never accepted it and still do not, although I am proud of that heritage. I have always thought of myself as Welsh and British. The hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) said he hoped that Scotland would not break away from the United Kingdom. I endorse that sentiment. The hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) mentioned his German ancestry and bragged about the size of his following, much to the derision of Government Members. He made a thoughtful contribution to our debate.

I am glad to see the Minister here. I thought that the Schools Minister might have come along to respond to the debate, as teaching featured in its title. Perhaps that is because, as we understand from press reports, the Deputy Prime Minister is a bit uneasy about the new Government policy on a consultation on British values. If so, that is a shame, because I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen: it is important that we debate what this means and what its implications are, and I welcome that.

A couple of weeks ago, I attended a moving event in my constituency where Councillor Ali Ahmed of Cardiff was honoured by the Bangladeshi community on becoming the deputy lord mayor of Cardiff. His opening remarks at that event were: “I’m proud to be a Muslim, I’m proud to be a Welshman, I’m proud to be a British Bangladeshi and I’m proud to be the deputy lord mayor of Cardiff.” In saying that, he showed what we all want from British values and what we all want in our communities: the opportunity for everyone, from whatever background, including the humble, poor background in Bangladesh of Ali Ahmed and his family, to succeed and fulfil their potential. I found that event moving.

I wanted to intervene briefly on the right hon. Member for Banbury, because he mentioned the values that our fathers and grandfathers fought for. It is always important

to remember that on the Menin gate in Ypres are the names of Muhammad Aslam, Abdullah Khan, Ahmad Khan and Muhammad Usman—soldiers who fought alongside our grandfathers and fathers in previous wars. We sometimes forget that the grandfathers and fathers of many of those in the immigrant community in Britain today fought alongside British soldiers in those wars and that they are here because their grandfathers and fathers were part of the British empire’s Army at the time. We should always remember that strongly in our discussion of British values.

I echo the comments that my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen made about Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—the other parts of the UK. When the UK Government kick off such a debate—but in an England-only jurisdiction—it is important that we should also talk to colleagues to the devolved Administrations and involve them in it, otherwise there is a danger of it becoming isolated and more about Englishness than Britishness. Those perspectives are important, as are the perspectives of the various minority ethnic communities that were discussed in this debate.

The context for this debate is undoubtedly the Trojan horse incidents in Birmingham. Ultimately, things have come to a head because warnings given about what might be developing there were not heeded quickly enough, and one reason for that is that systematic problems in our education system have developed, allowing such developments to become likely. The current system is inadequate and fragmented, and there is a dangerous vacuum. Only last night—the hon. Member for Bradford East (Mr Ward) will know this—the principal of Kings science academy was re-arrested on suspicion of fraud in relation to that free school. There is a vacuum that we need to address. I will say more about that in a moment.

We also need to look at the reset button a little bit on faith in our schools and revisit what that is all about. Of course, the schools involved in the Trojan horse affair were not faith schools, but we should restate and be clear that no publicly funded school should be a place for indoctrination or proselytisation. Faith-based education can be positive—some of the finest schools in this country are faith-based schools—but they must still respect and understand other views. Indeed, all publicly funded schools should be clear that it is unacceptable for such indoctrination or proselytisation to take place and that it forms no part of any publicly funded school, whether faith-based or not. I think all the faith-based education services would accept that principle—indeed, I think I am using the exact words of the Catholic Education Service in that regard.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen that undermining citizenship teaching has not helped the situation. De-emphasising pupil and student voices in the system has not helped either. Yesterday I spoke to a group of articulate year 10s from a community school in London who were visiting the House of Commons, and their insights on this and other issues were important. With the fragmentation, there is also a danger that we are marginalising the parental voice in the system. With the growth of large academy chains that are accountable to no one, so-called autonomous local schools are often being dictated to by those large academy chains, more than local authorities ever did and with no accountability whatever.

[Kevin Brennan]

We need a debate about British values, but that conversation must include the young people involved who are in the schools, as my right hon. Friend said. It must be a debate about British values, not about an imagined Britain glimpsed through the rose-tinted spectacles of the Secretary of State for Education. As usual, with this story he hit the headlines but rather missed the point. British values cannot be the product of a Secretary of State for Education's solipsistic ruminations; they have to be shared and must arise from a common feeling among the diverse communities and generations in this country. Our schools should be in the business of teaching those values through the ethos of the school as much as in formal lessons, and it should be as much about the debating of the values as about inculcating them.

Schools should, first and foremost, be safe havens of learning that promote respect, tolerance and hard work, and encourage debate and discussion—I say that as a former teacher. They should also promote community cohesion, as they are required to by law, although they are no longer inspected on for that. We have seen how quickly things can go wrong where that is not made clear and where it is not monitored.

There is a danger that the Government are sending out mixed messages. If citizenship is talked down and undermined as a subject, but then they decide that it will be kept in the national curriculum, is it any wonder that people are confused? In a system where most secondary schools do not have to teach citizenship, because they are not required to teach the national curriculum, it is no wonder that heads, teachers and governors, as well as parents, can become confused about what is expected of them in relation to teaching citizenship and British values. That is why, if we really are to promote these values in our schools, we need a mechanism to ensure that all schools do so.

We have proposed a new approach to local accountability, through directors of school standards. We believe that, had our approach been in place in 2010, the Department for Education would not have ignored the warnings about Birmingham. In requiring collaboration between schools, different groups could be brought closer together.

This is an important debate for this country and our schools, and we need more than headline-grabbing soundbites from the Secretary of State to tackle the great challenge.

3.49 pm

The Minister for Skills and Enterprise (Matthew Hancock): Mr Bone, I hope that you, like me, have found this to be an enlightening, well thought through and extremely reasonable debate. It has been positive, and I congratulate the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr Denham) on securing it. I will try to address his five points and some of the points raised by other Members, but we need to set the debate in context. The question of the values that tie us together as a country is a crucial point that has been raised and relevant through the ages. This debate is not on a new subject, but one that has been raised throughout history.

It is best to start on the point about universal values and the question of what British values are. As has frequently been stated, the Government have set out that British values are

“democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs”.

The right hon. Gentleman said that we could all unite behind those values, and I certainly hope that we can, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman) rightly pointed out, we are complacent if we say that that is easy or natural. British values are not universal around the world, and we should be proud that they are very widely, if not universally, accepted here at home. Those universal values flower in Britain because of the protection of our strong democratic state, defended through liberty—with blood, in times gone by—by our forefathers and the forefathers of those from many different backgrounds.

To seek to defend those values, and the British polity that protects them, is a valuable task. In that, I thought that many of the comments made by the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen were astute, but it was a sad irony that in arguing that we should come together in many of these things, he sought to find points of division where none exist. The argument for a conscious focus on nation building is one that we support. He argued not for a legal basis in that space, but for providing teachers with the powers and resources to enable them to deliver. While it is crucial to ensure that we defend British values by specifying what is not acceptable, that inevitably ends up with a legal basis for intervention. As my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) pointed out in describing the paradox of tolerance, if we are to ensure that we promote British values—including ensuring that we take action against extremist ideologies that are anathema to them—there need to be legal elements. There is, however, much, much more to the issue. For example, the broadening of the history curriculum is one part of a response to a need to strengthen the underpinning of British values that has been under way over the past few years.

On the promotion of citizenship and British values in the curriculum, the right hon. Member for Southampton, Itchen made an odd critique about citizenship and Ofsted. Of course Ofsted inspects on the teaching of spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. That is a core part of its framework, and the argument that it did not inspect for that is, frankly, wrong. His point on involving young people in debate is important. Having listened to his speech very closely, I argue that there is much more that unites than divides us.

There is another crucial point, which everyone in the debate has touched on: British values are not simple and British identities are often multiple. I did not even know that my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East had a Jewish background. Being Jewish and British is a widely held identity, much like being Scottish and British, English and British or Welsh and British. Once we get to Ireland it is slightly more complicated, because Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, rather than Great Britain. As my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma) set out, however, identities expand to being Indian and British and many other different backgrounds. Nevertheless, the reticence with which some express British values, and the argument that it is rather British to be reticent about expressing British values, which I recognise, should not prevent us from setting out expectations on shared values. British values are a core set of beliefs that support and ensure freedom, liberty and tolerance and underpin the way we want our society to function.

The debate rightly touched on the issues in Birmingham schools. We are clear that we need to learn lessons from what happened there. I will deal with a couple of technical details before going on to the broader point. In 2008, when concerns were expressed, the schools were maintained schools. Much progress has been made in maintained schools. They must promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils so that they can participate in wider society, and they must promote community cohesion. The strategy for creating the conditions for integration recognises the critical role that local organisations, including schools, can play in bringing communities together. Existing advice on teacher misconduct confirms that misconduct includes:

“Actions or behaviours that undermine fundamental British values, democracy and law, promote...extremism, or demonstrate deliberate intolerance and/or lack of respect of the rights, faith and beliefs of others”.

Maintained schools are also required under the citizenship curriculum to teach pupils about subjects including democracy and human rights.

Those requirements are only part of the wider answer to the question on British values, of which the teaching of history is also part. Here I come to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke), because he, in his eloquent articulation of British values, warned against those who would try to divide us and pointed to the special role of Dover and its white cliffs in the British story. We should pay heed to his words. Having said that, we will take further action, in addition to the action taken since 2010, to strengthen guidance to schools to set out more clearly our expectations. That follows the publication of the Government’s Prevent strategy, which focuses not only on tackling directly violent extremism, but extremism more broadly. That is necessary to tackle the roots of violent extremism, and the Secretary of State has set out that we will consult on further action.

On Monday, we launched a consultation on strengthening the wording of the independent school standards, which apply to independent schools, academies and free schools, to require schools actively to promote principles that encourage fundamental British values. That builds on the change made last year to include a requirement to encourage pupils to respect fundamental British values. In addition, we will also require teaching

“on the strengths, advantages and disadvantages of democracy and how democracy works in Britain, in contrast to other forms of government in other countries”.

The guidance also describes the outcomes that independent schools, including academies and free schools, will be expected to demonstrate. That shows that the accountability of academies and free schools is stronger than that of maintained schools, not least because of inspection by the Education Funding Agency as well as by Ofsted.

Finally, I want to pick up on one point made by the shadow Minister. He said that there was no accountability whatsoever in academies. I would say that—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I am afraid that time has beaten us. I would like to thank all hon. and right hon. Members for co-operating to get everyone in, and for an interesting debate.

Gender Equality in Overseas Parliaments

4 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.15 pm

On resuming—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): The current debate may continue until 4.45 pm and the final debate may continue until 5.15 pm.

Catherine McKinnell: I am delighted to have secured this debate on the link between gender equality in Parliaments and political corruption, not least because I have been trying to secure it for some time now, in my capacity as the co-chair and co-founder of the all-party group on corruption. As the Minister will be well aware, female politicians can be very persistent and do not tend to let an issue go without achieving some sort of resolution. As a result, I am pleased that we finally have an opportunity, albeit a brief one, to discuss the issue today.

Before I turn to the specific subject of the debate, I want to remind us of the position in which women around the world continue to find themselves in relation to influence and power. An excellent paper published by the international development charity VSO—Voluntary Service Overseas—highlights that women are estimated to account for almost two thirds of the people globally who live in extreme poverty. Women perform two thirds of the world’s work and produce 50% of the food, but earn only 10% of the income and own only 1% of the property.

At the same time, around the world, including here in the UK, women are not participating in public and political life on equal terms and in equal measure to men. As the VSO paper goes on to highlight, all the evidence suggests that we are still very far from solving the problem. Only one in five parliamentarians worldwide is a woman—the figure is 22% for the House of Commons and 23% for the House of Lords. Women hold only 17% of ministerial positions around the world and just three of the 22 full Cabinet positions in the UK. At the highest level, women account for only 13 of 193 Heads of Government, although of course the UK has had a very highly respected female Head of State for the past 62 years.

In local government, women make up only 20% of elected councillors and hold mayoral positions in only 10 of the world’s capital cities; only 32% of councillors in England are women and London is yet to have a female elected Mayor. On the basis of those current trends in representation, women will not be equally represented in Parliaments until 2065—more than 50 years’ time—and will not make up half of the world’s leaders until the quite staggering date of 2134, an achievement not a single person alive on this planet will get to see.

In its paper, “Women in Power: Beyond Access to Influence in a post-2015 World”, VSO makes an incredibly persuasive—indeed, inarguable—case for putting women’s rights at the heart of the international development agenda as the United Nations considers a new international

[*Catherine McKinnell*]

development framework for after the millennium development goals expire in 2015. As VSO argues, a new post-2015 goal of empowering women and girls to achieve gender equality needs to take account of the obstacles to that and how and why they are being perpetuated, as well as evidence of measures that have proved successful in addressing them.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Am I right in saying that the hon. Lady will be 100% behind my International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014? She is quoting from and drawing on the same VSO paper as I quoted on Third Reading before my Bill was enacted, and so her explanation has been almost word for word the same as mine—she is not copying me, of course. She is absolutely right. I commend her for taking such a strong line and wish her well.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support and very much agree with the sentiments he has expressed. He clearly sees the urgent need to take action on the problem rather than simply talking about it.

Indeed, we are not alone: the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, once said:

“Data not only measures progress, it inspires it...what gets measured gets done...nobody wants to end up at the bottom of a list of rankings.”

I know that the Prime Minister is co-chairing the high-level panel on the post-2015 development agenda, and developing countries are being asked to identify their priorities for 2015 and beyond. I would be interested to hear the Minister's thinking on whether gender equality will form one of the post-2015 goals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Through the all-party group on Egypt a short while ago, we met new President Sisi, for whom 33 million people voted. He told us that there had been so much change because of the women of Egypt. In recognition, he has set aside some seats in Parliament for women to be represented. Is that an indication of what the hon. Lady wants to see—not just in Egypt, but throughout the whole middle east?

Catherine McKinnell: Indeed. No one in this Chamber thinks that we should not be making greater strides on gender equality and political representation here in the UK and around the world, and I will give some examples. The hon. Gentleman mentioned Egypt, but I will focus on Rwanda where a remarkable transformation has taken place on gender representation.

What does the issue have to do with corruption? The Minister may be aware that earlier this year, to mark international women's day, the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption published a position paper on gender equality in Parliaments and political corruption. The all-party group on corruption, which I co-chair, is a member of GOPAC, which based its research on a 10-year analysis of trends in the proportion of women elected to national Parliaments, correlated to trends in levels of national corruption.

The research found that an increase in the number of women in Parliament will tend to reduce corruption but, crucially, the GOPAC paper also made it clear that women politicians cannot be expected to tackle this

issue on their own. It concluded that increasing the number of female parliamentarians must take place in tandem with steps to increase institutional political transparency, to strengthen parliamentary oversight, and to enforce strong penalties for corruption. In other words, an increase in the number of women in Parliaments will tend to reduce corruption if the country in question has a reasonably robust system to uphold democracy and to enforce anti-corruption laws.

On publication of the paper, the vice-chair of GOPAC's women in Parliament network, Dr Donya Aziz, commented:

“The status of women has come a long way since the first International Women's Day in the early 1900's, but our participation in the political sphere is still far too low in most countries across the world. Our paper demonstrates that the strongest fight against corruption is one that includes and embraces the female perspective as a critical part of strengthening parliamentary oversight and parliamentary democracy.”

The GOPAC paper illustrated its findings with the fascinating case study of Rwanda, a country that has made significant strides since the appalling genocide of 1994. As the Minister will know, Rwanda is the only country in the world where an outright majority of parliamentarians are female. Indeed, as of 2013, an unbelievable 63.8% of Rwanda's Members of Parliament are women. The paper explains that that is partly the result of concerted efforts by Rwandans to increase female participation in politics, such as the introduction of a gender quota system, employing seats reserved for women and the establishment of legislated candidate quotas.

Such measures have seen the number of female parliamentarians in Rwanda increase from 17.1% in 1997 to 25.7% in 2002 and 48.8% in 2003 when the gender quota was established. The rate increased again to 56% in 2008 and then to the staggering 63.8% that Rwanda enjoys today. While this rapid change in gender representation has taken place, Rwanda has also strengthened its parliamentary oversight mechanisms. For example, in April 2011, the Rwandan Parliament established a new public accounts committee to examine financial misconduct in public institutions and to report misuse of public funds. Previously, despite evidence of continuous theft of public monies, no parliamentary body had that responsibility.

Subsequently, in 2012, the Rwandan public accounts committee released its examination of state finances, which reported that 9.7 billion Rwandan francs—\$16.3 million—was lost in 2009-10 as a result of failings in Government operations. The Rwandan PAC went on to present recommendations for Government reforms and established the requirement for Parliament to act to remedy gaps in the management of public funds.

During the same period, Rwanda consistently improved its score on the corruption perceptions index, which has been published every year since 1995 by Transparency International. Over the past nine years, Rwanda has improved its CPI rating by 23 points, well above the eight-point global average improvement between 2003 and 2013. It scored 53 on the CPI in 2013 and was ranked 49th least corrupt country of the 177 countries surveyed. To put that in context, the UK scored 76 and was ranked 14th least corrupt country.

GOPAC's paper concluded:

“Although Rwanda's CPI score leaves room for improvement, it has experienced a significant reduction in corruption, clearly correlated with an increase in female political participation, in the context of improving systems of parliamentary oversight.”

GOPAC draws the link between a fall in levels of public corruption and an increased number of female parliamentarians, combined with improved parliamentary oversight mechanisms, while making it clear that that first step of having more women in Parliament is insufficient to reduce the problem.

Sir William Cash: I am deeply interested in what the hon. Lady is saying. The connection with corruption is in many senses new to many of us. A few years ago, I introduced the International Development (Anti-corruption Audit) Bill with the hon. Member for York Central (Hugh Bayley) and one or two other hon. Members. We are learning a great deal from what the hon. Lady is saying, which is very helpful.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support and for his work on the issue. I look forward to us working together to take the matter forward. I also look forward to the Minister's response and to hearing what the Government can do to take the issue forward as part of the millennium development goals.

I have asked myself whether it is entirely coincidental that Rwanda happened to see such significant improvements in its oversight of public funds and financial misconduct at exactly the same time as a significant increase in the number of female parliamentarians. The two developments may not be linked, but I contend otherwise. I would be interested to hear the assessment of the Minister and her Department.

Earlier this month, I had the privilege of meeting a delegation of Kenyan women parliamentarians during their week-long visit to the UK and Westminster, which was organised by the CPA. As the Minister knows, Kenya is often held up as another African country leading the way in female representation following their 2010 constitutional reforms, which stipulate that no more than two thirds of any appointed or elected body can be of the same gender.

The delegation was keen to hear more about the work of the all-party group on corruption. We spoke for over an hour about their experiences as female politicians in a very male dominated culture. They highlighted the fact that although there are now six women in Cabinet posts, including in defence and foreign affairs, there is a motion before the Kenyan Senate—their upper house—calling for the number of parliamentary seats for women to be scrapped and citing cost as the reason. Clearly, any progress made on gender equality and therefore on corruption cannot be taken for granted.

I have considered at length the link between increased female representation and reduced levels of corruption, but what about the female experience of corruption, which is often termed “graft”? Everyone knows that corruption is wrong. It keeps poor people poor and allows rich people to capture power and money. It stops development aid from countries such as the UK reaching the right people in the right places at the right time. Perhaps most importantly, it prevents developing countries from being able to develop their own tax base in order ultimately to reduce their dependence on aid.

We know from the statistics that I outlined at the beginning of my speech that the majority of people living in extreme poverty in the world are female and therefore at risk of being kept poor by this pernicious problem. Various research projects have looked at the

different ways in which corruption has an impact on women, as opposed to men, in developing countries. Women remain the primary care-givers around the world, so they tend to face more corruption because of their increased interaction with public services, whether they are trying to obtain a school place for their child, support a relative through the health system or obtain legal documents for their family.

Recent reports suggest that the experience of many women facing corruption goes beyond the traditional gender spheres. One study found that the major problems were about starting a business. There have also been suggestions that, as more women access higher education, there is an increasing convergence of sexual harassment and academic corruption. When I visited Kenya earlier this year with CAFOD, I saw and heard about the damaging impact that corruption can have on many women's lives.

In addition to the top-down approach of ensuring that there are more female elected representatives at decision-making level, a report from October 2012 by the UN Development Programme suggested that those who face corrupt officials most often develop the most efficient techniques for dealing with them. Such a bottom-up approach, in which relatively simple projects brought together groups of women who faced that problem, resulted in a marked success.

Simply by joining together, women empower each other by sharing experiences, comparing success stories and training their peers to deal with corrupt officials. Such projects are vital to enable women to break free from a culture—the norm in many parts of the world—that prevents women and girls from reporting corrupt practices, most notably practices such as sexual extortion, which carry a huge stigma.

I have attempted to cover in a relatively short time a significant and wide-ranging issue that affects many millions of women around the world. I am keen to emphasise the context of the debate. Almost two thirds of people globally who live in extreme poverty are women. Women perform two thirds of the world's work and produce 50% of the world's food, but they earn only 10% of the world's income and own only 1% of the world's property.

Given such pitiful levels of female representation, is it any wonder that we still find ourselves in a situation where today alone, 800 women will die unnecessarily in childbirth, 29,000 under-fives will die from preventable causes, 67 million children are not in school when they should be and almost 1 billion people will go to bed hungry? The money required to remedy that totally unacceptable situation is entirely available, but all too often corruption means that it is stolen for private gain instead. I strongly believe that empowering more women and girls around the world, from the top down and from the bottom up, will prove to be one of our strongest weapons in tackling this appalling injustice.

4.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Lynne Featherstone): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Bone. I thank the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) and congratulate her on her persistence in getting a debate on this topic.

[Lynne Featherstone]

I do not think I disagreed with a single word of what she said. Her speech was powerful and she put the case forcefully.

The participation of women in political life is absolutely crucial for gender equality and poverty reduction around the world. We are in an appropriate venue for debating it—and I thank the hon. Lady for her attempts to get me promoted to the Cabinet. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) on the work he has done on gender equality. The Department for International Development has a woman as Secretary of State and a woman as Under-Secretary of State. Although that may not be the case in perpetuity, we are now required in perpetuity by law to consider gender in international development, which is a welcome move forward.

I will not repeat all the relevant statistics; otherwise, the hon. Lady and I will end up making the same speech. I agree that around the world, it is not adequate for only 22% of elected representatives in national Parliaments to be women. The hon. Lady mentioned that Rwanda leads the world in that respect because 64% of its parliamentarians are women. I visited Rwanda two weeks ago, and the country's story is remarkable—perhaps all the more remarkable when we think where it has come from. Perhaps because of where it has come from, there was a recognition, in Rwanda's desire for change, of the need to have no differences. I think that is one of the motivating factors.

Rwanda also ranks second in the world for ease of doing business, which the country has made a priority. I am not sure how strong the evidence is on lack of corruption, because it seems to be conditional on institutions and the application of law, as well as female representation. Rwanda is an exemplary development partner and a beautiful country that has seen amazing progress over the past 20 years. At the same time, as I am sure the hon. Lady acknowledges, there has been a lack of political space and there are concerns about human rights. Rwanda is, however, certainly an exemplar in terms of development and women's participation.

What difference does it make to have more women in political roles? Helping more women into power improves inclusiveness; it creates female role models, which are incredibly important; and it leads to legislative changes to tackle gender inequalities that might not happen if women were not in a position to take them forward. I am sure, like me, the hon. Lady occasionally wishes that we did not have to fly the flag on those issues, and I am sure she longs for the day when women do not have to fly the flag, which is why it is so nice to have the flag raised by a gentleman.

Sir William Cash *rose*—

Lynne Featherstone: I thought my hon. Friend might come in at that point.

Sir William Cash: I commend the Minister and the Secretary of State for what they have done. Mariella Frostrup, the GREAT Initiative, WaterAid and others have been enormously helpful over the past year.

Lynne Featherstone: I thank my hon. Friend. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North asked that we put women at the heart of international development,

and we have lived up to that. I have not attended an occasion or met a Government anywhere in the world without raising that as a primary issue.

The hon. Lady also asked about the post-2015 agenda. The high-level panel report was excellent and, amazingly, it was applauded by people across the spectrum, and from all sides of the political debate, across the world. I assure her that the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State and I are focused on the stand-alone goal for gender in the post-2015 agenda.

I was talking about legislative changes that come from having women in elected positions. In India, for example, greater representation of women in local government, which is an important level of government, resulted in greater budget allocations for women and children's services. I have always said to women colleagues that we need to get into decision-making positions on budgets, because budgets ultimately make the difference.

If we want to get more women elected, we have to get more women involved and active in political processes. We also need to get more women voting. In the run-up to the 2013 election in Pakistan, it was discovered that 8 million women were missing from the voter roll. Thanks to support from the UK and other donors, the register was updated and millions of women were able to vote for the first time. Women candidates also need support. The UK provides considerable support to elections across the world, and we have supported 11 free and fairer elections since 2010. That includes helping election organisers to meet the needs of women candidates and voters.

Changes to national constitutions and legislation can also be powerful tools to signal change. The hon. Lady mentioned Kenya, which adopted a new constitution in 2010 that guarantees gender equality and the use of affirmative action. I have met women parliamentarians, and in Kenya I met equally powerful women parliamentarians. I very much hope that Kenya does not change its decision. I am wildly off message in my party on quotas, of which I have always been a great supporter.

Catherine McKinnell: I welcome the Minister's supportive response, but it is somewhat embarrassing for the UK to be pronouncing on these issues when we have a very poor record on female representation. I hope we can seek to make advances both across the world and here in the UK, too.

Lynne Featherstone: Winning seats is the issue for my part of the coalition, because if we do not win seats, we cannot get women or men into them. I totally agree, however, and I think we are working in that direction. The hon. Lady's party, with its all-women shortlists, and my coalition partners with their A list or B list—I am not sure which—have made advances, and the face of Parliament has definitely changed. We would like further changes, but our issues are different from the issues facing the other two parties. We are moving in that direction. I will address corruption in a minute, but having a balanced gender mix is good, whether it is in the boardroom or on the Floor of Parliament. Wherever it is, groupthink is dangerous when making decisions. I might say the same if it was all women.

At the heart of what DFID does is unlocking the potential of girls and women by empowering them to have a voice in decision making, so we support women

parliamentarians in many countries. Our work with MPs in Ethiopia helped to improve the gender balance and oversight functions of many Standing Committees. We promised £4.5 million to help train female politicians in Afghanistan. In Pakistan, the Aawaz—which, as I am sure the hon. Lady knows, means “voice”—programme, funded by DFID, aims to increase women’s representation and voice in political organisations by 20% at local and 10% at national level.

It is interesting that it is a mix of everything, because women’s representation is incredibly important but it is not the only answer. That the pace of advance in all ways and at all levels and at every stratum of our society and the developing world is so slow is one of the most frustrating things. I am the international violence against women champion and I have been to Africa, where one sees appalling levels of violence against women, but there is a continuum across the world. In the UK, two women a week are killed by their partner or ex-partner and one in four women experience domestic violence their lifetime. The other end of the spectrum is rape as a weapon of war and levels of brutality dictated by social norms, because women are suppressed and oppressed and have how they should live their lives dictated to them. They are not given voice, choice or control over their own existence.

We support women’s involvement in all areas of public life by building leadership skills. Girl Hub, our collaboration with the Nike Foundation, for example, uses the power of brands and media to drive change in attitudes towards girls and build their self-esteem.

I turn to corruption, because that was the other thrust of the hon. Lady’s speech. I have always thought that development has three enemies: conflict, corruption and climate change—the three C’s. The hon. Lady is right that corruption robs many of the wealth that lies beneath Africa. The UK Government’s stance on corruption is clear. Corruption corrodes the fabric of society and public institutions. It is often at the root of conflict and instability. It diverts and wastes precious resources. There is clear evidence that poor people—it is always poor people—feel the effects more harshly than the better-off. The uncertainties of bribery stifle business development and inward investment. Corruption is therefore bad for development, bad for poor people and bad for business.

The evidence is less clear when it comes to whether having more women in politics is the answer, because, as shown in the Global Organisation of Parliamentarians Against Corruption report, progress is conditional on other things, such as the rule of law, institutions, the application of law and so on. The correlation is difficult,

but it is a work in progress. Sadly, I believe that I have met corrupt politicians of both genders—I would love to think that women were completely innocent. Nevertheless, the more women that help in decision making, the more likely we are to move forward. Findings such as those in the GOPAC report support our approach, which I have described. We work with countries to strengthen their institutions of government and their enforcement of anti-corruption law.

On DFID’s overall approach, we have published specific plans for each country with whom we have a bilateral programme, explaining how we will help to tackle corruption and to insure against the misuse of aid funds, because I have to stand at the Dispatch Box and answer to the British taxpayer for every penny spent. When addressing fraud and corruption, we must be able to follow the money and to defend how it is used. To tackle corruption, we need to address the three conditions that allow it to thrive: opportunities for corruption, incentives for corruption and reduced chances of being caught.

We aim to prevent corruption by strengthening the integrity and accountability of public services, particularly the management of the civil service, of public finances and of public procurement. We aim also to ensure the efficient functioning of oversight mechanisms, such as auditors general and parliamentary public accounts committees. We focus on helping partner countries ensure both an impartial, effective and reliable judiciary and a properly regulated private or corporate sector. Supporting civil society to use transparency and information to demand accountability of Governments is also important and is a key component of the UK Government’s transparency and accountability initiatives.

The UK Government are deeply committed to improving the lives of women and girls around the world, empowering them to have a voice and to participate in politics and decision making. Getting more women involved in politics and elected to Parliaments will be an important part of this work. I thank all hon. Members for their interest in the matter and the hon. Lady for raising such an important issue.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. I thank hon. and right hon. Members for that important debate.

We were about to go on to an important debate on Anglo-Libyan relations, but the lead Member is unfortunately not very well.

Question put and agreed to.

4.45 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 25 June 2014

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Regional Growth Fund (Correction)

The Minister of State, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (Michael Fallon): I regret that there was an administrative error in my written ministerial statement on 19 June 2014, *Official Report*, column 88WS. The Regional Growth Fund (RGF) round 6 dedicated expression of interest day will not be taking place in Sheffield on 28 July but will instead be held at:

Alexandra House
Lawnswood Business Park
Leeds
LS16 6QY

The Leeds event will start at 10 am on 28 July.

In addition, due to demand, we have added an extra dedicated expression of interest day in Yorkshire and Humber. This will be held in Kingston-upon-Hull on 18 July.

More details on how to register for these two sessions or any of the events we are running across England in July and August are available at: www.bis.gov.uk/rgf.

Zero-hours Contracts

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Jenny Willott): Last summer, the coalition Government conducted an informal information-gathering exercise on zero-hours contracts in response to concerns about abuse of these contracts by a small number of employers.

Following that review, on 19 December 2013 the Government launched a public consultation on zero-hours contracts. The consultation closed on 19 March and received a record number of responses—over 36,000. Responses came from businesses of all sizes, charities and social enterprises, unions, union representatives and individuals.

We sought views on a number of issues including banning exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts, whether a code of practice should be introduced covering the fair use of exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts and these contracts generally, and how useful respondents found existing information, advice and guidance on these contracts. The consultation found:

The overwhelming majority of respondents, 83% of responses, supported a ban on exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts. Many respondents felt that a code of practice focusing solely on the fair use of exclusivity clauses would not go far enough to tackle potential abuses. They wanted Government to develop a code of practice covering all aspects of the fair use of zero-hours contracts.

In relation to the quality of existing information, advice and guidance on these contracts, 42% of respondents said the current guidance was “not helpful”. Only 14% said they found existing guidance “very helpful”. This clearly demonstrates that more should be done in this area.

As a result, today, through the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, we will be introducing legislation which stops abuses of vulnerable workers who work under zero-hours contracts:

We will be banning the use of exclusivity clauses in contracts which do not guarantee any hours. This will ensure that individuals will be free to look for work elsewhere to help boost their income if they so wish.

We will also be introducing provisions via the Bill which provide a power which will allow avoidance of this ban to be dealt with. We will be consulting further on the best mechanism to tackle avoidance of the ban and the issue of redress should this law be broken.

Government will now work with business representatives and unions to develop a code of practice on the fair use of zero-hours contracts; and

Government will also work with interested parties to review existing guidance and improve information available to individuals and employers on using these contracts.

These measures will allow individuals on zero-hours contracts to seek additional work, if they choose to, and ensure that no employer can tie down an individual when they make no reciprocal commitment to provide that individual with any guaranteed work.

TREASURY

Cheque Imaging/SME Credit Data

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Andrea Leadsom): In March 2014 the Government published a consultation, “Speeding up cheque payments: legislating for cheque imaging”, which set out proposed legislation for the introduction of cheque imaging in the United Kingdom. Cheque imaging is an innovation that speeds up cheque clearing times through the sending of a digital image of the cheque for clearing, rather than the original paper instrument itself. Cheque imaging enables a wide range of benefits to be delivered to consumers, businesses and the banking industry. It will speed up clearing times, increase customer convenience, deliver operational efficiencies and help challenger banks to compete with incumbents.

Separately in December 2013 the Government published a consultation, “Competition in banking: improving access to SME credit data” which set out its proposal to require banks to share information on their SME customers with other lenders through credit reference agencies. The proposals will help small businesses access the finance they need to grow by opening up access to the credit data that the major banks hold on their SME customers to other banks and finance providers. The proposals are intended to make it easier for SMEs to seek loans from a lender other than their bank by improving the ability of challenger banks and alternative finance providers to make accurate SME risk assessments and lending decisions.

The Government are publishing responses to both consultations today, alongside introducing legislation in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill to allow for the introduction of cheque imaging in the UK and to improve access to SME credit data.

I am placing copies of these documents in the Libraries of both Houses.

Recovery of Public Sector Exit Payments

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Danny Alexander): Last month, the Government announced that the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill will include legislative provisions to ensure exit payments are recovered

when high earners return to the same part of the public sector within 12 months of leaving. These provisions will mean individuals are not over-compensated and will ensure value for money for the taxpayer. The intention is to underpin consistency and fairness across the whole of the public sector.

HM Treasury is today launching a consultation on the “Recovery of Public Sector Exit Payments”, seeking views on the proposed changes. The consultation has been published online: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/recovery-of-public-sector-exit-payments>. It closes on 17 September 2014.

The Government welcome responses and will give careful consideration to these before taking a final decision.

EDUCATION

Early Years Pupil Premium

The Minister for Schools (Mr David Laws): Today, we are publishing a consultation document setting out our proposals for the implementation of two key changes to early years funding in 2015-16: the introduction of the early years pupil premium for disadvantaged three and four-year-olds and moving to “participation funding” for disadvantaged two-year-olds.

Achievement at school is the strongest determinant of a child’s future earnings. Pupils who achieve five A* to C grades at GCSE earn on average 10% more than those who do not. However, the Sutton Trust have suggested there is a 19-month gap at the start of school between the most and least disadvantaged children. These gaps persist and widen throughout a child’s life. Research also shows that children from disadvantaged backgrounds can benefit the most from receiving a high-quality early education.

The New Early Years Pupil Premium

The aim of the early years pupil premium is to close the gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers by providing funding to early years providers to help them raise the quality of their provision.

All children aged three and four are already entitled to 15 hours a week of funded early education, for 38 weeks of the year (570 hours/year). The early years pupil premium will complement that entitlement by providing nurseries, schools and other providers of Government-funded early education with an additional £300 a year for each eligible child accessing the full 570 hours with them. We estimate that over 170,000 children could benefit from the early years pupil premium in 2015-16.

Providers will be funded for the early years pupil premium along with their existing early education funding. We are also publishing today indicative local authority funding allocations for the premium.

The consultation document seeks views from professionals, parents and other interested parties on our proposals for the implementation of the early years pupil premium. We propose that—

- (i) Those from low-income families, children in care or children adopted from care should be eligible for the early years pupil premium;

- (ii) Providers are best placed to know how support their disadvantaged pupils with the early years pupil premium and so should have the freedom to decide how it is spent;

- (iii) Ofsted will hold providers to account for how they have used the early years pupil premium to support their disadvantaged children through the regular inspection process.

Participation Funding for Early Learning for Two-Year-Olds

In September 2013 the entitlement to early education was extended to the 20% least advantaged two-year-olds, and from September 2014 it will be extended further to the 40% least advantaged two-year-olds. The early years pupil premium will close the gap at ages three and four between the additional support disadvantaged children get at age two through the new free entitlement and the additional support they get in school through the school-age pupil premium.

The consultation also covers moving funding of the free entitlement for two-year-olds onto a stable, long-term footing by introducing participation-based funding from 2015-16. This will mirror the way that the three and four-year-old entitlements are funded. This means that we will fund local authorities according to the actual numbers of eligible two-year-olds taking up a place. We recognise local authorities’ concern that we use the most up-to-date data to determine funding in the first year of participation-based funding. We are therefore proposing to use two data collections rather than one in 2015-16 to help us to do this.

The early years pupil premium and the two-year-old entitlement both only apply in England.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

EU Energy Council

The Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (Mr Edward Davey): I am writing to report discussions at the Energy Council in Luxembourg on 13 June, where I represented the UK.

Under the first item on the agenda the Council reached political agreement on the Greek presidency’s compromise text on the proposal to amend the renewable energy directive and the directive relating to the quality of petrol and diesel fuels. The proposal is intended to address indirect land use change (ILUC), which occurs when production of biofuels from crops grown on existing agricultural land results in the displacement of production on to previously uncultivated land.

I and several member states voted in favour while indicating disappointment with the agreement’s lack of ambition. Other member states made a statement that the cap on first generation biofuels must not be lowered from 7% during negotiations with the European Parliament. While the UK has consistently argued for a 5% cap on the contribution from food-based biofuels and the introduction of ILUC factors and considers it regrettable that the cap on food crops in the Council proposal is as high as 7%, we supported the compromise package as it represented the best compromise possible and is preferable to the status quo that would place no restriction on the expansion of food-based fuels.

This discussion was followed by a policy debate on the follow-up to the March European Council. The debate covered the three linked issues of European energy security, the internal energy market and the 2030

climate and energy framework. The Greek presidency opened the debate by asking member states for their priorities under the three issues. Commissioner Oettinger spoke to advocate the prioritisation of a smaller number of projects of common interest to help the most vulnerable member states and a new interconnection target of 15%.

I proposed that the June European Council should focus on short-term measures to address energy security and to prepare for potential disruptions this winter. I and a number of other member states also called for decisions on energy security and the 2030 climate and energy framework to be taken in parallel by the European Council. Some member states asked for decisions on energy security to be prioritised at the June European Council. There was some support for the Commission's proposal for a 15% interconnection target but others expressed caution, noting that it could impose additional costs on consumers.

I with a number of member states supported the proposal to prioritise a small number of key infrastructure projects to help the most vulnerable regions. Some member states noted that prioritisation of infrastructure projects

should not be at the expense of other energy infrastructure priorities such as addressing energy isolation and the exploitation of indigenous resources in the eastern Mediterranean.

A number of member states noted the importance of energy efficiency to the 2030 and energy security strategies.

Ministers adopted conclusions on energy prices, competitiveness and vulnerable consumers without discussion.

There was a second debate on international relations, focusing on the value of multilateral energy frameworks—such as the energy charter treaty, the energy community treaty and the International Energy Agency. The Greek presidency emphasised the importance of developments in the eastern Mediterranean and the contributions that gas supplies in the region can make to energy security in the EU. The Commission focused on the energy community and the role that it can play in the energy security of the European neighbourhood.

Over lunch, Commissioner Oettinger updated Ministers on the energy situation in Ukraine.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 25 June 2014

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Broadband

Helen Goodman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport with reference to paragraph 18 of Investing in Britain's Future, Cm 8669, produced in June 2013, how he intends to spend the £250 million allocated to broadband in 2015-16 and 2016-17. [201331]

Mr Vaizey: With local match funding, the £250 million allocated to broadband in 2015-16 and 2016-17 will enable superfast broadband coverage to be extended to 95% of premises by 2017. The Department announced indicative funding allocations for local broadband project areas in February 2014. The first procurements for projects using this funding are now under way.

Cinemas

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the total number of cinemas in operation in (a) Scotland, (b) England, (c) Wales and (d) Northern Ireland in each year since 2010. [201638]

Mr Vaizey: The total number of cinemas in operation in the four nations in each year since 2010 is shown in the following table¹.

¹ The regions are based on ISBN television regions and do not necessarily reflect the geographical region, for example, data for Wales also covers a small area of west England and data for Scotland also covers a small part of England around the Scottish border.

Region	2010	2011	2012	2013
England	544	571	587	577
Wales	72	71	77	74
Scotland	73	74	76	77
Northern Ireland	27	29	29	28
Total	716	745	769	756

Source:

Dodona Research, Beacon Dodsworth, Cinema Advertising Association, BFI RSU Analysis

Film

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the level of investment in British-produced films in each year since 2010 with budgets of (a) under and (b) over £500,000. [201637]

Mr Vaizey: The level of investment in British-produced films in each year since 2010 is shown in the following tables. The total UK spend is used as the nearest indicator of total investment.

(a) Films with a budget of less than £500,000

	£ million				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Co-productions	1.1	1.3	1.6	0.6	4.7
Domestic	24.6	17.1	17.9	13.6	73.2
Inward investment	0.5	0.2	3.1	0.2	4.0
Total	26.2	18.6	22.7	14.3	81.8

(b) Films with a budget of £500,000 or more

	£ million				
	2010	2011	2012	2013	Total
Co-productions	75.1	54.0	72.9	53.6	255.6
Domestic	176.6	182.4	229.2	138.9	727.1
Inward investment	1010.7	1070.1	620.3	868.1	3569.2
Total	1262.4	1306.5	922.4	1060.6	4552.0

Source:

BFI

SCOTLAND

Sovereignty

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the total costs incurred (a) in his Department and (b) in the Government of the creation and production of the booklet, What staying in the United Kingdom means for Scotland. [200947]

David Mundell: The total UK Government cost to date of 'What Staying in the United Kingdom Means for Scotland' is £723,501 (plus VAT).

This works out at the equivalent of 30p per household for the entire process of design, production and delivery. Further detail will be published in the usual fashion in the Cabinet Office transparency returns.

The Scotland Office incurred no costs in the production or creation of the booklet. Staffing costs were taken from existing Scotland Office budgets.

Written Questions

Alison Seabeck: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many parliamentary questions tabled to his Department in the last parliamentary session did not receive a substantive answer by the time of the 2014 prorogation; and when each such question was first tabled. [201549]

David Mundell: None.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Cybercrime

Mr Hanson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps she is taking to tackle cyber-crime. [904459]

Karen Bradley: Combating cyber crime is a core part of the National Cyber Security Strategy, which is underpinned by the National Cyber Security Programme (NCSP) with £860 million of new investment over five

years. The NCSP funds a range of work to tackle cyber crime, including strengthening law enforcement capabilities with the establishment of the National Cyber Crime Unit in the National Crime Agency, and cyber teams within each of the Regional Organised Crime Units (ROCU) across England and Wales, as well as developing the capability of local police forces. It also funds the Cyber Streetwise campaign, and the Action Fraud reporting system for cyber crime that is run by City of London Police.

Domestic Violence: Dartford

Gareth Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate she has made of the number of (a) arrests and (b) convictions for domestic violence offences in Dartford constituency in each of the last five years. [201302]

Norman Baker: The information requested is not available.

Data on arrests are reported to the Home Office on the basis of aggregated offence categories only, for example violence against the person, sexual offences and robbery. From these centrally reported categories it is not possible to separately identify arrests that involve domestic violence.

HM Passport Office

Katy Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what (a) services and (b) jobs within the Passport Office were transferred to the private sector in the last five years; and when those transfers took place. [199369]

James Brokenshire: No jobs have been transferred from Her Majesty's Passport Office to the private sector in the last five years.

Rachel Reeves: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the current total remuneration package is for the Chief Executive of HM Passport Office. [199849]

James Brokenshire: The Remuneration package for the Chief Executive of HM Passport Office is disclosed in full within the published annual report and accounts which is available on the website at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/orr-annual-report-and-accounts-2013-to-2014>

Remuneration for 2013-14 will be published in the annual report and accounts which is due to be laid in the House before the summer recess.

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much has been paid in overtime and other costs incurred in the last three weeks due to changes in HM Passport Office. [200523]

James Brokenshire: The precise information requested by the hon. Member is not available. Overtime payments to staff are recorded by the month in which payment is made. In May 2014, Her Majesty's Passport Office incurred overtime costs of £964,742.

Jessica Morden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much overtime has been paid to passport office staff at the Newport Passport Office since 2011. [200527]

James Brokenshire: Overtime costs relating to the Newport Passport Office from January 2011 to 2014 amount to £298,965.

HM Passport Office: Belfast

Mr Gregory Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will urgently increase the number of personnel working in the Belfast Passport Office. [200195]

James Brokenshire: The Home Office is identifying staff who could be temporarily redeployed to work with HM Passport Office during this very busy period.

Human Trafficking

Mr Frank Field: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many calls the Metropolitan police human trafficking hotline received from victims of human trafficking in each of the last three years; and what the annual cost of running the hotline is. [201396]

Karen Bradley: The following table shows the number of calls received by the Metropolitan police human trafficking hotline since it was set up in June 2011.

	<i>Number of calls</i>
2014 (to 19 June)	29
2013	41
2012	52
2011 (June to December)	34

The freephone hotline number (0800 783 2589) is funded by Stop The Traffik and therefore has no cost to the Metropolitan Police Service other than the £15 per month line rental.

Members: Correspondence

Sir Gerald Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she intends to reply to the letter to the Immigration and Security Minister dated 12 May 2014 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regards to Mr Rab Nawaz. [201412]

James Brokenshire: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 20 June 2014.

Sir Gerald Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she intends to reply to the letter to her dated 22 April 2014 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regards to Mr A. Mehmood. [201414]

James Brokenshire: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 15 May 2014.

Sir Gerald Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she intends to reply to the letter to her dated 12 May 2014 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regards to Mr Bhatti Akhter. [201415]

James Brokenshire: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 19 June 2014.

Sir Gerald Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she intends to reply to the letter to her dated 12 May 2014 from the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton with regards to Mr Sebti Messaoud. [201416]

James Brokenshire: I wrote to the right hon. Member on 20 June 2014.

Passports

Mr Gregory Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people applied to the UK embassy in Dublin for British Passports between 2011 and 2014. [200198]

James Brokenshire: This information is not held by the Home Office.

Steve McCabe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what compensation the Passport Office provides to British passport holders who have faced increases on the cost of their flights because they have had to wait an extended period for a completed passport application. [200403]

James Brokenshire: HM Passport Office's policy on compensation can be downloaded from the website at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/compensation-and-complaints-handling>

JUSTICE

Community Rehabilitation Companies

Ian Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether staff working for community rehabilitation companies will be able to (a) recall offenders and (b) write parole reports without consulting National Probation Service staff. [201199]

Jeremy Wright: The decision whether to recall an offender to custody continues to rest with the Secretary of State. Where a warning does not appear sufficient or appropriate, CRCs will be required to refer potential breaches to the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) with a breach report and a recommendation on the action to be taken. NOMS will take the final decision on behalf of the Secretary of State. The enforcement process for CRCs and the National Probation Service was described in detail in our published Target Operating Model.

Offenders serving indeterminate sentences for public protection will be managed by the National Probation Service: the arrangements for Parole Board hearings during their recall period will remain unchanged. If

recalled to custody, offenders allocated to the CRCs who are serving determinate sentences will continue to be managed by the CRC, unless their risk of serious harm increases to "high". CRCs will need to provide information, as appropriate, to support the recall process and consideration of re-release.

Ian Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether (a) Serco and (b) G4S will be permitted to bid for community rehabilitation company contracts. [201207]

Jeremy Wright: G4S and Serco decided to withdraw from the competition to select lead providers of rehabilitation services.

Courts: Video Conferencing

Sarah Champion: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) how many sites for giving remote evidence are operational in England and Wales; [200182]

(2) how many (a) children and (b) vulnerable adult witnesses gave evidence remotely in 2013. [200183]

Damian Green: Facilities for remote video links are now available in 84 Crown court centres and 165 magistrates courts. These facilities enable the victim or witness to appear by video link from a different court location to that of the trial court.

As part of the action plan to increase video usage across the criminal justice system, we intend to examine how to best extend use of remote links for vulnerable, intimidated and other priority victims, as defined by the Victims' Code.

The Department does not hold a breakdown of child and vulnerable adult usage of remote links for giving evidence.

Health Professions: Crimes of Violence

David Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what steps he is taking to ensure that attacks on health professionals are prioritised in the criminal justice system. [201538]

Jeremy Wright: All attacks on health professionals are deplorable. The criminal justice system is already equipped to deal with violent, threatening and abusive behaviour against those in public facing roles, including health professionals. The guidelines for assault offences specify that it is an aggravating factor for an offence to be committed against those who are either working in the public sector or who are providing a service to the public. An offence of this nature would therefore result in a more severe sentence. Tough punishments are available to the independent judiciary, who make their sentencing decisions based on the individual facts of the case.

Islam: Marriage

Mrs Hodgson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what recent discussions he has had with (a) the Muslim Institute, (b) the Muslim Council of Great Britain and (c) the Muslim Parliament of Great Britain on the legal status of Islamic marriages in England and Wales. [201473]

Simon Hughes: I have not discussed the legal status of Islamic marriages with any of the organisations listed.

There are no plans to change the law to recognise in English law Muslim marriages and divorces which do not conform to the Marriage Act 1949.

Mrs Hodgson: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what steps he is taking to provide support for and protect the rights of Muslim women in unrecognised marriages in England and Wales. [201476]

Simon Hughes: The Government is committed to the protection and promotion of the rights of women, families and children. This includes raising awareness of the legal consequences of 'religious only' marriages and encouraging mosques to register in order to be able to carry out legally recognised marriages in their various facilities.

Prisons: Closures

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much in capital receipts has been generated by the disposal of each prison closed since May 2010. [201662]

Jeremy Wright: Through the sale of three prisons we have generated capital receipts of over £30.8 million and, in doing so, avoided unnecessary costs.

The following prisons have been sold since May 2010:

	<i>£ million</i>
HMP Ashwell (2012)	1.34
HMP Latchmere House (2013)	22.5
HMP Canterbury (2014)	7

In addition to these disposals, the lease for HMP Lancaster Castle was handed back to the Duchy of Lancaster in 2012. However, no capital receipt was generated from this.

When disposing of surplus property assets the Ministry of Justice will always seek best value for money for the taxpayer.

Prisons: Employment

Richard Burden: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many hours per week of purposeful activity was undertaken by offenders in each security category in (a) 2011-12, (b) 2012-13 and (c) 2013-14. [200830]

Jeremy Wright: The information requested is not available centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Work in prisons is a key priority to ensure prisoners are engaged purposefully while they are in custody. It also gives them the opportunity to learn skills and a work ethic which can increase their chances of finding employment on release, a key element to reducing reoffending.

The number of prisoners working in industrial activity in public sector prisons increased from around 8,600 in 2010-11 (the first year for which figures are available) to around 9,700 in 2012-13. This delivered an increase in the total hours worked in industrial activities from 10.6 million hours to 13.1 million hours. Private sector prisons have also been supporting this agenda and have reported

that they delivered over 1.5 million prisoner working hours in commercial and industrial workshops in 2012-13 which provided work for over 1,200 prisoners.

In addition, there are substantial number of prisoners who work on tasks such as cooking, serving meals, maintenance and cleaning as part of the prison's day-to-day running.

Figures for public sector prisons are published in the NOMS Annual Report Management Information Addendum, available at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/225225/mi-addendum.pdf

Figures for 2013-14 will be published in July.

Our reforms to the incentives and earned privileges national policy framework came into effect in adult prisons on 1 November 2013. Prisoners will be expected to engage in purposeful activity, as well as demonstrate a commitment towards their rehabilitation, reduce their risk of reoffending, behave well and help others if they are to earn privileges.

Information on purposeful activity in each prison and category of prison was published annually in the Prison Performance Digest up until 2011-12 and can be found at the following location:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/163299/prison-performance-digest-2011-12.xls

The data were not collected at individual prisoner level and therefore it is not possible to break this historical data down by security category of prisoner.

Please note that figures are not available after 2011-12. Purposeful activity was formerly a performance indicator for prisons, but was discontinued at the start of 2012-13. The indicator was not used in the day-to-day management of prisons and NOMS had concerns over the burden on the front line of collecting the information. Indicators introduced into prison SLAs in respect of rehabilitation, resettlement and work in prisons provide a better demonstration of efforts to prepare prisoners for release and reduce reoffending.

Figures have been drawn from administrative IT systems, which, as with any large scale recording system, are subject to possible errors with data entry and processing.

Prisons: Overcrowding

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) what proportion of the prison population were in overcrowded accommodation on 1 April (a) 2009, (b) 2010, (c) 2011, (d) 2012, (e) 2013 and (f) 2014; [201490]

(2) what proportion of the prison population were sharing cells on 1 April (a) 2009, (b) 2010, (c) 2011, (d) 2012, (e) 2013 and (f) 2014. [201497]

Jeremy Wright: We will always have enough prison places for those sent to us by the courts and continue to modernise the prison estate so that it delivers best value for the taxpayer. This Government has a long-term strategy for managing the prison estate which will provide more adult male prison capacity than we inherited from the previous Government.

Crowding occurs when the number of prisoners in an accommodation unit exceeds the Certified Normal Accommodation in that unit. The average rate of crowding is published annually in the NOMS annual report and accounts.

Figures for the years 2005-06 to 2013-14 are as follows:

	<i>Average rate of crowding</i>
2005-06	24.0
2006-07	24.6
2007-08	25.3
2008-09	24.7
2009-10	24.1
2010-11	23.8
2011-12	24.1
2012-13	23.3
2013-14	22.9

In 2013-14, the average number of prisoners held in crowded conditions decreased to 22.9% of the total population compared to 23.3% in 2012-13. This is the lowest level since 2001-02 and has come down from a high of 25.3% in 2007-08.

While we collect the total number of prisoners held in crowded conditions we do not centrally record the overall numbers of prisoners who are accommodated in multiple-occupancy cells, be it crowded (eg two prisoners held in a cell designed for one) or not (eg two prisoners held in a cell designed for two). To identify the number of prisoners who shared a cell in each prison in England and Wales in each of the last five years would require manually going through prisoners' individuals records to identify each prisoner's cell location in each prison in each of the last five years, which could be undertaken only at disproportionate cost.

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many prisoners were in overcrowded cells on 1 April (a) 2009, (b) 2010, (c) 2011, (d) 2012, (e) 2013 and (f) 2014. [201661]

Jeremy Wright: We will always have enough prison places for those sent to us by the courts and continue to modernise the prison estate so that it delivers best value for the taxpayer. This Government has a long-term strategy for managing the prison estate which will provide more adult male prison capacity than we inherited from the previous Government.

Crowding occurs when the number of prisoners in an accommodation unit exceeds the Certified Normal Accommodation in that unit. The average rate of crowding is published annually in the NOMS annual report and accounts.

The average number of prisoners in crowded accommodation for the years 2005-06 to 2013-14 is set out in the following table, alongside the average percentage in crowded accommodation in order to provide context.

	<i>Average number of prisoners in crowded accommodation</i>	<i>Average rate of crowding (%)</i>
2005-06	18,356	24.0
2006-07	19,438	24.6
2007-08	20,377	25.3
2008-09	20,452	24.7

	<i>Average number of prisoners in crowded accommodation</i>	<i>Average rate of crowding (%)</i>
2009-10	20,235	24.1
2010-11	20,211	23.8
2011-12	20,907	24.1
2012-13	19,933	23.3
2013-14	19,383	22.9

In 2013-14, the average number of prisoners held in crowded conditions decreased to 22.9% of the total population compared to 23.3% in 2012-13. This is the lowest level since 2001-02 and has come down from a high of 25.3% in 2007-08.

Prisons: Staff

Mr Raab: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the per capita spending on prison officers was in England and Wales in each of the last five years. [201042]

Jeremy Wright: Information on the average total salary cost, including national insurance and pension contributions, of a prison officer as at 31 March each year since 2010, is contained in the following table:

	<i>Mean annual pay cost of prison officers, including employer national insurance and pension contributions, as at 31 March 2010 to 2014</i>
	<i>Mean annual pay cost (nominal)</i>
2010	32,747
2011	34,024
2012	34,951
2013	35,608
2014	36,157

The pay costs shown are for band 3 prison officers and their equivalents and include basic salary and local pay allowance where applicable.

Suicide

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice (1) how many self-inflicted deaths there have been in each month since January 2014; [201655]

(2) how many deaths in custody there have been in each month since January 2014. [201656]

Jeremy Wright: The number of deaths in custody for the requested period is not yet available. The number of deaths in prison custody for the first quarter of 2014 will be published on 31 July 2014.

The latest information on deaths in prison custody can be found in the Safety in Custody Statistics bulletin which can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/safety-in-custody-statistics>

TRANSPORT

A14

Mr Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many motor vehicle accidents occurred on the A14 in each of the last 12 months. [201630]

Mr Goodwill: The numbers of reported personal injury motor vehicle accidents on the A14 for each of the 12 months in 2012 are given in the following table; by severity:

Number of reported personal injury accidents involving at least one motor vehicle¹ on the A14 from Felixstowe to its junction with M6: 2012

	<i>Fatal</i>	<i>Serious</i>	<i>Slight</i>	<i>Total</i>
January	0	2	40	42
February	1	12	36	49
March	3	7	36	46
April	3	6	35	44
May	6	5	32	43
June	0	9	30	39
July	4	7	62	73
August	3	14	38	55
September	1	1	31	33
October	0	5	29	34
November	2	3	54	59
December	5	1	50	56
Total	28	72	472	573

¹ Excludes pedal cycles, horse riders and mobility scooters.

Note:

Data for 2013 will be published on 26 June 2014.

Mr Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate his Department has made of how many motor vehicles have used the A14 in each of the last three years. [201632]

Mr Goodwill: The Department's estimates of vehicle flows give the average number of vehicles per mile of the A14 on an average day of the year. Figures for the last three years are in the following table.

	<i>Average daily number of vehicles per mile</i>
2011	46,073
2012	46,013
2013	46,709

A428

Mr Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what estimate his Department has made of how many motor vehicles have used the A428 in each of the last three years. [201631]

Mr Goodwill: The Department's estimates of vehicle flows give the average number of vehicles per mile of the A428 on an average day of the year. Figures for the last three years are shown in the following table.

	<i>Average daily number of vehicles per mile</i>
2011	12,491
2012	12,476
2013	12,660

Mr Djanogly: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many motor vehicles accidents have occurred on the A428 in each of the last 12 months. [201633]

Mr Goodwill: The numbers of reported personal injury motor vehicle accidents on the A428 in each of the 12 months in 2012 are given in the following table; by severity.

Number of reported personal injury accidents involving at least one motor vehicle¹ on A428: 2012

	<i>Number of accidents</i>			<i>Total</i>
	<i>Fatal</i>	<i>Serious</i>	<i>Slight</i>	
January	3	4	26	33
February	0	2	14	16
March	1	3	20	24
April	0	5	6	11
May	0	2	14	16
June	0	1	14	15
July	0	4	16	20
August	0	7	18	25
September	0	6	21	27
October	0	0	21	21
November	0	1	16	17
December	0	4	19	23
Total	4	39	205	248

¹ Excludes pedal cycles, horse riders and mobility scooters.

Note:

Data for 2013 will be published on 26 June 2014.

A5: Shrewsbury

Daniel Kawczynski: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what consideration he has given to reclassifying the A5 from Shrewsbury to the M54 so that the M54 runs to Shrewsbury. [201198]

Mr Goodwill: Following the meeting with my hon. Friend last year, I asked the Highways Agency to look into the case for and against reclassifying the A5 between the M54 and Shrewsbury as a motorway. The Agency has indicated that work to quantify costs associated with such a reclassification is almost complete but that identifying and evaluating the resulting benefits is proving more problematic. Further assessment will be necessary before a robust cost/benefit analysis can be completed. I have asked the Agency to liaise with my hon. Friend as this matter progresses.

Large Goods Vehicles

Stephen Phillips: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what steps he is taking with his European counterparts to encourage the reduction of fuel consumption by heavy-duty vehicles across the EU. [201318]

Mr Goodwill: We are committed to reducing the fuel consumption of heavy duty vehicles. We continue to work closely with both the UK industry and our European counterparts to ensure that the recently published EU strategy for improving heavy duty vehicle fuel consumption and reducing CO₂ emissions reflects UK interests, and is ambitious but deliverable, proportionate and cost-effective.

Motor Vehicles: Excise Duties

Gareth Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many people were prosecuted for failure to pay vehicle excise duty in (a) Dartford constituency and (b) England and Wales in each of the last five years. [201323]

Stephen Hammond: The Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency does not hold this data broken down by parliamentary constituency. Figures are not held specifically for England and Wales. The following table shows the total amount of prosecutions for the offence of keeping or using an unlicensed vehicle in England, Scotland and Wales in each of the last five years.

	<i>Total number of prosecutions</i>
2009-10	64,408
2010-11	53,648
2011-12	44,159
2012-13	29,035
2013-14	25,044

The DVLA operates a comprehensive package of measures to tackle vehicle excise duty evasion. These range from reminder letters and penalties through to court prosecutions and the wheelclamping and/or removal of unlicensed vehicles. These measures have helped to improve compliance and the latest estimates show that vehicle excise duty evasion is at a historic low of just 0.6%.

Speed Limits: Cameras

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many average speed cameras are operating in each region and constituent part of the UK. [201417]

Mr Goodwill: In England, the Highways Agency has the following six average speed camera systems on its network:

- M3 (Junction 2) (South East Region)
- M3 (from the M25) (South East Region)
- M25 (J12) (South East Region)
- A14 (East of England)
- A38 Saltash Tunnel (South West Region)
- A3 Hindhead Tunnel (South East Region)

Average speed cameras are also used in road works as a temporary measure.

The Department for Transport does not hold this information for cameras on local authority roads. Local authorities have statutory duties related to road safety and decisions about whether they operate speed cameras are a matter for them.

This is a devolved matter so the Department does not hold information on average speed cameras in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what statistics his Department has collected on the use of average speed cameras and their effectiveness in reducing (a) accidents and (b) fatal accidents. [201418]

Mr Goodwill: The Department for Transport does not collect statistics on the use of average speed cameras on local roads.

The most recent evaluation of the effectiveness of safety cameras was carried out in the four-year evaluation report of the National Safety Camera Programme, published in 2005. This evaluation did not, however, specifically address average speed reduction cameras.

In England, since the National Safety Camera Programme ceased in 2007, evaluation of safety cameras on local roads has been for the individual safety camera partnerships, local authorities and police forces which operate the cameras.

The Highways Agency produces Post Opening Project Evaluation (POPE) reports for average speed camera systems on the Highways Agency network in England.

Valuation of Life and Health Interdepartmental Group

Mr O'Brien: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will place in the Library a copy of his Department's submission to the Inter-departmental Group for the Valuation of Life and Health review and evidence submitted to the series of interviews with his Department's staff conducted by researchers from the university of Leeds published in 2008. [201407]

Stephen Hammond: I can inform my right hon. Friend that the documents have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

South Asia

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much funding her Department allocated to the Conflict Pool for South Asia in each of the last three years. [201189]

Mr Duncan: The Conflict Pool is funded from an HM Treasury settlement which is separate from and additional to departmental budgets. Details of Conflict Pool allocations are provided to Parliament annually in a written ministerial statement. The statements for financial years 2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14 are available on the parliament.uk website.

A statement giving details of Conflict Pool allocations for FY 2014-15 will be laid before the House shortly.

DEFENCE

Afghanistan

Stephen Phillips: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to work with his international counterparts on ensuring that the Afghanistan Government continues to maintain security in sparsely populated areas of that country following the withdrawal of international troops. [201319]

Mr Francois: The international security assistance force's (ISAF) combat mission will end this year and the Afghan national security force (ANSF) will assume full responsibility for security across Afghanistan. The UK and our international partners have committed to providing long-term support to the Afghan Government, including continued development of the ANSF, as part of the follow-on resolute support mission. This is subject to the necessary legal permissions being in place before the end of this year. The UK is also contributing an additional £70 million per year until 2017 towards ANSF sustainment.

Air Force: Training

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the results were of the recent interoperability training between RAF 41 (reserve) Test and Evaluation Squadron training with Swedish Air Force and their JAS39C Gripen aircraft. [201351]

Mr Francois: The visiting Swedish aircraft were from the Swedish Air Combat Training School. This visit enabled both parties to conduct tactical development of our respective operational test and evaluation processes. It also provided a valuable opportunity to exchange experiences in this area.

Armed Forces: Cadets

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what criteria he will use in deciding in which schools to establish a new Combined Cadet Force detachment; [201019]

(2) what estimate he has made of the annual cost in each school of setting up a new Combined Cadet Force detachment; [201016]

(3) what assessment he has made of the effect of establishing new Combined Cadet Force detachments in state schools on recruitment to existing community-based cadet forces. [201020]

Anna Soubry: The cost of setting up a new Combined Cadet Force (CCF) unit under the Cadet Expansion Programme depends largely on the number of cadets in the unit.

Decisions on opening new CCFs in schools are made jointly by the Department for Education and Ministry of Defence (MOD). The key criteria for deciding which schools can establish a new CCF are the ability of the school to fund the new unit and provide sufficient adult volunteers to run it. However, we are particularly interested in establishing CCFs in areas of deprivation.

No assessment has been made of the effect of establishing new CCFs in state schools on recruitment to community cadet units. However, it should be noted that CCFs and community cadet units deliver different but complementary elements of the MOD's youth engagement strategy.

Mr Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what recent discussions he has had with the Combined Cadet Force (CCF) Association about the funding of school CCFs; [201086]

(2) what plans he has to change the funding support for Combined Cadet Forces; [201087]

(3) what plans he has for further funding of Combined Cadet Forces; and if he will make a statement. [201088]

Anna Soubry: We have set a target of expanding the number of Combined Cadet Forces (CCFs) in state schools.

We are moving towards a model for all CCFs which will involve schools making a small contribution towards the running costs of their units, irrespective of which sector the school is in. We are working with schools to establish the best way forward and our current plan is that funding changes will happen in a phased manner over a four-year period from September 2015.

The Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), has not had discussions with the Combined Cadet Force Association (CCFA), although officials are in regular contact. The CCFA is represented on relevant Government cadet committees, and has been briefed on the planned changes.

Armed Forces: Crimes of Violence

Emily Thornberry: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many cases of (a) rape, (b) sexual assault and (c) domestic violence were (i) reported to the Royal Military Police, (ii) referred by the Royal Military Police to prosecutors and (iii) directed for trial in each year since 2009. [201069]

Anna Soubry: The tables show the number of cases of rape and sexual assault reported to the Royal Military Police, which of those were referred by the Royal Military Police to prosecutors and which were directed for trial since 2009.

These represent any case worldwide where the Royal Military Police has jurisdiction. Decisions to direct cases for trial are taken by the independent Service Prosecuting Authority.

	<i>Number of rape cases reported to the Royal Military Police</i>	<i>Number of rape cases referred by the Royal Military Police to prosecutors</i>	<i>Number of rape cases directed for trial¹</i>
2009	20	15	10
2010	20	10	10
2011	20	15	5
2012	20	15	10
2013	20	5	10

	<i>Number of sexual assault cases reported to the Royal Military Police</i>	<i>Number of sexual assault cases referred by the Royal Military Police to prosecutors</i>	<i>Number of sexual assault cases directed for trial¹</i>
2009	60	30	10
2010	65	45	30
2011	50	30	40
2012	35	25	25
2013	45	30	25

¹ The figures relating to referrals and directions for trial use the date of referral receipt as the base line. The Service Prosecuting Authority often receive referrals in one year and the cases are directed, disposed and/or tried in the following year. As such there is no direct correlation to the number of cases brought in any one year. Over a period of time the figures may well fluctuate as additional referrals are either directed or non-instituted.

The figures have been rounded to the nearest five. The specific figure has not been disclosed to ensure that the alleged victim(s) cannot be identified. This is in line with the Sexual Offences (Amendments) Act 1976 and 1992.

Because of the way domestic violence statistics are recorded it is taking some time to collate the information. I will write to the hon. Member with an answer shortly.

Army Reserve

Mr Kevan Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what planning data was used to devise his Department's recruitment target for the Army Reserve as part of its Army 2020 reforms. [200586]

Anna Soubry: The term "recruitment target" has been interpreted as the 30,000 trained Army Reservists required under Army 2020.

During the three-month exercise, the Ministry of Defence examined a range of force structure options which were assessed as being able to deliver the policy demand specified by the new defence planning assumptions laid out in strategic defence and security review 2010. As a result of this, a Senior Military Judgement Panel chaired by the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff and including the Assistant Chiefs of the Royal Navy, Army and Royal Air Force concluded that the size of the Regular Army should be 82,500, and the Independent Commission to Review the United Kingdom's Reserve Forces recommended an Army Reserve of 30,000 trained personnel. This was judged to be the optimal size and shape of the Army within available resources.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the Army Reserve returned injured from operations in the last 10 years. [201503]

Anna Soubry: 239 Army Reserve personnel have returned injured from operations between 1 April 2007, when records began, and 30 April 2014.

Army: Length of Service

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence pursuant to the answer of 16 June 2014, *Official Report*, column 363W, on army: length of service, if he will provide the full calculations used to produce that Answer. [201309]

Anna Soubry: The table included in my answer of 16 June 2014 included a column headed 'Average Strength'. This was incorrectly labelled and should have been headed 'Underlying Outflow'.

The tables from my answers of 3 April 2014, *Official Report*, column 809W, and 16 June 2014, *Official Report*, column 363W, are reproduced as follows with the correct headings and to provide clarity.

Regiment/Corps	Average Career Length		Underlying Outflow
	Enlisted under 18	Enlisted 18 or over	
Household Cavalry & Royal Armoured Corps	11 years, 4 months	9 years, 4 months	1,860
Royal Artillery	13 years, 0 months	9 years, 6 months	2,210
Royal Engineers	12 years, 11 months	8 years, 6 months	2,830
Royal Signals	14 years, 5 months	10 years, 1 months	1,830
Infantry	11 years, 0 months	7 years, 9 months	8,700
Army Air Corps	14 years, 1 months	11 years, 3 months	370

Regiment/Corps	Average Career Length		Underlying Outflow
	Enlisted under 18	Enlisted 18 or over	
Royal Logistic Corps	13 years, 5 months	10 years, 2 months	4,560
Royal Army Medical Corps	12 years, 1 months	9 years, 10 months	560
Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers	14 years, 4 months	13 years, 3 months	2,670
Adjutant General's Corps (Provost)	19 years, 7 months	13 years, 6 months	400
Adjutant General's Corps (Staff and Personnel Support)	18 years, 10 months	14 years, 4 months	870
Royal Army Veterinary Corps	12 years, 10 months	9 years, 6 months	80
Small Arms School Corps	23 years, 0 months	21 years, 5 months	20
Royal Army Dental Corps	13 years, 7 months	11 years, 10 months	60
Intelligence Corps	22 years, 10 months	14 years, 4 months	240
Royal Army Physical Training Corps	22 years, 0 months	19 years, 11 months	110
Queen Alexandra's Royal Army Nursing Corps	14 years, 5 months	11 years, 4 months	140
Corps of Army Music	22 years, 2 months	13 years, 3 months	180
Senior Soldier Continuity Posts (Long Service)	34 years, 11 months	30 years, 4 months	140

Notes/Caveats:

Underlying outflow figures have been rounded to 10; numbers ending in "5" have been rounded to the nearest multiple of 20 to prevent systematic bias.

Source:

Defence Statistics (Army)

An individual's Length of Service and enlistment age have been calculated using the current entry date recorded on the Joint Personnel Administration system. There can be small anomalies in the data where personnel have transferred to the Army from another service, served under an alternative assignment type (eg reserve forces), are re-entrants or have transferred from officers to other ranks.

The average career length is a simple calculation based on dividing the total length of service of all those personnel who have left the Army by Corps between 1 April 2010 and 31 March 2013 by the total number of personnel leaving each Corps during the same period.

Army: Recruitment

Sir Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of his Department's contract with Capita in relation to the Army Recruitment Partnering project. [201968]

Anna Soubry: Since January 2011, as part of the Transparency Agenda, central Government Departments have been required to publish information about contracts they award on Contracts Finder. A copy of the Ministry of Defence contract with Capita for the Army Recruitment Partnering project can be found at:

Recruiting Partnering Contract, part 1:

<https://online.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/Common/View/%20Notice.aspx?site=1000&lang=en¬iceid=473310&fs=true>

Part 2:

<https://online.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/Common/View/%20Notice.aspx?site=1000&lang=en¬iceid=473847&fs=true>

D-day Landings: Anniversaries

Jim Shannon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans his Department has to hold further D-day commemorations. [200628]

Anna Soubry: Following the very successful commemorations to mark this year's 70th anniversary of D-day, we will be discussing with the Normandy Veterans Association how we might approach future commemorations once the association disbands later this year. We are sure that veterans will continue to return annually as long as they are able and that particular plans will again be made as the 75th anniversary, another significant milestone, approaches.

European Fighter Aircraft

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the technical fault was with Typhoon aircraft T3 ZJ815 which forced it to land in Lajes Field; whether this fault has been rectified; and whether this aircraft has since returned to the UK. [201350]

Mr Francois: Typhoon ZJ815 was on a pre-planned stop at Lajes Field on its return journey to the UK from exercise in the USA. A fault with the Inertial Measuring Unit on Typhoon ZJ815 was identified during routine pre-departure checks at Lajes Field. The fault was repaired in situ and the aircraft returned to the UK.

France

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the final investment approval for Project Teutates. [200913]

Mr Dunne: I am unable to place a copy of the business case that sought investment approval for Project Teutates in the Library as the document contains classified information.

Military Decorations

Mark Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will add a category of name of medal requested to the Certificate of Kinship Request for the Medals of a Deceased Ex-Serviceman/woman form. [201090]

Anna Soubry: The existing combined medal application and next of kin form contains a box where the applicant can specify which medal they are applying for.

Ministerial Policy Advisers

Ian Swales: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department has spent on redundancy payments for special advisers since May 2010. [200475]

Anna Soubry: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster

General, my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr Maude), on 19 June 2014, *Official Report*, column 678W.

Nuclear Weapons

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what reports covering the factors surrounding the use of nuclear weapons have been (a) prepared and (b) commissioned by his Department. [201426]

Mr Dunne: The UK has made it clear that the circumstances in which any employment of nuclear weapons might be contemplated are very remote. We would employ nuclear weapons only in extreme circumstances of self-defence and in accordance with our obligations under international law. The UK uses nuclear weapons as a deterrent every single day as demonstrated by the Continuous At Sea Deterrence. The most recent major Government reports that explore these issues are the 2006 White Paper "The Future of the United Kingdom's Nuclear Deterrent"; the 2010 SDSR and the 2013 Trident Alternatives Review, all of which are in the public domain.

South Asia

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much funding his Department allocated to the Conflict Pool for South Asia in each of the last three years. [201193]

Mr Francois: The Conflict Pool is funded from a Treasury settlement which is separate from and additional to departmental budgets and is administered jointly by the Ministry of Defence, the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for conflict prevention and mitigation work. Details of Conflict Pool allocations are provided to Parliament annually in a written ministerial statement. Statements for financial years (FY) 2011-12, 2012-13 and 2013-14 are as follows:

5 April 2011, *Official Report*, columns 57-59WS.

19 November 2012, *Official Report*, columns 19-22WS.

13 June 2013, *Official Report*, columns 14-15WS.

A Statement giving details of Conflict Pool allocations for FY 2014-15 will be released to the House shortly.

Type 26 Frigates

Mr Ellwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the key stages of decision-making are in the procurement process of the Type 26 global combat ship. [201542]

Mr Dunne: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 17 March 2014, *Official Report*, column 504W.

Ukraine

Jim Shannon: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many ships from the Royal Navy were present in the recent joint manoeuvres with the Ukrainian navy. [201028]

Mr Francois: None.

Veterans: Mental Health Services

Dan Jarvis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to improve care for veterans suffering with psychological injuries after their service. [200935]

Anna Soubry: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 8 May 2014, *Official Report*, column 277W, to the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mr Hancock). In addition to the initiatives outlined in that answer, I would also note that the mental health of our personnel and veterans is a top priority for the Government and that is why we have committed £7.2 million to ensure there is extensive mental health support in place for those who need it.

EDUCATION

Billing

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how many creditors had remained unpaid by his Department on 1 June 2014 for (a) 45, (b) 60, (c) 75 and (d) 76 days and over. [201611]

Matthew Hancock: The information requested is not collated centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. In common with other Government Departments, the annual report and accounts for the Department for Education, which are available in the Libraries of both Houses, contain information on supplier payment performance.

Teachers: Veterans

Alex Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what assessment he has made of the success of his troops to teachers initiative. [201636]

Mr Laws: The Troops to Teachers undergraduate programme is a new programme, which started in January 2014. Trainees in the first cohort are in their second term of school-based training so whilst feedback from host schools is positive, it is too soon to fully evaluate the success of the programme.

CABINET OFFICE

Government Procurement: SMEs

11. **Mr Bain:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent steps he has taken to address barriers to small and medium-sized enterprises participating in Government procurement. [904464]

Mr Hurd: This Government has transformed central Government procurement to make it more accessible to small and medium-sized businesses. We are in the process of implementing Lord Young's recommendations to create an SME-friendly 'single market' in wider public procurement, and we will go even further through reforms in the forthcoming Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill.

Public Sector Mutuals

12. **James Morris:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress his Department has made on supporting public sector mutuals. [904465]

Mr Maude: The number of public service mutuals has increased from nine in 2010 to nearly 100 today, operating in sectors ranging from youth services to social care. My Department's Mutuals Support Programme continues to provide professional support and training to live and developing mutuals, supporting over 65 to date.

Social Enterprises

14. **Peter Aldous:** To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what progress his Department has made on supporting social enterprises. [904467]

Mr Hurd: This Government is doing a great deal to support the growth of social enterprises. We are improving their access to finance through social investment. We are making it easier for them to deliver public services through the Social Value Act and a wide range of capacity building support.

Billing

Nick de Bois: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many creditors had remained unpaid by his Department on 1 June 2014 for (a) 45, (b) 60, (c) 75 and (d) 76 days and over. [201612]

Mr Maude: During the 2013-14 financial year my Department paid 98.7% of invoices within 30 days.

On 31 May 2014, the following creditors were unpaid by the Cabinet Office—all were in dispute:

<i>Number of days unpaid</i>	<i>Number of creditors</i>
45-59	13
60-74	24
75 and over	30

Brain: Tumours

Rebecca Harris: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office (1) how many patients in the UK were diagnosed with secondary brain tumours in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010, (d) 2011, (e) 2012 and (f) 2013; [201899]

(2) how many patients in the UK were diagnosed with low grade brain tumours in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010, (d) 2011, (e) 2012 and (f) 2013; [201897]

(3) how many patients in the UK were diagnosed with high grade brain tumours in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010, (d) 2011, (e) 2012 and (f) 2013. [201898]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Glen Watson, dated June 2014:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking:

How many patients in the UK were diagnosed with secondary brain tumours in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010, (d) 2011, (e) 2012 and (f) 2013. [201899]

How many patients in the UK were diagnosed with high grade brain tumours in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010, (d) 2011, (e) 2012 and (f) 2013. [201898]

How many patients in the UK were diagnosed with low grade brain tumours in (a) 2008, (b) 2009, (c) 2010, (d) 2011, (e) 2012 and (f) 2013. [201897]

Detailed information about secondary cancer diagnoses and grade of primary cancer at diagnosis are not routinely recorded on individual cancer registrations sent to ONS for processing and publishing as National Statistics. For these reasons it is not possible to provide figures on secondary brain cancer incidence or primary brain cancer incidence by grade.

The most recent cancer incidence figures available are for cases diagnosed in 2012. Table 1 provides the number of newly diagnosed cases of brain cancer in men and women resident in England, for the years 2008 to 2012.

ONS publishes cancer incidence data for England. The latest published figures on cancer incidence for the UK constituent countries are available from the following websites:

England:

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsobl/cancer-statistics-registrations--england--series-mb1-/index.html>

Wales:

<http://www.wcisu.wales.nhs.uk/home>

Scotland:

<http://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Cancer/Cancer-Statistics/>

Northern Ireland:

<http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/nicr/CancerData/OnlineStatistics/>

Table 1: Number of newly diagnosed cases of brain cancer¹, 2008-12², male, female, England³

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Male	2,283	2,356	2,310	2,275	2,336
Female	1,689	1,714	1,702	1,759	1,623
Total	3,972	4,070	4,012	4,034	3,959

¹ Cancer of the Brain is coded as C71 according to the International Classification of Diseases Tenth Revision (ICD-10).

² Cancer incidence figures are based on newly diagnosed cases registered in each calendar year.

³ Figures for England exclude cancer registrations for non-residents.

Source:

Office for National Statistics

Muslim Brotherhood

Daniel Kawczynski: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when the review of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Sir John Jenkins will be published. [201852]

Mr Maude: The findings of the review will be published once they have been considered by the Government.

Telephone Services

Valerie Vaz: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many telephone lines with the prefix (a) 0845, (b) 0844 and (c) 0843 his Department (i) operates and (ii) sponsors; how many calls each such number has received in the last 12 months; and whether alternative numbers charged at BT local rates are available in each such case. [201604]

Mr Hurd: The Cabinet Office does not operate or sponsor telephone lines with the prefix 0843, 0844 or 0845.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Sovereignty: Scotland

Jonathan Edwards: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether his Department had discussions with the Welsh Government regarding the use of public funds by the Cabinet Office to produce and send an anti-Scottish Independence pamphlet to every house in Scotland. [201175]

Greg Clark: There are regular discussions between UK Government and Welsh Government Ministers on matters of mutual interest.

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Companies: Ownership

Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the proposed beneficial ownership registry identifies the real controlling parties of all companies listed. [201303]

Jenny Willott: The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill will make provision for the implementation of a central registry of company beneficial ownership information. The legislation will set out the obligations and sanctions that will apply to companies and others to ensure that the central registry contains information on the ultimate owners and controllers of UK companies.

Mr Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills when the public register of beneficial ownership will be introduced. [201559]

Jenny Willott: The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill will make provision for the implementation of a central registry of company beneficial ownership information. We will implement the registry through secondary legislation as soon as practicable following Royal Assent of the Bill, which is subject to the will of Parliament.

Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate

Ian Murray: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what the budget for the Employment Agency Standards inspectorate is for 2014-15. [201394]

Jenny Willott: The budget for the Employment Agency Standards inspectorate is no longer devolved below branch level in the Labour Markets Directorate, and we are therefore unable to provide this information.

Higher Education: Dartford

Gareth Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many students at schools in Dartford applied for higher education places in each of the last five years. [201222]

Mr Willetts: Information on the number of UCAS applicants from Dartford constituency is shown in the following table:

UCAS applicants aged under 21¹ and 21 and over to full-time undergraduate courses from Dartford constituency

	Year of entry				
	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Under 21	705	800	845	740	835
21 and over	1,205	1,225	1,245	1,130	1,085

¹ This analysis uses country specific age definitions that align with the cut off points for school and college cohorts within the different administrations of the UK. For England, ages are defined on 31 August. Defining ages in this way matches the assignment of children to school cohorts.

Source:
UCAS.

Minimum Wage

Ian Murray: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) how many complaints about payment of the National Minimum Wage (a) were made, (b) were resolved within the required departmental timescales and (c) were not resolved within the required departmental timescales in 2013-14; [201382]

(2) what the target timescale is for resolving complaints regarding non-payment of the National Minimum Wage. [201383]

Jenny Willott: The Government is committed to increasing compliance with minimum wage legislation and effective enforcement of it. Everyone who is entitled to the minimum wage should receive it. HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) enforces the national minimum wage (NMW) on behalf of BIS.

HMRC investigates every complaint made to the Pay and Work Rights helpline and deals with each NMW complaint on a case-by-case basis. The timescale for each case is dependent on a number of factors:

- the complexity of the issues;
- the size of employer;
- the co-operation of the employer; and
- the enforcement route required.

In 2013/14, HMRC investigated 1,631 cases. Of these, 1,084 cases were closed; 565 cases were closed within 120 days; 519 cases were closed outside of 120 days; and 547 cases are still open and yet to be concluded.

Please note that investigations may not commence and be completed in the same financial year.

Ian Murray: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how much the Government spent on national minimum wage enforcement in 2013-14. [201395]

Jenny Willott: Final figures for the Government spend on national minimum wage enforcement during 2013/14 are not yet available.

Telephone Services

Valerie Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many telephone lines with the prefix (a) 0845, (b) 0844 and (c) 0843 his Department (i) operates and (ii) sponsors; how many calls each number has received in the last 12 months; and whether alternative numbers charged at BT local rates are available in each case. [201603]

Jenny Willott: The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) currently operates the following 0845 numbers:

- 0845 015 0010 BIS Publications Order line;
- 0845 015 0020 BIS Publications Order line (Fax);
- 0845 015 0030 BIS Publications Order line (Minicom); and
- 0845 600 9006 Business Link Helpline.

BIS does not operate any 0843 or 0844 numbers. No records are available showing the number of calls made to these lines in the last 12 months. Alternative numbers charged at the local rate are available on all of these lines.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Combined Authorities: Tees Valley

Tom Blenkinsop: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what recent discussions his Department has had with local authorities in the Tees Valley on the creation of a combined authority. [201293]

Brandon Lewis: On 16 June 2014 the Government signed a City Deal with the Tees Valley in which the local leaders committed to develop plans to strengthen governance, including progressing the idea of a combined authority for the area.

It is for the local areas themselves to decide, given their circumstances, what governance arrangements will best enable effective and collaborative decision taking, which is transparent and locally accountable, thus delivering successfully the implementation of the area's Strategic Economic Plan. Where councils come forward with a proposal for a combined authority that commands wide local support, if the Secretary of State considers that the statutory conditions are met, he will invite Parliament to approve an Order which enables the combined authority to be established.

Fire Services: Pensions

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he plans to hold a further formal public consultation on firefighters' pensions. [201654]

Brandon Lewis: Paragraph 3.3 of the current consultation states that the Department will hold further consultations during 2014 on the governance and transitional arrangements for the firefighter pension reforms.

The current consultation document, which closes on 4 July, can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consultation-on-the-regulations-to-introduce-a-new-firefighters-pension-scheme-from-april-2015>

and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Energy

Dr Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether independent generators who sign a conditional power purchase agreement ahead of competing in a Contract for Difference auction will be able to participate in a later short-term power purchase market that the offtaker of last resort arrangements seek to support. [201411]

Michael Fallon: We anticipate that some generators will seek to establish the terms of any PPA and financing arrangements before they participate in the CfD allocation round, in order to understand better their likely costs. Agreements between generators and PPA providers could take a number of different forms, from indicative terms to a signed contract. The decision to sign a conditional PPA ahead of the auction, and the duration of any agreement, are ultimately commercial matters.

We anticipate that the Offtaker of Last Resort (OLR) will encourage competition in the PPA market both at

the outset of the CfD and once any initial PPA has expired. Generators agreeing to a conditional PPA would be able to participate in the later short-term PPA market, once their initial PPA had expired; backed by the protections afforded by the OLR.

Dr Whitehead: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether he expects independent low carbon generators to have secured conditional power purchase agreements prior to bidding in the contract for difference auction in October 2014. [201533]

Michael Fallon: We anticipate that some generators will seek to establish the terms of any PPA and financing arrangements before they participate in the CfD allocation round, in order to understand better their likely costs. Such conditional PPAs could take a number of forms, from indicative terms to a signed contract.

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what estimate he has made of his Department's consumption of (a) gas and (b) electricity in KWH in each month since June 2010. [201634]

Gregory Barker: DECC's monthly consumption of gas and electricity since June 2010 can be viewed in the following tables. The information provided covers those buildings occupied by the core DECC Department where we are directly billed or have estimates.

Energy (kwh)

	2010-11		2011-12		2012-13	
	Gas	Electricity	Gas	Electricity	Gas	Electricity
April	-	-	26,271.73	118,488.24	46,300.80	113,694.34
May	-	-	18,433.40	125,714.37	31,941.54	130,823.49
June	16,628.86	167,271.19	16,884.90	136,170.60	15,849.41	116,916.29
July	14,492.51	164,190.62	15,374.25	136,162.10	15,971.68	134,794.47
August	14,974.66	149,930.22	13,919.53	136,094.85	14,398.05	134,941.62
September	16,061.27	144,175.92	15,624.00	131,236.52	16,688.21	123,473.43
October	20,574.86	138,090.94	26,751.63	126,006.34	37,936.41	137,211.91
November	37,716.87	136,012.49	41,786.65	122,336.22	70,721.10	129,018.94
December	73,459.07	122,576.51	72,210.50	107,805.51	60,382.93	113,633.33
January	50,313.01	125,964.32	82,497.66	119,865.17	110,003.52	135,198.76
February	36,569.65	116,975.48	104,100.95	124,662.19	104,456.34	130,040.57
March	32,840.54	132,109.71	46,541.02	124,512.95	103,784.53	135,098.05

Energy (kwh)

	2013-14		2014-15	
	Gas	Electricity	Gas	Electricity
April	71,226.79	131,565.73	44,331.45	118,491.17
May	36,416.79	139,388.95	27,540.83	123,533.18
June	22,242.11	145,514.18	-	-
July	21,409.88	172,389.81	-	-
August	17,438.38	152,973.22	-	-
September	19,566.45	136,575.72	-	-
October	31,900.85	139,261.69	-	-
November	61,766.97	132,878.44	-	-
December	62,490.21	127,263.77	-	-
January	82,280.77	145,212.29	-	-

Energy (kwh)

	2013-14		2014-15	
	Gas	Electricity	Gas	Electricity
February	69,704.16	135,216.86	-	-
March	56,728.98	139,352.76	-	-

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how much his Department spent on (a) gas and (b) electricity bills in each year since 2010. [201659]

Gregory Barker: Departmental spend on gas and electricity bills, by financial year, is as follows:

Gas

	£
2010-11	19,122
2011-12	16,700
2012-13	21,719
2013-14	¹ 15,851

Electricity

	£
2010-11	203,723
2011-12	165,782
2012-13	202,289
2013-14	205,847

¹ March gas bill not yet received, February used as approximation.

Energy: China

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what commitments to transparency were included in the bilateral co-operation agreements with China on Energy announced on 17 June 2014. [201315]

Michael Fallon: On 17 June 2014, the UK signed two agreements relating to civil nuclear energy at the UK-China Summit. Both the Joint Statement on Civil Nuclear Energy Co-operation and the Memorandum of Understanding on Enhancing Co-operation in the Field of Civil Nuclear Industry Fuel Cycle Supply Chain are on the gov.uk website and can be viewed via the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/multimillion-boost-to-uk-economy-as-china-and-uk-government-sign-civil-nuclear-agreement-and-sign-agreement-to-deepen-cooperation-on-climate-change>

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what the cost has been of the visit of his Department's officials ahead of the completion of the agreements on energy collaboration with China signed on 17 June 2014; and if he will publish the dates and purpose of each such visit. [201316]

Michael Fallon: From 12-15 April, three officials from the Office for Nuclear Development visited Beijing to discuss the Joint Statement on Civil Nuclear Energy Co-operation and Memorandum of Understanding on Enhanced Co-operation on Civil Nuclear Industry Fuel Cycle Supply Chain with the Chinese Government. Officials also attended various other meetings to understand Chinese civil nuclear capability and to explain UK regulatory requirements. The cost of this visit was £11,787.38.

Housing: Energy

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many households in (a) the UK, (b) England, (c) Scotland, (d) Wales and (e) Northern Ireland are off the mains gas grid. [201492]

Michael Fallon: In 2012, it is estimated that there were approximately 2.83 million households in Great Britain that did not have access to the gas network; 2.21 million of these households were in England, 0.44 million in Scotland and 0.20 million in Wales.

Data on gas connections in Northern Ireland, and data on the number of households within 500 meters of the gas grid, are not held by DECC.

These data are available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sub-national-estimates-of-households-not-connected-to-the-gas-network>

Tom Greatrex: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many properties were connected to the gas distribution network in (a) 2013 and (b) 2014. [201495]

Michael Fallon: The figures set out in the following table are for gas grid connections that fall under the eight gas distribution networks in Great Britain. These figures do not include gas transmission, nor do they include independent gas transporters (IGTs) as IGTs are not regulated (they are part of a relative price control as part of Ofgem's remit).

Please see the following figures from 1 April 2012 until 31 March 2013:

	2012-13				
	<i>New housing</i>	<i>Existing housing</i>	<i>Industrial/commercial</i>	<i>Fuel poor</i>	<i>Total</i>
East of England	1,559	4,534	74	2,748	8,915
London	635	1,145	68	200	2,048
North West	494	1,523	57	1,943	4,017
West Midlands	469	1,257	47	1,206	2,979
Northern Gas Networks	1,187	3,341	407	914	5,849
Scotland	378	7,531	295	2,801	11,005
Southern	3,405	6,577	458	120	10,560
Wales and West	2,653	5,069	556	2,105	10,383
Industry	10,780	30,977	1,962	12,037	55,756

Ofgem receive the 2013-14 regulatory year submissions from the companies on 31 July. We therefore do not have any more up-to-date information at the moment for gas distribution connections in 2014.

Housing: Insulation

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change how many households with a below-average income have received support for comprehensive insulation of their homes in the last year. [904340]

Gregory Barker: The coalition Government is committed to fighting fuel poverty through the installation of robust energy efficiency measures.

Statistics published this morning show that from the start of 2013 to the end of April 2014, 394,000 low-income and vulnerable consumers, or households in specified areas of low income, had benefited from energy efficiency measures being installed under the new energy company obligation.

Liquefied Petroleum Gas

Mr Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of existing regulations on commercial propane gas providers. [201530]

Michael Fallon: The supply of propane gas in bulk and cylinder form is subject to UK competition law under the Competition and Markets Authority; and Health and Safety Regulations.

The study by the Office of Fair Trading into the off-grid energy market in 2011 showed that on the whole competition works well, with consumers offered a good choice of suppliers, and that the off-grid sector does not need price regulation.

Health and Safety Regulations place obligations on propane gas suppliers so that the supplier must ensure that the installation is safe to receive propane gas before refilling, that the product is safely contained and that the installation is fitted with a pressure regulator and other key safety devices.

Nuclear Power

Gareth Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what proportion of the UK's energy supply he expects to be obtained from nuclear energy in each of the next five years. [201221]

Michael Fallon: DECC's most recent projections of future electricity generation were made as part of the EMR December Delivery Plan 2013. The percentage of total electricity generation expected from nuclear sources in each calendar year is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Yearly percentage of total electricity generation expected from nuclear sources

	Percentage of total generation from nuclear sources
2014	17.4
2015	17.6
2016	17.2
2017	17.3
2018	17.4
2019	17.4

Veterans

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether his Department issues guidance about the protocol of former armed forces personnel using their rank as a title after they have left service. [201635]

Gregory Barker: The Department of Energy and Climate Change does not have a policy or guidance on the protocol of former armed forces personnel using their rank as a title after they have left service.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Burma

Valerie Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make an assessment of the accuracy of the report of 9 May 2014

by the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies that a military factory in Pauk Township of the central Magwe Division, Burma, has some features that are consistent with a chemical plant. [201667]

Mr Swire: The James Martin Centre report states that it is not possible to determine the nature of the facility in question. We are unable to make any further assessments at this stage.

We have made a concerted effort to encourage Burma to ratify their Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC). I raised this most recently with Deputy Foreign Minister U That Kyaw on 12 June. We are working with the OPCW to offer practical support, and the UK National Authority to the CWC has offered to host a Burmese delegation later this year.

India

Valerie Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on sexual assault of ethnic Chin women and children from Burma in New Delhi, India; and if he will make a statement. [201663]

Mr Swire: We are aware of such reports. We are committed to working with the new Indian Government and international partners to address the problem of gender-based violence, human trafficking and child exploitation in India. Through the Department for International Development's (DFID) programmes, we support measures in India's 120 poorest districts to promote the empowerment and access to benefits and services of excluded and vulnerable groups. Through DFID, we also provide support to national and state authorities in India helping girls to complete basic education and further tackling violence against women and girls.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), invited the Indian Government to attend the recent global summit to end sexual violence in conflict and has already discussed the initiative with the new Indian Foreign Minister. The Indian high commissioner to the UK attended the summit.

Kashmir

Mr Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent assessment he has made of the situation in Kashmir; and what recent discussions he has had with his (a) Indian, (b) Pakistani and (c) US counterparts on this matter. [201187]

Mr Swire: The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), has spoken to each of his Indian, Pakistani and US counterparts in recent months about South Asia regional issues and relations between India and Pakistan. We recognise the importance of finding a lasting solution to the situation in Kashmir, but remain of the view it is not for third parties to prescribe one. We continue to follow developments in the region closely, and officials from our high commissions in both New Delhi and Islamabad regularly discuss the situation in Kashmir with both governments and travel to the region, security situation permitting.

Palestinians

Mr Godsiff: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to his Israeli counterpart on the recent destruction of fruit trees at the Tent of Nations farm on the West Bank. [198634]

Hugh Robertson: We have not raised this specific issue with the Israeli authorities. However, we repeatedly make clear to the Israeli authorities our serious concerns about continued demolitions of Palestinian property and the need to abide by their other obligations under international law. Officials from our Embassy in Tel Aviv raised the issue of demolitions in general on 28 May with Prime Minister Netanyahu's office.

Sudan

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the government of Sudan about the imprisonment of Meriam Ibrahim. [198895]

Mark Simmonds: I am appalled at the death sentence given to Meriam Ibrahim, and her continued imprisonment. Immediately following her trial, I issued a statement describing her conviction as barbaric and calling upon the Government of Sudan to respect the right to freedom of religion and international human rights laws as enshrined in its own constitution. The chargé d'affaires of the Sudanese embassy in London was summoned to the Foreign Office on 19 May at the request of the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague). The Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), reiterated our demand with the Sudanese Foreign Minister when she met him on 20 May. Our embassy in Khartoum, that attended her trial, continues to press the Sudanese authorities for Meriam Ibrahim's release, and is in close contact with the defence team.

Naomi Long: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will press for the immediate release of Meriam Ibrahim and her two children who are imprisoned in Sudan. [201304]

Mark Simmonds: Meriam Ibrahim was released on 23 June, which we strongly welcomed. She has subsequently been detained again by the Sudanese authorities. Together with our international partners we are urgently seeking clarity on the precise details of her re-arrest and to seek her immediate release.

Before her short release, the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for International Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), and I had all issued statements calling for Meriam Ibrahim to be released immediately. We also raised our concerns directly with the Government of Sudan: my colleague Lynne Featherstone with the Sudanese Foreign Minister; and our ambassador in Khartoum with other Ministers and senior officials. We will continue to press for her freedom.

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent steps he has taken to call for the release of Mariam Ibrahim and her son from prison in Sudan and for her death sentence to be revoked. [201657]

Mark Simmonds: We have repeatedly raised our concerns about this appalling case with the Government of Sudan. The Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for International Development, and I all issued statements calling for Meriam Ibrahim to be released immediately. We also raised our concerns directly with the Government of Sudan: I highlighted this case in a letter to Presidential Assistant Professor Ghandour; the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), raised it with the Sudanese Foreign Minister; and our ambassador in Khartoum has raised it on multiple occasions with other Ministers and senior officials.

Syria

Mark Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what evidence his Department holds on whether the Syrian Government was responsible for the chemical weapons attack in Kafr Zita. [199799]

Hugh Robertson: The UK was among the first to express concern at allegations that chemical weapons had again been used in Syria, and called for them to be investigated.

On 29 April the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Director General announced he was establishing a Fact Finding Mission to determine the truth behind recent allegations of chemical weapon use in Syria. The UK has continued to stress the importance of this mission determining the full facts.

We are aware of at least 9 attacks in April in which the use of chemical weapons has been alleged. We consider it likely that chemical weapons have been used on at least some of these occasions. There are a number of pieces of information that suggest that only regime could have been responsible for these attacks, including the use of helicopters to deliver bombs to their targets and the fact that the attacks took place in opposition controlled areas. We have shared the information we hold with the OPCW.

We condemn the attack on the convoy carrying inspectors to Kafr Zita and urge all parties to the conflict to ensure that inspectors are given secure and unrestricted access to all relevant sites to enable the full facts to be established.

HEALTH

Abortion

Daniel Kawczynski: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what regulatory oversight his Department will apply to 24 hour helplines provided by independent abortion clinics. [201311]

Jane Ellison: It is a condition of approval from the Secretary of State that independent sector providers have a 24 hour helpline available. The Care Quality Commission is considering the best approach to regulating termination of pregnancy services.

Billing

Nick de Bois: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many creditors had remained unpaid by his Department on 1 June 2014 for (a) 45, (b) 60, (c) 75 and (d) 76 days and over. [201613]

Norman Lamb: As at 1 June 2014, the Department had three creditors that remained unpaid for between 45-59 days.

The Department had no creditors that remained unpaid for between 60-74 days.

The Department had no creditors that remained unpaid for 75 days.

Following the abolition of primary care trusts (PCTs) and strategic health authorities (SHAs) on 31 March 2013, the Department took over responsibility for ensuring that legacy invoice payments were made correctly. Legacy PCT and SHA teams remained in place, to process creditor payments for prior to 1 April 2013, until 31 August 2013. Those outstanding at that point were transferred to successor organisations, including the Department. As at 1 June 2014, there were 270 creditors that remained unpaid. This is due to the careful diligence taking place in order to mitigate the risk of making fraudulent or duplicate payments.

Diabetes

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what discussions he has had with the Chief Executive of NHS Improving Quality on (a) preserving the legacy of the work of NHS Diabetes and (b) improving care for people with diabetes; and if he will make a statement; [201298]

(2) what discussions he has had with the National Clinical Director for Obesity and Diabetes on the implementation plans for Action for Diabetes; and if he will make a statement. [201296]

Jane Ellison: Jonathan Valabhji, the National Clinical Director for Obesity and Diabetes, has had no discussions with the Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), specifically about Action for Diabetes.

There have been no recent discussions about diabetes between the Secretary of State for Health and NHS Improving Quality.

Drugs: Misuse

Mr Virendra Sharma: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to reduce the incidence of opiate-related overdoses among people recently released from prison. [201223]

Jane Ellison: People who have recently been released from prison are at a greater risk of overdose. A 2005 report on drug-related mortality among newly released offenders (1998-2000) showed that male prisoners in the study were about 29 times more likely to die than males in the general population.

The Department of Health and Ministry of Justice have funded a joint initiative to improve the "through the gate" provision for prisoners who are dependent on

drugs and alcohol. Ten prisons in the North West are currently piloting a range of innovative interventions to provide more intensive support and supervision for people leaving custody which include the use of peer mentors, recovery housing services and take-home naloxone as they return to the community.

Public Health England has also published a checklist to support local authorities with commissioning services and interventions that help to prevent overdose, as part of a wider treatment and harm reduction system.

The Integrated Drug Treatment System (IDTS) programme, implemented in prisons between 2006 and 2010, sought to improve the standard and quality of drug treatment in prisons. One of the key drivers for this programme was the need to reduce drug-related deaths among people who had been recently released from prison.

Through IDTS, prisoners could get access to evidence-based opioid substitution treatment in prison, which they could continue in the community after release. The extent in which this was successful in reducing drug-related overdose deaths will be one of the themes in the IDTS evaluation, which will be published next year.

The principles of IDTS continue to be adopted by local partners responsible for commissioning health services.

Mr Virendra Sharma: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the effectiveness of take-home naloxone in reducing the number of opiate-related deaths across the UK in conjunction with the training and educational programmes within the prison services. [201224]

Jane Ellison: From July 2009 to February 2010, the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse (now part of Public Health England (PHE)) ran a trial at 16 pilot sites around England in which carers and relations of opiate misusers were trained to respond to overdoses and use the antidote naloxone and basic life support techniques.

A report¹ on the trial was published in 2011, and it was clear that naloxone appeared to help save lives. The report said that there were 18 overdoses where carers used naloxone and two where they applied basic life support. All the drug users survived the overdose. The trial included people who were about to leave prisons, and the report covers some of the issues around this.

There is currently a trial running on the effectiveness of giving prisoners naloxone when they leave prison, which has yet to report.

Some prisons currently supply prisons with take-home naloxone as part of their post-release support. PHE does not hold the data centrally.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has recommended that naloxone be made more widely available, and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has undertaken a consultation with the field on implementing this recommendation. There will be no further policy announcements on naloxone until the report on this consultation is published.

¹ Full report available at:

<http://www.nta.nhs.uk/uploads.naloxonereport2011.pdf>

Healthy Start Scheme

Mrs Hodgson: To ask The Secretary of State for Health how many parents received Healthy Start vouchers in the latest year for which figures are available; and what the total cost to the Exchequer of such vouchers was. [201421]

Dr Poulter: Healthy Start provides a nutritional safety net to pregnant women, new mothers and children under four years old in United Kingdom families claiming income-based benefits, or claiming child tax credit without working tax credit (unless it is working tax credit run-on) with an annual family income of £16,190 or less. Healthy Start vouchers are issued four-weekly by post and the number entitled to receive the vouchers in each complete four week period during 2013-14 is set out in the following table.

<i>Four weeks beginning on:</i>	<i>Total number of households</i>	<i>Total number of women and children</i>
8 April 2013	457,035	557,833
6 May 2013	455,271	555,454
3 June 2013	453,646	553,208
1 July 2013	450,164	548,533
29 July 2013	443,939	540,437
26 August 2013	441,385	537,195
23 September 2013	438,471	533,703
21 October 2013	434,397	528,620
18 November 2013	432,549	526,151
16 December 2013	428,328	520,777
13 January 2014	427,362	519,570
10 February 2014	425,659	517,463
10 March 2014	423,156	514,217

The gradual reduction in the number entitled to support during 2013-14 reflects a decline in the number of households meeting the qualifying criteria.

Approximately £93 million was paid to retailers during 2013-14 for Healthy Start vouchers they had accepted in exchange for milk, formula milk, fresh and frozen fruit and vegetables. Retailers have six months from the use-by date printed on vouchers to claim reimbursement, and typically they claim reimbursement for at least 91% of all Healthy Start vouchers issued.

Hospitals: Waiting Lists

Ms Abbott: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of patients waiting more than six weeks for diagnostic tests through NHS England; and if he will make a statement. [201358]

Jane Ellison: The Government has invested more than £750 million over four years to support early diagnosis in cancer and improve access to key diagnostics to make sure that everyone has access to the best possible treatment. Awareness raising campaigns such as Be Clear on Cancer are encouraging more people to come forward with their symptoms.

Patients should receive timely care, and NHS England, the NHS Trust Development Authority and Monitor are working with providers and commissioners to ensure patients get access to tests and treatment as quickly as possible.

In Vitro Fertilisation: Trafford

Kate Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps his Department plans to take to ensure that Trafford Commissioning Group provides the full treatment for IVF as recommended by National Institute for Health and Care Excellence in 2004. [201288]

Jane Ellison: The level of provision of infertility treatment, as for all health services they commission, is decided by local clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and will take into account the needs of the population overall. The CCG's decisions are underpinned by clinical insight and knowledge of local health care needs. As such, provision of services will be tailored to local requirements.

NHS England expects all those involved in commissioning infertility treatment services to be fully aware of the importance of having regard to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence fertility guidelines. In February 2013, NHS England issued a factsheet to support CCGs in taking on those responsibilities.

Meat

Sir Greg Knight: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the effect of recent changes to safety checks in slaughterhouses on the risk of diseased meat entering the food chain undetected; and if he will make a statement. [201310]

Jane Ellison: The Food Standards Agency advises that the new procedure for pig meat inspection will better protect consumers from foodborne pathogens such as Salmonella. It reduces the amount of routine carcass handling and incision carried out by officials that contributes to the risk of microbiological contamination on carcasses and offal. This is in line with a 2011 scientific opinion from the European Food Safety Authority.

Under the new procedures, all pigs will continue to be inspected by an official veterinarian while they are alive, and their carcasses and offal will be visually inspected by an official meat inspector or veterinarian after slaughter. Any abnormalities that indicate possible animal health, public health or welfare issues will be further investigated and removed before meat can be declared fit for human consumption.

Medicine: Research

Andrew Gwynne: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if the Health and Safety Executive will create a register of qualified professionals to ensure that clinical research is carried out safely; [201201]

(2) if he will bring forward legislative proposals to ensure that clinical research is carried out by suitably qualified professionals. [201200]

Norman Lamb: The Health and Safety Executive is responsible for the enforcement of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 and ensuring that "risks to people's health and safety from work activities are properly controlled".

The Health Research Authority (HRA) ensures that ethically-approved clinical research is carried out by suitably qualified professionals through its arrangements for research ethics committee review. Research ethics committee review includes scrutiny of researchers' suitability to conduct the research they are proposing. This review is required by departmental guidance, which applies to all health and adult social care research, and by legislation, for instance, in the case of clinical trials, by schedule 1 part 2(2) of the Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004 (SI 2004/1031).

The HRA publishes a register of research summaries, including a contact name (usually that of the chief investigator) and the research ethics committee's opinion. The register is publicly available online at:

www.nres.nhs.uk/researchsummaries

From September 2013, registration of clinical trials in a publicly accessible database is a condition of the favourable ethical opinion given by a research ethics committee.

Organs: Donors

Stephen Phillips: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to work with international counterparts to ensure the sharing of best practice to increase organ donation. [201300]

Jane Ellison: NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT)-the United Kingdom organ donation organisation responsible for matching and allocating donated organs-actively participates and is involved in European Union initiatives to increase organ donation. This includes two current major European organ donation projects: the ACCORD (Achieving Comprehensive Coordination in Organ Donation) and FOEDUS (Facilitating the Exchange of Organs Donated in EU Member States) projects. NHSBT was also a collaborating partner for the completed ODEQUS (European Organ Donation Quality System) project.

The UK drew heavily on evidence of world-wide success, such as Spain, for the development and implementation of the Organ Donation Taskforce recommendations published in 2008, which saw donor rates rise by 50% in five years. A number of international experts from the United States of America, Germany and The Netherlands also contributed to the development of the UK's new strategy published in 2013 "Taking Organ Transplantation to 2020". A number of measures will be used to track improvements in performance in organ donation and transplantation to compare with international benchmarks, in order to try and match the best performing programmes in the world.

TREASURY

Building Societies

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to publish the results of the consultations on bail-in order for building societies; and if he will make a statement. [201186]

Andrea Leadsom: The Government is currently analysing the responses to the consultation on bail-in secondary legislation. Once this review is completed, the Government will publish a summary of the responses and indicate how it plans to proceed.

Children: Day Care

Ian Austin: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what guidance his Department issues to employers on helping employees with the cost of childcare. [201184]

Nicky Morgan: HM Revenue and Customs has published extensive guidance to help employers run successful child care schemes, including the Employer Helpbook E18 'How you can help your employees with childcare'.

Minimum Wage

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what date each of the 25 firms named and shamed for breach of the national minimum wage by his Department on 8 June 2014 was issued with the relevant Notice of Underpayment of the minimum wage by HM Revenue and Customs. [200988]

Jenny Willott: I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

The dates that the Notice of Underpayments (NoU) were issued for the 25 firms named and shamed for breach of the national minimum wage (NMW) are as follows.

<i>Month</i>	<i>NoUs</i>
December 2013	1
January 2014	9
February 2014	10
March 2014	4
April 2014	1

They were issued under the revised Naming Scheme which was introduced on 1 October 2013. It takes time for cases to work their way through the system as there is a process to follow before an employer can be named. If HMRC investigates an employer that is breaking NMW law they will be issued with a Notice of Underpayment (NOU) by HMRC. An employer has 28 days to appeal against the NOU and 14 days from when the case closes to make representations to BIS.

Mortgages: Government Assistance

Andrew George: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many applications for the Help to Buy scheme have been for (a) shared equity, (b) shared ownership, (c) mutual housing and (d) self-build properties since the scheme was launched. [201366]

Andrea Leadsom: The Government does not collect data on the number of applications made under the Help to Buy: mortgage guarantee scheme.

The Government publishes quarterly official statistics relating to the Help to Buy: mortgage guarantee scheme. The first of these were published on 29 May 2014.

This report, along with accompanying tables, can be found at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/help-to-buy-mortgage-guarantee-scheme-quarterly-statistics-october-2013-to-march-2014

The Help to Buy: equity loan scheme is a shared equity scheme. At Budget 2014, the Government announced that it will seek to explore how it can make the Help to Buy: equity loan scheme available for custom build.

Statistics on the legal completions supported by the equity loan scheme are published monthly at:

www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/help-to-buy-equity-loan-scheme-monthly-statistics

Stamp Duty Land Tax

Mrs Gillan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will bring forward proposals to offer a stamp duty holiday to people who will be required to sell their property and purchase another as a result of High Speed 2. [201629]

Mr Gauke: The Government announced in April an extensive compensation and assistance package for property owners close to the route of HS2.

There is no separate treatment of SDLT for individuals purchasing a property after their property has been compulsorily purchased by a public body.

However, owner occupiers within the 'surface safeguarded area' and those who are eligible for the Express Purchase scheme will be entitled to reasonable moving costs, including surveyors' fees, legal fees and stamp duty land tax on a replacement property of similar value.

VAT

Mr Chope: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish details of the Government's proposed legislation to provide for a controlled release of non-financial VAT registration data for specific purposes. [201571]

Mr Gauke [*holding answer 24 June 2014*]: The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, introduced today on 25 June, includes a clause making provision that allows HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) to release non-financial VAT registration data to qualifying organisations for the purposes of assessing credit worthiness, risk of fraud or compliance with financial regulations.

Research indicates that this has the potential to release up to £1.8 billion worth of additional trade credit. Taking into account the differing circumstances of individual businesses, we estimate an actual take-up of between £0.7 and £1.4 billion.

Venture Capital

Cathy Jamieson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer pursuant to the answer of 11 June 2014, *Official Report*, column 160W, on venture capital, what steps he has taken to support crowdfunding and peer-to-peer (a) lending to and (b) investment in small businesses; and if he will assess the value of such forms of finance to the small and medium-size sector. [201391]

Andrea Leadsom: Crowdfunding and peer-to-peer lending are innovative new forms of finance that support competition in the business lending sector.

The Government has taken a number of steps to support their growth, including bringing peer-to-peer lending within the scope of the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), and announcing that the range of

products that can be held in stocks and shares ISAs will be expanded to include loans made through peer-to-peer platforms.

The Government also operates two tax-advantaged venture capital schemes which are used by equity crowdfunding investors: the Seed Enterprise Investment Scheme (SEIS) and the Enterprise Investment Scheme (EIS).

The Government has not made any assessment of the value of investment in small and medium-sized businesses from peer-to-peer lending and crowdfunding platforms.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Disadvantaged: EU Grants and Loans

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) how much of the EU's Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived he has allocated to public bodies and non-governmental organisations in 2014; [201516]

(2) how much of the EU's Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived he intends to allocate to public bodies and non-governmental organisations in each year between 2014 and 2020. [201517]

Esther McVey: No allocations have yet been made.

National Insurance

Mr Ruffley: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what recent estimate he has made of the number of (a) new national insurance numbers registered and (b) new workers in (i) Bury St Edmunds constituency, (ii) Suffolk and (iii) England and Wales in the latest period for which figures are available. [200746]

Esther McVey: Information on the number of national insurance numbers registered to individuals including new workers, via constituency, county and country, can be found at:

<https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk>

Guidance on how to extract the information required can be found at:

https://sw.stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/webapi/online-help/Stat-Xplore_User_Guide.htm

National Insurance Contributions Office: Newcastle Upon Tyne

Andy McDonald: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for what reason Newcastle was chosen as the National Insurance centre for residents of Middlesbrough; and what effect this choice is having on service provision. [200847]

Esther McVey: Newcastle was chosen as the national insurance centre for residents of Middlesbrough as it has centralised expertise in administering applications for national insurance numbers. Given this expertise, proximity to Middlesbrough and availability of public transport, Newcastle provides a viable service that maintains the level of expertise and security required.

New Enterprise Allowance

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many claimants of employment and support allowance have been admitted to the new enterprise allowance scheme in each year since that scheme began. [201605]

Esther McVey: NEA was rolled out nationally in August 2011, with eligibility for JSA claimants only. Eligibility was broadened to ESA WRAG recipients in February 2013 although we expect the vast majority of participants to continue to be those claiming JSA.

The benefit type of claimants admitted on new enterprise allowance (NEA) is not routinely recorded. Analysis has been conducted to identify NEA mentor starts by ESA claimants since eligibility for NEA was opened up on 18 February 2013. The results are shown in the following table.

Estimated number of NEA mentor starts by ESA claimants in each calendar year

	<i>Estimated number</i>
18 February 2013 to 31 December 2013	630
1 January 2014 to 31 March 2014	210

Notes:

1. Figures rounded to the nearest 10
2. Data available to 31 March 2014
3. More than 99% of mentor starts were matched to an appropriate benefit record

Source:

DWP National Benefits Database and Opportunities Database

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many start up loans have been approved by his Department for participants on the new enterprise allowance scheme in each year since that scheme began. [201606]

Esther McVey: Following a trailblazer started in January 2011, new enterprise allowance was launched in April 2011 creating 46,000 new businesses between April 2011 and March 2014.

Table 1: Number of loans that have been made on behalf of DWP under the new enterprise allowance scheme

<i>Year (January-December)</i>	<i>Number of loans</i>
2011	910
2012	5,140
2013	7,711
2014	472

Table 2: Number of new enterprise allowance loans that have been made since October 2013 under the Start Up Loans scheme administered by BIS

<i>Year (January-December)</i>	<i>Number of loans</i>
2013	158
2014	1,805

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how much his Department spent on the new enterprise allowance in each year since the scheme began. [201609]

Esther McVey: Following a trailblazer started in January 2011, new enterprise allowance was launched in April 2011 creating 46,000 new businesses between April 2011 and March 2014. Expenditure on new enterprise allowance in each year since the scheme began up to March 2014 is shown in the following table.

	<i>New enterprise allowance</i>
	£
2010-11	45,600
2011-12	14,384,781
2012-13	38,853,998
2013-14	64,358,727

This includes capital loan payments which will be repaid within three years.

Nurseries

Ian Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what steps his Department has taken to help its employees who use on-site nurseries to find alternative childcare when these close from September 2014. [201360]

Mike Penning: The following steps have been taken to support DWP employees affected by the on site nursery closures:

At least six months notice of the closures given to users of the nurseries, in order to give them sufficient time to find a suitable alternative place. All contract expiry dates coincide with the beginning of the new school year to minimise disruption for parents and children as much as possible.

Employees have been provided with information regarding the DWP salary sacrifice scheme, where employees can give up part of their salary in return for childcare vouchers. This allows for savings through tax relief and gives parents support in order to make their own choices for child care.

Information, on other nurseries in their local areas, has been provided to parents

DWP has awarded one day's paid special leave to give parents paid time off work to find an alternative place.

Ian Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether employees of his Department's Child Maintenance Group will be compensated for the loss of their childcare subsidy. [201398]

Steve Webb: Five Child Maintenance Group on-site nurseries are due to close on expiry of the contract at the end of September 2014. They are located at offices in Birkenhead, Dudley, Falkirk, Hastings and Plymouth.

Child Maintenance Group child care subsidy was made no longer available to new entrants from 1 June 2012. This brings Child Maintenance Group into line with the Department's policy on child care subsidy.

As part of its remuneration package, the Department supports employees through a salary sacrifice scheme where employees can give up part of their salary in return for child care vouchers. This scheme allows for significant savings through tax relief and gives parents support in order to make their own choices for child care.

Employees affected by the closure of the five on-site nurseries have been offered a day's special leave in order to look for suitable alternatives.

Occupational Health

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on what date he expects the Health and Work Service to start operations. [201607]

Mike Penning: Implementation will begin in late 2014 and the details will be confirmed when the chosen supplier has been appointed.

Personal Independence Payment

Pamela Nash: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many personal independence payment applicants are awaiting an assessment centre appointment in (a) Airdrie and Shotts constituency, (b) Scotland, (c) Wales, (d) Northern Ireland and (e) England; and what the average waiting time for such appointments is. [201522]

Mike Penning: The information you have requested is not available.

Information regarding Northern Ireland is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

Pamela Nash: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what average time was taken between an application for personal independence payment being made and receipt of payment for claims made in (a) Scotland, (b) Wales, (c) Northern Ireland and (d) England in each year since introduction of personal independence payment; [201524]

(2) what average time was taken between an application for personal independence payment being made and receipt of payment for claims made in each (a) parliamentary constituency and (b) local authority area in each year since introduction of personal independence payment. [201523]

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (1) what the average time taken to resolve personal independence payment claims is; and for how long the longest outstanding personal independence claim has been awaiting resolution; [201553]

(2) how many personal independence payment claims had not had a decision more than four weeks after receipt by his Department. [201554]

Mike Penning: The information you have requested is not currently available. Statistics on clearance times are intended for future publication but releasing them at this stage would give an incorrect representation of the process since the system has not yet reached maturity, and further quality assurance of the data is required.

Information regarding Northern Ireland is a matter for the Northern Ireland Office.

Social Security Benefits: Nottinghamshire

Gloria De Piero: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many benefit claimants in (a) Ashfield constituency and (b) Nottingham, have been sanctioned in the last (i) six and (ii) 12 months. [201079]

Esther McVey: The information for JSA and ESA sanctions is published at:

<https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/>

New sanctions rules came into force for JSA and ESA from 22 October 2012 and 3 December 2012. The number of JSA sanctions applied for the new regime is the number of low, intermediate, and high level referrals where the decision was found against the claimant. Further information can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobseekers-allowance-overview-of-sanctions-rules>

Social Security Benefits: Preston

Mark Hendrick: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions how many claimants in Preston constituency are being sanctioned for (a) jobseeker's allowance and (b) employment and support allowance. [201101]

Esther McVey: The information requested is published and available at:

<https://stat-xplore.dwp.gov.uk/>

New sanctions rules came into force for JSA from 22 October 2012 and ESA from 3 December 2012. The number of JSA sanctions applied for the new regime is the number of low, intermediate, and high level referrals where the decision was found against the claimant. Further information can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/jobseekers-allowance-overview-of-sanctions-rules>

Universal Credit

Chris Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what sanctions his Department uses on universal credit claimants who refuse a zero hours contract. [201282]

Esther McVey: Universal credit means that claimants can accept any offer of work without fear of their benefits or the support they receive from the jobcentre being negatively affected. They will always be better off in work.

All claimants are expected to accept reasonable offers of employment. If they do not then they may be referred for a sanction. This is the same for UC.

Stephen Timms: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if he will estimate the additional annual cost of introducing a taper on (a) an occupational pension and (b) other unearned income into universal credit set at 95 per cent. [201608]

Esther McVey: When universal credit is fully rolled out, a 95% taper on occupational pension is estimated to cost an additional £50 million per annum. A 95% taper on all other unearned income (excluding occupational pension) is estimated to cost an additional £300 million per annum. These estimates are in 2014-15 prices.

The general principle in universal credit is that income other than earnings which is provided to meet everyday living costs is taken fully into account in the calculation of the award of benefit. Universal credit is designed to be responsive to the actual amount of income a claimant receives each month, to ensure people get help when they need it and can budget effectively. This approach also keeps administrative costs down and provides simpler rules for treatment of unearned income.

Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 25 June 2014

JUSTICE Bronzefield Prison

Sadiq Khan: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether (a) the prison governor or (b) another official gave permission for the performance of Sister Act in HMP Bronzefield in February and March 2014. [201121]

[Official Report, 23 June 2014, Vol. 583, c. 1W.]

Letter of correction from Simon Hughes:

An error has been identified in the written answer given to the right hon. Member for Tooting (Sadiq Khan) on 23 June 2014.

The full answer given was as follows:

Simon Hughes: Former employees of the Trusts have transferred to the new organisations, namely the National Probation Service (NPS) and the 21 Community Rehabilitation Companies. A small number of chief executives have taken early retirement or are due to do so over the next few weeks. There have also been a number of departures at Assistant Chief Officer (ACO) level. These were part of the normal turnover of staff; details of these are not held centrally.

The correct answer should have been:

Simon Hughes: HM Prison Bronzefield is a private (contracted out) prison and therefore any activities in the establishment are the decision of the Director of that prison. The production of the performance of Sister Act was arranged between Sodexo Justice Services and the respective parties. Therefore this is not part of the contractual agreement between Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and Sodexo Justice Services.

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