Oral Answers to Questions

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

The Secretary of State was asked—
Aerospace Engineering: Pendle

Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): What plans his Department has to support aerospace engineering in Pendle constituency over the next five years. [908332]

Vince Cable: Government and industry are working together in the aerospace growth partnership to implement a long-term industrial strategy that benefits companies throughout the UK. This is backed by a £2 billion investment over seven years in aerospace research, and a £250 million sharing in growth supply chain improvement programme. ELE Advanced Technologies in Pendle is one company benefiting from that programme.

Andrew Stephenson: The aerospace sector is vital to Pendle’s local economy, and as vice-chair of the all-party group for aerospace I have been pleased with the level of support provided to the industry by the Government over the past five years. Although overall the aerospace sector across Pendle is doing well, Rolls-Royce has cut its work force at its two Barnoldswick sites. What more can my right hon. Friend do to support Rolls-Royce to maintain and expand its operations in Pendle?

Vince Cable: Perhaps I may preface my answer by reflecting on the fact that I think I have held this job, or its equivalent, for longer than anybody in 60 years, and I thank everybody in the House for their interest in the affairs of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills over those five years. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your impartial oversight of our proceedings, but I will stop short of wishing everybody well in the forthcoming election.

The hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) is right to say that the aerospace sector is booming, and I think his constituency contains the headquarters of the North West Aerospace Alliance. He is also right to say that despite its considerable successes, his constituency has lost 100 jobs out of the 1,000 at Rolls-Royce. We are supporting Rolls-Royce in many aspects of the industrial strategy, and in surrounding constituencies such as Burnley there is unalloyed success with Aircelle’s recent big investment supported by the regional growth fund.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): As in Pendle so in Derby great concern followed the Government’s plans for aerospace engineering, following the announcement by Rolls-Royce last year that 800 skilled engineering jobs would be lost in the UK. When many of us, including the Minister, met the company to discuss forward plans in November, did the Government know that Rolls-Royce would be recruiting up to 500 skilled engineers in Bangalore, and does he share my concern for what that implies for the long-term future for skilled jobs in the UK?

Vince Cable: I have discussed Rolls-Royce’s long-term strategy with its chief executive on several occasions. We are well aware that it is a global company, and that to maintain its strength it invests internationally, including in India. It is also investing a great deal in the UK, and we work closely with it, not just in the aerospace sector. The talent retention scheme is ensuring that the vast majority of the unfortunate individuals who lost their jobs in the restructuring will be redeployed in high value jobs in the aerospace and related industries.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Rolls-Royce has received hundreds of millions of pounds from the British taxpayer for research and development, yet the company has not paid corporation tax for a considerable time. It is now offshoring jobs to low-wage economies—we have heard about India this morning. I have heard Ministers say that they want to rebalance the economy, so what steps has the Secretary of State taken to try to deter companies from offshoring high-skilled engineering jobs?

Vince Cable: There is indeed some offshoring taking place, but there is also a great deal of onshoring, by Rolls-Royce and other engineering companies elsewhere.
Indeed, engineering that used to be carried out in India is now carried out in the UK. In particular, Rolls-Royce is investing: I have been to several events and seen the new advanced blades for its engines. The research and development and the production is being done in the UK and Rolls-Royce will continue to make a major contribution to the UK economy.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Aerospace is important in Pendle and it is also important in north Wales, with the Broughton site, which has 7,000 workers, and the Filton site near Bristol. Some 70,000 jobs depend on it. Airbus is a joint European venture. What does the Secretary of State think would happen if the Tories took us out of the European Union?

Vince Cable: I would hope that all parties continue to support the industrial strategy, which has been a considerable success, particularly in the aerospace industry, and Airbus has been one of its beneficiaries. To be frank, when I came into office I was warned by the industry that it was gradually drifting away overseas and that we would no longer be able to claim that we were the second aerospace power in the world, but with the big, long-term commitment we have made its future is secure, including that of Airbus.

Small Businesses

2. Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support small businesses.

Vince Cable: I would hope that all parties continue to support the industrial strategy, which has been a considerable success, particularly in the aerospace industry, and Airbus has been one of its beneficiaries. To be frank, when I came into office I was warned by the industry that it was gradually drifting away overseas and that we would no longer be able to claim that we were the second aerospace power in the world, but with the big, long-term commitment we have made its future is secure, including that of Airbus.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): We have established the British Business Bank, which is supporting more than £1.8 billion of finance to 43,000 smaller businesses. More than 26,000 start-up loans have been drawn, totalling more than £136 million. The greatbusiness.gov.uk website brings together expert advice for businesses in one place, and the new Business Growth Service provides joined-up support to firms with growth potential. Some 48,000 businesses have been helped by our UKTI support—90% were small businesses.

Mr Evans: My constituency is next door to Pendle, funnily enough. It is very similar, but we do not have and do not want an airport. What we do have are many small businesses, from the butcher to restaurants, bars, hotels and independently owned stores that tend to employ local people and source locally whenever they can. Does the Secretary of State agree that we have to bend over backwards to ensure the vibrancy of those businesses so that they continue to be the lifeblood of our communities?

Vince Cable: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and one of the success stories of this Government has been the massive expansion of small business, with hundreds of thousands of start-ups, many of them now employing people. However, I would caution against attempts to make some distinction between big and small businesses. They are interdependent through supply chains, and the excellent announcement today from Jaguar Land Rover, with its big investment in the west midlands in the new Jaguar, is an example of its confidence in the country, but it will also provide a substantial amount of business for its suppliers, small and large.

Meg Munn (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab/Co-op): Many small engineering companies would have liked the opportunity to apply to the £10 million fund to support women engineers, but the design of the fund meant that they could not afford to do so. Unfortunately, less than £200,000 was spent of the £10 million. In his last few days in office, will the Secretary of State look again and ensure that the rest of the money is specifically designated to support women engineers, especially women returning to work, and that small businesses can afford to apply for it without the barriers that were previously put in place?

Vince Cable: I will certainly undertake to look at that with the Minister for Skills and Equalities, my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles). We are aware of the issue that has arisen. The issue the hon. Lady surfaces—the shortage of women engineers—is severe, and we underperform much of Europe in that respect, with only one in 10 of our engineers being women. We are doing a lot to try to change the trend, but a substantial deficit remains.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Small businesses in rural areas are increasingly reliant on access to the internet. In the light of the Chancellor’s announcement in the Budget on using satellites to improve broadband internet access in rural areas, can the Secretary of State set out what steps he is taking to safeguard the radio spectrum that is essential for delivering that and other satellite services?

Vince Cable: Sadly, I am not responsible for telecommunications and related activities, but I am sure that the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has heard what my hon. Friend has said. The positive point in his question that I would emphasise is that our satellite industry is one of our most successful. We have a Catapult that invests in its activities, it is expanding rapidly and there is no reason why it should not fit alongside land connections in improving broadband speed.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State and I have worked on manufacturing matters and other matters quite well over these five years. I have enjoyed it and we have co-operated well. Small businesses, like big businesses, depend on finance and a good banking system. Is he as worried as I am about the takeover of TSB? The bank employs a lot of people in the area I represent, and it is a very important taxpayer investment. Are we getting value for money in this takeover, from a country and a company that has a big question mark over its economy?

Vince Cable: I had an opportunity to discuss the TSB takeover on the day it was initially announced. One of the first questions I asked was: what would be the implications for business lending? The Spanish bank conducting the takeover has expertise in this field. This is its major area of activity in Spain. I understand that TSB will be pushed in that direction, which is surely positive. There are many other outlets now opening up through challenger banks, and the Business Bank has made a major contribution to increasing diversity, as well as the supply of finance to small businesses.
Simon Kirby (Brighton, Kemptown) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in welcoming the record number of business start-ups in sunny Brighton and Hove?

Vince Cable: There has been a record number of start-ups across the country, but Brighton is a particular growth centre. The creative industries are very much at the heart of that, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman would like me to congratulate him on his own contribution to that.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): If women set up businesses at the same rate as men there would be 1 million extra entrepreneurs in this country, adding about £60 billion a year to our economy. What is stopping the Secretary of State putting into practice the Liberal Democrat Burt report recommendations on monitoring whether the Government are buying from women in their own supply chain to help to bridge that gap?

Vince Cable: I can cite a couple of examples of where we have consciously and successfully sought to promote women in business. The start-up loans scheme has a very high proportion of women entrepreneurs—off the cuff, I think it is 40% or more. Yesterday we launched, with the Cranfield business school, the report on the successful efforts to get women on the boards of our top companies. The target was set and it is very, very close to being achieved. I am sure the hon. Lady is happy to work with us in continuing a very important campaign.

Engineering

3. Sir Peter Luff (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken by his Department to encourage more young people to obtain qualifications leading to careers in engineering.

The Minister for Skills and Equalities (Nick Boles): Apprenticeship starts in engineering and manufacturing technologies have increased by 52% since 2010. In 2014, there was a 10% increase in new students studying engineering at university, following an 11% increase in 2013.

Sir Peter Luff: I welcome that very positive response from the Minister. However, given that continuing shortages of engineering apprentices and graduates will cost the economy as much as £27 billion a year in lost output, undermine our competitiveness and threaten our security, can he think of better words to inspire a new generation of young men and women to become engineers than those of the railway engineer who wrote:

“I am an engineer. I serve mankind by making dreams come true.”

Nick Boles: It is entirely fitting that my hon. Friend should conclude his parliamentary career on such a poetic note, championing a cause he has consistently championed. It relates directly to the earlier question from the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Meg Munn), who is also bringing her parliamentary career to a close by championing the same cause. We have a huge amount to do, but inspiration is the key. We need to inspire young people that engineers are the people who go out and do things and make things happen in our society. We need many more of them.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) has a question down on engineering. He is very welcome to come in on this matter now if he wishes, but he is not obliged.

13. Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): [908345] It’s all right—it’s not a difficult one.

Further to my hon. Friend’s excellent and encouraging answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Sir Peter Luff), whose departure from this House we will all regret, may I point out that a company in my constituency, a very successful business called Technetix that I went to visit some time ago, drew to my attention the fact that it simply could not find enough here. The figures I asked for in a question show that in 2004 5,630 electronic and electrical engineer graduates appeared, but that in 2013-14 only 5,500 appeared. The Government are doing a great deal and the call for inspiration is worthy, but we need to deliver many more people to engineering.

Nick Boles: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have made good progress, but from an unbelievably low base, having taken over from a Government who told people they only needed to do media studies or some such waffle to have a good career. We are picking up from a disastrous inheritance and making good progress, and with his support I know we will make further progress in the next parliamentary term.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I was at a school in my constituency on Monday where the students told me of the difficulties they had studying engineering and other STEM subjects. The school said the problem was it could not recruit the teachers. There has been a shortfall in the number of teachers recruited to STEM subjects in the last few years as well. Does the Minister agree that this is a fundamental problem and that the action taken by the Government on teacher training has not addressed it at all?

Nick Boles: It will not surprise you, Mr Speaker, to hear that I do not agree at all. Through the outstanding Education and Training Foundation, we have invested a great deal specifically to put further education teachers into a position to teach the vital skills of English and maths. Take-up has been substantial, and as a result further education colleges can continue to teach people maths through to 18 if they have not achieved successful results. We have also set up more university technical colleges—a great deal more than the last Government. These are long-term plans to turn around the situation that the hon. Gentleman’s Government did nothing to deal with in 13 years.

Approved Suppliers

4. Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to ban the practice of firms being asked by large companies to make agreements to pay to become or remain approved suppliers.

[908335]
The Minister for Business and Enterprise (Matthew Hancock): The Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill contains radical steps to tackle late payment. We have prohibited the practice of paying to join or remain on supplier lists in certain circumstances. We recently consulted on going further and will now require large companies to report on these practices.

Debbie Abrahams: I have been campaigning for four years to end the blight of late payments to small businesses, including by ending controversial “pay to stay” contracts. The small business Bill is too little too late. Labour tabled amendments in Committee to end and outlaw the controversial “pay to stay” arrangements. Why did the Government oppose them, and in the light of recent revelations, will they now drop their opposition?

Matthew Hancock: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady’s long-standing and effective campaign on late payment. The amendments did not work technically, but I am prepared to consider anything to tackle the culture of late payment. We will make 30 days the normal payment term and 60 days the maximum. That is the culture change we need, and I look forward to working with her to make it happen.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister seems to be entering the realms of fantasy when he claims that the limited steps the Government have taken will put an “end to the UK’s late payment culture once and for all.”—[Official Report, 24 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 1357.]

According to the latest BACS figures, there were more than £46 billion of late payments last year—the highest figure on record—and that figure has continued to grow over the course of this Government. How much and by when would late payments need to fall for him to consider his steps successful in eradicating this culture once and for all?

Matthew Hancock: We do need to eradicate that culture, and I have already set out the steps we are taking. However, may I also take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work of the Business Secretary on this issue and many others over the past five years? We have had an incredibly business-like relationship working hard in the Business Department, and I pay tribute especially to his work on getting an industrial strategy that all parties in the House are now signed up to; to his work on women on boards; and on late payment. It has been a great pleasure, and I look forward to working with her in the future, too.

Infrastructure Development

5. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent representations he has received from businesses on the importance of infrastructure development to business growth.

[908337]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (George Freeman): The Government have delivered the largest investment programme in the railways since Victorian times and the biggest investment in our road network since the 1970s. The national infrastructure plan sets out £460 billion of investment to 2020 and beyond. Not surprisingly, this has been strongly welcomed by business leaders as part of our long-term economic plan to put the economy back on its feet after the appalling mess we inherited.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Business leaders in Hull would like to have the rail line to Hull electrified, but that was missed out of the Government’s plans. Why is the Minister blocking Labour’s plans for an independent infrastructure commission, as recommended by Sir John Armitt, to take the politics out of the major infrastructure decisions that this country needs?

George Freeman: What we need is not more bureaucracy and commissions, but continued progress on infrastructure investment. Specifically, the Chancellor announced in the Budget that we are proceeding with the electrification of the Selby to Hull line. The Liverpool to Manchester line has already been electrified and the Manchester to Selby line is being done. We are investing major sums in northern infrastructure to drive the northern powerhouse—£1 billion on the region’s railways and on updating trains. This is strongly supported. John Cridland of the CBI, for example, said:

“Businesses in the north will be encouraged by ongoing support for infrastructure and innovation.”

The Construction Products Association said:

“We are pleased to see that the government recognises the value of infrastructure, and…has prioritised it.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): Does the Minister agree that the investment in infrastructure in my constituency will enable people to get to the new university technical college that is providing training for engineering and cyber-skills, which will lead in turn to substantial economic growth in Stroud and the surrounding area?

George Freeman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I pay tribute to his doughty campaigning on this issue throughout this Parliament. It is part of £460 billion package, with £12 billion in city deals and local growth funds and £1 billion in broadband. As he says, this is alongside our investment in vocational training and apprenticeships in engineering to put our economy back on its feet.

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the CBI, and Katja Hall of the CBI has said:

“The vast majority of businesses back the creation of an independent body to assess the UK’s long-term infrastructure needs as a means of finding

“a new way to agree upon and then consistently deliver the improvements we’ll need over the next fifty years—not just the next five.”

EEF has said that

“good infrastructure is an essential building block for the UK’s long-term competitiveness and growth”.

and has called for a permanent infrastructure body to act as a “game changer”. This is not, as the Minister said in an earlier reply, “bureaucracy”, so will he respond to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) in the light of overwhelming business support and to stop decisions on our country’s long-term future prosperity
being kicked into the long grass, will the Minister back
British companies and support Labour’s plan to set up
an independent national infrastructure commission?

George Freeman: This is a bit rich from a party that
neglected our infrastructure for 13 years and left us with
gridlock Britain. Let me repeat: £460 billion-worth of
investment amounts to the biggest infrastructure
programme since Victorian times—and it has been
welcomed. As I said, the CBI’s John Cridland said that
businesses in the north would be “encouraged”. We
have set up the National Infrastructure Advisory Board
and we do not need another commission. What we need
is to continue with the progress of investments. Let me
quote Simon Walker from the Institute of Directors:
“The Chancellor was right to resist the temptation of politicalised
giveaways, and focus instead on long-term investment in infrastructure,
science and efforts”.

We are making progress.

Student Loans

6. Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): What recent
estimate he has made of the average level of indebtedness
of people who have taken out student loans. [908338]

The Minister for Universities, Science and Cities (Greg
Clark): A graduate with a student loan of £41,000 will
expect to earn during their career, net of tax and
student loan repayments, £200,000 more than a similar
individual with two or more A-levels. That is why more
young people than ever are choosing to go to university,
with the biggest jump coming from people from the
most disadvantaged backgrounds.

Valerie Vaz: The fact remains that young people will
be leaving university with an unsecured debt of over
£43,000. Does the Minister agree that this will place an
intolerable strain on middle-income families?

Greg Clark: No. In fact, the success of the Government’s
policy reforms are reflected in the hon. Lady’s own
constituency. In October 2009, 20.8% of young people
in her constituency went to university, whereas this
October it was 30.2%—nearly a 50% increase. What is
extraordinary is that a day before the general election
campaign begins, the Labour party has not worked out
how to pay for its university policies. Labour’s chaos
would plunge the successful policy that we have introduced
into chaos—a very good reason not to have a Labour
Government.

Mr David Willetts (Havant) (Con): Does my right
hon. Friend agree that our higher education reforms
have delivered more students, especially from disadvantaged
backgrounds, more funding for teaching in universities
than ever before and have lowered the monthly repayments
by graduates, which is the key sum that mortgage lenders
take into account when people are trying to get started
on the housing ladder?

Greg Clark: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right.
I pay tribute, as the whole House should, to his work in
achieving this transformation. This is a proud moment
for him to leave the House, in a year in which more
young people have been to university in this country
than ever before as a result of the far-sighted policies
that he championed in the House.

16. Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): Have the Government examined the case
for lifting the cap on student fee contributions, perhaps
just selectively? If so, what conclusions have they
reached?

Greg Clark: We are very happy with the policy. The
questions to be answered should be answered by the
Labour party, because there is a £600 million gap in its
ability to pay for its university policy. No wonder the
vice-chancellors are concerned about the chaos into
which that policy would plunge our universities.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): As Chair of the Select Committee, I thank the Secretary of
State and his team of Ministers, both current and
past, for their unfailing willingness to appear before the
Committee and be questioned on their policies. I also
thank them for adopting so many of our recommendations,
and hope that they will look again at those that they did
not adopt.

According to the Office for Budget Responsibility,
£12 million of the projected deficit from the non-repayment
of student loans will be funded by the sale of the
student loan book. Given the low rate of repayment of
those loans and the low interest rate that they attract,
what assessment has the Minister made of the incentive
that may be needed to induce people to buy them?

Greg Clark: Preparations are continuing for the sale
of the loan book during the next Parliament, and it is
right that they should. I acknowledge the work of the
hon. Gentleman, as Chairman of the Select Committee,
in scrutinising this and other aspects of business during
the current Parliament, but he should, perhaps, reflect
on the words of a prominent Labour business person—
indeed, the only prominent Labour business person.
John Mills, who is Labour’s biggest donor, said that the
party’s university policy would destabilise British universities
and disadvantage “working class children”. He also
said that it would hurt Labour’s economic credibility.

Mr Speaker: Order. The Minister has finished. He
may not know that he has finished, but he has.

Basic Maths and English Skills

7. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What
steps he is taking to ensure that more adults gain basic
English and maths skills. [908339]

The Minister for Skills and Equalities (Nick Boles): A
good grasp of English and maths is the vital passport
into the world of work. Of course, people should ideally
acquire that good grasp of English and maths not as
adults, but at an earlier stage of their education. That is
why we have made English and maths essential components
of college study programmes, apprenticeships and
traineeships.

Alex Cunningham: Two weeks ago, my hon. Friend
the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) and I met the
principals of the Tees Valley further education colleges,
who pressed for an end to the funding disparity between FE colleges and other parts of the education system. They were particularly concerned about English and maths, but they were also worried about further cuts in funds for school leaver and adult funding, and asked whether the FE loans programme could be extended to people over 19 who were on level 3 programmes. I do not know whether the Secretary of State plans to be in government after 7 May, but if he has any influence, what does he or the Minister think can be done to address the issues raised by our principals?

**Nick Boles:** When it comes to further education funding, we are emphasising the stuff that works. Apprenticeships deliver the most value to the people who do them, much more than any other further education. English and maths are vital—[*Interruption.*] We are funding them. We are funding them to the tune of more than £300 million a year. That is what we are spending on the provision of English and maths as part of study programmes.

**Stephen Mosley** (City of Chester) (Con): Many businesses recognise that the best way of gaining new skills is to upskill their current work forces. How are the Government supporting companies that want to invest in the skills of their own workers?

**Nick Boles:** We are making an unparalleled investment in apprenticeships, which—notwithstanding the criticism from the Opposition—companies sometimes use to help existing employees to gain new skills and realise their potential. We are also making advanced learning loans available to people who want to invest in their own skills so that they can command higher salaries in the workplace.

14. [908346] Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): Funding for non-apprenticeship adult education courses is dropping by 24% this year, and the adult further education budget has been cut by a third in the last five years. Can the Minister confirm that, by definition, apprenticeship courses serve those who are working—albeit for only part of the week—and that many of the courses that will be cut provide vital basic skills for the unemployed, and vital support and education for those who want to improve their skills when employers are not supporting them?

**Nick Boles:** Unlike the previous Government—and no doubt the Government that Labour would form were they to get into office again—we follow the evidence, and the evidence is clear. We published a report in December that looked at the destination data of young people taking different kinds of further education course and apprenticeships. A level 2 apprenticeship provides an 11% increase in income three to five years later. A level 3 apprenticeship provides a 16% increase in income three to five years later. No other FE course provides more than a 1% or 2% increase in people’s income. We are investing in what works: apprenticeships and traineeships for people who are not yet ready to take on an apprenticeship or a job. That is the right investment for any Government to make.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What discussions does my hon. Friend have with his counterpart in the Department for Education to ensure sufficient numbers of young people are going through schools with a maths background so that they can eventually teach maths in further education?

**Nick Boles:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that one of the great tragedies is young people, at a very young age, making choices whose impact they do not realise and closing off routes into engineering and maths teaching. That is why we have introduced the e-bac to prioritise those subjects—sciences, English and maths—that open doors and open possibilities for all young people.

22. [908355] Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that if we are to improve basic maths and English, a key step is to bring forward, with some urgency given that the Government are about to go to the electorate, a number of proposals already in the Department, such as the disadvantaged learners fund and proposals to ensure our FE provision is completed—in my case at Basford Hall FE?

**Nick Boles:** The hon. Gentleman has been a champion for his constituency, and not just a champion but an initiator and a creator of very good ideas and programmes. We are very keen to work with him to support disadvantaged learners in the outer Nottingham estates in the way he has outlined. We are currently looking at how we will fund that, but he has my commitment that we will be working with him to achieve his goals.

**Marine Energy**

8. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the business potential of marine energy for UK suppliers.

**The Minister for Business and Enterprise** (Matthew Hancock): We are strong supporters of marine energy and I can confirm to the House we have today granted funding to support Wave Hub, the world’s largest wave technology incubator in Cornwall.

**Richard Graham:** I understand that Tidal Lagoon Power, which is headquartered in Gloucester, will be sourcing at least half its £1 billion project in Swansea bay from UK suppliers. Will my right hon. Friend encourage UK Trade & Investment to work with me and the Gloucestershire local enterprise partnership to host a tidal energy supply chain seminar at our new growth hub at the university of Gloucester—and by the way this afternoon all Members will want to join me in congratulating it on announcing a new business school?

**Matthew Hancock:** I join my hon. Friend in congratulating the university on announcing a new business school. His question also demonstrates that tidal power reaches all parts of the country, and the fact that Gloucestershire can benefit from the £1 billion investment we are working on in the Swansea bay tidal lagoon announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Budget demonstrates the value of supply chains and energy investments throughout the country.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I thank the Minister for the Government’s support for the offshore Wave Hub, which is just to the north of my constituency. That is a welcome development. May I also draw his attention to the fact that the Swansea bay tidal lagoon proposes
to source its stone from my constituency, which creates some challenges as it will have an impact on one of the Government's important marine conservation zones?

Matthew Hancock: I am sure that that point will be taken into account. It is right that Wave Hub gets the support from Government that it needs. It is near Redruth, just north of my hon. Friend's constituency, and I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who has worked tirelessly to ensure its future.

Ceramic Products: Origin Marking

9. Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): If he will make it his policy to promote origin marking on ceramic products.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Jo Swinson): We have no plans to introduce a requirement for origin marking for ceramic products. However, ceramics companies continue to be free to use origin marking on a voluntary basis. Industry sectors with well-deserved reputations for design and quality, such as the UK ceramics industry, may find this a helpful promotional tool.

Joan Walley: The Government's failure to endorse mandatory origin marking and promote product safety is a matter of unfinished business for me, but there is still time for them to change their position. Will the Minister give assurances that when her officials meet manufacturers from Stoke-on-Trent, including Steelite International, in April, the Government will take as much account of what they and people such as Steven Moore from "Antiques Roadshow" have to say as they do of retailers and importers? I know I should not do this, Mr Speaker, but I have a mug here with me. When you turn it over and find that it says "Staffordshire, England", you should have confidence that it comes from Staffordshire and not from China.

Jo Swinson: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady and the efforts she has made on this and many other issues; she has been a stalwart campaigner on this issue, standing up for the ceramics industry, I will happily give her the assurance that when officials meet representatives of the industry, they will be listening very carefully to what they say. We have commissioned a study on this recently, and of course we will welcome the outcome of the European Commission study.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I share the Minister's preference that this should be done on a voluntary basis, but does she not agree that in industries such as ceramics and bricks China enjoys unfair competition over companies such as York Handmade Brick Company, given the cheaper energy China produces?

Jo Swinson: As in many areas, we are competing in a global marketplace and that can be challenging, given the different circumstances in different countries. Of course that is why many of the measures we have set out in the Budget and elsewhere try to support companies in this country, particularly those with high energy usage. We will continue to do that because it is important for building the stronger economy we all want to see.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley) and praise her championing of the ceramics industry over so many years. Does the Minister agree that this issue is incredibly important because the ceramics industry is a considerable net exporter and therefore helps our balance of payments?

Jo Swinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the success of this industry, and I mentioned in my earlier answer the quality of the products produced; this is a good success story for the export industry, which is why it is important that the ceramics industry continues to get support and we promote the quality of the products around the world.

Zero-hours Contracts

10. Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): If he will ensure that employees working on zero-hours contracts who are in practice working regular hours over an extended period have the right to a fixed-term contract.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Jo Swinson): All employees on a zero-hours contract can already, after 26 weeks, request a move to a fixed-hours contract. That flexible working legislation measure was implemented on 30 June 2014. In the Small Business, Employment and Enterprise Bill, we will ban the unfair use of exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts, and the employment status review is looking further at the employment rights that zero-hours workers have.

Paul Flynn: May I take the Minister forward to the morning of 8 May, when she will be in her kitchen having a moment of kitchen candour over her muesli, liberated from control by the thought police of the Tory nomenklatura, and she will be making a judgment on her Department's legacy on the question of the most vulnerable of workers, those on low pay and on zero-hours contracts? Would that verdict not be, "Nothing achieved, much lost"?

Jo Swinson: I wholeheartedly disagree with the hon. Gentleman. I am proud that we are taking forward measures in that Bill to protect workers on zero-hours contracts. I am very proud of the work we have done to enforce the national minimum wage, which of course is one of the key protections for workers on low pay. Of course we always need to keep employment law under review, and the employment status review I mentioned is a really useful piece of work that will make sure that the next Parliament can consider these issues further. In terms of modernising workplaces, shared parental leave, flexible working, and increasing the national minimum wage and enforcing it better, we have a very strong record to be proud of.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I, too, am pleased that this Government have been proactive in investigating, consulting and taking bold action to prevent the abuse of zero-hours contracts. Does the Minister agree that that is in contrast with the zero efforts on this subject of the previous Labour Government?
Jo Swinson: My hon. Friend rightly points out that it this Government who have taken action on this issue. It is right that as the employment market changes—there will, rightly, always be evolution and flexibility in the UK labour market—we need to make sure we keep the legislation and that framework under review. The work that has been done on the employment status review will play a really important role in forming that discussion in the next Parliament.

17. [908350] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Conservative party’s parroting of the slogan, “long-term economic plan” rings very hollowly—[Interruption.]—will Members listen to the views of the constituents of Newcastle? It rings very hollowly in Newcastle where many of my constituents cannot even plan for the next week, because they do not know how many hours they will be working. The exploitative use of zero-hours contracts has rocketed under this Government. Why will the Minister not sign up to Labour’s plans to end it?

Jo Swinson: As I have said, we have taken action on zero-hours contracts, and the next Parliament will have to consider whether anything further needs to be done on that issue. We must keep the matter under review. This Government have been absolutely determined to build a stronger economy and a fairer society, and I wholeheartedly agree with that.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Zero-hours contracts are perfectly happy with them. The problem is not with the contracts themselves but with the behaviour of some employers.

Regional Growth

11. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote regional growth. [908343]

15. David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): What steps he is taking to promote regional growth. [908348]

The Minister for Universities, Science and Cities (Greg Clark): Since this Government were elected, nearly 2 million more people are in employment, with jobs created in every region of the country—60% outside London and the south-east. The 28 city deals and 39 local growth deals are helping drive local growth by transferring powers and resources from Whitehall to local economies.

Henry Smith: I am grateful to the Government for investing £10 million in a growth deal to upgrade Gatwick airport station, and a further £18 million in the same growth deal to improve the highways in Crawley. Does the Minister agree that that is only possible because of the Government’s long-term economic plan, which means that we can invest in infrastructure for further growth?

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is notable that, during the time when £20 billion was spent on regional development agencies by the Labour party, the divisions within our economy grew, whereas, under this Government, the growth in jobs and employment right across the country is accelerating, which is good news for every part of the country.

David Rutley: I congratulate my right hon. Friend for all that he has done to help take forward the vision of a northern powerhouse. That will lead not just to important infrastructure developments, but to the transfer of power to local authorities and a much-needed focus on key industrial sectors in the north-west. Will he tell the House what steps he has taken to help take the life science corridor forward in north-east Cheshire?

Greg Clark: One principle behind our reforms in devolving powers is that every part of the country is different, and it is that difference that plays to the strengths of those reforms. Throughout this Parliament, my hon. Friend has been a formidable champion of the science sector in Cheshire and across the north-west. It is doing very well and creating jobs. I thank him for his efforts during this Parliament.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Here comes a tenuous link. The strength of the EU and the euro is critical not just for the economic success of the UK, but for regional growth. However, major concerns are rightly being raised about the effect that the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations will have on our national health service and public services. Will the Minister and his business team use this very last Business, Innovations and Skills questions to rule the NHS out of the TTIP negotiations, or will it be left to a Labour Business Secretary and a Labour Government, as it always is, to save our NHS?

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman said it himself: this is a tenuous connection. There is no relevance in it at all. But there is relevance in the sense that, as our economy prospers and is the strongest in the EU for job creation, other countries are looking to the success of our long-term economic plan. We advocate it to the world, and when Yorkshire is creating more jobs than France, it pays close study.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, I call Kelvin Hopkins.

Balance of Trade

12. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effect on the balance of trade of depreciation of the euro. [908344]

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): In the latest Office for Budget Responsibility forecast, while sterling is assumed to be stronger against the euro, the balance of trade is forecast to improve. I recognise that a strengthening pound can create pressure for some exporters, but any discernible impact on the balance of trade has been more than offset by other factors, such as demand conditions in overseas markets.
Kelvin Hopkins: The UK has a trade deficit of about £1 billion a week with the rest of the EU, equivalent to 1 million jobs lost, and the significant depreciation of the euro rate against sterling, while bringing a short-term benefit to the trade balance because of the J-curve effect, will cause serious longer-term damage to the economy. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Chancellor and the Governor of the Bank of England about this worrying matter?

Vince Cable: I have had a lot of discussions with both of them about this issue, but since the hon. Gentleman is an expert on the subject he will know that what really matters is the real effective exchange rate. We have devalued substantially against the dollar, by more than 10%, and that must be put into the mix. One lesson we learned from the 2008 financial crisis, when we had sterling devaluation of 25%, is that does not automatically translate into improved trade.

Topical Questions

T1. [908357] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Vince Cable): My Department plays and has played a key role in supporting the rebalancing of the economy through business to deliver growth while increasing skills and learning.

Alex Cunningham: The Secretary of State has kindly met me several times, along with local companies from my constituency, to discuss development. In most of the cases, I have been grateful to him for a positive outcome. Jobs are good, but I would ask for his comments on the so-called drop in unemployment in Stockton where just over one third of those no longer claiming jobseeker’s allowance have found a job. Does he have any idea where his Tory colleagues have hidden the hundreds of people from Stockton who have not been that fortunate?

Vince Cable: As it happens, I am going to Teesside today on my last ministerial visit. I look forward to hearing more about the detail on the ground. There is a very positive story in the adjacent seat of Redcar, which is what I shall be celebrating.

T3. [908359] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Alstom in my constituency has announced that it will build its replacement automation research and development and manufacturing centre on the new business park in Stafford, which is a far-sighted investment both by Alstom and by the county council, which constructed the park. Does my right hon. Friend the Minister agree that that demonstrates the importance of providing the infrastructure and incentives so that we retain manufacturing investment in the west midlands at the same time as attracting it from overseas?

The Minister for Business and Enterprise (Matthew Hancock): I do agree with my hon. Friend and I pay tribute to him for his steadfast work in promoting manufacturing. On that subject, I can also announce to the House that we will make a £62 million investment today in ultra-low emission taxis, including support for roll-out by local authorities of charging stations. As a result, instead of being moved to China, production of the next generation London black cab is being secured for Britain in Ansty, with a £250 million investment by Geely in the London Taxi Company creating 1,000 new jobs and apprenticeships.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): This is indeed the last departmental questions of this Parliament and, Mr Speaker, it has been good to see you in your place at all of them. I have enjoyed my exchanges with the Secretary of State and note that during his time no fewer than nine Conservative minders have been sent to ensure, as his former deputy, the Defence Secretary, has intimated, that he does not slip his electronic tag. In all seriousness, despite all the efforts to promote certainty for business, does he agree that the biggest uncertainty facing business in this country is his Tory Prime Minister’s decision to flirt with EU exit and that the biggest mistake for his party would be to go along with it?

Vince Cable: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his courteous question on the last day of this Parliament and, for once, I agree with him. It would indeed be disastrous if we were to leave the European Union. There would be a prolonged hiatus before the referendum was held and many options could follow it, all of which would be very damaging for employment in this country. I and my party will certainly not go along with that.

Mr Umunna: I know that the Secretary of State does not think that his party’s former president and current foreign affairs chief, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), has much credibility, but I think that that hon. Gentleman was right to say that an in/out referendum at the arbitrary date of 2017 would “damage the national interest, compromise our negotiating position and be bad for the economy and jobs”.

Both the hon. Gentleman and the Business Secretary fear that their leader will once again sell out his principles, this time on the EU, and they are worried about our future membership. There are many other reasons to do so, but is not the truth that the best and only way to clear up this uncertainty for business and the country is to vote Labour in 42 days?

Vince Cable: I have a longer memory than the hon. Gentleman; I first became involved in debates on the European Union in the mid-1970s, when I was campaigning in favour and the Labour party was against it. I am glad that it has finally seen the light, but since the hon. Gentleman is an expert on the subject he will know that what really matters is the real effective exchange rate. We have devalued substantially against the dollar, by more than 10%, and that must be put into the mix. One lesson we learned from the 2008 financial crisis, when we had sterling devaluation of 25%, is that does not automatically translate into improved trade.

Topical Questions

T4. [908361] Mr Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): Last week Len McCluskey set out plans for illegal strikes. The Conservatives condemned it and the Leader of the Opposition said nothing—Labour is bankrolled by Unite. I just wonder whether the Secretary of State and his party condemn the threat to the rule of law or sit on the fence.

Vince Cable: Of course we condemn threats to the rule of law. I simply point out that the level of strikes in this country is the lowest it has been for a generation.

T2. [908358] Mr William Bain (Glasgow North East) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State seen this week’s report by Open Europe, which indicates that unless rights at work in this country were to be completely destroyed,
leaving the European Union would cause permanent damage to the British economy? Is not the real risk to businesses and workers at the next election the United Kingdom Independence party-Tory alliance that would destroy our place in the European Union?

Vince Cable: I am beginning to recognise a theme, albeit a very welcome one. I do not wish to spoil the harmony on the Government Front Bench, having worked very well with my Conservative colleagues on restoring the economy, but we happen to disagree fundamentally on the future of Europe.

T6. [908363] Sir Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for his excellent stewardship of the Department over the past five years. Greater attention must be given to Britain’s defence industry when placing orders. Price and competition are all very well, but in the defence interests of the UK, and to support the skilled jobs we have, does he agree that in a changing world we should not put at risk the skills, supply, maintenance and servicing of our defence capability?

Vince Cable: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He refers to a recent decision by the Ministry of Defence to award a contract to a British company in Germany, rather than a German company in Britain. In general our industrial strategy has been widely adopted across Government, but we probably have not gone as far in integrated defence procurement in that process.

T5. [908362] Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the north-east is the only region with a balance of trade surplus, so he will appreciate the importance of exports to the regional economy. Is not it a major cause of concern that rhetoric from Ministers pushing Britain towards an EU exit risks damaging jobs, investment and exports in the north-east?

Matthew Hancock: No, far from it. The rate of job creation in the north-east is faster than the national average, and that has happened since we made it clear that there needs to be a referendum so that the British people can decide on our future position in the EU.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): May I take this opportunity to welcome the recent announcement that Blackpool airport has been designated a joint enterprise zone with the one at Warton? What steps is the Minister taking to encourage businesses to move to enterprise zones such as the one in my constituency in order to stimulate further regional growth?

The Minister for Universities, Science and Cities (Greg Clark): I certainly congratulate my hon. Friend, along with colleagues, on his lobbying for that important expansion of that new enterprise zone. We are seeing across the country that enterprise zones are one of a number of policies that are attracting and driving jobs. Very large numbers of jobs are being created, reversing the pattern under the previous Government.

T7. [908364] Fiona MacTaggart (Slough) (Lab): In the time that he has been in government, East Berkshire college has lost 40% of its Government funding, and the courses that have been hit, while apprenticeships have been protected, are technician-level courses, so we will not have the nursery nurses, the lab technicians or the IT technicians that business and industry desperately need. What is he going to do about it?

The Minister for Skills and Equalities (Nick Boles): What we are doing is investing more in apprenticeships than any previous Government, and apprenticeships create lab technicians and nursery nurses—[Interruption.]

They do. They are very successful, and they are much more valuable than full-time college courses. An apprenticeship for a nursery nurse or a lab technician is a much better way to go for a young person than any other.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Although the Department has created many opportunities for business, one of the biggest concerns in my constituency is late payments to small business. What steps have the Government taken to address that problem?

Matthew Hancock: We are taking unprecedented steps to tackle late payment, including in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, which we hope will become an Act today. A change in culture is needed to make 30 days payment terms the norm and 60 days the maximum. We are changing the prompt payment code to reflect that and to say, “If you don’t sign up to that and practise what you preach, you’ll get kicked off the code, so we can change this culture for good.”

T8. [908365] Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Over 9,000 people have phoned the RBS telephone helpline on the enterprise finance guarantee scheme. Does the Secretary of State—not the Minister—agree that whoever holds his position after the election should order an urgent investigation into the use of the enterprise finance guarantee scheme by RBS?

Vince Cable: That process is already under way. I have met representatives of RBS to discuss it. They have acknowledged that there are failings in the way in which they operated the scheme, and they have given assurances that anyone who was a recipient of the loan and who has been disadvantaged by the way RBS handled it will receive recompense.

Mr David Willetts (Havant) (Con): May I warmly congratulate the Secretary of State on his very substantial record during his five years in office, and invite him particularly to welcome the agreement across all three parties on the importance of Government support not just for science and research, but for innovation and the eight great technologies?

Vince Cable: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. We worked extremely well together and I thank him for his contribution to that. One of the legacies was the creation of the catapult network. We built on the initial foundations of the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre. It has now become internationally recognised as an excellent way to promote innovation.

T9. [908366] Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Newcastle United football club and City Link share an owner, and the fans of the one and the workers of the other have suffered as a result. Indeed, the
Scottish Affairs Committee recently berated him for his attitude to this House. Following the publication of its report, will the Secretary of State follow the example of my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State and call for steps to tackle false self-employment, which damages workers and leaves them without proper protection and support?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Jo Swinson): The hon. Lady raises very important issues. We are already looking at the issue of self-employment. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is doing so from a tax perspective, and we are also doing so in the employment status review because it is important that people have the protections they need as employees and that unscrupulous employers do not try to evade their employment responsibilities.

May I say thank you to colleagues on both sides of the House for their engagement in the debate on my portfolio issues in the past two and a half years? I never expected to become a Minister when I was elected in 2005. I have enjoyed it immensely and I hope I have made a difference in protecting consumers, improving corporate responsibility and modernising workplaces.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Are you going to agree?

Duncan Hames: Amen to that, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State will know that advanced manufacturing businesses have exceeded the Government’s expectations with their high value bids for the supply chain initiative for their sector. Will he ensure that the over-programming necessary to accommodate those bids does not cause any further unwelcome delay in enabling those businesses, including one in Chippenham, to make great strides in creating jobs in this valuable sector?

Vince Cable: We are just missing the baby, and the family will be complete. I am aware of the difficulties that my hon. Friend has had with the AMSCI bid. I have taken a close personal interest in it and I hope it will be resolved within the next few weeks.

Grahame M. Morris (Easington) (Lab): The Skills Minister seems reluctant to answer questions about cuts in adult learning opportunities amounting to 35%, so there are a million fewer adults receiving such training. East Durham college in my constituency has warned that if the Government continue, adult further education will, in effect, be a thing of the past. Why are the Government undermining lifelong learning and hindering opportunities for adults to retrain and obtain qualifications that they need to meet the demands of the labour market?

Nick Boles: I am not denying anything, but the Opposition seem incapable of recognising that, first, this Government have created more jobs than any Government in the entire European Union, so many of the adults that the hon. Gentleman is talking about are now in work and happily so, and secondly, that we have invested more money in apprenticeships, and apprenticeships are the best and most productive form of training. I note that his college’s performance on apprenticeships is woeful and is declining at a time when we are offering colleges more money every year to help adults also into apprenticeships.

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): Recently, Georgie Hall, my 23-month-old constituent, lost her short fight against meningitis. Her parents Matt and Paula Hall are understandably devastated. Given the impasse over the meningitis B vaccine, can my hon. Friend the life sciences Minister use his best offices to resolve the issue between GlaxoSmithKline and the Government? Will he consider looking at a new framework for drug procurement to avoid this type of impasse and future tragedies like the one that the Hall family has suffered?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (George Freeman): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s work on this issue, which he has raised with me on more than one occasion. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in passing on our condolences to Matt and Paula Hall for the loss of their daughter Georgie from this terrible bacterial disease. I can confirm that I have asked the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation for recommendations on a national immunisation programme and will use my offices in the Department of Health as well as the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to drive negotiations with the company on a fair price. It is also right to point out that we have launched an accelerated access programme for the quicker adoption of innovative medicines in the NHS, which will also help.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: My apologies to colleagues, but as usual demand has exceeded supply.
10.36 am

**Mr Peter Hain** (Neath) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Home Affairs if she will make a statement on whether the public inquiry into undercover policing will examine files held by the special branch on Members of Parliament.

The Minister for Policing, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): Undercover policing is an essential tactic in fighting crime. However, we have known for some time that there have been serious historical failings in undercover policing and its practices. To improve the public’s confidence in undercover work, we must ensure that there is no repeat of these failings. That is why the Home Secretary established a public inquiry earlier this month—to investigate thoroughly undercover policing and the operation of the special demonstration squad.

The appointment as chairman of Lord Justice Pitchford, a highly experienced criminal judge of the Court of Appeal, has been confirmed.

The scope of the inquiry, announced to Parliament on 12 March, will focus on the deployment of police officers on covert human intelligence sources, or CHIS, by the SDS, the national public order intelligence unit and other police forces in England and Wales. The inquiry will review practices and the use of undercover policing to establish justice for the families and victims and make recommendations for the future, so that we learn from the mistakes. Lord Justice Pitchford and his team will consult all interested parties in the coming months and will review and publish their terms of reference for the inquiry by the end of July. We should encourage Lord Justice Pitchford to get on with this important piece of work.

**Mr Hain**: I thank the Minister for his statement. Will he pass on to the Home Secretary my request that she ensure that the remit of the public inquiry she has announced into the operations of the special demonstration squad includes the surveillance of the MPs publicly named by Peter Francis when he was an undercover officer between 1990 and 2001?

Is the Minister aware that Mr Francis saw a special branch file on not only me but my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw), who was actually Home Secretary for four of those years? He also saw files on my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham, Dame Joan Ruddock, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Dame Joan Ruddock) and my hon. Friends. The Members for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), as well as former colleagues Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone and Bernie Grant.

Did the monitoring affect our ability as MPs to speak confidentially with constituents? What impact, if any, did it have on our ability to represent them properly? We know, for example, that the campaign to get justice for Stephen Lawrence, the black teenager murdered by racists, was infiltrated by the SDS and that the police blocked a proper prosecution. Did police infiltrators in the Lawrence campaign exploit private information shared by constituents or lawyers with any of us as MPs?

It is hardly a revelation that the special branch had a file on people like me, dating back 40 years to anti-apartheid and Anti-Nazi League activist days, because we were seen through a cold war prism as “subversive”. Even though we vigorously opposed Stalinism, that did not stop us being lumped together with Moscow sympathisers.

Surely the fact that these files were still active for at least 10 years while we were MPs raises fundamental questions about parliamentary sovereignty and privilege—principles that are vital to our democracy. It is one thing to have a police file on an MP suspected of crime, child abuse or even co-operating with terrorism, but quite another to maintain one deriving from campaigns promoting values of social justice, human rights and equal opportunities that are shared by millions of British people. Surely that means travelling down a road that endangers the liberty of us all.

Mike Penning: The right hon. Gentleman has put his point to the House very well. It is important that the country has confidence in the way the police operate, and that is exactly why the Home Secretary has instigated the inquiry. I am sure that Lord Justice Pitchford and his officials will be contacting the right hon. Gentleman and others in this House, and those who have left this House, to make sure that their views are known as he addresses the way he is going to take his inquiry forward.

**Mr David Davis** (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): In the past year there have been a number of revelations about the police improperly hacking into journalists’ telephone calls, and improperly breaching the legal privilege of suspects and using the information they obtain from doing so. The Government have been very coy about responding to my requests about the current state of the Wilson doctrine. If the allegations that have now come out are true, that indicates that the Wilson doctrine was broken in spirit, if not in the letter. Will the Minister make sure that the inquiry comes right up to date in terms of what it looks into and that it is drawn broadly enough to ensure that none of these risks exists today?

Mike Penning: Let me say to my right hon. Friend that I have never been coy; it is an attribute that I do not really have. On the Wilson doctrine, it is plainly obvious why we have to be careful. There is litigation in place, and we need to make sure that it goes further. By the end of July, Lord Justice Pitchford will set out his remit, including the sorts of things that my right hon. Friend alluded to. I am sure that my right hon. Friend will put them forward directly to make sure that they are part of the inquiry.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The allegations in the newspapers today will send a chill up the spine of all those who value free speech, democracy and campaigning for one’s beliefs. Being investigated not for crime but for political beliefs is quite obviously unacceptable.

Almost five years ago, before the last general election, the activities of what was then the special demonstration squad were reported in *The Guardian*. Over the past few
years, we have seen horrifying allegations, many looked at as part of Chief Constable Mick Creedon’s Operation Herne investigations. They include allegations that SDS officers engaged in sexual relationships, and even fathered children, then leaving the women as if the relationship had never occurred; used the identities of dead children for covert identities; and spied on the Lawrence family—the grieving parents of a cruelly murdered son.

Two years ago, the shadow Home Secretary called for stronger safeguards on undercover operations. There remains an overwhelming case, further strengthened today, for more safeguards, including independent pre-authorisation, for example by the Office of Surveillance Commissioners, especially for the small number of long-term covert operations, and then continuous, not paper-based, independent checks. I hope the Minister can respond directly on that point.

Now we also want assurances that the inquiry into the activities of the SDS led by Lord Justice Pitchford will be extended to the allegations set out in the newspapers today. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr Hain) said, this is an affront to parliamentary democracy—to the sovereignty and independence of this House. It is also an affront to the vital principle, the breach of which can be very serious indeed, of confidentiality between a Member of Parliament and those he or she represents. Lord Justice Pitchford’s inquiry must be extended to look into the allegations as part of the investigation into the Met’s special demonstration squad. I stress again that undercover policing remains a crucial tool in combating serious and organised crime, but it must not be abused.

In conclusion, Labour has for years pressed for much stronger oversight of undercover policing, and that is all the more important in the light of today’s shocking revelations. Lord Justice Pitchford needs to be able to conduct an extensive and wide inquiry, which, crucially, should have the flexibility to investigate any allegations about undercover policing, in particular those relating to surveillance of Members of this House.

Mike Penning: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and questions, and I think the whole House shares his concerns, but it is for Lord Pitchford to decide how he wants to take this forward. That is exactly why the concerns touched on—

Jack Dromey: What is the view of the Government?

Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman is better than this. This is a really serious inquiry. There have been concerns for many years, including when his own party was in government, but it is this Government who have established an inquiry as a result of the work of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary. We shall wait and we shall work together. If Lord Pitchford asks for more, I am sure we will give him more.

Mr David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Forty years ago, when I was president of a students union, I was visited by officers from King’s Cross special branch, whose express purpose was to tell me that they had a file on me. Like the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr Hain), I do not take that desperately seriously, given the circumstances of the time, but I do take very seriously the matter of files being kept on Members of this House and, indeed, members of the Government. As the inquiry takes shape, will Speaker’s Counsel or the Clerk of the House be involved so that if matters relating to Members’ privilege are engaged, as almost certainly they will be, this House will be able to take appropriate action?

Mike Penning: I think that is exactly the approach that Lord Pitchford will take. If Speaker’s Counsel and the Clerks have concerns, they will certainly submit them, and, if they are asked, there will be full communication between them.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): This is more important than just feeding our views to an inquiry; the question is what the Minister decides. I want him to assure me that the Government will let me see a full copy of my file. In the 1970s and ’80s, when I was at Brent law centre and then Liberty, I campaigned for the rights of women and workers and the right to demonstrate. None of that was against the law and none of it undermined our democracy; on the contrary, it was essential for our democracy. The security services do an important job and of course the Government should support them, but if they overstep the mark the Government must hold them to account. In the light of these new revelations, may I repeat to this Government a request that I made to the previous Government which was turned down? Will the Minister give me an assurance that this Government will release to me a full copy of my file?

Mike Penning: I would love to give the right hon. and learned Lady that assurance from the Dispatch Box, but I cannot. [Interruption.] / There is no point trying to shout down a Minister. Ultimately, there may be reasons for that. I was a counter-terrorism Minister in Northern Ireland, where there had to be redactions. I will make sure that as much as can be released is released. I give that assurance to the right hon. and learned Lady and I will write to her.

Sir Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): I have two questions for my right hon. Friend. My preliminary question is: will he, the Leader of the House or someone else tell us before I leave this place what has happened to the concept of Privy Counsellors exchanging information on Privy Council terms? Secondly, does my right hon. Friend agree that all of us need to have confidence, as do our constituents, in the integrity of the police, and that every part of every police force needs to democratically accountable and to carry out their actions lawfully? If the inquiry finds that police officers have not acted lawfully, can they be referred for possible prosecution for misconduct in public office?

Mike Penning: On the latter point, that option remains open, but it is for others to decide. We have changed the law so that officers who have left or resigned during an investigation can be brought back. As far as I am concerned as a Privy Counsellor, Privy Council undertakings are intact and should stay so.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): All I would like to say to the Minister is that he must have been a busy man to follow me to 5,000 industrial meetings in the last 30-odd years. I went to Grunwick, I did three pit strikes,
[Mr Dennis Skinner]

I went to Wapping—I was all over the place. When I saw the man with that posh flat cap, which looked as if he had bought it from Harrods, I always thought he might be the agent provocateur present at the meeting. The thing that has always worried me—the Minister might be able to answer this, as well as whoever looks into this matter—is why do they only seem to pursue left wingers, socialists? Is that one of the reasons why all those paedophiles managed to disappear into thin air, and why Jimmy Savile never had his collar felt?

Mike Penning: I am tempted to treat the question—I think there was one there—with the contempt it deserves. Having been a member of the Fire Brigades Union and been on picket lines over the years, perhaps they were even watching me in the funny hat that the hon. Gentleman refers to.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): It must be shocking for the MPs involved to hear these revelations, but parents grieving for their dead children still do not know whether their children's identity was stolen by the special demonstration squad. The Met police has openly apologised to parents to whom that has happened, but they have not put in place any means by which parents worried that someone had impersonated their dead child can find out what happened or be reassured that their child's identity was not stolen. Will the Minister ensure that the Met police use their ingenuity to find ways, without endangering security, to bring such reassurance to the many people, including constituents of mine, who still wonder whether their child was impersonated years after the sad occasion of their death?

Mike Penning: It is exactly because of the families of the victims to whom the hon. Gentleman refers that the inquiry will take place. I hope that its recommendations will address some if not all of his concerns. I say publicly to the Met police that, as well as apologising, they should do everything they possibly can to help the families, without endangering security.

Dame Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): In 1981, I was elected as chair of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Two years later, an MI5 agent, Cathy Massiter, blew the whistle on the surveillance, the phone taps and the collection of special branch reports on me. She cited political interference in the service and said that what had happened was illegal, and she resigned. In 1987, I became a Member of this House and took the loyal oath. In 1997, I became a Minister, and I subsequently signed the Official Secrets Act. How is it that surveillance that was undertaken of us, our families and everything that was written about us and every piece of evidence was destroyed? I ask again: can we have a full, unredacted version of everything that was written about us and every piece of surveillance that was undertaken of us, our families and our friends?

Mike Penning: The hon. Gentleman raises a valid point. Members of Parliament can stand in this House and ask a question, but many other victims cannot and that is why the inquiry is in place. I will do everything I can to ensure that as much information as possible is passed to current and past Members of Parliament, but I cannot give a guarantee. No Minister of any persuasion—such questions need to be asked of previous Labour Home Secretaries, and I will do everything I can to ensure that the answers come forward.

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Ind): Following the observations by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) does the Minister accept that if the allegations are correct, we have an extraordinary situation where I as Home Secretary, and from 1997 to 2000 the police authority for the Metropolitan police, not only knew nothing about what appears to have been going on within the Metropolitan police, but may also have been subject to unlawful surveillance as Home Secretary?
Secretary? That ought to be looked at, as should what appears to be the trigger and is much more serious: my decision—taken against a lot of reluctance from the Metropolitan police—to establish a full judicial inquiry into the murder of Stephen Lawrence. It is completely unacceptable that it appears that elements of the Metropolitan police were spying on the bereaved family of Stephen Lawrence.

Mike Penning: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the tone of his comments. He knows from his experience how difficult it is, and to realise that he was in the dark about authorisations that have taken place—that is exactly what the inquiry has to consider. Lord Justice Pitchford must have full access, and even though the right hon. Gentleman will sadly be leaving the House, I am sure he will give him all the help he can in future to find out why Home Secretaries, Ministers and police managers were not informed about what was going on inside the Met. That is what the inquiry must do.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Does the Minister really understand that this is a matter of parliamentary sovereignty and privilege? Action was taken by the police purely and simply for political reasons, and that is why it is so unacceptable. If the House of Commons was exercising its authority, as it would have done in previous times, the Metropolitan police commissioner would be at the Bar of the House to explain precisely why this was done and only Labour Members were targeted. It is unfortunate that that has not been done today.

Mike Penning: We do not know if it was only Labour Members, and that is what the inquiry will find out. As the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) said, we know so little because so little was passed up the food chain to Ministers. That is why we need the inquiry to find out exactly what went on.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): A few months ago, I met with Herne inquiry officers who confirmed to me covert surveillance of the campaign that Mrs Reel and I set up to find out what happened to her son, Ricky, when he died 13 years ago. We were told that we were subject to “collateral intrusion”. Two weeks ago, I tabled early-day motion 899 because I was contacted by Peter Francis, the former member of the Metropolitan police’s special demonstration squad, who confirmed in a statement that covert surveillance was carried out on trade unions, including the Fire Brigades Union, the Communication Workers Union, the National Union of Teachers and Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians, as well as the families involved in justice groups, when all they were doing was seeking justice. In the Reel case, the family were simply trying to find out what happened to their unfortunately lost son.

Can the Minister confirm—and this rests with the Minister, not with the inquiry—that immunity will be given to Peter Francis, and other whistleblowers who have come forward, from any action under the Official Secrets Act when they give evidence to the inquiry?

Mike Penning: The Home Secretary, the Prime Minister and I will want everybody who gives evidence as whistleblowers to have immunity. We need to get to the truth, and that is something I am committed to doing from this Dispatch Box—I am sure that I have the authority of the others to say so.

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Why can the Minister give immunity to whistleblowers in this case but not give a cast-iron guarantee that he can give immunity to whistleblowers in the child abuse investigation?

Mike Penning: To be fair, I answered a specific question on a specific point. The hon. Gentleman’s question does not come under my portfolio, but I will look into it and find out. He raises a valid point and I will write to him.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): As one of the people under surveillance in the 1990s, I assure the House that I was never engaged in anything illegal and I certainly was not engaged in seeking to undermine democracy. On the contrary, many of the campaigns I was involved in served to reinforce democracy by engaging with people who otherwise thought they did not have a voice, notably the Stephen Lawrence campaign. I am clear in my mind that that surveillance could not have happened without authorisation at a very senior level, and I want to know who authorised it and on what grounds. Above all I feel I am entitled to an unredacted copy of my file. What happened is not just a breach of privilege, it is a breach of the privacy and confidence of the many people I have worked with down the years on the campaigning I did in the 1990s.

Mike Penning: I think I have answered the latter point and I will do everything I can to make sure that the documents are released. I have said that and I will do everything I possibly can. On the point about who authorised it, the right hon. Member for Blackburn was the Home Secretary and he was being investigated, which someone must have authorised. That is what we have to find out. It sounds ludicrous that that should have taken place in the mother of all democracies, and we have to find out exactly what went on.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): When I was a very much younger MP, I spent four years as Roy Hattersley’s deputy, as shadow Minister for policing in the shadow Home Affairs team, so I knew a little about this area. Real individual pain and anger has been expressed today, but I hope the House can signal, and not just through this inquiry, a new beginning. Personally, I believe that Labour has always supported our police. I support undercover policing if it is properly regulated. I want undercover police to be embedded within the Russian mafia who have moved to London. I want them to stop child abuse. I want them to be able to find the people who do human trafficking. Let us get the balance right. Let us back the police to do a good job. Let us regulate them well and let us be more effective in chasing criminals.

Mike Penning: This is probably the only time since becoming Police Minister that I have not stood at the Dispatch Box and said how proud I am to be the Police Minister and what a fantastic job they do to protect us. There are some who have let us down over the years and we must find out what went wrong. Covert policing, as the hon. Gentleman says, is vital to keeping this country safe.
Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Like many people of my generation, I spent far too many weekends in the '60s and '70s on marches and demonstrations against racism, the Vietnam war and many other issues. Many of those people have now become Members of this House. How do we know whether our names are in any of these files? Some 12 years ago, I was contacted by The Sunday Times, which asked me whether I knew anything about a document in a Stasi file with my name on it that had turned up in Berlin. I would like to know whether the Stasi's British equivalent also had documents with my name on them.

Mike Penning: No matter what wrongdoings have been done, we do not have Stasi police in this country—thank goodness. I have no idea why the Stasi were so interested in the hon. Gentleman. Some of us were doing other things in the '60s and '70s. As I said, I will do everything I can to make sure as much information as possible is passed on to colleagues in this House and to those who have left this House.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Like most of us here with a lifelong trust in the integrity of the police and security services, I had the very disturbing experience a few weeks ago, with the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, of reading the report on Operation Tiberius. We were not allowed to have cameras or phones with us. The information in that document is deeply shocking. It is a story of decades of conspiracies between the police and criminal gangs. Knowing the case of Daniel Morgan from Llanfrechfa, who was murdered while he was investigating police corruption 28 years ago, and the failure of the security services to identify the way that Sir Cyril Smith and Sir Jimmy Savile were destroying lives, is there not a case for publishing the report on Operation Tiberius so the whole country can know the depth of corruption that has taken place in the Metropolitan police?

Mike Penning: I would like to pay tribute to the work of the Home Affairs Committee—I know the Chair of the Committee is not in his place—not only on Operation Tiberius but on other inquiries in this Parliament. I do not know why the file was not released, for instance when it was viewed, but I will find out and write to the hon. Gentleman.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I still find it astonishing that undercover police officers entered into long-term sexual relationships with environmental activists, as we have heard, which included the fathering and subsequent abandoning of children. There can surely be no justification for that, nor for the kind of revelations we are hearing about today. Covert policing clearly has an important role to play, particularly in tackling such things as gun crime in Greater Manchester, but does the Minister accept the growing unease in the House and among the public at the revelations we are hearing? Will he commit to taking the action we need to get to the bottom of this?

Mike Penning: I was just as shocked as everybody in this House to hear what some—not all, but a tiny minority—Met police officers were doing. That is why the Met police apologised and that is why I said we will ensure the Met police do more for the victims in particular.
come to the House and contact MPs directly to give them clear answers about the two key issues that are unanswered—the scope of the inquiry, to ensure that it can get to the truth about these allegations, and about the transparency and access to individual files for Members? I apologise for making this point of order, but given the gravity and timing of this matter, with Parliament about to dissolve, I think we need far more answers directly from the Home Secretary today.

Mr David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will respond to the right hon. Lady, but not before I have heard from the right hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath).

Mr Heath: Mr Speaker, you will have heard the exchange between me and the Minister. Given the importance of these matters for parliamentary privilege and future Parliaments and Members, can you assure me that, far from simply waiting for the inquiry to take place and looking at its results, parliamentary authorities will be fully engaged with the inquiry throughout, so that we can be absolutely sure that, where it affects Members and former Members, we are aware of the circumstances and take appropriate action?

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will come back to the right hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, after we have heard from Mr Jeremy Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will the inquiry also tell us whether any authorities in the House were contacted at any time to put Members’ offices or phones under surveillance during that period and if that is the case who knew about it in the House?

Mr Speaker: Let me first explain that I am taking these points of order untypically now, rather than later, because they spring directly out of the business that we have just dealt with. On the last point from the hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), the short answer is that I do not know, but I feel that I should be made aware. Inquiries can and will be made.

In response to the right hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath), I think I can offer the assurance he seeks. In response to him and to the right hon. Lady the shadow Home Secretary, I should perhaps say this, which I think is at least as strong as is sought and possibly stronger. I have no doubt that the permanent authorities of the House—the Clerk and the Speaker’s Counsel—will not wait to be asked, but will proactively take steps to ensure that the concerns of the House are fully understood by Lord Justice Pitchford and his team. This is an extremely serious matter.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not believe reference has been made so far to the promise made by Harold Wilson when he was Prime Minister that the telephone conversations of Members of Parliament would not be intercepted in any way. May we work on the assumption, bearing in mind what has come out, that this continues to be the position? If the position of Members of Parliament has been undermined in the way we have heard about today, we do not know whether Harold Wilson’s pledge continues to apply.

Mr Speaker: In response to the hon. Gentleman, I do not feel there is anything more I can add. There is a sense in which his point of order contains a rhetorical question. He has aired his concern, which is widely shared. I am not in a position to allay that concern today, but it is very clear that it is a concern that I share 100% from the Chair on behalf of the House. This matter will not go away.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There are pressing reasons why this point of order has to be taken now; it is one I raise with great reluctance. I overheard, as did several others, an hon. Member saying that he had been instructed by a Deputy Speaker on speaking in the later procedure debate, including on what kind of speech to make. May we ask that whoever is due to chair that debate is asked whether there is any truth in the claim made by the hon. Member, in order to ensure that the impartiality of the Chair is preserved?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I am not aware of those matters beyond what he has just said. Suffice it to say that I am in the Chair, and I am intending to remain in the Chair [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]—today and, I hope, subsequently. I hope the hon. Gentleman, whom I greatly esteem, will not doubt my competence or fairness in chairing such proceedings of the House as take place today. I am not going anywhere.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Further to the point of order raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper), will you advise me, Mr Speaker, whether it is within your power or the power of the House to call to the Bar the previous Metropolitan Police Commissioner to answer questions arising out of today’s debate?

Mr Speaker: It is not possible to do that without notice. Lots of things are possible with notice—in the next Parliament. The answer to the hon. Gentleman in respect of the here and now is no.
Penrose Inquiry

11.19 am

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health to make a statement on the publication of the Penrose inquiry and its implications for the United Kingdom Government.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): Yesterday the Prime Minister issued an apology for these tragic events on behalf of the Government, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health laid a written ministerial statement as an interim response to the Penrose inquiry.

As the hon. Lady knows, this was a Scottish public inquiry. I understand that Scottish Ministers will not make a statement to their Parliament until this afternoon, and it would therefore be inappropriate for me to comment on the report in detail at this stage. However, I can say that Lord Penrose reviewed more than 118,000 documents and more than 150 statements from patients and relatives, and also took oral evidence from many of the officials who were involved in decision-making at that time. It seems to have been an extremely thorough job, and it has provided the first authoritative narrative of these events.

During the Back-Bench debate in the House on 15 January, I said that the Government would make an interim response to Lord Penrose’s report—which appeared yesterday, in the form of the written ministerial statement—and that it would be for the next Government to consider a more substantive response once they had had time to examine the findings of the inquiry.

Yesterday we announced that the Department of Health would allocate an additional one-off amount of up to £25 million from its 2015-16 budget to support any transition to a different system of financial assistance. We intended that announcement to provide an assurance to those affected by these devastating events that we have heard their concerns and are making provision to reform the system. As the hon. Lady knows, we had hoped to consult during the current Parliament on reform of the ex gratia financial assistance schemes, and I very much regret that our considerations on the design of a future system of financial assistance for those affected were postponed while we awaited the publication of Lord Penrose’s final report.

The Prime Minister also said yesterday that if he was still Prime Minister after the election in May, his Government would respond to the findings of the report as a matter of priority.

Diana Johnson: Thank you for granting the urgent question, Mr Speaker. I thank the Minister for her response.

As we know, the contaminated blood scandal was the biggest disaster in the history of the NHS. Today we should again remember all those who contracted HIV and hepatitis C, and their families. For them, this is not an historical issue, but an ongoing tragedy which continues to have a devastating impact on their lives.

I am pleased that the report of the Penrose inquiry was published yesterday, after six years. It runs to five volumes and 1,800 pages, and it appears to document accurately the tragedy, how it came about, and the decisions that were made at the time. However, I share the surprise and disappointment of those affected that the report makes only one recommendation. I know that, for that reason, yesterday was a very difficult day for many people.

The Prime Minister’s apology on behalf of the United Kingdom Government represents a significant moment in the long struggle for recognition of the scale of the tragedy, and it is very welcome, but what we need is a proper system to support and compensate all those who are affected. The report that was published a few weeks ago by the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood shows that the current system is simply not meeting the needs of those whom it is meant to help, and is not fit for purpose. I should like to hear a reassurance from those on both Front Benches that, whichever party forms the next Government, swift action will be taken to provide a permanent support and compensation settlement. I should also like to be reassured that it will be specifically stipulated that the £25 million which was announced yesterday should go directly to the beneficiaries, rather than the trusts and funds deciding what to do with it.

This is not the end of the matter. As the Minister knows, a large number of Members on both sides of the House will return to it after 7 May, and will hold whoever is in power to account when it comes to sorting out this tragedy.

Jane Ellison: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that this is an ongoing tragedy, and that, as I said in my statement, many people’s lives have been devastated and continue to be severely affected. I pay tribute to her and to other members of the all-party group, including my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), who cannot be present today but who has spoken to me in the last couple of days, since the publication of the report. Indeed, I pay tribute to all the Members who have represented their constituents so ably and passionately over many years.

As the hon. Lady said, the next Parliament will return to this issue. I was very open with Members during the Back-Bench debate on 15 January, and the hon. Lady knows that I am frustrated by the fact that we were not able to do more in the current Parliament. It is a matter of record from that debate that I spoke with Scottish Government Ministers in spring 2014 in anticipation that we would have an earlier report from the inquiry and that we might be able to move forward.

In response to the specific points the hon. Lady raised, let me reiterate something I said in my initial remarks: the one-off amount of up to £25 million is to support any transitional arrangements to a different system of financial assistance. That is intended to provide assurances to those affected by these devastating events that we have heard their concerns.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I remind the House that there is a further urgent question that has to be taken and I am keen to proceed in an efficient way. So we will hear from colleagues, but as briefly as possible, and then we must move on.
Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The 2010 to 2015 Parliament will be remembered for some extraordinary work to right historical wrong—on Bloody Sunday, on Hillsborough, on child abuse—but as it comes to an end this Parliament has not made enough progress on perhaps the greatest injustice of them all: the loss and ruination of many thousands of lives through the use of contaminated blood.

That is not to say there has not been progress. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and many others across the House who have worked assiduously in this Parliament to keep this issue on the agenda. The Prime Minister was right to apologise yesterday, but my hon. Friend is right that it will have real meaning only if it is followed by efforts to bring truth, accountability and redress.

Let me ask the Minister about the one recommendation that the Penrose report makes: that all people in Scotland who had a blood transfusion before 1991 now be tested for hepatitis C. Does the Minister think that recommendation should apply in England?

Given that, as my hon. Friend says, Penrose does not answer all the questions, and nor does it apply accountability to those who made decisions in this regard, does the Minister think there now needs to be a further process of inquiry in the next Parliament to produce that accountability?

Finally, while we cannot bring about a resolution today, does the Minister agree that the best thing we can say to the many thousands of people affected who will be watching these proceedings is that we will work together across the House in the next Parliament to bring a full, fair and final resolution to this terrible injustice?

Jane Ellison: I absolutely agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s last point. This is a tragedy that goes beyond party and has spanned many Parliaments now and we do need to move forward. I can only reiterate my frustration at the fact that we were not able to make more progress in this Parliament, but I can give the assurance to the House, and through Members to their constituents, that a great deal of detailed work has been going on, and I am sure it will continue as the many pages of Lord Penrose’s inquiry are considered.

With regard to the one recommendation that Lord Penrose makes—that the Scottish Government take all reasonable steps to offer a hepatitis C test to everyone who had a blood transfusion before 1991—I can confirm that the Department of Health concluded a UK-wide look-back exercise in 1995 to try to identify everyone who might have received infected blood prior to 1991, but the Department will consider if anything more can be done on this in England. That work is very important and will be undertaken.

On the next steps, as confirmed in the written ministerial statement yesterday, all relevant documents have been, or will be, released. The Government’s initial reaction is that another inquiry would not be in the best interests of sufferers and their families as it would further delay action to address their concerns. The strong message I have had is that it is time for action, and I have just heard the same message from the shadow Secretary of State.

The apparent thoroughness of Lord Penrose’s report and the fact that it sets the events in Scotland in a wider UK context gives us a sense of the fact that he has looked at these events in the widest possible way, including for England. He has done a thorough job of examining the facts, and we now for the first time ever have that detailed authoritative narrative account of what happened, and that is an important building block on which the next Government can take their policy forward.

Mr Tom Clarke (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): You will recall, Mr Speaker, that on many occasions I have raised the case of John Prior, who is from Moodiesburn in my constituency. He was infected in the ’70s and his files have been lost. To put it bluntly, he is devastated; he says that the report offers him nothing. He regards the £25 million on offer from the Prime Minister as peanuts—not even sufficient for Scotland. The report cost £12 million, went on for seven years and has produced one recommendation. Does the Minister accept that that is not sufficient to respond to 4,000 people who are suffering? May we have a final agreement—a settlement—for every individual, consistent with what happened in Ireland and with the last Labour Government’s delivery on miners’ compensation? Otherwise, this report will be seen as a mountain that produced a mouse.

Jane Ellison: This inquiry was commissioned by a Scottish Minister—I believe it was the current First Minister—in 2008. It is a matter for the Scottish Government to comment on the length of time taken by Lord Penrose and the expense. The money announced in yesterday’s written ministerial statement was, as we said it would be, part of an interim response—it is interim because this very long report comes right at the end of this Parliament. I am sure that the next Parliament and the next Government will want to return to this and give a more substantive response to the findings of this very thorough inquiry.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab): I was the chair of the all-party group on haemophilia from 2001 to 2010, and what we got then was an interim settlement as well, because no one would face up to the fact that these people should be compensated, not just given an ex gratia payment or some more money to go away quietly. We are told that all documents were looked at, but in the time that I have been involved in this campaign we have been told by the late Alf Morris that he was promised by Lord Owen, a former Health Minister, that there were documents available which proved that after the Government adopted the policy that no more contaminated blood would be brought from America and from dangerous sources, the health service went on buying that blood. The report said that many people’s lives have been saved, but the reality is that somebody in the health service contaminated these people by breaching the policy of a Government. When are we going to see those documents revealed, and to look for a proper public inquiry and compensation for the victims, not some pay-off?

Jane Ellison: That is a rather harsh response. It is worth noting that the terms of reference given by the Scottish Government to the Penrose inquiry do not make reference to compensation. Yesterday’s written ministerial statement referred to an amount that is
specifically intended to help with transitional arrangements while the next Government consider how they might want to take forward the reform of the various payments systems. We explored that in the Back-Bench debate.

The report runs to many thousands of pages and has considered all of the many documents and statements, as I set out. All the relevant documents held by the Department of Health on blood safety covering the period from 1970 to 1985 have been published, in line with the Freedom of Information Act, and are available on the National Archives website. As part of our response to Lord Penrose’s report, we are releasing all the relevant documents on blood safety that we hold for the period 1986 to 1995. The Government have been completely transparent and open about that, and given the inquiry all the documents it asked for. We are now releasing all the relevant documents, subject to that. Some of the issues the hon. Gentleman refers to are, I am afraid inevitably, because of the timing of this report, a matter for the next Government to consider in detail.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): My constituent David Fielding has suffered as a result of this and his whole life has been ruined. I ask this Government and any successive Government to compensate these victims properly.

Jane Ellison: As I have said, those are matters for the next Government to consider. Compensation was not in the terms of reference of the Penrose inquiry, but it was important, given the extent of the inquiry, that we waited for it to report. Unfortunately, it has reported too late for us to be able to make substantial progress in this Parliament, but I am quite certain that the next Government, held to account by the next Parliament and it rests with the next Parliament to move forward. In a more positive vein, does the Minister have a view—personally and as a Minister and a representative of the Government—whether these people, whose lives have been torn apart, should be adequately compensated by the next Government?

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): The sad reality for all our constituents who are affected by this matter is that, after waiting for the Penrose report, nothing has materially changed for them during the life of this Parliament and it rests with the next Parliament to compensate by the next Government.

Jane Ellison: I certainly look at that matter, but I fear that I may not have time to put a response in the public domain. I can give an assurance to the Select Committee that were I to be in office in the next Parliament I would be happy to respond to that in detail. As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have had detailed exchanges on such matters over the past year.

Jane Ellison: Yesterday’s written ministerial statement was just what I said it would be in the Backbench business debate on 15 January: an interim response to a very long and detailed report. All matters will have to be considered in a substantive response by the next Government.

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Will the Minister reflect carefully on paragraphs 111 to 113 of the Science and Technology Committee’s Legacy report on variant CJD? The Minister gave compelling evidence to our inquiry; the one area of difference was the long-term protection of research funding to give public confidence. Will she look carefully at that and put her response in the public domain?

Jane Ellison: I think the Prime Minister was clear yesterday when he told the House that returning to this important matter and these tragic events was a priority. The reason we say it is an interim response is that the Prime Minister and this Government feel that a more substantive response will need to be given in the next Parliament. Of course my feeling is that we need to return to this important subject and respond more substantively across a wide range of issues. I am well aware of the high concern among sufferers about the way in which the current financial assistance schemes work, and they will need to be considered in a great deal more detail.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): On Friday, I met a hepatitis C nurse and support worker in Bristol, and they urged not only speedier diagnosis but earlier treatment for people who are infected, before they develop serious liver problems. Will the Minister take that thought back to her Department?

Jane Ellison: Of course. In my response to the Backbench business debate, I gave Members a sense of how to represent constituents as regards the latest NHS treatments. The latest treatments available for hepatitis C are of a different order of effectiveness and have many fewer side-effects than the older treatments and it is important that anyone affected is seen by a hepatologist and referred appropriately. NICE and the NHS are currently considering the new treatments.

Pamela Nash (Airdrie and Shotts) (Lab): The report published yesterday suggests that NHS staff were working according to the best available knowledge at the time.
As chair of the all-party group on HIV and AIDS, however, I often hear about current incidents in which NHS staff do not have the best available knowledge at their fingertips. What have the Government done and what are they doing to ensure that we have a well-informed NHS? Is the Minister confident that there is not a similar tragedy brewing within the NHS today?

Jane Ellison: For blood donations, the picture is thankfully very different today from the situation in the 1970s and ’80s that Lord Penrose was considering. Today, blood donations are screened for both HIV and hep C as well as a number of other infections. I recently visited the blood processing site at Colindale to see the rigorous and high-tech approach to blood safety in this country. Members can be more reassured in that regard. Of course, synthetic products are available for the treatment of all haemophilia patients for whom they are suitable. On the question of the latest knowledge, I can only reiterate that NHS England is considering a further early access policy to include patients with cirrhosis. It is aiming to have that in place in the first half of this year. Importantly, NICE guidance on the use of such therapies is also expected in the first half of this year.

Today’s Business of the House

11.41 am

Sir Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Leader of the House to make a statement about the change in today’s business.

The First Secretary of State and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr William Hague): The reason for the additional business is to allow the House to reach a decision on procedural matters that relate to the opening days of business in a new Parliament and therefore merit a decision now. In each case, I have received representations either from the Procedure Committee or from Members around the House—[ Interruption. ] Including Members on the Opposition Benches. They would like to see these issues decided. Three factors prompted the Government to table these motions yesterday. One is the absence of Lords amendments to be considered, as provided for in the original business, freeing up parliamentary time today—[ Interruption. ] It has freed up parliamentary time today. If Opposition Members do not believe that there was ever going to be any Lords amendments, they have great insight into what the House of Lords would decide.

The second factor is last week’s Procedure Committee report, specifically requesting that one of the four issues, concerning the programming of Bills, be dealt with before Dissolution. The third is the view of Government business managers that if we were to do that, the other three outstanding matters relating to the beginning of a new Parliament should, if at all possible, be decided at the same time.

Tabling motions at short notice is not unusual in the closing days of a Parliament and is specifically provided for in the motion agreed on Tuesday—agreed by the Opposition.

Sir Gerald Kaufman: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that this grubby decision is what he personally will be remembered for? After a distinguished career in the House of Commons, both as a leader of a party and as a senior Cabinet Minister, he has now descended to squalor in the final days of the Parliament. Without consultation, without consultation with the Opposition parties and without notifying the Procedure Committee, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) pointed out, the right hon. Gentleman wants to make a fundamental change in how this House proceeds—[Hon. Members: “Grubby!”] Grubby, squalid, nauseous: we can go through the catalogue of adjectives to describe what the Leader of the House has descended to being. In seeking to push this through, he has made sure that there is a large attendance of Conservative Members of Parliament at a whipped event in another building here, so his claim of a free vote is fraudulent: sad, sad, sad, Mr Hague—change your mind.

Mr Hague: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman, as always, for his remarks. I do not mind any amount of personal abuse, because he cannot compete with the abuse I have received in previous years in the House: it is water off the back of this particular duck as I leave the House today. I make no apology for asking the House, on a day when the public are entitled to expect large numbers of Members to be here, to make a
decision on its procedures for the day it returns after the general election. That is what Members should be able to do; that is what the public would expect us to do. I have received representations from Opposition Members who will not speak or ask questions today for fear of their formidable Chief Whip—I could say who they are but will not—and they are entitled to have matters debated, just as everyone else in this House is.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I would not put quite the way the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Sir Gerald Kaufman) did, but the gist of what he said is correct. This House should not be asked without proper notice to decide on such an important thing. I think that the Leader of the House will live to regret this—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order, Mr Barker, calm yourself. Your hon. Friend is on his feet, and he is entitled to be heard with courtesy. [Interruption.] Order. It is better to remain silent and look a fool than to speak and remove any lingering doubt.

Mr Bone: This is a bad day for Parliament. Of course, if we had a business of the House committee, which the Leader of the House could have introduced today in this rash of measures, we would not be in this position.

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend has been a long-standing champion of a business of the House committee, as I am sure he will be in the next Parliament, but that is when that will have to be decided. What we are proposing to bring to the House today are those issues that would affect the opening days of a new Parliament, which obviously cannot be decided with any usefulness or meaning any later than today.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): In my 23 years in Parliament I have never seen a Government behave in such a grubby and underhand way. In October 2011 the Procedure Committee published its report. At the express request of the Government, the Committee did not pursue bringing forward the necessary debate in that Session. In the following Session, in February 2013, the Committee looked again at its report and concluded that it did not feel that a change was necessary. However, it wrote to the Government to request a debate on the Procedure Committee's report and everything to do with the character of the Prime Minister? It is a petty and spiteful act because he hates his Government being properly scrutinised, thanks to this reforming Speaker. The Leader of the House should be ashamed of himself for going along with it.

Mr Hague: The hon. Lady quotes the Procedure Committee, which said in 2011:

“We recommend that the House be invited to decide whether on the first day of a new Parliament, where the Presiding Member's decision on the question that a former Speaker take the Chair is challenged, the question should be decided by secret ballot or by open division.”

The Committee asked for an opportunity for the House to decide, so Opposition Members cannot consistently complain that that has not been debated and that now it is going to be debated. The debate is not “tucked away”. It cannot possibly be described as being “tucked away” when there are hundreds of Members here on both sides of the House entirely able to make a decision, and they should be able to do so of their own volition on a free vote. They should be able to do so, and I hope Opposition Members will be able to have a free vote on this question.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): If the House passes the first motion today in the name of the Leader of the House, it will be to our credit that by extending the deadline for amendments on Report we will have more considered debates with time to consider the arguments, so how can it be that he considers it appropriate for Buckinghamshire Benchers to give the rest of the House more notice, yet in the very same set of motions he gives the House barely 12 hours’ notice of his motion on elections for positions in the House?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend is right about the first of the motions, which implements the recommendation of the Procedure Committee, but on his second point the public would expect this House on its last day to be able to decide on any important question and to be here in order to do so. Indeed, hon. Members are here in order to do so.

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Ind): The Leader of the House must know that there is always a reason for taking urgent action without giving notice to the Opposition. I hope he will acknowledge that the reasons in this case are partisan—[Interruption.] Mr Speaker will confirm this—it is a matter of public record: I did not support Mr Speaker in the election in 2009. I nominated the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young), and I suspect the Leader of the House voted for him too. Will the Leader of the House accept from me, having supported a different candidate, that this is an underhand measure to try to
undermine the incumbent of the Chair, and that I am surprised that someone—the Leader of the House—who has upheld the honour of this House should be party to manoeuvres by his own Whips Office?

**Mr Hague:** I have not spoken to Mr Speaker. I do not accept that. I do not think that the institution of a secret ballot that frees all Members from pressure from Whips on either side or from the Chair is an underhand thing to bring about. As I will explain in the debate, I think that would be an improvement in our procedures and would help Members on both sides of the House.

**Gregory Barker** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House for clarity in this debate? Following the progressive reforms that there have been, how many elected House positions are decided by secret ballot and how many simply on an open Division?

**Mr Hague:** The great majority of our positions are now elected by secret ballot, and that has been warmly welcomed across the House. It applies to the Chairs of Select Committees; only two weeks ago, we agreed the election of the Standards Committee Chair by secret ballot, with the support of the Opposition on that occasion. That has increasingly become our standard procedure, and the public would be surprised to hear that it was anything other than our standard procedure.

**Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): May I tell the Leader of the House, for whom, as I think he knows, I have the highest respect, that his shabby manoeuvre demeans him and the office of Leader of the House, and shows contempt for Parliament? His successor should bring the matter back for a proper debate in the next Parliament.

**Mr Hague:** I think it is appropriate to decide the matter in this Parliament; that is what we are disagreeing about. All the motions that I am bringing forward are matters that, if not decided today, could not take effect in the next Parliament. That is their distinguishing characteristic.

**Dr Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): A case can be made for an open ballot and for a secret ballot; what there is no case for at all is the staging of a debate at the eleventh hour of the last day, when people have been sent away to get on with campaigning and when people on my side—[Interruption.] I should be grateful if my colleagues allowed me to speak. People on my side of the House were due to be campaigning for my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Amber Rudd), a Minister in a critical marginal seat, but were unaccountably told that that had been postponed. Now I know the reason why.

Will the Leader of the House answer me one question? When the notice was put around at 5.45 last evening saying that this would be a matter of debating the Procedure Committee’s reports and recommendations, was it that the first that the Chair of the Procedure Committee heard of that was when I spoke to him at 6.30? Why was it concealed from the Chair of the Procedure Committee?

**Mr Hague:** I assure my right hon. Friend that all these issues arise, one way or another, from reports of the Procedure Committee. Last week’s Procedure Committee report called for one of these motions to be brought forward before Dissolution, and in 2011 the Procedure Committee recommended that this debate take place.

**Mr Shaun Woodward** (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The office of Speaker in this House is the guardian of fairness. Will the right hon. Gentleman explain how the reputation of Parliament and the fairness of this House is enhanced by his not sharing even at the beginning of this week his intention to bring about this debate today?

Across the country, people look at Parliament, whose reputation has not been enhanced by many of the actions taken in recent years. This, the last sitting day before the country goes to a general election, is an opportunity for the country to look at us and see that we behave fairly. In the next Parliament, if the Speaker is to be able to conduct business properly, all hon. Members must feel that his election is fair. Yet today, many hon. Members cannot be part of this debate. Will the right hon. Gentleman simply explain to us why it was not possible to inform all Members at the beginning of the week that this debate would take place today?

**Mr Hague:** I have already explained why there was a change in the business. However, the right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that it is very important that people should have confidence that any future election, in this House or elsewhere, is fair. I have no doubt that when we come to the debate, that will be the case that Members wish to make in favour of a secret ballot in the particular election that we are discussing.

We would not ask voters to go to the polls on 7 May in anything other than a secret ballot, and there are long-established historical reasons for that. There has to be an opportunity for Members to put the case for a secret ballot in elections in this House.

**Jacob Rees-Mogg** (North East Somerset) (Con): My right hon. Friend is one of the most revered and admired figures within the Conservative party. He is a figure who has made his reputation by being a great parliamentarian. Throughout the years when he was leader, we were all cheered by his success at the Dispatch against Mr Blair. Does he therefore appreciate the deep sadness that many of us feel that his career should end with his name being put to a bit of parliamentary jiggery-pokery that has come about, representing grudges that some people have against Mr Speaker, and that this is deeply unfortunate?

**Mr Hague:** I obviously disagree with the idea that it has come about from any grudges. Hon. Members on both sides of this House have asked for this debate to be held, and they are entitled to have a debate held. It is part of the job of the Leader of the House to do what is in the best interests of the House. I believe that the House resolving these issues before the end of the Parliament is in the interests of the House of Commons.

**Mark Reckless** (Rochester and Strood) (UKIP): The coalition agreement promised:

“A House Business Committee, to consider government business, will be established by the third year of the Parliament.”
Is the Leader of the House proud that instead of that, his legacy is continued Government control of the bulk of the parliamentary timetable to be exploited for partisan purposes as we see today?

Mr Hague: This Parliament has seen the greatest transfer of the parliamentary timetable from outside the Government's control of any Parliament of modern times, with the establishment of the Backbench Business Committee as well as maintaining Opposition days. There has been historic reform, and I am sure that that trend will continue in the future. This Parliament has also seen the election of Select Committee Chairs by secret ballot, and that is now an important principle in this House. What we are discussing today is in line with that.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I started with the presumption that I would vote in favour of a secret ballot for the Speaker. However, this is a constitutional matter of some importance that also goes to the heart of the relationship between the Executive and this Parliament, and as such, it should have been heard on a prime-time day, with the whole House here, with plenty of time. Instead, if the House votes for this today, people will get the impression that what should have been a constitutional matter has been allowed to become an ad hominem matter, and a rather mean-spirited one at that, and that in future this House will tolerate the Executive taking action against an uncomfortable and difficult Speaker.

Mr Hague: It is for the House to decide on the merits of this. I do not think my right hon. Friend can argue that we are in anything other than prime time at the moment, since the House is well attended and this debate is receiving a great deal of attention. It is for the House to decide on the merits of the motions. If the motion on a secret ballot is carried, it will be for the House to make its own decisions in the future.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): May I say to my right hon. Friend—I call him my right hon. Friend—how much he admired his qualities, including his qualities of Churchillian speech-making—that I am afraid that today will not go down as his finest hour?

Mr Hague: I am always grateful to my hon. Friend, if I may say so. The question for all of us and our democracy that it is seen to be in the interests of the House and the public's faith, but we leave with a House that is unreformed. I think it is for me, rather than you, Mr Speaker, to answer that, since the questions are to me. My hon. Friend correctly quotes other passages of the report. Those are indeed issues that can be discussed in the debate that we are about to hold, and in the considerations in favour of a secret ballot on these occasions.

Mr Hague: I think it was a bit of mock outrage from the hon. Gentleman, if I may say so. The question of whether a vote in Parliament should be held by secret ballot cannot possibly be an attack on parliamentary democracy. It would, of course, in the view of those in favour of it, be an affirmation of parliamentary democracy. I can understand some of the comments made by Opposition Members, but I think the hon. Gentleman is getting a little too excessively outraged on this occasion.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The office of Speaker is centuries old and it is absolutely essential for all of us and our democracy that it is seen to be above party politics. Therefore, I appeal for calm. We may or may not like Mr Speaker, and there may or may not be a case for a secret ballot. We all accept that. However, in order that we are not accused of making this about a particular individual, should we not do this on a consensual basis and come to an agreement when Mr Speaker has announced his retirement? There would then be no question that this is about the present Speaker, but about the House of Commons we love.

Mr Hague: The House can come to its own decision about that. It can accept or reject the motions before it. It is up to the House to make its decision later today.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It will be said of the present Leader of the House that nothing demeaned him as much as the manner of his leaving, with a mean, spiteful kick at the best reforming Speaker we have had for 30 years. The task of this Parliament after the nightmare of the expenses scandal was to restore the public’s faith, but we leave with a House that is unreformed. It is still possible to buy a peerage and to buy access to Ministers, and the revolving door is still spinning, making
it possible for former Ministers to prostitute their insider knowledge for the best job. Is not the Leader of the House ashamed of himself?

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman goes a little wide of the question. The obvious retort is that it is still possible to buy a party, which is what trade unions do with the Labour party. That is what really needs reform in our political system.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): The Leader of the House knows that there is no greater admirer of him than me, but even if I agreed with the motion—as it happens, I do not—it is unjustifiable to keep it secret until the last minute and to have just one hour to debate it. The tactic of keeping the parliamentary party here for a meeting so that as many people would be here as possible in the hope that the Opposition parties would have left so the motion could be sneaked through at the last minute is the kind of student union politics that has the fingerprints of the Whip’s Office all over it. I think the Leader of the House will regret that the greatest parliamentarian of his generation has gone along with that kind of tactic.

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend continues his fruitful relationship with the Whip’s Office with that remark, which we all understand. He has views about the motion and he will be able to express them. Members should be able to vote freely on this question, which they certainly can do on this side of the House.

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman gives the thesaurus out this morning to find as many adjectives as possible, but I personally think that it is very important that this issue is decided.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House not deserve better than to allow his political epitaph to be written by a lazy, cowardly, bullying, spiteful, vindictive Prime Minister, who is not fit to lace his shoes?

Mr Hague: Hon. Members have clearly had the thesaurus on these matters, is that what has been said is a political epitaph to be written by a lazy, cowardly, bullying, spiteful, vindictive Prime Minister, who is not fit to lace his shoes?

Mr Speaker: Order. If I felt the need of the advice of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), I would seek it, but I am seeking to respond to the point of order. It is a matter of taste; it is not language that I would use, and it is certainly not language that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg) would use. I have responded to him, and I think that we should leave it there.

Jacob Rees-Mogg: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. What the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) has just said about the Prime Minister—calling him “vindictive” etc.—cannot be within the bounds of parliamentary discourse. I really object most strongly. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just respond to the hon. Gentleman as follows? My strong sense, and I do take advice on these matters, is that what has been said is a matter of taste. [Interruption.] Order. If I felt the need of the advice of the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), I would seek it, but I am seeking to respond to the point of order. It is a matter of taste; it is not language that I would use, and it is certainly not language that the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Jacob Rees-Mogg) would use. I have responded to him, and I think that we should leave it there.

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Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Progressives everywhere will surely welcome the possibility of a secret ballot throughout a Parliament, but is it not the case that this motion could not have been brought forward earlier without precisely a constraint on the potential freedom of Members to vote as they see fit?

Mr Hague: I agree with my hon. Friend that it can be seen in that light: the institution of a secret ballot would be an important strengthening. I will come on to this during the debate—of our parliamentary democracy. I noted earlier that there are Members, particularly Opposition Members, who feel constrained in expressing their views on this question, and indeed, have stayed silent during these exchanges. That is their right, but they do have a fear of expressing their views on this issue, as is very clear from this discussion.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): It pains me to say that the Leader of the House has today betrayed the House. May I simply ask him: when did he first make the decision to bring forward this matter for a vote today?

Mr Hague: The Government decided, when it became clear that there would be no further Lords amendments yesterday afternoon, to bring it before the House.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): There seems to be an assumption among some Members that Thursday is some kind of day off, but those of us who attend every Thursday see it as a day of work. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government are entitled to table whatever business they like in their own time?

Mr Hague: The public would expect us to be here today to do our job, and that indeed is what we are here to do.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): Does it bother the right hon. Gentleman that his legacy will not be that of a parliamentary statesman, but of a grubby, cowardly assassin?

Mr Hague: I do not think that anything the hon. Gentleman said would ever bother me.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend remember that he and I were the only participants in the debate on the business motion on Tuesday? Will he explain why he did not take that opportunity to say that he would bring forward changes to Standing Orders, bearing in mind that, in the absence of a written constitution, our Standing Orders are effectively our freedom and democracy—our unwritten constitution. The proposals before the House today would effectively change that constitution without proper notice. Why is my right hon. Friend going along with that?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend and I did indeed debate that issue on Tuesday. As I have explained, the decision to table the motions was taken on Wednesday, so I would not have been able to explain it to him on Tuesday afternoon.

Mr Russell Brown (Dumfries and Galloway) (Lab): May I quietly remind the Leader of the House that during the last Parliament, when he was on the Opposition side of the House and I sat on the Government, he
spoke before me in a debate and I then paid him the compliment—some might say it was not a compliment—that in my view, he was quite frankly the best of a bad bunch on the Opposition Benches? I have to say to him that he has gone down seriously in my estimation today, and that will be shared by many across the country. As the shadow Leader of the House has said, this is a grubby piece of work. The hand and fingerprints of the Prime Minister are on this, and I just hope that the Leader of the House will seriously consider what he is doing.

Mr Hague: The House will be able to make its decision. Let me say that, despite what the hon. Gentleman said, I still regard him as one of the best of a bad bunch, and that will remain my opinion of him.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): My right hon. Friend has written eloquent books about the history of our country and about great parliamentarians. He grew up, as I did, with a great reverence for this institution of Parliament. Regardless of the merits of the motion on which we will vote, does he agree that on this, the last day of this Parliament, it is sad that the tone and atmosphere in the Chamber has been so partisan and so bitter?

Mr Hague: Yes, we often have cause to regret that, but it is also necessary—as all students of parliamentary history know—to be able to decide important issues freely and without favour, and that is the subject of our debate later.

Mr Speaker: I think the House appreciates what the right hon. Gentleman has said.
12.17 pm

**Mr Hague:** I beg to move

That this House takes note of paragraphs 21 to 28 of the Seventh Report of the Procedure Committee, Matters for the Procedure Committee in the 2015 Parliament, HC 1121, concerning the trial of a three day deadline for the tabling of amendments and new clauses/schedules at report stage of all programmed bills; and approves the Committee’s recommendation in paragraph 28 that the trial should be extended for the duration of the first session of the 2015 Parliament, and extended to amendments and new clauses/schedules in Committee of the whole House of all bills and at report stage of un-programmed bills.

**Mr Speaker:** With this it will be convenient to debate the following:

Motion on pay for Petitions Committee Chair—

That the Resolution of the House of 19 March 2013, relating to Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of Section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, be amended by inserting after “the Liaison Committee”, “the Petitions Committee.”.

Motion on elections for positions in the House—

That this House notes the recommendation of the Procedure Committee in its Fifth Report of Session 2010-12, 2010 Elections for positions in the House, that the House should be invited to decide between a secret ballot or open division where the question at the start of a new Parliament that a former Speaker take the Chair is challenged, and accordingly makes the following change to Standing Orders, with effect from the beginning of the new Parliament:

Standing Order 1A (Re-election of former Speaker) Line 11, at end insert—

“(1A) If that question is contested, it shall be determined by secret ballot, to take place on the same day under arrangements made by the Member presiding, who shall announce the result of the ballot to the House as soon as is practicable.”

Motion on Deputy Speakers—

That, at the start of the 2015 Parliament, the Speaker may nominate no more than three Members as Deputy Speakers to serve until the House has elected Deputy Speakers in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 2A; and that the Members so nominated shall exercise all the powers vested in the Chairman of Ways and Means as Deputy Speaker.

**Mr Hague:** We have already anticipated some of this debate during the urgent question, but I rise to speak to the motions standing in my name and that of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House.

The motions facilitate making decisions on areas which, to have any meaningful usefulness, need to be decided before the early days of the next Parliament. They include matters raised in the Procedure Committee’s latest report “Matters for the Procedure Committee in the 2015 Parliament”, published last week. The report specifically called for a decision of the House before the end of this Parliament on the issue of extending the trial of new arrangements for programming legislation.

Let me deal with that motion first.

The House agreed on 8 May last year to the trial of new arrangements with regard to programming legislation, following the Procedure Committee report on the same subject, published in December 2013. The arrangements included bringing forward the deadline for tabling amendments, new clauses and schedules from two days to three days before the day on which the debate takes place. The Procedure Committee agreed to review the operation of the arrangements at the end of the current Session. That review, aided by a memorandum produced by the Public Bill Office, is summarised in last week’s Procedure Committee report. The report noted that the trial had not produced very much evidence on the impact of the change, and therefore recommended that the trial should be continued in the first Session of the next Parliament. The Procedure Committee also recommended that the deadline be extended to cover amendments in Committee of the whole House for all Bills, and on Report for unprogrammed bills.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): If we are having a secret ballot for the position of the Speaker of the House, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we should have secret ballot for the position of the Leader of the House?

**Mr Hague:** I am talking about the programming of Bills, but I shall come on to the secret ballot issue in a moment.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): As the Leader of the House will recall, the purpose of changing the arrangements for timetabling amendments was to facilitate debate on non-Government amendments in order to democratise the Report stage and consideration of Lords amendments. Will he explain why he is continuing with only one part of the experiment, and—if I may say so—not going all the way to facilitate proper consideration on Report?

**Mr Hague:** We have generally had a great number of days for Report, and we worked closely with the Opposition on that in the last Parliament. We are implementing the recommendations of the Procedure Committee—the part that the Committee recommended should be implemented before the end of the Parliament, which is today. That does not exclude further changes in the new Parliament, but if the motion is agreed to we will implement the urgent recommendation of the Procedure Committee. The Committee also recommended that the deadline be extended to cover amendments in Committee of the whole House for all Bills, and at Report for unprogrammed Bills. Those are further improvements to the procedures.

**Mr David Nuttall** (Bury North) (Con): I understand that the delay in tabling these matters was that the Government needed to see whether any Lords amendments would be sent to the House today. What would have happened to this amendment to our Standing Orders if Lords amendments had been sent to this House? Would it have been held over until the next Parliament?

**Mr Hague:** It would certainly have been much more difficult to do it, so the absence of Lords amendments made a big change and allowed us to consider more motions than might otherwise have been the case. On that issue I am happy to facilitate bringing the motion to the House for decision before the end of the Parliament, as requested by the Procedure Committee. I hope the House will support the extension of the trial in the way outlined. It will then be for the Procedure Committee in
the next Parliament to evaluate the trial further, before bringing it to the House for a decision on whether the changes should be made permanent.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Given that the right hon. Gentleman told the House that he tabled these motions on the basis of representations by anonymous Members of Parliament whom he was not prepared to name, is he proposing further changes so that in future amendments and resolutions can be tabled anonymously by Members of Parliament and considered by the House?

Mr Hague: I think that would be too much of a revolutionary change, but the particular change I am talking about was recommended before the end of the Parliament by the Procedure Committee.

The second issue, which I shall cover briefly, concerns the pay of the Petitions Committee Chair. On 24 February the House agreed the Standing Order changes necessary for the Petitions Committee, recommended by the Procedure Committee as part of a collaborative e-petition system to be established at the start of the next Parliament. It considered issues relating to the Chair of the new Committee. The motion before us adds the post of Chair of the Petitions Committee to the list of Select Committees that attract an additional salary. That principle is a matter for the House to decide, but in the light of the expected responsibility and work load of the Committee, I believe that a valid case has been made, and I hope the House will support it.

The final motion, which comes after the issue of the secret ballot, follows up one of the final acts of the Procedure Committee in this Parliament, which was to publish a report recommending a revision of the Standing Orders of this House. I shall respond immediately to the Chair of the new Committee as part of a collaborative e-petition system for the Petitions Committee, recommended by the Procedure Committee.

Mr Hague: That is an important consideration and it brings me to the fourth motion, on whether there should be a secret ballot or an open Division in a contested re-election of a former Speaker. In its latest report the Procedure Committee reminds us that the issue has not yet been addressed, and I believe—we discussed this during the urgent question—that it is in the interests of the House for the matter to be resolved before the start of a new Parliament. The Committee recommended in 2011 that the House be given the opportunity to determine whether, on the first day of a new Parliament if the decision on a former Speaker is challenged, the question should be decided by secret ballot or open Division. There are arguments both ways.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I very much support the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) who said that these matters ought to be determined when the current incumbent of the post of Speaker stands down. Otherwise, it looks precisely like what I fear it is: partisan behaviour on the part of the governing party.

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman can take his own view and is able to vote in the coming Division on whether we should make this change. If his view is that we should not, he can vote that way.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): If the Committee made this recommendation years ago, as has been said, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if proper time been allocated for it and people had had notice of the fact that it was to be discussed, he would not be facing the criticism he faces today, which is that this is very much a stitch-up by the Government?

Mr Hague: Of course the recommendation could have been considered earlier in the Parliament, but it was not. As it was not considered, it is important that before the new Parliament Members are able to express their views on it.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I think my right hon. Friend has inadvertently misled the House. The recommendation from the Procedure Committee in 2011 that we should visit this issue and vote on whether the election of the Speaker should be by secret ballot was a reiteration of an argument that the Committee first put forward in 2009, as it felt that the decision should have been made before the 2010 election.

Mr Hague: That is an important point. There was a clear view from the Procedure Committee in 2009, but it was not acted on at the end of the last Parliament. It is possible to go on for ever not acting on those recommendations and arguments in one Parliament after another.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Will the Leader of the House confirm what would happen at the beginning of the next Parliament? As I understand it, the Father of the House—whoever that is—will take the Chair and will decide on the collection of voices whether there is a contest or not. It will be up to the Father of the House to decide whether there are enough voices
Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): May I suggest that we accept that, with the presence of the Speaker in the Chair now, it is a depersonalised issue and one for the House and the procedure it wants to follow, rather than a yes or no against a particular person?

Mr Hague: I think the House should treat this issue in that way because we are talking about procedures of the House that may stand for a long time. They may of course be changed by a subsequent Parliament, but it should be treated in that way.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Hague: Before I give way again let me discuss some of the arguments because I want to leave time for the shadow Leader of the House and others.

The arguments in favour of the status quo are that it is a familiar procedure, that it is a quick procedure, and that the Speaker stands for election as the Speaker in his or her constituency in expectation of continuing in office and is therefore in a different situation from other officeholders. But obviously the arguments the other way are very strong. We conduct the great majority of elections in the House, and all elections out in the country, by secret ballot for reasons well understood and instantly appreciated. That has been a general principle of our democracy since the 19th century. Whenever voters elect someone to a position of power and authority over them, the principle is that they should be able to do so without fear or favour. It is how we elect our party leaders, it is how we elect our Select Committee Chairs—[Interruption.] It is certainly how we elect our party’s leader. It also frees MPs from pressure from the Chair or from their parties.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): This proposal, like the elections for Committee Chairs, goes against one of the major principles of standards in public life: transparency. Should we not bring Parliament into the 21st century and make all elections for everyone open, so that we and the electors can see exactly what we are doing in here? We have a bad enough reputation now; this motion sullies it further.

Mr Hague: I think it would be a minority view on the Procedure Committee considered—all MPs”—

which means in a secret ballot—

“as we believe this would enhance the confidence of the House in the Committee”,

so his Committee has made the case, as he will have to admit, for election by secret ballot.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I was elected Chair of the Education Committee under the new procedure in this Parliament by secret ballot of the whole House. If it had been up to the party Whips, I doubt I would ever have taken that position. How can a secret ballot be anything other than a protection of the voice of people in this Chamber so that they can speak up? For the Opposition to suggest otherwise can only be for partisan purposes.

Mr Hague: Personally, I come down on the same side of the question because I think that a secret ballot frees Members from pressure from their parties or from the Chair. It is the right thing to do in principle. Although the case can be made that those arguments do not apply when it comes to the election of the Speaker, it can also be argued that they apply particularly in that instance so that Members can vote without fear or favour.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Earlier the Leader of the House said that these proposals were coming forward today because we had no Lords amendments to consider and, as a result, there was time. If there had been some Lords amendments, would these proposals not have been brought forward today?

Mr Hague: I have already answered that question. It would certainly have been much more difficult and I doubt whether we would have been able to do so, but we have been able to bring them forward, and we do have time.

The House can decide as it wishes, and it should decide on the basis put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley), which is not on any individual case but on what it thinks is the best and right procedure. My opinion, as Leader of the House, is that a secret ballot would be right, fair and democratic in such circumstances, and thus completely justified. I hope therefore that the House will approve the motion.

12.35 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is with genuine sorrow and anger that I rise to oppose this motion today. I shall address only the real point at issue—the third motion, which seeks to change Standing Order No. 1A on the election of the Speaker. Despite the fact that the Procedure Committee asked for this not to be done in this way and for no changes to be made to this Standing Order, we are—in arguments rehearsed in the urgent question earlier—in this appalling situation with only one hour to discuss an issue that we could have discussed in great detail. It is a matter of great interest to all Members on both sides of the House.

There are arguments on both sides about the options that the Procedure Committee considered—

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Eagle: No.

The Leader of the House has taken nearly a third of the time that he has allocated for the entire debate in his opening speech. Every Member of the House has a direct interest in what he suddenly proposed out of the blue late last night. This is an appalling and shabby way to treat the House.
The motion to make changes to Standing Order No. 1A would effectively create a motion of no confidence in the existing Speaker at the beginning of every Parliament and mandate that it should be held in secret. Let us stop and think about the meaning of that for future Parliaments. Let us try to get away from the partisan nature of what has been presented to us today and think about the principle that we have been given almost no time to think about or debate. Let us think about how it would affect the position of Speaker in the future. It opens up the possibility that any future Government will be able to threaten an existing Speaker in a way that undermines the independence of the House of Commons.

The motion before us was decided in underhand negotiations by the Government parties. It has been presented with no notice, no consultation with the Procedure Committee or the Opposition—a point I made extremely forcefully to the Leader of the House when I found out about it by accident late last night—and it is against the express wishes of the Procedure Committee. I refer the House to the minutes of the Procedure Committee from 6 February 2013 which, on this very issue, state that

"with reference to the recommendation on the re-election of a former Speaker, the Committee agreed that the motion to be put to the House should be 'That no change be made to Standing Order 1A (Re-election of former Speaker).’"

An e-mail I have from the Clerk of the Procedure Committee to the office of the Leader of the House confirms this. In the list of proposed motions that the Clerk of the Committee sent for debate on House business, on the question of re-election of a former Speaker, it reads:

“That no change be made to Standing Order 1A”.

I also have letters from the Chair of the Procedure Committee to the Leader of the House stating that any debate on these matters should take place in the early part of the week and

“not tucked away on a Thursday afternoon”.

I doubt that even the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) could have anticipated that the Leader of the House would seek to spring this motion on us on the very last day of a five-year, fixed-term Parliament—the Leader of the House cannot argue that he did not know when it was all going to end, because we have known for five years—after all whipped business has been concluded and many MPs will have already returned to their constituencies. This is a matter for all of us. It is not, and should not be, a matter for this kind of ambush.

In our parliamentary system, the Leader of the House has two jobs. The first is to ensure that the Government in this House. The second is to be the voice of the Government in this House. The House would seek to spring this motion on us on the very last day of a five-year, fixed-term Parliament—the Leader of the House cannot argue that he did not know when it was all going to end, because we have known for five years—after all whipped business has been concluded and many MPs will have already returned to their constituencies. This is a matter for all of us. It is not, and should not be, a matter for this kind of ambush.

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The Leader of the House must know that it is improper to change the Standing Orders of this House with no notice on the last day of the Parliament. This is no way for the House to be asked to change the way it governs itself, and in such a crucial area.

We all know what is really going on here. In all the morass of procedure, this is really a spiteful attempt to get rid of a Speaker who has the temerity to stand up for this House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] And it is a cynical attempt to bring the speakership into play and use it as a bargaining chip in coalition negotiations because the Tories have accepted that they cannot win a majority. I urge the House, for the future of our constitution, the way we do things and the freedoms we enjoy in the House, to vote the motion down.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. Given that many Members are standing and time is limited, will you be issuing guidance on time limits for speakers?

Mr Speaker: There is not a time limit and it is not that common to have a time limit on procedural matters. I would urge colleagues to have regard to each others’ interests, but there is no fixed time limit. That is the short answer to the hon. Gentleman.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given that so many Members wish to speak on this very important constitutional matter, which we have been bounced into at the last minute with the last gasp of this dreadful Government, is there not a way in which more time could be allocated so that everyone can express themselves?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is no. The motion has been tabled by the Government for the debate to last for up to one hour. Colleagues can make their own assessment of whether they think that is a sufficiency of time for this matter, but I am not in a position to extend the time.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Can you make sure that the general public out there, who will look on in disbelief, have some understanding of the absolutely ridiculous way in which Parliament has now been forced to act?

Mr Speaker: Well, people can attend to our proceedings if they so wish. I imagine that some will and some won’t.

Gregory Barker: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the very sensitive nature of this discussion, have you taken advice on whether you, sir, should actually be in the Chair? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I will respond to the right hon. Gentleman in a moment with pleasure.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Can I just say that my right hon. Friend has just excelled himself in the atmosphere
he has generated in this House, in precisely the way in which the Leader of the House has excelled himself in the atmosphere of the country?

Mr Speaker: I am very happy to respond to the right hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Gregory Barker). The short answer is that I have not found it necessary to seek advice on this matter. It is commonplace for the Speaker to be in the Speaker's Chair. I am genuinely sorry if that disquiets the right hon. Gentleman, but it has been my normal practice to do at least the expected number of hours of the Speaker in the Chair, and frequently rather more so. I have not generally found that that has met with disapproval in the House.

12.44 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate this afternoon, Mr Speaker. I am not ashamed to say that I admire you. I am a friend of yours. I have not yet seen your kitchen, but I hope to one day. You have done an enormous amount for this House and you have done an enormous amount to empower this Chamber. Mr Speaker, we do share a weakness and we both know what that weakness is: we both have a temper, and we need to work together to better manage our tempers in the future. I was quite cross with a couple of very decent Whips yesterday and I apologise to them today, as I did yesterday.

The report should not be about you, Mr Speaker, and it is becoming about you. I fear that the Government have wanted it to become about you. It should be about the position of Speaker. On 6 February 2013, my Committee decided to bring forward this report. We were going to recommend a motion that the status quo be retained. This was an amendable motion, so those colleagues who disagreed could have amended the motion and a vote could have taken place. On 7 February, I wrote a letter to the then Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr Lansley), notifying him of this matter and asking that our debates be taken in prime time, so the whole House could come to an informed decision.

At about that time, circumstances meant that the Government felt unable to bring forward the report. We agreed with the Government's view on the matter. On 28 January 2015, we met the Leader of the House and had further discussions about various reports, including on the election of the Speaker. I sent a letter on 3 February 2013, my Committee confirming the Committee's firm and unanimous view—the Committee is made up of all sorts of people from all sorts of parties—that any vote should take place in prime time so that the House could come to an informed decision.

I do say to the Government that this is not, I think, how they expected today to play out. The Government were hoping that the party would be kept here under a three-line Whip for a party meeting and that others would have gone home. This does not reflect well on the Government.

May I just say that how one treats people in this place is important? This week, I went to the leaving drinks for the Leader of the House. I spent 20 minutes saying goodbye to his special adviser yesterday. I went into his private office and was passed by the Deputy Leader of the House yesterday. All of them would have been aware of what they were proposing to do. I also had a number of friendly chats with our Chief Whip yesterday, yet I found out at 6.30 pm last night that the Leader of the House was bringing forward my report.

I have been played as a fool. When I go home tonight, I will look in the mirror and see an honourable fool looking back at me. I would much rather be an honourable fool, in this and any other matter, than a clever man.

[Applause.]

12.48 pm

Mr Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): We talk a lot these days, in this House and elsewhere, about transparency. There is a more old-fashioned meaning of the word transparency, which was often used when I was growing up. It was that one could see the ulterior motives of the people who put things forward. In this occasion we can see some of the old-fashioned meaning of transparency on the Floor of the House today: a device so thin to have found an hour or so from amendments to the Modern Slavery Bill that did not come; a little bit of loose change behind the sofa. I agree with everything that has been said. My admiration for the Leader of the House is not dimmed in any way, but the way he has behaved, or allowed himself to be presented as he has today, is shameful. Fortunately, he is not writing another book on Churchill—that has been left to somebody else—but as a historian he should remember what was said in the 1940 Chamberlain debate when Winston Churchill stood up to defend his colleagues' failures. The right hon. Gentleman should not allow himself to become an air-raid shelter for them. I am tempted here to quote Mark Antony:

“For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men.”

Let us ask ourselves just of what is the present Speaker supposed to be guilty? Is it that he has firmly enforced the reforms in the House giving all Members a fair deal? Is it that he has been strong with MPs on both sides, in Prime Minister's Question Time and elsewhere, who yah-boo their way through events in a way many of our voters feel sick about? Is it that he has let daylight into the House by encouraging many people from outside—charity and educational groups and others—to have access to and use of the facilities in an unprecedented fashion? If there are those in the House who are not happy with the Speaker, they can stand in the next Parliament and say their piece. They can stand up themselves. They can put up or shut up.

What we have today is a grubby piece of schoolboy intriguing that Michael Dobbs would have been ashamed to have dreamt up for one of his novels. These are matters for the House to deliberate on properly and initiate, not the Executive. These are matters of due process and due thought. After the expenses scandal in 2008, we spent two traumatic years trying painstakingly to recover the House's powers and reputation, including through the Backbench Business Committee and the Select Committee elections, and the present Speaker has faithfully defended that process. It will not do the Government any good having their voters turned off by the pocket Machiavellis behind today's spectacle.

While we speak, Richard III is being interred in Leicester cathedral. He was the monarch who brought a new meaning to decisiveness by arresting one of his councillors, Hastings, at a Privy Council meeting, accusing
him of treason without due process and having his head chopped off on Tower hill to secure his usurpation—all within the hour. I wonder that some of those behind the motion are not mourners at the service, since they seem initiators of the methods. This is the mother of Parliaments. Commonwealth countries and Parliaments all over the world come to see it and take example from it, and if we cede our right to decide thoughtfully and after due process to any Government, in this hole-in-the-wall vote, before Parliament prorogues, we will surrender the House's self-respect and the respect of the voters. We will turn this House into a receptacle for Executive despotism and cronyism.

Those who are tempted to look over their shoulders for advancement at those pulling the strings on this grubby occasion should remember that there will come a day when each of them needs an independent Speaker to protect their rights and interests. Even if it were just on the basis of self-interest, do Members supporting the motion want to face their voters in six weeks' time as accomplices to this chicanery—to a process that demeans this House and gives credence to what is peddled by cynics and stand-up comics about this House? Are we to dispense, after an hour, with a process that has stood the test of time in the House for six centuries? Previous Speakers have occasionally been beheaded, murdered or killed in battle, but as far as I am aware, none has ever been stabbed in the back on the Floor of the House. Do Members want to align themselves with proceedings more fit for a Soviet-era puppet Parliament rubber-stamping edicts from dictators?

Speaker Lenthall, when he faced up to Charles I, after he burst in to arrest the five Members, said: “I have neither eyes to see nor tongue to speak in this place but as this house is pleased to direct me”.

If Members cravenly cave in to this trumped-up device to attack an incumbent Speaker whose high crime has been to protect Members' interests and to throw some daylight into a Parliament to redeem its reputation among a disillusioned public, they will not only dishonour the great struggle for independence from the Executive, over which a civil war was fought, but jeopardise the relevance of this great place to the people of this country, who will rightly say, six weeks from a general election, “All the problems and serious issues we face, and what on earth are these people playing at?”

12.55 pm

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who delivered an extraordinarily moving and powerful speech, and I would like to put on the record my unbounded admiration for my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), who knows the high regard in which I hold him on a range of important issues. I am disappointed, however, that his last act appears, on the surface to the very least, to be underhand. I have to ask myself, “What is the point of having a Procedure Committee, when it is completely ignored on an issue of procedure?”

For my part, I am conflicted. I can see very strong arguments in favour of the motion, but I want to hear those arguments, and I want to hear them from members of the Committee, who have looked into this issue at great length. With just a few hours' notice and just one hour of cramped debate, that simply will not be possible. So we have what looks like an ambush and the sense that we are not resolving a procedural issue of Parliament, but punishing the incumbent.

For the record, I fully understand the Government's impulse. As a Back Bencher trying to hold the Government to account over the past four and a half years, the incumbent has made my job much easier. He is a reformer and a champion of Parliament. If a new Government form after 7 May, I suspect they will find the Speaker just as awkward as this Government have done, and that is as it should be. So Mr Speaker, in opposing the motion, I am opposing not the motion but the manner in which it has been brought to the House. I hope it will be returned after the election.

12.57 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): By definition, the Government of the day have a majority in the House and can remove a Speaker any day of the week. It is a tribute to our constitutional settlement that no Government have chosen even to attempt to do that since 1835. That is why the motion is so wrong. The Speaker used to be the appointee of the Crown, but today the Speaker is a servant of the House, not the poodle of the majority party. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is noise on both sides. We cannot have recurring noise when colleagues are speaking, from either side. Let us hear Mr Chris Bryant.

Chris Bryant: If the Speaker should have any bias at all, as has been the established practice for more than 150 years, it should be a bias in favour of allowing more debate and continuing discussion and enabling scrutiny. If, therefore, there is a bias at all, it must always be in favour of the Back Bencher, not the Government. For that reason, the Government are always tempted to get rid of a Speaker, but they have never chosen to do so until today. A Speaker should always be able to order proceedings without any fear or favour, in particular without any fear of the Government, the Executive or the Crown.

Kevin Brennan: Given that we have a constitutional convention that the Speaker is not opposed by the main parties and that the current Speaker will be standing on that basis, should the Conservative leadership want to get rid of him, should they not be putting up a candidate against him and allowing members of the public, in a secret ballot, to decide who they want to vote for?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The Speaker does not stand on a party ticket, so if the good burghers of Buckingham decide that you, Mr Speaker, should be returned as Speaker, and then this House, because of a Conservative plot, decides to get rid of you, what is to become of you? Are you to return to the Back Benches? No Speaker has done that for more than 150 years. Every other candidate presented for Speaker will have stood on a party ticket. It would therefore be a profoundly irresponsible act for us suddenly to change the rules so that we end up with a party candidate rather than a non-party candidate as our next Speaker.
Gregory Barker rose—

Chris Bryant: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, because previously he exposed the whole rationale behind today’s debate, which is that he has a personal vendetta against Mr Speaker.

Gregory Barker: On the contrary, I have not made a single personal remark about the Speaker during my entire time in Parliament. The hon. Gentleman has wandered rather far from the motion. Will he address himself to it and tell us whether he is in favour of a secret ballot or against it? This is similar to when Labour consistently opposed secret ballots in the reform of the trade unions. It is their dirty little prejudice against real democracy.

Chris Bryant: If the right hon. Gentleman does not mind, let me say this. If he has not worked out my views on this by now, he must be a little dim. My biggest fear is that the Conservatives are planning to hand out the speakership to somebody else as part of the coalition negotiations, because they know they will not get a majority in the next Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Bryant: I am not giving way any more, as I ought to draw my remarks to a conclusion.

I say to Conservative Members that when our procedure was crafted in 2001, we took the view that the re-election of a Speaker at the beginning of a new Parliament was, in effect, a vote of confidence in the Speaker. The Leader of the House suggested that anybody elected to a position of power over the people should be elected by secret ballot. The Prime Minister will also depend on a vote of confidence or a vote of no confidence. If the Leader of the House is to continue with this, his argument must be that a vote of no confidence in the Prime Minister should be a secret ballot. Of course it should not. If Conservative Members genuinely believe that hon. Members will be so frightened that they will not be able to own up to the public how they voted on such a motion of confidence or no confidence in the Speaker, frankly, they have no confidence in one another.

The proceedings of this House were secret for centuries. John Wilkes campaigned to be allowed to reveal to the public what went on in this place. What did the majority Government do at the time? They used their majority to chuck him out of Parliament, and what did the voters do? They put him back in. What did the Government then do? They chickened him out. What did the voters do? They chickened him back in. They believed that this House’s proceedings should be in public and should be known to all so that voters could make their decisions.

The Leader of the House has done himself no favours; he has betrayed the confidence of the House today. He tabled his motion at some time about 7.30 last night. He did not notify the Opposition, but let us get over that. He is arguing that we should have a secret ballot for the election of the Chair of the Procedure Committee, yet he has deliberately gone behind the back of the very person who was elected by the whole House in a secret ballot. His argument bears no weight. Moreover, he constructed today’s one-hour debate in such a way as to make it impossible to table an amendment for consideration.

It is completely impossible for us to consider a single amendment today. That is not the action of a Leader of the House who respects Parliament. That is why I say to him: in the name of God, go—and I think the people of this country will say the same.

Pete Wishart: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the great unhappiness about this process and the way this House has been bounced into considering it, is there any way that this question could not now be put?

Mr Speaker: There is, of course, a device of moving the previous question, but it would affect only the first of the motions, which is not the one that has excited the debate. It could be done, but I rather suspect that it would not be effective.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I take more points of order, let me explain that I would like to call a couple more colleagues in the very short time available and that I hope colleagues will be considerate of each other.

Mr David Heath (Somerston and Frome) (LD): Further to the point of order, Mr Speaker. There is, of course, another way. The Leader of the House could withdraw the motion—[HON. MEMBERS: “Withdraw, withdraw.”] I have to say that although I would always support a secret ballot, I very much dislike the way in which this matter has been brought before the House today.

Hon. Members: Withdraw, withdraw!

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House can respond to the point of order if he so wishes, but he does not wish to do so. [Interruption.] Order. Reference was made to tabling at 7.30 pm. In the interests of proper transparency, it is only fair to say—I want accurate information to be before the House—that the Leader of the House notified me of his intentions on this matter at 5.30 pm.

1.5 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I am going to break the habit of a lifetime and say nothing myself, quoting instead a Liberal Democrat colleague with approval. Following some discussion of this matter on a programme this morning, I received the following message from the hon. Member—and he is honourable—for St Ives (Andrew George). He said:

“I feel very frustrated and annoyed by this. In addition, I cannot be there. My father died last night and, as you might expect, I have other priorities today which I cannot alter. Had I been able to attend, I would object in the strongest terms to THE WAY THIS IS BEING DONE—

the emphasis is his. He continued:

“I don’t mind a motion being brought forward in an open and honest manner, but not in this underhand way. If it helps, I’d be happy for you to make reference to any of this message in your remarks.”

I need add nothing further other than to endorse those sentiments.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. In calling the next Member, let me say that I intend to call a Liberal Democrat Member, and I want to accommodate as many Members as possible. Great brevity will be appreciated.

1.7 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I believe that the Leader of the House has a choice in front him: withdrawal of this motion or humiliation in the Division Lobbies. It is clear from all those hon. Members who have spoken from all corners of the House that what is happening is entirely unacceptable to us.

When hon. Members left in 2010, we did so at the worst time for Parliament. We were being pilloried in the press—sometimes fairly, sometimes grossly unfairly, and I wrote a book about an hon. Member who I believe died prematurely because he was unfairly accused in the expenses scandal. This was the then hon. Member for North-West Leicestershire, David Taylor. Much of what happened then—the great screaming nightmare of the expenses scandal—was unjustified, but sadly a lot of it was justified and our reputation was in the gutter. Our main task in this Parliament was to restore confidence in this House and in democracy. The person who has done most to achieve that is Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker has stood up to the Government in a better way than any of the previous Speakers over the last 30 years. To the best of my knowledge, all were bullied at some time by the Government. Mr Speaker never has been. He has libered Back Benchers and given us the time to name our debates at peak time when maximum attendance by Members is evident and the attention of the country is focused on us. He is the great success of this Parliament.

If we are looking to reform our Parliament—we remain greatly unreformed—there are at least a dozen other issues to take into account. If some Members have this latter-day devotion to democracy, why can we not do something about the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments when Members retire? This is a shameful institution—not the rottweiler it should be in controlling Members and stopping them using their insider knowledge to sell to the highest bidder. It should be stopping the corruption of Members in office, Ministers, civil servants, generals and so forth; it should prevent them from being tempted in their deliberations as they look for retirement jobs. We have done nothing about the scandal of the buying of peerages, and nothing about the buying of access to Ministers. All those scandals should have been addressed, but we have addressed none of them.

I believe that the Government will stand demeaned and shamed by this final act. They will be exposed as the nasty party, devoted not to the honour of the House—which has served us down the centuries—but to spite and malice.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the House has listened to the views of the House, and I believe that he has a pretty good understanding of the feelings of the House. Would it not be appropriate for him to stand up now and withdraw the motion? [HON. MEMBERS: “Withdraw!”] Mr Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair. The Leader of the House can respond if he wishes, but he is not obliged to.

Mr Hague indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the House does not wish to respond.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am keen to accommodate more colleagues, but great brevity is required. There are seven minutes to go.

1.10 pm

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): I am very grateful to you for calling me, Mr Speaker, not just as a Liberal Democrat but as a Member who had the privilege of joining the House in the most recent intake, in 2010. Since then I have sought to learn a great deal from my colleagues, not least my right hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath), who has been an inspiration to me in respect of the way I have performed my role.

However, the lesson that I want to share with colleagues today is one that I learned from the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), who told the House on another occasion that it owed a great deal to the authority of the Speaker. “The House” means each and every one of us—the legislature that stands up to the Executive—and none more than those of us who may expect to find ourselves from time to time, or even frequently, in a minority, and thus unable to rely on the force of numbers in a majority of Members to get our way. That is a lesson to which I urge my colleagues to pay particular attention.

I am not against secret ballots when choosing someone in an election. Indeed, we have used them many times over the last five years, during the current Parliament. However, the motion refers not to circumstances in which a Speaker has retired, resigned or even died in office, and in which we might choose between candidates—I believe that, in those circumstances, there should be a secret ballot—but to the imposition of a secret ballot when the question under consideration is “that a former Speaker take the Chair”.

I think that the shadow Leader of the House was right to describe that as a motion of no confidence in the Speaker at the start of a Parliament.

An unforeseen—I think, and hope—potential consequence of the motion would be the fatal wounding of a Speaker, even if that Speaker were to win such a vote of confidence and continue in the Chair. That, I believe, is the gravest danger to Members of this House: to have a weakened Speaker, whoever that might be, at some time in the future. There may come a time, Mr Speaker, when you, or indeed your successors, will need to call it a day. If the House were to decide as much, and if there were to be a kill, let it be a clean kill. We would all regret a fatal wounding of the Speaker that left ordinary Back Benchers vulnerable to the power of the Executive.

As Members well know, Mr Speaker, you have not always had your way during this Parliament, particularly in relation to the question of the future of the Clerk of the House; but when you did not have your way—when
you did not have the support of the House—you were very gracious in recognising that, and accepting the will of the House. I urge the Leader of the House today to show an equally gracious attitude to the will of the House, and to withdraw the motion.

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

1.14 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I am surprised that we are having this debate at this time, and I think that it does us no good.

The Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), spoke with great eloquence about the fact that the Committee had not been treated seriously in relation to this matter. The Leader of the House himself said that the motion could have been presented to the House in 2011, four years ago. In 2013, an exchange of information between the Procedure Committee and the then Leader of the House established that if it were to be presented, it should be presented on a Monday, a Tuesday or a Wednesday. In 2015, the Leader of the House approached us and we had a convivial discussion about what should happen. We went away from that meeting with the understanding that the Leader of the House was working with the Chair of the Procedure Committee to ensure that no such motion would be moved other than at an appropriate time. I would say, Mr Speaker, that the last gasp of this motion would be moved other than at an appropriate time. I urge the Leader of the House today to withdraw the motion.

1.15 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I am not opposed in principle to the idea of a secret ballot, and I very much regret, Mr Speaker, that that was not voted for, and I have crossed swords many times over a wide range of issues, but I want to put on record that you have shown me, and many of my colleagues in all parts of the House, a most courteous approach and a most courteous attitude, and I appreciate that very much—although you are not, of course, without your faults. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: Who is?

Sir Gerald Howarth: Indeed—who is?

I must say to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House—whom I revere as well—that I feel very uncomfortable about the procedure that the Government have adopted, which has allowed only an hour for debate. I think that that is unfortunate, given that we are debating a House of Commons matter. However, I cannot vote with the Opposition, because, unlike my right hon. and hon. Friends, they have displayed a monolithic, partisan approach to this issue, which has demeaned them and, I am afraid, has done no credit to the House either.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I express my sadness and regret that you have not seen fit to call any other Members to speak in support of the motion? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: If the hon. Gentleman’s complaint is that there is inadequate time for right hon. and hon. Members to be called in this debate, let me say, with a clarity that is beyond peradventure, that I would be happy to sit here all day and all night for right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Gentleman is a constitutionalist, and I think that he prides himself on understanding Parliament. The motion was tabled by the Government, and the time for it was determined by the Government. I think that that is clear.

Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As there is such widespread demand for an increase in the time in the available, would it be permissible to suggest, under Standing Order 24, an emergency debate on the subject?

Mr Speaker: The answer to that, I fear—as far as the hon. Gentleman is concerned—is that the Government tabled the motion earlier in the week, which removed any possibility of Standing Order 24 debates today. The answer to the hon. Gentleman’s point of order is that there cannot be such a debate, but that is the reason. It has nothing to do with a decision by the Chair; it has to do with a judgment that the Government have made.

I must now put the Question.

Hon. Members: Withdraw!

1.18 pm

One hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the first motion, the Speaker put the Question (Order, this day).

Question agreed to.

Ordered,

That this House takes note of paragraphs 21 to 28 of the Seventh Report of the Procedure Committee, Matters for the Procedure Committee in the 2015 Parliament, HC 1121, concerning the trial of a three day deadline for the tabling of amendments and new clauses/schedules at report stage of all programmed Bills; and approves the Committee’s recommendation in paragraph 28 that the trial should be extended for the duration of the first session of the 2015 Parliament, and extended to amendments and new clauses/schedules in Committee of the whole House of all Bills and at report stage of un-programmed Bills.

PAY FOR PETITIONS COMMITTEE CHAIR

Ordered.

That the Resolution of the House of 19 March 2013, relating to Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of Section 4A(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, be amended by inserting after “the Liaison Committee”, “the Petitions Committee,”—[(Mr Hague).]

ELECTIONS FOR POSITIONS IN THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put.

That this House notes the recommendation of the Procedure Committee in its Fifth Report of Session 2010-12, 2010 Elections for positions in the House, that the House should be invited to decide between a secret ballot or open division where the question at the start of a new Parliament that a former Speaker take the Chair is challenged, and accordingly makes the following change to Standing Orders, with effect from the beginning of the new Parliament:

Standing Order 1A (Re-election of former Speaker) Line 11, at end insert—
“(1A) If that question is contested, it shall be determined by secret ballot, to take place on the same day under arrangements made by the Member presiding, who shall announce the result of the ballot to the House as soon as is practicable.”—(Mr Hague).

The House divided: Ayes 202, Noes 228.

Division No. 188 [1.20 pm]

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Tellers for the Ayes: Harriett Baldwin and Dr Thérèse Coffey

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| Buck, Ms Karen |
| Burden, Richard |
| Burnham, rh Andy |
| Burns, Conor |
| Burt, Lorely |
| Campbell, rh Mr Alan |
| Carswell, Douglas |
| Chope, Mr Christopher |
| Clark, Katy |
| Clarke, rh Mr Tom |
| Clwyd, rh Ann |
| Coaker, Vernon |
| Connarty, Michael |
| Cooper, rh Yvette |
| Corbyn, Jeremy |
| Creagh, Mary |
| Creasy, Stella |
| Crouch, Tracey |
| Cruddas, Jon |
| Crys, John |
| Cunningham, Alex |
| Curran, Margaret |
| Dakin, Nic |
Charlotte Leslie (Bristol North West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The hon. Members for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeney), for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), for West Lancashire (Rosie Cooper) and for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) raised points of order yesterday on my Prime Minister’s question about the Health Committee—I was not given prior warning of that. Can you confirm that it was in order for me to raise the issue of the Health Committee’s publicly minuted decision—[Mr Hague.]?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady must be heard.

Charlotte Leslie: It was a publicly minuted decision not to prepare a report on NHS public expenditure. Secondly, I have not, as was claimed last night, been referred for any investigation. Can you advise me on how I might put this false information straight?

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to other points of order, but first may I thank the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving me notice of her intention to raise this point of order and for what she has said? I know she will not take it amiss if I say that although her point of order contained an inquiry as to how she could put the matter straight, I think that she has found her own salvation. What I do want to say is that it is one of the courtesies expected of hon. Members that they should give notice—I make this statement on advice; I do take courtesies expected of hon. Members that they should give notice—of order contained an inquiry as to how she could put the matter straight, I think that she has found her own salvation. What I do want to say is that it is one of the courtesies expected of hon. Members that they should give notice—I make this statement on advice; I do take courtesies expected of hon. Members that they should give notice—of order. Whether it was wise or appropriate to raise matters relating to the internal working of a Select Committee is not for me to say; it is for the House to decide, and I have decided that it is not for me to make any ruling on it.

Charlotte Leslie: I rise to contribute to a debate on the motion—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member’s question will come later. I will return to other points of order. It may be for the convenience of the House to divide on the motion when it is called, so that Members have the opportunity to vote as they see fit.
Committee in Prime Minister's questions is a different matter, on which Members will doubtless have different views. The hon. Lady says that she has not been referred for any investigation. In this respect, I understand that she is correct. The Health Committee has not, at this stage, made any report on the matter. She has put her view on the record.

I think we should leave this matter there. I would simply add my view that mutual trust between members of Select Committees and confidence that the confidentiality of private discussions in Committee will be respected are important to the effectiveness of Select Committees.

Chris Ruane (Vale of Clwyd) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is about more grubby business. On 4 November, I tabled a question asking how much money was spent on social housing in each of the past 15 years. It was answered today, nearly five months late, and the answer showed that there had been a 75% decrease in the spending on social housing over the past five years. Was this a good day to bury bad news? Can you investigate why it has taken five months to answer my question?

Mr Speaker: I am very taken aback by the idea that any question should be unanswered for so long. Members will have heard me many times say, on behalf of the House, that Ministers should answer questions speedily and as comprehensively as they can. The Leader of the House has noted that. Probably a nod of assent from the Government Chief Whip will suffice to acknowledge the point on his part.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Michael Gove) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I thank him for that. We will hope to secure an improvement in the next Parliament.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This is in fact further to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie). Could we have your guidance on whether or not a referral relates to a letter that has gone to the Standards Committee or a letter to you? Should the hon. Lady not have given us a courtesy when she released informal notes of conversations in meetings of a Select Committee to the media and in Prime Minister's questions?

Mr Speaker: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. She is, of course, a member of the Committee in question and therefore has a very direct interest. I hope she will not take it amiss if I say that I think my fairly comprehensive response to the point of order from the hon. Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) treated of those matters. I acknowledged the veracity of what she had said, but I also made the point about courtesies and confidentiality and, by implication, the inappropriateness of breaching such conventions. I hope colleagues will feel that there is nothing that now needs usefully to be added.

Backbench Business

Valedictory Debate

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young), may I just explain to the House that a very large number of colleagues wish to speak and I have decided that the first two speakers should have eight minutes each? I hope that is considered acceptable by the House, and of course there is scope for interventions, which would add to that eight minutes. Thereafter the limit will have to be tighter. I would happily sit here until midnight listening to the speeches, but, unfortunately again, I am subject to the timetabling, which is not determined by me. The first speaker in the debate will be the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire. I call Sir George Young.

Sir George Young (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am very grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate. It is appropriate that this Parliament should end with a procedural innovation—a valedictory debate—having begun with so many other such innovations.

The sponsors thought that this would be a quiet day before Prorogation, with those retiring least inclined to return to our constituencies, giving us the opportunity to bid farewell to the House before we turn into pumpkins at the stroke of midnight on Sunday. I am delighted that the Leader of the House is replying to the debate, that the Father of the House is in his place and that so many colleagues are eager to take part.

I made my maiden speech on 18 March 1974. I thought it would also be my valedictory speech, as a second election was imminent and I had a wafer-thin majority in Ealing, Acton. Indeed, Harold Wilson delighted in telling me that he was in my constituency twice a week, which he was—on the A40 to and from Chequers. I was lucky enough to get in first time and I have been here ever since. Thanks to the Boundary Commission, I have represented two very different seats—Ealing, Acton and North West Hampshire. It has been a privilege to serve my constituents, my party and my country in this House. Whether my career has justified that privilege is another matter. Few MPs can have been sacked by two Prime Ministers, and then brought back by both, thus showing some ambivalence about my talents. I doubt whether any will achieve the double of The Spectator Back Bencher of the Year award for leading the rebellion against the poll tax, and another one for being appointed Chief Whip—and for the same party.

Let me share a few quick reflections—first, on the coalition. The Liberal Democrats did the right thing in joining my party in coalition, and I believe that history will be kinder to them than the electorate is going to be. The coalition was at its strongest with the business managers, and I enjoyed working with my right hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath) as Deputy Leader of the House, and with the current Secretary of State for Scotland and the right hon. Member for Bath (Mr Foster), who were Liberal Democrat Chief Whips. Both parties had Back Benchers with independent views—they were the so-called awkward
squad, but the two squads tended not to be awkward at the same time. Their reluctance to engage with the Whips was mercifully matched by a reluctance to work with each other, and so defeat was rare.

I recall one exchange in a meeting in my office—without coffee—with a difficult colleague who wanted to talk about social mobility. He looked me in the eye and said: “Sir George, I believe in social mobility, downwards as well as upwards.”

I was greatly assisted in my task by two high-quality deputies, and a strong team of Whips who kept me out of serious trouble. There were occasions in the last Parliament when the Conservative Whips thought we had a better idea of how the Liberal Democrats were going to vote than their own Whips did, but together we helped deliver a stable five-year Government—something that many people doubted would ever happen. We were greatly assisted by the staff in the offices of the Leader of the House and the Whips under Mike Winter and Roy Stone.

At times, my patience with the Liberal Democrats was tested. I would get back to my constituency on Friday to find them taking the credit for all the good things the coalition had done, while blaming my party for the cuts that had made them possible.

Although a coalition was right for this Parliament, I hope it will not become the norm. I am worried that this country may drift towards an unstable Italian style of Government, with moving coalitions remote from the electorate. I worry too that the sharp change of direction that this country needed in, for example, 1945 and 1979 may no longer be possible.

Looking ahead, I hope that the next Parliament will work hard to ensure that the United Kingdom stays intact. The Union is more fragile than it has been since the partition of Ireland and will require very sensitive handling.

We need to restore confidence in the profession to which we all belong—that of politician. It is a paradox that most people believe that their own MP is a paragon of virtue, but refuse to generalise on the basis of that experience. We must decontaminate our brand and encourage more young able people to stand. Although we may never be popular, the next Parliament must rebuild public confidence both in MPs as a professional body and in Parliament as an effective and relevant institution.

To that end, I hope that we shall have a clean campaign, fought on the issues, with alternative positive visions of the future being promoted, with a minimum of personal inventive and abuse. As a former Housing Minister, I hope that housing will be an important issue in the campaign, as we need to build more houses than were built under either of the last two Administrations if every family is to have a decent home.

Finally, if we have to leave this building at some future date for repairs, we must come back here. We should never abandon the history of this magnificent Palace of Westminster for a horseshoe-shaped Chamber in a new glass building outside London.

We have all in our time had our narrow squeaks. My career as Chief Whip nearly ended in disaster. One of my last visitors was the Australian Chief Whip who presented me with a whip—not a small whip that a jockey might use but a stock whip with a long leather handle, and yards and yards of leather of diminishing width. He made it clear that this was a personal gift to me and not a donation to the Whips Office. The rules of ministerial gifts are that they should be worth in less than £125, one can keep it; if it is worth more, one must either buy it or give it to the Government. When my guest had gone, I asked my private office to establish the value of his gift. Minutes later, a white-faced official came into my room. All the websites he had accessed on my behalf had been barred by the parliamentary authorities, and he feared that retribution for the instigator was imminent.

I am conscious that many Members wish to speak, so I shall finish on that cautionary tale. I thank colleagues on both sides of the House and the staff of the House for their friendship over 40 years. I wish my successor and the new Parliament well in the challenges that lie ahead.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has done the House a wonderful service, not only in terms of his service in the House but in once again being briefer than he had to be, and it is appreciated.

1.46 pm

Mr Gordon Brown (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Lab) I wish to start by thanking all those who have helped me during my time as a Member of Parliament. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for your stewardship of this House, your dedication to our parliamentary democracy and your unfailing courtesy to all sides, even when provoked. It is customary, of course, for the new Speaker to give up his previous party when he becomes Speaker. You, of course, had given up your previous party long before that.

Let me also thank the staff of the House: the Clerks, the cleaners, the catering staff, the librarians and the doorkeepers for their non-partisan and always unselfish support. Let me thank my colleagues on the Labour Benches, who have been so brilliant to work with and to work alongside. Their wisdom and friendship have sustained my family and me at times of personal loss. Let me also thank all colleagues, especially those who leave the House today, for their outstanding contribution to what we are right to believe is the greatest democracy in the world. Most of all, I owe a debt of gratitude to my constituents who sent me here and who accorded me the privilege of trust and service more than 32 years ago, in which time I have always tried to represent their needs and aspirations.

When I first stood for Parliament in 1983, I asked constituents to elect me as a candidate of youth and fresh ideas. I had to change tack in 2010 to ask them to accept me as a candidate of maturity and experience.

When I first arrived here in 1983, I was so unknown, so patently here just to make up the numbers and so clearly forgettable that The Times confused me with one of the many other Browns in this Parliament—there were as many MPs named Brown as there were Liberals or Social Democrat MPs. That may never happen again. The newspaper published a photo of me when I was a student, but then said that I had been born in 1926. In each successive newspaper in London, the error was repeated—not so much the power of the press, but the power of the press cutting. I was labelled as “elderly”,...
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“veteran” and “old Labour stalwart” — definitely old Labour — with the result that, a few days later, I received a letter from a pension company saying that I had joined a new job late in life and would want to make provision for an early retirement.

Now, 32 years on, it is for others to judge what has been achieved between then and now. Today, it is not my constituents, Scotland or public service that I am leaving, but Westminster in London. I leave to live full time in the place in which I grew up and in which my children will grow up and complete their schooling. I leave this House feeling not just a huge amount of gratitude, but some concern. As the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young) said, the UK is fragile, at risk and potentially at a point of departure. Countries at their best, their strongest and their truest are more than places on the map and a demarcation of borders. Great countries stand on shared foundations. They are guided by unifying ideals. They move forward in common purpose, and so it must be in Britain.

Whatever the future, in the constitutional revolution that is now under way I will fight and fight and fight again to renew and reconstruct for a new age the idea of Britain, based around shared values that can bring us together and advance a common Britishness, with a shared belief in tolerance, liberty and fairness that comes alive in unique British institutions such as the national health service and in common policies for social justice.

It is because I believe in Britain’s future that I am saddened—I am sorry to have to say this—that for the first and only time in 300 years of the Union, it has become official Government policy to create two classes of elected representatives in this House: a first class who will vote on all issues, and a second class who will vote on only some. That mimics the nationalists by driving a wedge between Scotland and England, and is meant only to head off opposition from the extremists with a direct nationalist appeal to the English electorate. It is not so much English votes for English laws as English laws for English votes. I ask this House to remember that our greatest successes as a country have come not when we have been divided and when we have turned inwards, but when we have confidently looked outwards and thought globally, our eyes fixed on the wider world and the future.

With the unwinding of what is called the pax Americana and in the wake of the recent retreat from global co-operation, we have today no climate change treaty, no world trade treaty and no global financial standards. We must recapture what now seems a distant memory—the heightened global co-operation of the past, which Britain led. We must never allow ourselves to become spectators and watchers on the shore when the world needs us in Europe and beyond to lead and champion global action to deal with problems from poverty and pollution to proliferation and protectionism.

This is about more than economics. Over 30 years, I, like most people on this side and on both sides of the House, have condemned the discrimination and prejudices of the past, which should now be consigned for ever to that past. I welcome the new freedoms, the new rights for equality and the anti-discrimination laws we have enacted and embraced. All societies need a moral energy that can inspire individuals to self-sacrificial acts of public service that come alive out of mutual respect and obligation. Yes, the predominant feeling in our country is an anger at elites that I can see in people’s eyes and hear in their voices. Yes, too, of the many social changes I have witnessed in 30 years, one of the most dramatic has been the fall in religious observance, but I also sense that the British people are better than leaders often presume. They are ready to respond to a vision of a country that is more caring, less selfish, more compassionate and less cynical than the “me too, me first, me now, me above all—me whatever” manifestos.

I sense that there are millions of us who feel, however distantly, the pain of others today; who believe in something bigger than ourselves; who cannot easily feast when our fellow citizens go hungry to food banks; who cannot feel at ease when our neighbours, in hock to payday lenders, are ill at ease; who cannot be fully content with poverty pay and zero-hours contracts when around us there is so much discontent. I repeat that it is not anti-wealth to say that the wealthy must do more to help those who are not wealthy; it is not anti-enterprise to say that the enterprising must do more to meet the aspirations of those who have never had the chance to show that they too are enterprising; and it is not anti-market to say that markets need morals to underpin their success. For this, and for showing me when I was young that when the strong help the weak, it makes us all stronger, I will always be grateful to my parents, who taught me these values of justice; to my constituency, which taught me how to fight for justice; and to my constituents, who taught me every day the rightness of justice.

We must never forget that politics at its best imbues people with hope. In 1886, Tennyson wrote one of his last poems, “Locksley Hall”, with its pessimistic refrain:

“Chaos, Cosmos! Cosmos, Chaos! who can tell when all will end?”

The then Prime Minister, Gladstone, was moved to remind Tennyson that in his first poem of that title he had said:

“When I dipt into the future far as human eye could see;  
Saw the Vision of the world and all the wonder that would be.”

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I want merely to take Mr Speaker’s advice, since he mentioned that if someone intervenes, the Member speaking gets more time—[Laughter.]

Mr Brown: I have spoken today about what endures beyond anyone’s time in office and I want to leave here as I came here, with an unquenchable faith in the future—the future of a country that we can build and share together, a future in which we help shape the world beyond our shores, and a future in which we always demand the best of ourselves. That is a future worth fighting for.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The time limit from now on is five minutes, but again the principle of interventions applies, of course. We want to try to accommodate everybody, so consideration of one other would be appreciated.
1.55 pm

Charles Hendry (Wealden) (Con): Thank you for that guidance, Mr Speaker, and I shall endeavour to show that consideration.

This is for me where the journey ends—a journey that started when I was an 11-year-old and met Sir Geoffrey Johnson-Smith, the MP where I grew up, and said to my parents that that was what I should like to do one day. I was incredibly fortunate some decades later to be selected as the candidate to take over from him, although, with his timeless film star looks, people wondered why he was giving way to an older man.

My journey has in many ways been one from north to south. My first seat was Clackmannan; my friends thought that I had wanted to stand in Clapham in south London but had stuttered and ended up in a mining seat in the middle of Scotland. It became clear to me in the course of that campaign that I had never really met a miner before and that they certainly had not met a Conservative before. I moved gradually further south and stood in another mining seat, in Nottinghamshire, and I worked out eventually that if I wanted to be a Tory MP, I should stop fighting mining seats. I was then very lucky to be selected for High Peak in Derbyshire and to serve there for five years before, after a break, coming back in for Wealden. To have had wonderful constituencies in glorious parts of the country has been an unbelievable and very special pleasure.

I have been given great jobs by the leaders of my party, including my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who will be responding to this debate. If I look back at the thing in which I have greatest pride, it is that as Energy Minister I was able to drive through electricity market reform, one of the most important bits of legislation in the course of this Parliament. I feel that we do these things better when we do them collectively and when we try to take energy out of politics. When I left office—it would be more appropriate, I think, to say that the Government left me rather than that I left the Government—I received very kind messages from the leader of the Labour party, the leader of the Scottish National party and the leader of the Liberal Democrats. I thought, “Three out of four leaders; that’s not bad going.”

If we are looking at where we can make a change to Parliament, we must remember that the institution of Parliament is bigger than all of us, even collectively. I look at some aspects of it with great concern and even some sadness. We must address the opprobrium with which we are held as a collective breed and we must recognise that in some ways, that is to do with the way we do business. This Parliament is ruder and less courteous than I remember Parliament being when I first came in 23 years ago. We need to address that, because if we do not show that we believe in the institution and that the people with whom we debate on the other side of the House are as genuine and sincere as we are about what they are trying to do— they might have chosen a different way of trying to do it and might hold different values, but ultimately we are all here because we believe in serving our constituencies and our country— why should people looking in from outside believe that?

I have noticed as well a strange habit among Members of Parliament, which is that we do not shake hands. For 23 years, I found that rather strange but over the past few days I have been shaking an enormous number of hands and the policy starts to make real sense. At the end of this process, we are leaving as people who enjoy each other as people, and as friends and who value each other as human beings who all want to do the best for their constituencies.

I have been incredibly lucky. I have had wonderful constituents in two different constituencies and have had a wonderful parliamentary staff, but above all I have been supported by a wonderful family. In the course of the next Parliament, I look forward to being able to spend more time with them and to enjoying working with them and giving them the time and attention that they deserve.

1.59 pm

Dame Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): This place has shaped my life for the past 28 years, but before that I remember my late father Ken and my mother Eileen, who instilled in me my values, and my late husband Keith, who introduced me to socialism and was a great support for 30 years.

I hope that I have remained true to those values. First and foremost, I have been a woman Member of Parliament who did not want to play the boys’ games—probably to my detriment at times. I am proud to have been the first full-time Minister for Women, even though my efforts got me sacked a year later.

I have had many opportunities as a Back Bencher, particularly in private Members’ Bills. My first was a Bill to tackle fly-tipping. My second was to place a duty on local authorities to introduce doorstep recycling. Both passed. I always hoped to win a third place in the ballot so that I could introduce a Bill to permit assisted dying, in which I believe passionately.

Another privilege has been membership of Select Committees, beginning with the Committee on Television of Proceedings of the House, in which I had the distinction of proposing the hanging lights we now have today, as there were none there before. From the moment I arrived I wanted change. I got my first opportunity on Robin Cook’s Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee, which brought in many of our changes in procedure. It led to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ann Coffey) and me organising the first successful campaign to change the House’s sitting hours. When those changes were partially reversed, we organised again in 2010. With much help we achieved the more sensible timetable we have today. I also greatly enjoyed my time on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and later the International Development Committee, when you, Mr Speaker, were also a member.

Inevitably, there were bad times. Rejection from government was one of them, but by far the worst was the Iraq war. Despite the horrors of Saddam Hussein’s regime, I did not believe that he possessed weapons of mass destruction, and I could not support an illegal war that I knew would have repercussions for a generation.

As I leave, I reflect on some of the great issues that remain unresolved, most notably the outdated notion of nuclear deterrence, when the real threats to our security are cyber-warfare, terrorism and climate change. Nuclear weapons have no utility; they cannot be used to defend or gain territory, and their financial cost is an obscenity. I only hope that the new initiative for a global ban on nuclear weapons, spearheaded by Austria and now signed by over 50 states, will succeed.
[Dame Joan Ruddock]

Another great regret is to see the plight of yet another generation of Palestinians. I cannot believe that the international community has tolerated such oppression for so long.

By contrast, my greatest joy came late in my career when my right hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown) gave me the job of Climate Change Minister under the inspired leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). I am proud of the many achievements of our Labour Governments—our equalities legislation, the minimum wage and our investment in public services—but so much has been undermined by coalition policies.

Let me end with friendship, which makes life tolerable in this place. My first new friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley), has become the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Margaret Hodge) is the most notable Chair of the Public Accounts Committee. In 1986, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Camberwell and Peckham (Ms Harman) wrote me a note saying, “Joan. Deptford is wide open—go for it.” She has done more for women’s equality than anyone else, and I am proud to have managed her successful campaign to become deputy leader of my party.

I also value the friendship of my hon. Friend the irrepressible Member for Lewisham West and Penge (Jim Dowd) and my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Heidi Alexander), who has already made her mark in this her first Parliament. I am also grateful for all the hard work and loyalty of my constituency party, my constituents and the many staff who have worked for me over the years. Last, but not least, there is my dearest parliamentary friend and now husband, Frank Doran, with whom I have shared the rollercoaster life of two MPs with constituencies 500 miles apart.

Mr Speaker, it has been a privilege to serve in a House over which you preside as a truly modernising Speaker. I wish you, all the Officers and staff of the House and all those who continue to serve a fond farewell.

2.4 pm

Sir Malcolm Bruce (Gordon) (LD): I entered the House on the same day as the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown), and I was recalling just how much has changed in this place. When we arrived, there were no mobile phones, no e-mail and virtually no staff. My local party provided me with a rent-free office and a part-time secretary, so used, whether that is to champion the rights of women and girls and the poor around the world or to tackle climate change or disease. We, as a country, are now the second biggest donor in the world, which gives us the capacity to change and transform things, and it has been a privilege to be even a small part of that. Mr Speaker, you served on the International Development Committee—I very much enjoyed your company, both in the Committee and on our visits abroad—as did the right hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Dame Joan Ruddock) and the Secretary of State for Health, so it has been a wonderful training ground, as Ministers, Speakers and all kinds of people have come through that route.

Mr Speaker, we had a rather tetchy debate just before this one. All I want to say about that is that if we are to have a secret ballot for the role of Speaker, the right time to introduce that is when you stand down, at a time of your choosing, so that we can decide how to elect the next Speaker. I have valued and appreciated your support and friendship, which, in terms of speaking in this House, I will not require again, but I hope that the friendship will last beyond that.
My final point is that the most important industry in my part of the world is the oil and gas industry, which is going through a difficult time at the moment. I want to pay tribute to the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr Davey), for the work he did in commissioning the Wood review and setting up the oil and gas regulator, which I believe, along with the industry’s determination to get costs down, will in the long run make the industry more competitive, despite the difficulties today, including Shell’s announcement of new redundancies.

I never expected to be here for 32 years. As the former Member for Manchester Central, Tony Lloyd, once told me, you have to keep reinventing yourself. I guess that I have. It is time to reinvent myself, as of Sunday night, as a private citizen, and I am really looking forward to it.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his extremely kind personal remarks. He was a superb Chair of the International Development Committee, as, to be fair, was the right hon. Member for Banbury (Sir Tony Baldry) before him. It was a pleasure to serve under his chairmanship, and I wish him well.

2.9 pm

Mr Peter Hain (Neath) (Lab): Mr Speaker, having served for 24 years, may I commend your role as in my view the greatest reforming Speaker in memory, by making the Commons immensely more user and citizen-friendly, and especially for the way in which you have enhanced Back-Bench influence? I thank all the Commons staff, including our excellent Sergeant at Arms and especially the Doorkeepers, with whom I have had a specially close relationship since I invited them in to share a few bottles of wine—South African wine—in the Leader of the Commons’ office.

I thank my constituents in Neath and Neath constituency Labour party for their tremendous loyalty and support. I was a Pretoria boy, but I am proud to have become a Neath man. When I first arrived I was shown into a local primary school, Godre'r Graig school in the Swansea valley: “This is a very important person to meet, class.” A little boy in the front row put up his hand and asked, “Do you play rugby for Neath?” Clearly, he had his priorities right.

I have been privileged and fortunate to have the very best friend anybody could have in Howard Davies of Seven Sisters, what he calls God’s own country, in the Dulais valley in Neath. I first met him in February 1990, a former miner who was lodge secretary at Blaenant colliery during the heart-rending year-long strike in 1984-85. My first agent and office manager, Howard has always been completely loyal and supportive, but privately frank and direct—priceless virtues which I commend to anyone in national politics.

Having come from a world of radical protest and activism, I never expected to be a Minister for 12 years. It began when Alastair Campbell unexpectedly called on me as he and I share something a little unusual, in that we have travelled from remote parts of Africa to find ourselves both sent to this place and now departing on the same day.

However, there was a tabloid columnist who described me as the “second most boring member of the Cabinet”. My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Mr Darling), the former Chancellor, came top. At least that was more civil than the editor of Sunday Express at the height of the anti-apartheid struggle, when I led campaigns to disrupt whites-only South African rugby and cricket tours. He said: “It would be a mercy for humanity if this unpleasant little creep were to fall into a sewage tank. Up to his ankles. Head first.” That was nothing compared with the letter bomb I received, fortunately with a technical fault in it, or being put on trial for conspiracy at the Old Bailey for disrupting South African sports tours, or being charged with a bank theft that I knew nothing about, which was later discovered to have been set up by South African agents.

Despite serving as an MP and Cabinet Minister, and remaining a Privy Councillor, I have not changed my belief that progressive change comes only through a combination of extra-parliamentary and parliamentary action. We know that from the struggles of the Chartists, the suffragettes, the early trade unionists, anti-apartheid protesters, the Anti-Nazi League and Unite Against Fascism activists confronting the National Front and the British National party, and Greenpeace activists inspiring fights against climate change.

If I am asked for advice by young people, who often ask me, “Can you tell me how to have a career in politics?” I say, “It’s not about a career; it’s about a mission.” We should never be in it for ourselves, but for our values. For me, these are equality, social justice, equal opportunities, liberty and democracy in a society based on mutual care and mutual support, not the selfishness and greed now so sadly disfiguring Britain. These values underpinned the anti-apartheid struggle and brought me into the Labour party nearly 40 years ago, but nothing I was able to achieve as an MP or a Minister was possible without the support of my family—my wife Elizabeth Haywood, a rock to me, my wonderful sister Sally, her daughter Connie, my sons Sam and Jake, and their mum, my former wife Pat.

Above all, I am grateful to my mother Adelaine and my father Walter, for their values, courage, integrity, morality and principle. My mum when in jail on her own listened to black prisoners screaming in pain. My dad was banned and then deprived of his job. They did extraordinary things, but as Nelson Mandela said, “What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others.”

After 50 years in politics some might say it is time to put my feet up, but I have been lucky to have the best father in the world, and he told me in the mid-1960s when I was a teenager living in apartheid South Africa, “If political change was easy, it would have happened a long time ago. Stick there for the long haul.” That is exactly what I will continue to do after leaving this House.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman.

2.14 pm

Mr Stephen O’Brien (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr Hain) as he and I share something a little unusual, in that we
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The abruptness of my departure is matched by the abruptness of my arrival in a by-election 16 years ago, when the present Leader of the House was then the Leader of the Opposition, so my right hon. Friend had the title “Leader” both when I arrived in this place and now as I leave it.

When constituents give us the privilege of serving in this place, we have the great chance to deliver on the passions that we share, which are the essence of the job—to represent those constituents and all constituents once we are elected. That is what I have found most rewarding, whether through championing the dairy industry and the wider agricultural economy, or dealing with the challenging issues that have arisen in the largest town in my constituency, Winsford. I will always be grateful to all my constituents for sharing their experience and their hopes and giving me the chance to turn things around for the better.

Once here, the chance to deliver on areas of policy has driven many of us to swap our previous lives in order to be part of our parliamentary democracy and that has been an enormous privilege. In my case, having been a manufacturing industrialist for so long, I have added and moved on through financial, health and international development issues. Among my experiences here, I pay great tribute to the armed forces parliamentary scheme. For those of us who have not seen service, that has been a wise and helpful introduction to the great and noble service that our armed forces give our country in support of the very freedom that we here seek to defend.

My experience throughout the past 16 years as a politician has been the shared cause. Aspiring to be a politician, staying so and then looking back on one’s time is a genuinely noble cause—some may say it is dangerous to make such a claim—to participate in our own parliamentary democracy, to have the privilege of a seat in this House and to have a platform. I had expected to be here longer—indeed, my re-election literature is just being pulped and my successor was chosen last night. I wish her well. I hope she will be elected and then serve brilliantly. With very few days to adjust, I find it is not so much the place that I anticipate missing, but above all the platform and the people.

I have enjoyed having the platform to deliver on some genuine enthusiasms, such as my passion to seek to deliver progress on the control of neglected tropical diseases and malaria, the world’s biggest killer, which is totally avoidable and treatable. We have made progress, with support across the House and across Government divides. I pay tribute to the joint enterprise in which we have all engaged to make a significant difference in our generation to that great cause. The platform that Parliament gives us enables us to engage the political will with the resources and the technical expertise to deliver results for some of the most needy people in the world.

As I reflect on my imminent departure, it is ultimately people who have defined my time here and will define my memory of it—colleagues and the many friends I have made, particularly on the Government Benches but, let it be said, in all parties and in both Houses. For that I shall be eternally grateful and very much hope to keep up with them. I have been blessed with the most phenomenal and loyal staff here in the House, with fantastic support in the constituency. The staff of the House and you, Mr Speaker, your predecessors and the Speaker’s Office have all been extremely helpful in assisting us to deliver what we all care about, which is a selective mother of Parliaments with a modern, functioning democracy.

I thank all the people of Eddisbury and the members of the Conservative party here and in Eddisbury. I leave Parliament with a passionate belief in parliamentary democracy, our values of accountability and challenge that politics brings, and the chance that my constituents gave me to seek in my own small way to make a difference for the greater good. It is that which unites all of us in this House and which, I hope, will continue to drive the work that I now find I am turning to at the United Nations. So I thank all the people here. And I thank particularly my parents, my family, my children and my wife.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. I am sure that the whole House wishes him very well with the important new responsibilities that he will shortly take up.

2.19 pm

Mr Jack Straw (Blackburn) (Ind): It is a pleasure to see the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) in his place. I first stood for Parliament in February 1974; I was able to discover that there were 14,000 socialists in Tonbridge and Malling, but unfortunately they were 10,000 fewer than the number of Conservatives who voted for the right hon. Gentleman. I took his and his constituents’ advice and moved elsewhere, and it has been my privilege to have served as the Member for Blackburn for the past 36 years.

Blackburn is a singular town in many ways, one of which is that it has had only two Members of Parliament—Barbara Castle, my predecessor, and me—in the 70 years since the war. I learned a great deal from Barbara, not least that the first and most fundamental responsibility of any Member of Parliament is to his or her constituents, however high and mighty that Member thinks they are and whatever office of state they may hold. It is our constituents who are, as it were, our employers and grant us the extraordinary privilege of serving in this place.

When I finally came to the House in May 1979, the conditions of the country were harsh and difficult, yet there was a greater instinctive faith in our political system and respect for its representatives collectively than there is today. There is a paradox here: in the 36 years I have been in the House, this place has become more effective, not less, in holding Government to account. In turn, governance itself has become more responsive and transparent.

In the past, the processes of government were protected by secrecy; judicial review was a rarity; there were no Select Committees; many Back Benchers on both sides held down full-time jobs outside; and the regulation of Members’ interests was elementary. The demands of constituents were far fewer: in the Select Committees that I chaired, we had evidence that, in the 1960s, each Member of Parliament had an average post box of between 15 and 20 letters a week.
Parliament has become stronger, MPs have never been more hard-working and this place has never been more visited, yet cynicism about politics is more pervasive than I can recall. The age of deference has come to an end, which in many respects is no bad thing. We are no longer on a pedestal. But I am reminded of those lines by T.S. Eliot in “Burnt Norton”:

“Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.”

We are now having to bear much reality. It would be good to see the prism through which this place and our politics are reported distorting the reality rather less often, but we have to examine the beam in our own eye as well.

The most urgent change needed by this place is in respect of Prime Minister’s questions. This is not a trivial matter about half an hour a week; it is part of the way in which people see our politics. Whatever purpose it served in the past, it now gives a terrible impression and rarely illuminates. It is time to change it. In the short term, we should go back to the 15 minutes on a Tuesday and Thursday; in the medium term, we should ask the Procedure Committee to look more closely at how it should be changed. I suggest that we also need to do something more about attendance in the Chamber. Perhaps we could consider Committee days and Chamber days, as happen elsewhere.

The average length of service for a Member of Parliament is 11 years, and I have been incredibly lucky to have served my constituents for three times that. For a big village, as we often describe ourselves, my town has had to change more than most others as it has absorbed a large Asian-heritage population, but it has done so with a generosity of spirit.

Deciding to leave was incredibly difficult. I love my constituency and I love this place. There has not been a day when, coming into this building, I have not marvelled at its inspiration. I thank my constituents for the privilege it has been to serve them; my wife and family for their unstinting support; my staff; and friends and colleagues on both sides.

This is a wondrous place. I felt that in May 1979 when I first arrived. I feel it still now, as I leave.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, who has been a model of courtesy and companionship to me and colleagues right across the House. He leaves this place as a hugely respected figure.

2.25 pm

Mr Brian Binley (Northampton South) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw), who was one of the first people to speak to me when I came to this House. He offered help if he could give it. That is the measure of the man, and it is a great privilege to follow him in this debate.

I am equally delighted to have had the honour of serving in the House as the Member for Northampton South over the past 10 years. I was an enthusiastic footballer for most of my first 43 years of life; having the opportunity to be in this place is to me the equivalent of an international cap, and I have been immensely grateful.

Over my 10 years as an MP, I have tried very hard to represent the interests of hard-working people in our county town—particularly those who, like me, would not normally be considered most likely to have a voice in Government. Indeed, I have travelled a considerable distance since leaving my secondary modern school aged 15; I created two businesses on the way, which now employ 300 people. To be here as a late arrival has been fun, but none the less has had its difficulties.

As an MP, I am proud to have worked hard to support the British pub, one of our most vital social resources, although often underrated as such by many. I am pleased to have fought to try to diminish the indignity of putting 27% of the population—those who smoke—out into the cold in shacks and lean-tos attached to pubs when better arrangements could have been provided for them. I am glad to have successfully fought to reduce the granny tax on bingo, which, to our shame, extracted a higher levy than other forms of gambling.

I make no apology for having given voice to the concerns of small businesses, and I served for nine years on the Select Committee on Business, Innovation and Skills. I consider that work to have been my major contribution to this Parliament. Small businesses are the backbone of our economy and they provide a strong and ethical base that has increasingly seemed to have been forgotten or ignored by many multinationals and large corporate enterprises. I recommend that they look again at that particular aspect of their work.

I am proud to be a Northamptonshire man and to have represented our county town in this place. That provided the opportunity to create the Northampton Alive regeneration programme, which is making such a big difference to our town. The 40 projects in the programme include a new railway station, a new campus for the university of Northampton, a new innovation centre, 1,000 new jobs at our enterprise zone, a new bus interchange, reinvigoration of our improving town centre and a heritage gateway around which the new station exists close to the ancient castle in an area too long neglected.

Most importantly, Northampton Alive has been an inclusive project, providing a forum in which about 100 vital opinion formers in the town, including young people, unions, business representatives and religious bodies, can make a contribution to the project and give feedback to it, giving a degree of ownership to the people we represent.

Finally, I am especially proud of Challenge 2016, a county-wide project instigated by Northampton Alive and run by the Northampton enterprise partnership. In 2012, some 5,600 young people were not in employment, education or training in our county. That figure has been reduced to under 1,500, thanks largely to Challenge 2016 and the efforts of the Government. I am very proud of that particular record. For me, that encapsulates the Northampton Alive approach—providing opportunities for our young people, attracting new businesses, building facilities for cultural and leisure pursuits, highlighting our town’s heritage and creating a first-class environment where people can raise families and live fulfilling lives. That, surely, must be our objective in this place.

My final message, however, is this. Too often we hear that young people lack aspiration. My experience shows that it is amazing how aspirational young people become once they have a job. Mr Speaker, it has been a privilege to serve under you and to serve in this House with the good people who sit around this Chamber, and I am most grateful.
Mr Elfyn Llwyd (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I made my maiden speech on 19 May 1992. By all accounts, it was a brilliant speech, because nobody interrupted me and within hours it was in a bound volume. I am very proud of that.

In ’92, of course, devolution was very much a minority sport. Nowadays it is central to virtually everything we do, as every Bill has on it its territorial reach. I mentioned many times in those early days that I was elected to Parliament in order to leave it, by which I meant in order to secure a Parliament for Wales.

In the 1992 Parliament, I well remember having to stay up all night during the Maastricht debates because I was the youngest of our Members and I was charged with waking up my friends and getting them in for the critical vote, which very often was between 4.30 am and 5.30 am. This went on for months, and often on two or three nights per week. It was at this time that I began to reflect on the enormity of what I had done in leaving a good legal practice and comfortable, rewarding job for this utter chaos, with its points of order, opera hats, “I spy strangers”, and general mayhem. Thankfully, of course, Maastricht came to an end, and something approaching normality descended in its place.

Looking back, I see that my Plaid Cymru colleagues, past and present, have a good record. For the past 35 years, we have pointed out, for example, the iniquity of the Barnett formula, with Wales losing out on billions of pounds over the years, and successive Governments denying it and making excuses. Post the Holtham report and the report from the other place, it is now received wisdom, and the fight goes on.

It so happens that I was the first person in the UK Parliament to argue for a Children’s Commissioner for Wales, and that came in 1993, swiftly followed by our friends in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Some eight years ago, I began a campaign on behalf of ex-servicemen who find themselves on the wrong side of the law after I discovered that upwards of 8,000 were in prison. This became a manifesto issue for every party at the last election.

During the 2010-11 period, I was privileged to chair a working group that brought in laws against stalking. Those laws have now saved lives, and there are currently over 800 cases before the courts. Last month, the Government accepted a ten-minute rule Bill of mine that brought coercive behaviour within the legal framework of domestic violence law.

I well remember opening a debate on the need for Parliament to see the full version of the Attorney-General’s opinion on the legality of the war in Iraq. The right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) spoke for the other side and did everything he could to trip me up—which was his job, of course, at the time. I opened the debate and my friend Alex Salmond closed for us. From a joint group of nine, we secured a vote of over 280, which I think was quite a substantial thing to do.

I suppose that what I am saying is that someone from a small parliamentary party can actually make a real difference—free of the dead hand of the Whips and free of any ministerial ambitions.

I thank my family for their forbearance and sacrifices. We all know what I mean by saying that: it can be a sacrifice for our families. I am very grateful to you, Mr Speaker, and your deputies for your fair-minded approach to all of us, whichever party we belong to. I thank all Speakers under whom I have had the privilege to serve. I also thank the Library and research staff, my parliamentary staff and constituency staff, and, last but not least, the security staff, police and Doorkeepers who enable us to do our work in the fashion that we do.

In an awards ceremony speech in Cardiff city hall four months ago, I said that I believe that 99% of Members of Parliament are good, honest people who want to make a real difference, and I hold very firmly to that view. I thank the electorate of Meirionnydd, Nant Conwy and Dwyfor for their steadfast support and loyalty over these last 23 years, and I wish my successor well in her endeavours.

If I could wind back the clock, I would do it all again—more than that I cannot say. For one who came to Parliament in order to leave it, I shall miss it and the many friends I have made across the political spectrum.

Mr Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): As many Members here have said, it really has been a privilege to serve in this House. I think of myself as a nine-year-old boy moving to this country and merging two families when my mum, who is from the South Bronx and had four children, married my step-dad, who lived in a very large English country house and had four children, and they had two children between them. We became a sort of Anglo-American version of “The Brady Bunch”, with me as the eldest. I really never dreamed I would be in this House today, and I do feel almost teary that I am leaving, but it has been a privilege.

Mr Adam Holloway (Gravesham) (Con): May I just say that I think it is a tragic waste that a guy of your ability is leaving this place, and it is our loss?

Mr Newmark: I thank my hon. Friend for his very kind comments, but I think that sometimes it is important that we put our families before ourselves, and that is a decision I have made.

My constituents have been amazing. Over the past 10 years, I have probably dealt with about 10,000 bits of correspondence. I particularly want to thank my constituents for their support over the past year, both to me and my family. My association has been fantastic. We fought some great campaigns. I particularly want to thank Jenny Jarvis, who was my first chairman, Roger Walters, Chris Siddall, who was my final chairman, and of course my agent Rikki Williams. We had some great times together, and I certainly enjoyed all my campaigns with them.

Unusually for an MP, I have not only got along with my association but actually got along with my councillors. I particularly want to thank Graham Butland, the leader of Braintree council, and David Finch, the leader of Essex county council. We have all worked very well as a team—my association and my district and county councillors. Finally, I would like to thank Paula Malone, my PA, for her support over the past 10 years.
It has been a long journey for me, from Bedford school in October 1973, when I joined the Young Conservatives, and Keith Joseph was my inspiration, to the Oxford Union, where my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague) was my inspiration—I have known him for 35 years—to when I became chairman in Bermondsey, stood in Newcastle in '97, and was finally selected, won and became the Member of Parliament for Braintree.

When we are selected, one of the things we all do is to get stuck into local campaigns. There are many campaigns that I have really got stuck into in Braintree, but I want to highlight just a few of them. For me, getting a community hospital there was one of the great success stories. I pay tribute to my predecessor, Alan Hurst, for the work that he did; I took on that mantle from him. Saving the postal depot at Halstead was a success. When we worked to build up the flood defences in Steeple Bumpstead, the village was torn as to where they should be, and working with both sides and pulling them together was something of an achievement. When there was the threat of 300 acres of solar panels in the north part of my patch, in Constable country, stopping those being built was a success story. I have had some not-success stories. I wanted to get the extension of the A120, which never happened, and a loop between Braintree and Witham, which also did not happen. But those are challenges for my successor, whoever he may be; I certainly hope it is a Conservative.

Supporting local community groups has also been important. I supported PARC—the play and resource centre—by running a marathon and raising £40,000 for it. I have worked with Braintree Rethink, the homeless charities Braintree Foyer and New Direction, and St Mary's church in Bocking.

I served on the Science and Technology Committee for two years, on the Treasury Committee for four years, and in the Whips Office for five years, and I finally ended up as Minister for Civil Society.

Being an MP provides a great platform for things that you want to campaign on. One of the campaigns that I am most proud of is Women2Win. When I arrived here, we had only 17 female Members of Parliament. Exactly 10 years ago, with Baroness Jenkin, I founded Women2Win. At the last election we had 49 women MPs, and I certainly hope that at the next election we will have more. I hope that next we can have a “50:50 by 2020” campaign whereby we get 50% women by 2020. I started the Million Jobs campaign to try to get more young people into work, and I thank the Chancellor for abolishing national insurance contributions for young people. I welcomed the seed enterprise investment scheme, which encourages venture capital, and I worked to protect the International Commission on Missing Persons, for which I got the support of the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks). I have also worked in Rwanda and Syria.

As I bring this chapter of public service to a close, I begin a new chapter of voluntary service. I shall work with Crisis, the homeless charity, and my own charity, A Partner in Education, doing primary education in Rwanda, and I shall spend time at Oxford.

I leave today a little sad. This has been an amazing experience. I have made many friends from all parties. I thank the staff and you, Mr Speaker, for the support you have given me, particularly over the past year. My constituents feel like a part of my family and it has been a privilege to serve them.

Finally, I thank my wife Lucy and my children Benjamin, Sam, Max, Lily and Zachary for the support they have given me over the years.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman and wish him well.

2.40 pm

Dame Tessa Jowell (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Like so many other hon. and right hon. Members, I begin by thanking you, Mr Speaker, for the way in which you have led us and conducted our business. It is many years since you and I first met over the Dispatch Box when we debated a piece of secondary legislation on European employment law. The House and our proceedings have been extraordinarily enhanced by the way in which you have presided over us, and I thank you for that.

I also thank the other officers of the House, who conduct their duties often without being properly recognised, including those who provide a service in the Dining and Tea Rooms, the Door Keepers who direct us and, of course, the formidable staff of the House of Commons Library, a facility on which I make far too many demands. I thank all of them very much.

I was first elected in 1992. When I became the Member of Parliament for Dulwich, as my constituency was called then, there were more MPs called John or Jonathan than all the women from all the parties combined. Why does that matter? It matters because the authority of this House is in crisis, which will no doubt be discussed and debated in the forthcoming general election campaign. As you so often tell us, Mr Speaker, this House should talk to the country and not to itself. The Westminster village can be a very comfortable abode, but it is not what we are here to serve. We need a Parliament that looks like, and that talks about the issues that matter to, the rest of the country, and that recognises the cost of child care, the shortage of decent homes and how difficult it is for an 18-year-old with very poor levels of literacy and numeracy to get a job. Dealing with these things is what inspires the confidence of people who live their lives with our politics as a low “brrr” in the corner most of the time. Those are the things that make them feel that we are worth it and worth engaging with.

I faced many challenges in my constituency, and the same is true of other London MPs in particular. The big issue when I was first elected was the number of elderly people waiting on trolleys for admission to the A and E department at King’s College hospital—the extraordinary hospital that serves my constituents. Another issue was the number of children who could not get into the primary school of their choice. There was an educational divide at age 11 whereby white and middle-class children went either to a private school or out of the boroughs. Now, however, with redevelopment at King’s and five new secondary schools in the constituency, the situation has begun to change, but the nature of our progressive politics, which Labour Members in particular hold so dear, means that the job is never done.

The great risk facing my constituency is that it will become a constituency of two types of life: that of the
comfortable and well-off and that of the poor. Similarly, our capital city of London faces the risk of becoming two cities.

I am very sad that Sure Start, which was set up as an early nurturing programme by the Government of which I was a member, has been hollowed out. I hope we will never forget the optimism and ambition of the Olympic games, which, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, showed us the better angels of our nature.

2.46 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con):

Without question, the greatest privilege I have had during my 41 years in this House and throughout my life is to have represented the people of Tonbridge and Malling in one of the most beautiful and historic parts of our country. I make a mild apology to Members on both sides of the House that my constituency is a phonetical trap, given that, almost with exception, every town and village is pronounced differently from the way in which it is spelt. I am glad to say that the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw), with his intimate knowledge from his time as my Labour opponent, pronounced the name of my constituency impeccably when he spoke earlier.

I am also glad to see the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr Hain) in his place and I want to take this opportunity to thank him for the contribution he made as a Foreign Office Minister to establishing a sound and effective policy on arms export control for the British Government. I have been the Chairman of the Committees on Arms Export Controls for the whole of this Parliament, and we have been doing our utmost to secure adherence to the policy the right hon. Gentleman set down in 2000.

I want to address my top concerns as I leave the House. The most important responsibility we have in this House is the proper and effective scrutiny of the Government’s proposals for the future law of the land. I have to be blunt: on the scrutiny of both primary and secondary legislation, this House has had its position in relation to the Executive weakened very substantially in the time I have been here.

The previous Government, early on, introduced the automatic guillotining of all Bills without debate after Second Reading, which represents a huge erosion of the scrutiny powers of the House. I certainly wish to call on the next Government, and indeed on the next House, to revert to the previous position whereby there was no such automatic guillotining of Bills after Second Reading, but there was a reserve power under Standing Orders for the Government to introduce a guillotine motion to deal with a clear attempt to filibuster.

The position on secondary legislation—almost entirely unreported and unrecorded—is every bit as serious in my view. The reason why we have virtually no debates at all on negative resolution statutory instruments and that those on affirmative resolution statutory instruments are for 90 minutes only and non-amendable is of course that secondary legislation is supposed to be relatively non-substantial and non-controversial. That was only a convention, and I believe that the House made an enormous mistake by not giving it a firmer buttress.
Finally, we must better engage the public here and locally with our work and procedures. Too often, our procedures are arcane and difficult to understand, or they invite contempt. I wholly concur with my right hon. Friend the Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) about the urgent need to reform Prime Minister's questions, which I am afraid does the House no credit at all. We must also think about how we engage people more effectively at local level and help to break down some of their sense that politics is done by people who are apart from them, rather than part of a process in which they are engaged.

In conclusion, I express my heartfelt thanks to the many people, not least the electorate of Greenwich and Woolwich, who have given me the opportunity to represent them over the past 23 years. I also thank the many colleagues, officers and staff of the House whose friendship, support and advice has made possible the contribution that I have been able to make over these years. I am deeply grateful to have had the privilege.

2.58 pm

Mr Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the right hon. Gentleman about the felicity of the 1997 intake.

Mr Lansley: As ever, the right hon. Gentleman is very kind. Just as the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich mentioned that he shared an alma mater with my right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley), the right hon. Member for Blackburn and I share an alma mater. I followed him there and I followed him here, albeit with a slightly bigger time lag.

I want to make some remarks from my heart. First, I want to thank my constituents. I hope they agree with many of the things for which I fought on their behalf in the constituency—infrastructure, the A14, the rebuilding of Papworth hospital, broadband infrastructure, the planning, maintaining our quality of life, supporting research and development and science, and making it the best place in the world for life sciences investment and one of the best in the world for any kind of scientific or high-tech investment. We talk about the Cambridge phenomenon, and a great part of it is in South Cambridgeshire; we can honestly say that we are...
the eastern powerhouse. I hope it is not hubris to say that I leave my constituency in extremely good shape and with a quality of life among the best in the country.

I also want to say a big thank you to Michael Howard and to the Prime Minister. They gave me the chance to be the Conservatives’ shadow Health Secretary for seven years—contrary to what the right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich said, I had a long tenure in that post—and then the privilege of serving as Secretary of State for Health. Supporting the NHS and improving the health of the people of this country has been my passionate commitment in Parliament. In opposition, we fought for safer care and, in government, we got it. In opposition, we secured the highest ever level of public trust in the Conservative party’s policies for the NHS. In government, we delivered on our commitment to increase the NHS budget in real terms and to safeguard the NHS in tough times. I know that commitment will be sustained by a Conservative Government in the years to come.

I was determined to do more—to achieve the reforms in the NHS that virtually all recent Secretaries of State knew were needed but had not been secured. Many say that I implemented a reorganisation of the NHS that I promised not to do. That is not true. The Conservative manifesto had no reference to “no top-down reorganisation”. I was elected on the Conservative manifesto and I delivered it, including rising real NHS resources; getting rid of political targets; using information and choice to drive better outcomes; creating a strong, independent NHS voice, with GPs at the heart of commissioning; creating Healthwatch to represent patients; cutting administration costs by a third to increase front-line staffing; commissioning a 24/7 service, with GP access from 8 to 8; setting up the 111 service; virtually eliminating the longest waits for operations; cutting infections to record lows; abolishing mixed-sex accommodation; more than 1 million more people getting NHS dentistry; establishing the cancer drugs fund, with 60,000 benefiting from access to the latest treatments; and reforming social care so that people no longer have to sell their homes to pay for their care.

We did that and more. With our Liberal Democrat colleagues, we established health and wellbeing boards, with public health responsibilities and the capacity to integrate health and care. It was not easy and it was not popular, but public service reform is not a popularity contest. It must and will survive. It needs to survive because it will make a big difference in the future. My Back-Bench colleagues were robust, solid and consistent in their support, and I thank them and the Prime Minister for backing reform. The reality will show through in the years ahead, as we have seen in recent announcements, not least from NHS England.

I had a career before coming here and I will have a career after leaving, but I will always remain proud of what we have done here, as well as thankful for the comradeship of colleagues, those with whom I have worked, the staff of the House, the staff in my office and so many across my constituency.

When we are here, we trade blows and we take a lot of blows, but it is probably our families who feel them the most. They cannot go into the arena and fight back, but they feel the pain at least as much as ever we do. I want to say a big thank you to Sally and my family.
one occasion when we sat through the night from 10.30 on Tuesday to 1 pm on Wednesday. We were prepared and the other side were not, and I have to say we enjoyed it immensely. I have also spent much of my political life on trade union issues, and I am proud to have been for 14 years—until relatively recently—the secretary of the trade union group of Labour MPs, which works closely with the trade unions. I have always valued that connection.

I have followed a different career from most. I became the first Chairman of the Administration Committee when it was formed in 2005, and from there I graduated to the Commission, on which I have served with you, Mr Speaker, for the whole of this Parliament, and, as I said, with the right hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. I learned a lot from my time with both Committees about how this place is run, and on this point I think we have to work harder. I quickly discovered how much I did not know about how this place operated and functioned, and I think most Members are in the same position; they do not find out about something unless they need to. There does not seem to be a ready need to find out how this place functions and is managed, or about the many staff it employs.

Mr Lansley: When we went through the night, I discovered the merits of a fully-fledged bathroom downstairs in the House of Commons.

Mr Doran: I thank the right hon. Gentleman; I now have a minute left.

The other Committee I have taken an interest in, was a member of and became Chair of was your works of art committee, Mr Speaker. I am proud of and have enjoyed the work I have done on that committee. However, probably the most enjoyable experience of my life—sitting next to my wife, I think this is saying quite a lot—was when the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I was a member, visited Hollywood to look at the film industry and I managed to spend two hours on my own with Maureen O’Hara and Jean Simmons. I challenge any Member to beat that.

Like everyone else, I want to thank the staff of the House, particularly the Clerks on the various Committees I have been involved with, and especially my loyal staff in Aberdeen, most of whom have been with me for a very long time and have kept me sane for most of it.

Mr Speaker: I note the hon. Gentleman’s joy at meeting his heroines. I empathise: having half an hour last November with Roger Federer in London was one of the most memorable experiences of my life, and I will never forget it. For the greatest tennis player of all time, rock star status of the的是扫地僧。我有时在看橄榄球比赛时，享受这种体验。当我在政府中担任反对党副党鞭时，因为我不想反对政府，所以我在Whips办公室时，是与同事们交谈，这让我觉得非常有趣。即使我有反对派议员，我也没有干过什么重要的事情。我曾经与你一起担任过边界委员会的主席，这是我最自豪的成就之一。在Uxbridge工作时，我被选区关闭了——尽管这是因为我搬到Middlesex而被选区选中。没有什么事情发生。我也参与过一些不太重要的事情，但我的工作就是帮助人们找到他们需要的东西。我知道我不是一个好角色，我很乐意做我并不擅长的事情。我有时会想，当我在政府中担任反对党副党鞭时，我并没有花太多的时间在演说上，人们不喜欢太过针锋相对的事情。我同意，但我不会 dwelling on this. It is for my memoirs—luckily, I am not going to publish them!

I have been lucky in Hillingdon. The previous Member representing Ruislip Northwood was John Wilkinson, and today there is my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) and the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell)—and we have always got on. We may be political opponents, but we have become friends and we work together for our constituents in Hillingdon. I believe our constituents like and respect that and that they do not like too much adversarial stuff.

I sometimes think when I am watching a rugby match that people are putting everything into the game, but at the end of it, they shake hands and probably go and share a beer together. Some people outside the House probably do not realise that although we have our arguments and discussions that can sometimes get quite heated, we are basically on the same side, trying to help our people.
I have some great memories. I remember going to the smoking room, which was empty apart from Edward Heath and Tony Benn. They asked me to come and join them as they talked about Europe. Both opposed their own party’s particular view on the subject, and I was like a bystander, just listening to them. In many ways, that is how I feel my experience here has been. When I first came into this place, I described it as an “out of body experience”. It has been like a dream. I have a feeling that in six months’ time, waking up in a hospital bed somewhere, I might wonder whether it was all a dream. There might be no trace of anything that went on, no trace in Hansard or anywhere else.

It was sad that my father, Alec, never saw me elected to this place, but I was delighted that my mother did. She was an ardent royalist and was particularly proud of my role as Treasurer of Her Majesty’s Household. The fact that I, the grandson of teachers and traders in Uxbridge, was travelling in a coach on a state occasion shows that it is possible to achieve a lot in this country, irrespective of background.

I look forward to engaging and training up my successor. I sometimes have a feeling that it is a bit like “Dr Who”, with MPs morphing into something else. I can already feel my hair getting a bit blonder and I seem to have found an encyclopaedic knowledge of Horace—we never know.

Finally, I would like to thank my long-serving secretary, Delma Beebe, who was with me from the start. She was sent to look after me and make sure I did not make too many mistakes. Luckily, I have not. I thank, too, my wife Kate, my sons Peter and David and my daughter Elizabeth, and, of most, all the people of my constituency for giving me this great opportunity to serve in the best place in the UK, serving the greatest country in the world.

3.18 pm

Mr David Hamilton (Midlothian) (Lab): What a momentous day today, Mr Speaker. I was able to vote for a victory on the Labour side, which makes it a great day for me to finish my parliamentary career.

Coming here was the last thing on my mind when I left school at the age of 15 and I went down the pit on my 16th birthday. I worked in the collieries for about 20 years through the dark days of the miners’ strike. I shall touch on that, because it is relevant to what is happening now. We lost our manufacturing base over the 10 years that followed—indeed, Britain’s manufacturing base was wiped out. I spent a couple of months in jail during that time. Before anybody thinks I have made a mistake, let me add that I was found innocent at the end of it. I was found innocent by a jury. It was the only trial jury in Scotland at the time. Thank God there was a jury and not just a judge.

You learn from such things. When I came down here many years later, after being blacklisted for two and a half years, I depended solely on my wife, who had to do two jobs to keep me going. The first tribute that I must pay is to Jean and my family—I have five grandkids now—who have stood by me through thick and thin. If Members think that it is hard for a wife to stand by them in Parliament, I can tell them that it is even harder for a wife to stand by someone who is in jail, and during a miners’ strike. My wife stood by me throughout all those times. I received texts from her and from my daughters today to wish me well, and I promised them that I would not become too emotional.

Next, I became a councillor in Midlothian. That, at the time, was the greatest privilege that I had experienced: representing, as a councillor, the area in which I had been born. For 20 years before that, I had been a union representative in the pits, so I have represented people for most of my life. It will be a strange experience to leave here and, for the first time ever, go home to my wife every night. I do not know how I shall cope. It will be a strange experience for both of us, after 14 years.

You may have forgotten this, Mr Speaker, but you were the first person I met in the Smoking Room. I had been to London only three or four times before—the first time I visited the House, there were police officers outside, and I was starting to attack some of the people in here—and when I finally got into Parliament, I had no idea what the place was like. The election took place in June that year, 2001—as Members may recall, it was postponed because of the outbreak of foot and mouth—and Wimbledon was on. It was impossible to find a place to stay anywhere in London. Eventually, the then Member for East Lothian and I found a boarding house, and, Mr Speaker, you and a good colleague took us there because we did not even know where it was, or what form of transport to take.

You were probably the first Tory that I had ever met, Mr Speaker. It was the first time that I had come to a place and been looked after there by the Opposition. I have always had a soft spot for them for that reason.

It gives me great pleasure to follow a Member—the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Sir John Randall)—who was a Deputy Chief Whip for the Opposition. My right hon. and good Friend the Member for Stirling (Dame Anne McGuire) was my Whip when I was first in the House. I learned very quickly—and I say this as a senior Whip—that you must mean what you say and say what you mean, because if you do not, the Whips will go after you. At the first sign of shuffling, they will pick on that. I have been a Whip for five years, and I love it.

What you learn very quickly is that you have to stand up for what you believe is right. That is something that anyone who enters Parliament should understand. We have had to make some difficult decisions in the past, and that includes the decisions that have been made during the last three parliamentary terms has been difficult. The decision on the Iraq war was one of the most difficult. I was on the side of the righteous and difficult. The decision on the Iraq war was one of the most difficult decisions that I would not become too emotional.

Let me make a point about that, though. People talk about war crimes and the like, but it was this Parliament that made the decision. It was parliamentarians who made it. We can blame other people for things that have happened, but everyone had to stand up and make their own decisions then, and I congratulate the then Prime Minister on having allowed that. Nowadays, we would never think of going into a conflict without Parliament being consulted. We should stand up and take it on the chin when we make a mistake.

The other occasion on which I voted against the then Government was the debate on the 92-day detention period. That was one of the most difficult decisions that
I ever had to make, and I was criticised harshly for it in my own area. That was the only time I have ever been criticised by my own folk.

I am running out of time. Let me end by saying that I will miss this place, and I will miss the Whips Office. I believe that the Whips do a really good job, and the side of their job that no one sees is the compassionate side. When people are in trouble—

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Hamilton: Yes.

Julie Hilling: I wanted my hon. Friend to have 30 seconds in which to finish his speech, especially as he is praising Whips.

Mr Hamilton: I am mindful of the time, Mr Speaker, but I think it important to remember that, while one role of the Whips is to enforce the position of the party that they represent, the second role—the role that is not seen—is the compassionate role. May I suggest a change that could be made by the two major parties? They should appoint a senior Whip to be in charge of the welfare of Members, and—with the greatest respect—that person should not be the Chief Whip, or the Deputy Chief Whip, or the pairing Whip.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. If memory serves me correctly, it was the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) who escorted the hon. Member for Midlothian (Mr Hamilton) home that night; I remember it well.

3.24 pm

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): When I took my seat in the House with a slender majority of 57 after the Berwick by-election, a state of emergency was declared at the same time. I do not think the two events were connected, but they were the beginning of a sequence which involved two further elections in the next 11 months. At the end of that I still had a majority of only 73. We then went into a referendum on British membership of the European Community—wait long enough and another one comes round. The difference, however, is that in that referendum campaign I was fighting alongside Tories in favour of British membership of the EC and most of the opponents we were dealing with were in the Labour party; the world has changed politically quite a bit in that time. Some 41 and a half years after my first day here, I can say that, with those majorities, I did not expect to enjoy the privilege of representing the people of north Northumberland for so long—longer than any previous Berwick Member of Parliament.

My primary concerns in that time have been those of my constituents in the over 100 towns and villages which make up the Berwick constituency. Like many Members, I have derived real satisfaction from helping constituents who have been ill-served by the bureaucracy of state or local government, or by powerful private businesses. In political life, there are things we know we have helped to achieve, and they are the things we know would not have happened but for our own efforts. In that category I place examples like the dualling of the A1, the new high school being built in Alnwick, and the fact that the RAF has kept its crucial command and control and training facilities at RAF Boulmer in my constituency. For that, I called on the help of an invaluable parliamentary tool: the National Audit Office. It is not often realised how helpful that body is to Parliament and MPs.

The first two examples were certainly made possible by Liberal Democrat involvement in the coalition Government, achieving what previous Governments had failed to do. I am proud to have been a supporter of the coalition, and in my view becoming involved in it was the right thing for the Liberal Democrats to do, in order to provide stability for the country at a time of crisis, to take tough but necessary decisions to reduce the deficit, to temper austerity with fairness and to maintain long-term investment. Many of those things would not have been possible had we not taken that decision to take part in the coalition.

Although I spent a lot of time in the leadership and management team of my party in this House and outside it, I want to concentrate finally on one aspect of parliamentary activity which is increasingly recognised as of real benefit to our constituents, and more rewarding to MPs who want to achieve something than the sterile shouting match, to which several Members have referred, which takes place on Wednesdays at Prime Minister’s questions. Select Committee scrutiny of how well or badly the Government are doing their job has assumed vastly greater importance during this Parliament. Committees are no longer chosen by party Whips; their Chairs are elected by secret ballot—a rather sensitive subject today, but it is crucial to the authority that now attaches to the chairmanship of a Select Committee—and Committee members are voted for by a ballot within their parties. There must be no going back on this vital reform. The next Parliament should build on that reform and should not in any way weaken or undermine it. I welcome the fact that the Liaison Committee, which I chair along with the Justice Committee, has secured, with your assistance, Mr Speaker, £800,000 from the resources of the House in the next Parliament to strengthen and support the work of Select Committees.

By its nature our system allows for a strong Executive, and they must be held effectively to account. We in the Justice Committee have done that, but we have also tried to create space for a more rational, evidence-based objective debate about criminal justice policy. In the Liaison Committee, we have focused our now more frequent question sessions with the Prime Minister, probing in detail the influence that he and the No. 10 staff have on departmental policy. I pay tribute to colleagues in all parties who, despite their different political views, have worked with me in the Select Committee system.

My final word must be one of thanks: to the staff in every department of the House, to the staff in my Westminster and constituency offices, to all those volunteers who have given me so much help over the years, to my colleagues and friends in the Liberal Democrats, and to the electors of my constituency. I hope they will take my advice and return another Liberal Democrat to maintain the liberal philosophical tradition and the Liberal tradition of vigorous local representation which I have sought to uphold in this House.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I thank the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), who is much esteemed across the House, and wish him well for the future.

3.29 pm

Dame Anne McGuire (Stirling) (Lab): It is a rare privilege to be allowed to make a valedictory speech. Mr Speaker. I have to admit that this is the first one I have ever had the opportunity to make in leaving a job; normally, there was a wee present and a drink in the local pub, so this certainly is an elevation beyond my expectations.

The people of Stirling paid me the honour of electing me four times and I thank them sincerely for it. Placed at the heart of Scotland, it is a constituency made up of many different and vibrant communities, across an area the size of Luxembourg. It is the most northerly rural Labour seat in the United Kingdom. I am its first woman MP, and there is a little picture of me in the city’s Smith museum, overlooking the marble bust of a previous MP for the city, Campbell-Bannerman, who was against votes for women—I think people going into politics in perspective. Having entered the House in 1997, and I hope there is never an attempt in this House for me. The first is the banning of handguns in Scotland, had become a national park. I make no apology for saying that all those things were completed normally, there was a wee present and a drink in the local pub, so this certainly is an elevation beyond my expectations.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said and the way in which she has said it.

I want to echo the thanks of other hon. Members who have spoken highly of the staff of the Commons. From the moment I entered this place some 18 years ago, they have shown nothing but courtesy and service to me and other Members. Of course, I give a special thanks to my parliamentary staff, Graham, Heather, Aileen, Stephen, Rachel and Gerry, for their support and forbearance during my time in Parliament. I also thank my constituency party members and my trade union, the GMB.

Like you, Mr Speaker, I came into this House in 1997. At that time, pupils in my area were being educated in schools where buckets were needed to catch the rain; we needed a new hospital; our sports facilities were not able to cope with the demands of an increasingly keep-fit society; and the long-held ambition of creating a national park had still not been realised. Yet, within a few years those schools had been replaced or refurbished; new sports halls were built; we had our own new hospital; and one of the most scenic areas in the country, the Trossachs, had become a national park. I make no apology for saying that all those things were completed or commissioned under Labour Administrations.

I am going to pick out two or three highlights in this House for me. The first is the banning of handguns in 1997, and I hope there is never an attempt in this country to weaken that legislation. The second is the passing of the Civil Partnership Act 2004, because for me it was one of the most impressive House of Commons occasions, when people were prepared to put on the public record their own journey to accepting civil partnerships. That made such a contrast with the divisive and harsh debate about section 28 in the 1980s. The third was when, as Minister for Disabled People, I travelled to New York to sign the United Nations convention on the rights of people with disabilities on behalf of the UK Government, with a young disabled man, Miro Griffiths, at my side. I am sure the Leader of the House, as a former distinguished Minister for Disabled People, will appreciate the significance of that occasion. My regret about these past five years, however, is that some of the progress on disability rights has been seriously undermined, certainly in the eyes of disabled people themselves, by some of the very “radical”—I use the word advisedly—changes in our benefits system.

I am the eldest of a family of four girls. I, along with my sisters Kathleen, Helen and Frances, and our parents, lived for the first six years of my life up a small Glasgow stair, in a tenement. We had a room and kitchen, and an outside toilet. Down here it would probably be called a “studio apartment with bijou facilities”. Moving to a Glasgow housing scheme, which had a proper bathroom, was an unbelievable step up for my hard-working parents. Their ambition for us as their daughters was that we would take advantage of an education system, and we all did. They left school at 14, whereas we took advantage of the education system, and our children thought that university was the way to improve their own education. It was the ambition of that post-war generation that things would be better for their families.

Finally, I want to say a special thanks to my husband Len and my children Paul and Sarah, all three of whom have given me tremendous support. Mr Speaker, when I came into this House I was a “Blair’s babe”. I am pleased today to take leave of it as Orla and Seumas’s granny.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said and the way in which she has said it.

3.34 pm

Mr David Willetts (Havant) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young) for this great innovation and for the excellent debate we have been able to have as a result of it. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for the innovations for which you have been responsible. I think particularly of the flow of schoolchildren through this House. We all see many more than in the past, and the effort you have put in to educating the next generation in this House will be a lasting legacy.

I begin by recording my debt to my constituents in Havant and explaining to them that when, in my final interview with my local paper, the story was run with the caption, “I leave Havant in great shape” it was not a personal statement about my fitness after years in this place; it was an attempt to be proud of what we had achieved together in Havant.

I thank my family for the inevitable burdens that they have shared as a result of my being a Member of Parliament. I know that my two kids look forward to being able to vote in an election without being under a moral obligation to support their father. I also thank our staff, particularly the three who have served me so well: Helga Wright, Annie Winsbury and Jackie Scaddan.

Colleagues matter. The inevitable ups and downs and triumphs and disasters of politics are among the great features of this place. There are colleagues in all parts of the House who are tolerant and understanding. There are friendships that keep the downs as well as the ups of politics in perspective. Having entered the House in 1992, I think particularly of two good friends, Judith Chaplin and Stephen Milligan, who both died within two years of being elected; that loss stayed with me for a long time.
In several speeches—most notably in those of the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr Hain) and the former Prime Minister—the great values of Britain were mentioned. Those British values are shared in all parts of the House. But for us, surely, what matters is not just the values but the institutions and conventions that protect them and sustain them. I had the privilege the other day to go to the Magna Carta exhibition. We are celebrating Magna Carta not because it was a list of great principles but because it set out some key practical requirements such as habeas corpus and the requirement that the King’s actions should be scrutinised by the barons, leading to this place. The institutions that sustain those values are what make this country distinctive and special. Among those institutions are this place and also, under-appreciated but equally important, organised political parties. Political activity is about working with others and making the inevitable compromises of working with others. True political activity demands more than simply pressing a button on a laptop to express a personal opinion.

I have been privileged in my career to try to serve some of these great institutions, particularly in the Cabinet most recently as the Minister for Universities and Science. I was able to see and support our great universities and our great scientific institutions.

There is always a risk that valedictory debates become rather melancholy and people regret that things have got worse. Famously, Tip O’Neill, looking back on his time in the American Congress, concluded this about the way it worked: better people, worse outcomes. That has been an undercurrent of concern in several of the speeches we have heard today.

I wish to end on a note of optimism. Looking back to how our country as a whole has changed since I and several others who have contributed to this debate were first elected in 1992, I have to say that Britain is a better place. Britain has become better in many ways. Of course there are always problems to be tackled as social conscience is restless. We are an open and flexible society. All Governments deserve credit: the Conservatives have played an enormous role in strengthening our economy. Looking back on the Blair Government, I think that, at the end of that, we were a more relaxed and tolerant nation than we were in 1997, and that improved the quality of our national life. I feel confident that the young, dynamic, hard-working Members of Parliament who will be coming here for the first time next month will also be making our country a better place.

3.39 pm

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): This has been a momentous day for Parliament, and none of us thought that the day would turn out quite as it did with the votes earlier. Regarding the part of that debate that centred on your role, Mr Speaker, one of the highlights for me over the past 28 years was being invited by you to help drag you to the Chair when you took up the post of Speaker.

For someone like me, from Stoke-on-Trent, it has been an absolute privilege to represent the area that I come from and that I belong to, uninterrupted, for 28 years. I have been fortunate. To have had the trust of my constituents, to have been taken into their confidence, to have been able work to try to make a difference where it really matters—no one could ask for more. I want to say a big thank you to all those who made it possible, not least the party, which had the confidence to select me as its Member of Parliament—coming as I did from Lambeth council, where I was got rid of by Mrs Thatcher—to serve here and make a difference over these years. It has been a huge privilege.

I want to thank my school and my late head teacher, Mr E.S. Kelly. In the days before the film, “The King’s Speech”, he asked me to stand up and speak at a schools award event. I told him I was too nervous and would never be able to do that, but he told me that because of George VI, if I believed in something I had to do it. Little did he know that his words would help me to come here and represent a whole constituency here in Parliament.

I thank my family. My father never knew that I got here, but I thank my mum and the rest of my family for standing by me. It was not easy in those early days, with just 41 women MPs and a young family. I was here every night, sometimes sharing one bed in the Lady Members’ Room when we were up all night long trying to keep everything going and never winning votes, while keeping alive the thought of a Labour Government next time round. We finally got that in 1997, although, unlike my right hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Dame Anne McGuire), I was never a Blair babe.

When I think about my achievements, many things stand out. No other MP has helped rescue their football team twice, as I had to do with Port Vale. The institutions that keep our constituencies alive are also important and we must ensure that that work continues. My maiden speech was on the subject of health, and I quoted the words: “The health of the people is the highest law.”

I still feel that that is acutely the case today. I have spent a lot of my time working on health and public health issues, and I am very grateful to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health for giving me a lifetime award—one of only a handful of people to receive one in the 150-odd years of its existence.

I could not have had better support from my staff and family, from my children and now my grandchildren, and, in particular, I want to thank my husband Ian. The important thing is to remember that time flies and that as Big Ben chimes, time is ticking away. Environmental issues are important. We have huge uncertainty about what the next Government will bring and when that will be put in place, but important talks are going on now, later this year in Paris on the climate change convention, and in New York on the sustainable development goals. More than anything else, I ask that this House, those who elect us to it and the young people who are the next generation embed environmental sustainability into its agenda and in all that we do.

I am aware that time is limited, and it has gone by in a flash. It is like a dream. I have every confidence that my successor candidate will be successful and will carry on the work on some of those issues. Only this morning, I was particularly privileged to ask a question about ceramics and origin marking. All of us in this House must do everything we possibly can to safeguard the future of Stoke-on-Trent and the Potteries.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. There will be no reduction in time limits, as I do not think that would be fair; but if Members could speak for four minutes each, that would help. If that is not possible, we will just have to cope as best we can.

3.44 pm

Mike Weatherley (Hove) (Con): The two questions I am asked most frequently about being an MP are: “Is it what you expected?” and “Do you feel you have made a difference?” That usually draws me into thinking about the big-ticket items I have been involved in. The first, of course, is just being here and sitting on the Government Benches, from which our country is being turned around—supporting the Prime Minister; voting in the Lobbies the right way, mostly; and serving on Committees and so on. That has to be the biggest role of any parliamentarian.

Then there are my individual achievements on national issues. Early on, a constituent was affected by squatters, and my office took that up as a cause. I started with an oral question, followed that up with a Westminster Hall debate and got the Government on side, and the law was duly changed via an amendment to the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Bill. Changing the law on squatting was a huge deal, and it has virtually ended squatting in residential properties in the UK. Wikipedia now lists it as “Weatherley’s law”. At this stage I pay tribute to my office manager, Robert Nemeth, who has worked tirelessly on the issue.

Then there is my work on intellectual property, or copyright as many refer to it. I took that up as a cause and was appointed the Prime Minister’s adviser on IP. I have now written four reports, one of which was released today, and they have been well received internationally. The Trading Standards magazine was kind enough to sum up my achievements as “changing the course of history in the UK regarding IP Rights”.

Back in 2010 we were heading in the wrong direction on IP, and now that has been turned around, with senior politicians on all sides keen to stress their support for the creative industries and protecting their rights. At this stage I pay tribute to my researcher, Michael Ireland, who has also become an expert on the issue.

It is probably right to mention the support initiatives that nudged along the IP debate, my Rock the House and Film the House competitions, which have become the largest in Parliament and culminated last week with the final awards ceremony at the US ambassador’s residence, Winfield house. We brought live amplified music to Parliament, with the likes of Fat Boy Slim, Whitesnake’s Bernie Marsden, national treasure Rick Wakeman and Slash playing live, plus the engagement in politics of a large demographic not often easily engaged by parliamentarians. I pay tribute to Niki Haywood, who founded the initiatives with me. I also pay tribute to you for supporting that right from the outset, Mr Speaker. There are two other issues that I should mention: my support for equal marriage and my opposition to fox hunting, both of which I can claim to be achievements.

However, it is not all about the big-ticket issues. I have probably enjoyed even more the work I have done on local issues, from galvanising support for the new Connaught primary school it as soon as I was elected to taking on the Department for Education to stop building an unsuitable site on the BHASVIC—Brighton Hove and Sussex sixth-form college—fields and working with countless charities and other groups. The work is not done yet. The King Alfred site needs a world-class facility with a 50 metre swimming pool, so I intend to keep up the pressure there. The “Sage of Sussex”, Adam Trimmingham, kindly referred to me recently as “the hyperactive” MP, and I am very proud of that tag.

May I also pay tribute to my other fantastic staff, Rachael Bates and Heather Newbury-Martin? All four of my staff have been with me throughout the five years. The zero turnover of staff must be some kind of record, and it has made working in Parliament an absolute delight.

So, have I made a difference? I think so, and from my mailbag it seems very many others do, too. Is it what I expected? Well, yes and no really. Much less time is spent on meaningful debates than I would have liked, and I would like more Bills from Back Benchers to have a chance of success. On the other hand, this is a great institution, these surroundings are fantastic and my colleagues are among the most dedicated and hard-working co-workers I have ever come across. And, yes, it has been a real honour to serve in this Parliament.

3.48 pm

Eric Joyce (Falkirk) (Ind): Half a century ago Mr Harry Ewing, a predecessor of mine as Member for Falkirk, described Falkirk as an iron town. He meant that in a worldwide sense, I think. The Carron Company was established in 1759 and sat at the forefront of the industrial revolution, and for over two centuries the iron industry defined the Falkirk area, feeding Glasgow’s shipyards and much else besides. Falkirk’s industry helped power Scotland. Today, a company in Denny called Specialised Castings can trace its lineage all the way back to the original Carron works, and Falkirk’s Alexander Dennis Ltd remains the wholly Scottish-owned manufacturer of the red buses we see across London and, indeed, the world.

Falkirk’s power remains central to Scotland’s industrial economy. Thousands of families in the Falkirk area will be sustained into the future by employment in petrochemicals and oil refining, shale gas importation and in the service industries that serve them. Ineos has committed huge investment to the area, as have the UK and Scottish Governments. Communities that once benefited from employment in mining are now leading the way in a different kind of underground activity—exploring for coal-seam gas. I know that that sometimes makes people in this place a little queasy, but I think it is one of the world’s future power sources.

It has been my great privilege to serve the hard-working folk of the Falkirk area in this place. They are as decent, realistic about human nature, forgiving and aspirational for their families as any people we could meet anywhere. They have been kind to me and my family in challenging times, as have you, Mr Speaker, and Members from across the House. I thank my constituents, all the Members here and the staff of the House for their great human generosity.

Like many Falkirk folk in the oil and chemical industries, and seafarers too, as quite a few come from the area, I have been able to apply the knowledge of oil, gas, mining and shipping that I have gained from representing those folk to other parts of the world, such as Africa—indeed, with yourself, Mr Speaker.
Falkirk people are the opposite of inward-looking wee Scots. They are the most decent and outward-looking people in the world. As a natural Unionist, who has served that Union in this place and in our very fine British Army, I recognised the narrow referendum vote in favour of the Union and the narrow win for the Union locally not as a sign of narrow-mindedness locally, but as the harbinger of the end of the Union as we know it. Most Falkirk folk, like most Scots, define themselves as Scottish first now, and many of those who chose the Union last year did so largely through fear. Scots are being asked for their votes now on the basis that they may get a larger share of UK wealth than many folk in England feel is fair. The Union cannot exist on the basis of fear or an appeal to greed. When greed and fear are the watchwords, we know that the tipping-point has been passed.

The Labour party in Scotland has not let anyone down, except people who did not like Labour Governments or Labour Prime Ministers, which admittedly included quite a few Labour party members, as I recall. However, from my modest participation in this place, I believe that the Labour party has done a great deal to be proud of. It faces great difficulties in Scotland. Scots feel that they face a choice between a new uncertain future in which they are masters and mistresses of their own destiny or behaving as if they are making menaces. That is how many people south of the border feel—that menaces or threats are being made that if great resources do not go up to Scotland, bad things will happen across the UK.

My strong view is that whatever the constitutional future of Scotland, the Labour party in Scotland needs to establish its own independent entity in Scotland. Two of my very close colleagues, my secretary May McIntyre, whom I thank, and Dennis Goldie, appear to own the trademark for the Scottish Labour party, so I suggest that the Labour party in Scotland treat them nicely and not threaten them. They are long-serving, very loyal Labour people.

Members of the English intelligentsia have already decided that Scots are on their way. They think it is a shame and hope it will all turn out for the best. Most English folk are concerned mainly about the impact of Scotland on their constituencies or where they live in England. They have discounted the result in Scotland—they think they know what is going to happen in Scotland.

The time has come for Scots to behave like the big boys and girls they are. Above all—this is what I am most concerned about—they need to convince energy businesses that Scotland will be stable economically, regardless of the new constitutional status. We have to move on from the Union we know to something altogether new. There is risk involved, and romance may well be the first casualty.

3.53 pm

Mr David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): I always said that I would leave this place before I lost the buzz of having the privilege of speaking in this Chamber. I am very happy to say that after 18 years I am doing that.

There are many people who did not think I would last 18 years. The late Lord Rees-Mogg wrote an article every time I stood for election, saying that on the basis of an extensive poll of his friends and family, I was going to lose the next election. It did not quite happen. I was elected for the first time with a majority of 130. I followed it up at the following two elections still with three-figure majorities. I increased my majority each time, but by nothing so vulgar as four figures, until last time. Had I done it four times in a row, I think I would have established a more recent record for any parliamentarian, having four three-figure majorities, but I blew it by getting a larger majority at the last election.

I made up for it by being the first Liberal Minister to speak from the Dispatch Box since 1945, the previous one being Sir Archibald Sinclair. That will be my little footnote in history. I hugely enjoyed my time in government, both in the job of Deputy Leader of the House and as Agriculture Minister, although I was faced with an almost endless succession of acts of God, it seemed to me when I carried out the latter role, so much so that I felt I was the Minister for the apocalypse. It was pestilence, plague, floods, death and destruction on an almost daily basis.

I want to say that I was very proud to be a part of the Government. I particularly thank those in my two private offices who made my life bearable and supported me so well during that time. The principal role, of course, is to represent one's constituency. I sometimes feel that I have become a bit of a Somerset cliché. I have brought matters to the House such as thatching, cider making, cheese making and carnivals—things that make people think, “Oh, for heaven’s sake—he’s doing his west country thing again!” My answer to that is that if I did not say those things, who on earth else would represent my constituents?

I like to think that I have also made progress on some really important issues—the A303 finally being done after all these years, the Great Western railway, what I hope will be successful responses to the flooding in my constituency, and maybe even broadband for some of my rural areas. When I was first elected, I did not imagine that Frome would ever be listed as one of the coolest places in Britain, but it has been repeatedly in recent years, along with Bruton, another town in my constituency. Even more importantly, I did not imagine, back in the '80s when unemployment in Frome was 17%, that it would now be less than 1%—statistically, that is full employment. That is a great virtue and I am very pleased about it.

The House needs to address some issues. There needs to be further reform, as I do not believe we have completed the job. I have a huge amount of time for my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young) and I think we significantly reformed the House, but things were left undone—such as the establishment of a House Committee, on which we were, if I may say so, thwarted. I hope that future Governments will set one up.

We need to get a better balance between the constituency responsibilities of Members of Parliament and their responsibilities in this House. When I was first elected, I went on to the Foreign Affairs Committee. Other members of the Committee thought I was ineffably quaint because I insisted on going back—instead of doing surgery most weekends, but that may be at the expense of the scrutiny of legislation, and that worries me.
I think I have been able to achieve things for Grimsby, such as compensation for the fishermen who lost their jobs in the Icelandic fishing dispute, raising the status of the college, getting Europarc and the jobs that went with it, and Grimsby Fish Dock Enterprises. That has been the joy of my existence. I am happy that my Labour successor will carry on that fight for Grimsby with all the vigour and courage of somebody younger and more dynamic than I am. I am happy that better times lie ahead for Grimsby, because we shall become the centre of the North sea wind turbine industry, with maintenance and supply carried on by Grimsby Fish Dock Enterprises and construction carried on by the Able UK construction site at Stallingsborough.

I am sad to be giving up the little platform of power that we have as MPs, because from it we can ask questions, taunt the Executive, and push causes. Perhaps I have pushed too many in my time, but it has been a very interesting and rewarding role. I am sad to be leaving the Select Committee, because Select Committees have been a joy of our existence. We can no longer control the Executive. We can check the Executive, as we did today, but that is only when they do something daft. We cannot control them; they control us. The job of Back Benchers, and indeed Parliament, is to heckle the steamroller of the Executive as it drives over us. However, we can audit the Executive. That is the useful job that the Select Committees are doing in absorbing so much energy and giving us such a rewarding role to replace the roles that have faded away as we have lost power as MPs. We are the auditors of the system—the auditors of power. We audit its mistakes and its policies: what it is doing wrong and what it is doing right. We need to develop that role. We are all auditors now—let's go for it!

4.3 pm

Mr Aidan Burley (Cannock Chase) (Con): In the short time available, I want to take the opportunity to thank all the people who have made standing here, in this cockpit of the nation, possible for a humble lad from Birmingham.

First and foremost, I thank my family, without whom I would never have inherited my interest in politics, let alone the confidence to pursue it. I think that interest stems from my great grandmother, Nora Hinks, who was one of the earliest female councillors in Birmingham—admittedly for the Liberal party—in the early 1950s. My mother, Lois, and my grandmother, who we call Mrs Ward, both played a huge role in the 2010 campaign that led to us winning Cannock Chase. Mum was out pounding the streets of Cannock whatever the weather, regularly delivering leaflets in the cold and rain, even in the snow. She even let me move back into her house, aged 30, and without that base in Birmingham I would never have been able to campaign so effectively 20 miles up the road to win the seat. She was always there, no questions asked, and ready to help, as indeed she has been all my life.

Mrs Ward, despite being in her nineties, often sat up into the late hours folding leaflets and putting them into walking routes. Others here will know how important it is to have a map with the roads highlighted on it to give to the deliverers, and it is fair to say that they were placed in the neatest piles, with the maps perfectly folded, when she personally organised them.
I also thank my dad, whose donation of a week’s holiday in his villa in Bali raised the most amount of money of any of our auction prizes in my campaign, securing vital funds to put out all those leaflets and newspapers, which are so important in persuading people to vote for us.

My sister Briar and my brother-in-law Rick were also regular visitors, driving all the way up from London to, as Rick put it, “sitting in the car”. Keep posting those letters!” My sister has always been a rock of support for me over the years, keeping me sane when the times were tough and encouraging me to have a positive outlook—a necessary requirement when fighting a seat with a 9,000 Labour majority. Her husband also wins the prize for the best letter to the editor of the local paper, saying that as the new MP for Cannock Chase I should get a Staffordshire bull terrier and name it Chevy Chase, which I promised to do, but did not—typical politician!

More than anything, I want to thank my long-suffering agent, Ian Collard, and his wife Rowena. They have worked more hours for me and my campaign than anyone else and they have never asked for a single penny in return. They were the architects of the 2010 campaign that secured the biggest swing of the election—a whopping 14%, which even the BBC called a “staggering result”. Without their meticulous planning, advice and strategy, we would never have won, and I thank them from the bottom of my heart for enabling me to have the experience of being an MP. They will remain true friends for long after I leave this place.

Finally, I thank my wife Jodie, who is sitting in the Gallery and who has worked for more than four years as the manager of my constituency office, the MP help zone. Dealing with some of the most complex cases and often the rudest and most awkward constituents, she has maintained a quiet dignity and poise that few could match. Our wonderful wedding in the Crypt last August has maintained a quiet dignity and poise that few could match. Our wonderful wedding in the Crypt last August was the highlight of my time here—a truly magnificent venue and a day we will never forget.

In this House, I personally thank my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) for his support and kindness to me, especially during the tough times, and wish him every success for yet another term in this place. I do not know how he does it. My dear friends Chisholm Wallace and Harry Spencer Smith have also been stalwarts and will remain good friends for years to come. Indeed, besides the parliamentary seats being contested, this House does not forget those fighting for district council and other seats. From Walsingham to Walham and from Cornwall to Cadwell, we wish them well.

Being an MP has been an incredible journey—a rollercoaster, really—with some huge highs as well as a few lows, but with the good more than cancelling out the bad. It was an itch I had wanted to scratch since I was a young man, when I met John Major in the 1997 general election, and I feel very fortunate to have achieved my dream when I was just 31. I had not expected to win the seat, let alone with the biggest swing in the country, but that just goes to show what can be achieved with great campaigning, hard work and the right team.

Being an MP has been a tremendous privilege, with some unique experiences and the opportunity to make a real difference to the lives of constituents. In what other job could someone save a hospital, electrify a train line or run a series of jobs fairs to help people back into work? We are rightly proud of all those achievements in Cannock.

Being an MP also comes at a great cost, including being away from home four nights a week, working very long hours, often for lower pay than before, and with constant, unwanted and unwarranted media intrusion into every aspect of our and our families’ lives. It is a price that was once worth paying, but for me that time has now passed and I look forward to new challenges, greater freedoms and a life outside this mad House.

4.8 pm

Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Forty-eight years ago, when I first joined the Labour party having been rather angry at the way in which a landlord had treated a neighbour of mine, little did I think that I would end up here. I thought about that when I gave my maiden speech on 6 May 1992. The 23 years between then and now have been extraordinary and I have a lot of people to thank for that, particularly from my local party, which contains some great stalwarts and wonderful people.

We have heard tributes being paid to great people in politics, some of whom work at the local level. Reg Chrimes and the late Fred Venables and Norman Angel—extraordinary people of great integrity—had something like 150 years of public service as councillors between them. If a little bit of their integrity has rubbed off on me, I will leave this place a proud man.

You were involved in one of my achievements here, Mr Speaker, namely my 10-year campaign to have Nelson Mandela’s appearance in the Great Hall recognised with a plaque there. It did take rather a long time. I remember the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young), when he was the Leader of the House, pointing out that the wheels grind very slowly here. That is probably the only early-day motion I have signed that has had an effect.

I want to reflect on such things as the legislation on agency workers and the work done—on a cross-party basis, I have to say—to support Vauxhall Motors. We have transformed that company with the support of Ministers from all three political parties. More recently, there has been the acquisition of the Thornton research centre, which must be going in the right direction because it has attracted visits by four Cabinet Ministers within the past year. We hope to see more Cabinet Ministers—Labour ones, I hope—during the next Parliament.

In the past few years, I have concentrated my efforts on the science agenda and the work of the parliamentary and scientific committee, the first ever all-party group. It was formed 75 years ago, and last year it had its 75th birthday party, hosted by His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh in Buckingham palace. There is also the work we have done on the Science and Technology Committee during the past five years. It is a great pleasure to see the right hon. Member for Havant (Mr Willetts) in his place, because he had to face me many times in enjoyable exchanges.

Some of those points are covered in the Select Committee’s legacy report. In the foreword to the report, I have commended the extraordinary staff we have in this House, and put on the record my thanks to the Committee for its collegiate approach. We have never
had a political division in the Committee; yet we have published some reports that are quite blunt about failures within Government. That says a lot about the new process, and reflects well on the election of Chairs and the authority that that gives Chairs over their Committee. I refer hon. Members to the Chair’s foreword to the legacy report, because there is a wonderful picture of me in the Jubilee Room setting off a methane mamba in my hand. It could have set the Houses of Parliament on fire, but I assure everyone that it was a controlled experiment.

Just yesterday, a Bill was published. I do not know, Mr Speaker, whether from your deep reading of parliamentary literature you are aware of the publication of this fake Bill by the science community—you can guess who was behind it. It is called the Andrew Miller parliamentary farewell appreciation (Amendment) (No. 2) Bill and was presented to me in all its glory, looking just like a parliamentary Bill, by the science community. I am immensely proud of that, but what I am really proud of is the work that the Committee has done to deserve the accolades it has received.

Finally, if I may, I want to thank the staff I have had over the years, and particularly, as several hon. Members have done, to thank my family, and nobody more than my wife Fran, who has stuck with me through thick and thin during this period. It has been an extraordinary 23 years, and I have enjoyed every single minute of it.

Mr Speaker: I am looking to call Sir George, for the last two minutes of the debate, at 4.28 pm.

4.13 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): This debate is a Backbench Business Committee innovation, and I suspect that we will probably have such debates in subsequent Parliaments. Today has been a fascinating insight into many careers: some have been longer, greater and grander than others, but all have added value to our life as a democracy and have assisted our constituents.

I think that I can safely say that I am the only Member in the Chamber who actually wishes to be returned to serve in this place after the general election. [Interruption.] Oh, sorry—some may have a harder job than others. It has been important to listen to the valedictory speeches, but I certainly hope that this is not mine.

I have been adding it up—this is probably wrong—but I have calculated that we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members with 677 years of experience serving in the House. Obviously that is all squashed together and not linear, but the House has benefited from that experience over the years. Such experience will be missed when hon. Members call it a day and Parliament prorogues, dissolved and ceases to be, and they go on their way to live and—I hope—very much enjoy the rest of their lives, be it in retirement or other vigorous work and experience.

We have listened to some gems in this Parliament’s final debate, and we have heard from three Leaders of the House whom it has been my privilege and fun to serve opposite during my three and half years as shadow Leader of the House. We heard from the right hon. Members for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young), for South Cambridgeshire (Mr Lansley), and for Richmond (Yorës) (Mr Hague)—I note that it is the birthday of the current Leader of the House, so I wish him a happy birthday. I suspect he has had rather happier birthdays than today, but I hope it gets better later on. Those three Leaders of the House have had rather contrasting styles, but I have enjoyed working with them on the House of Commons Commission and serving opposite them. I had a little joke and verbal joust at their expense, the occasional barb of which might have hit home, but I have been punched back as many times as I have managed to land my own blows.

We also heard from a distinguished ex-Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown), who spoke about the future after his 32 years in Parliament. His passion for equality and the developing world—he is currently the UN special envoy on global education—was evident, as was his morality, the approach he takes to equality in politics, and his passion for football. More than anything, we heard his warnings about the dangers that we approach if we balkanise our country, and he said he would “fight, fight and fight again” to save the Union. His unquenchable faith in the future also came through in his remarks, and he reminded us that we work best as a country when we co-operate rather than collapse in a morass of contention.

We heard from many distinguished “big beasts”—that is how my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Austin Mitchell) described them—including my right hon. Friends the Members for Neath (Mr Hain), for Blackburn (Mr Straw), and for Dulwich and West Norwood (Dame Tessa Jowell), who have all had fantastic achievements. My right hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood had the triumph of the Olympics, but we should also remember the sensitive way in which she handled the relatives after 7/7. Somehow I do not think she is intending to leave politics altogether, and I wish her luck and will support her in any future bids she may make.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Mr Doran) spoke about representing the entire constituency thanks to evolving boundary changes over the years, and about the transformation that Aberdeen’s emergence as the energy capital of Europe has made. He said that one of the best parts of his parliamentary career was going to Hollywood and meeting Jean Simmons and Maureen O’Hara, and he asked if anyone could better that. All I can say is that I think I can, because I was introduced to K D Lang by Chrissie Hynde. They are also two very interesting women to get to meet, and I am sure that I enjoyed my discussions with them as much as he enjoyed his time in Hollywood.

We have heard many gems of speeches. What shines through in all of them is the glory of our constituency system, in which people look after particular geographical areas, the dedication with which they do that and the way in which having that connection with real communities puts us more in touch with what is going on in our country than many people who comment on politics. I hope that is one aspect of our political system that will never be changed. What has shone through for me in this debate is the dedication, hard work and enduring commitment that Members, whether they have served here for five years or 42, have given their constituents.
I wish everyone who is retiring a long and happy retirement, and I wish everyone who is going on to pastures new, happy green pastures.

4.21 pm

The First Secretary of State and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr William Hague): My challenge in seven minutes is to mention one thing about as many as possible of the right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken in this debate, and to thank my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young) for suggesting it. I also join him in thanking the staff of the House for the professionalism of our security staff and Doorkeepers, the long hours of the Clerks and the staff of the Library and the massive expertise that keeps this building running despite all our best efforts to make it so difficult.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Mr Brown). I have disagreed with him about virtually everything in his career, but we should thank someone who has been Prime Minister of our country and served 32 years—a lifetime of public service in this place. My right hon. Friend the Member for Wealden (Charles Hendry) has been one of my cheeriest colleagues in my time in the House, and I can tell the House that when I was Leader of the Opposition, I needed cheery colleagues.

The right hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Dame Joan Ruddock) spoke of the importance of being a woman MP when she was first elected. It is still important, and there should be more. One of the great prizes of the 21st century will be the full social, political and economic empowerment of women everywhere.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Sir Malcolm Bruce) spoke about the importance of the connection with the constituency, which is a good argument against proportional representation, on which many of us will reflect.

The most revealing comment from the right hon. Member for Neath (Mr Hain) was that when he was first appointed a Minister, the call was from Alastair Campbell, not Tony Blair. That tells us something about that Government. My right hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Mr O'Brien) is going on to an important role in the United Nations which, sadly, will only carry bigger burdens with it. The House wishes him well in that role.

I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Straw) for his recent work in the House. I hope that after recent controversies his career will be seen in the full context of his achievements. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mr Binley) said that he had created two businesses and employed 300 people before he came to the House, and we need more people who create wealth and business here.

The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Mr Llwyd) said that as a Welsh nationalist he came to Parliament in order to leave it, and I am pleased that he is not leaving with his country as I will live there for much of the time. My hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (Mr Newmark) has been a great advocate for his constituency, and I remember that when he was selected for Newcastle—which he also became a great friend and fan of—he was astonished, because he had gone to the selection meeting not really caring about the result and not pretending to have any link with the constituency or any familiarity with it, and the selection committee chose him because he was honest.

We should recognise the important role played by the right hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Dame Tessa Jowell) in staging the best ever Olympic games in the history of the world. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir John Stanley) spoke about the decline of scrutiny in this House, but he has been a very good example in his own career, as Chairman of the Committee on Arms Export Controls, of the enhancement of scrutiny in this House.

The right hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr Raynsford) spoke about ending the annual shuffle of Ministers, but actually this Prime Minister has made quite a lot of progress in that regard, something I have always urged on him. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr Lansley) spoke about the eastern powerhouse. He has been an intellectual powerhouse.

The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire West (Mr Doran) has made a great contribution to the House and its Commission. My right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Sir John Randall) almost morphed into the Mayor of London in his speech, which was quite a spectacle.

The hon. Member for Midlothian (Mr Hamilton) spoke about having only been to London three times when he was elected—more a culture shock to London than it was to him—and spoke about the compassionate side of the Whips Office. That is a new concept for the nation, but an important one that Members of this House are familiar with.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) spoke about not going back on the role of Select Committees. He is right. The right hon. Member for Stirling (Dame Anne McGuire) spoke about going from being a babe to a granny and about her work for disabled people. I regard my proudest legislative achievement as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. My right hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Willetts) has been one of the most outstanding Ministers of science ever.

I cannot go through all the other remarks by the hon. Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (Joan Walley) and for Great Grimsby (Austin Mitchell), my hon. Friends the Members for Cannock Chase (Mr Burley) and for Hove (Mike Weatherley), the hon. Member for Falkirk (Eric Joyce), my right hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr Heath) and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Andrew Miller), but they all spoke powerfully and well. It has been such a display of brilliance that it is hard to imagine how the House will do without us all, but I am sure it will.

I have found the people of north Yorkshire, with their enterprise, resourcefulness and good humour, to be the inhabitants of one of the most welcoming places on earth and one of the best places on earth to be. To be their MP for 26 years has been a privilege beyond measure.

I want to thank my colleagues around this House. I can say with conviction, as Leader of the House, that I believe the great majority of colleagues in all parties are sincere and hard working. The reputation of this House can be restored by a continued display of that.
[Mr William Hague]

When I saw the Youth Parliament sit in this Chamber in November last year, I could see how inspiring the future can be and how, as so many of us leave the House, we can be confident that there will be a new generation of extremely impressive young people who will come to this House. Meeting young people is generally the single most encouraging experience that most of us have as Members of Parliament. The Youth Parliament was a display of that a few months ago. It is something I will remember on leaving this House after such a long time in it.

I again pay tribute to all colleagues who have taken part, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire, to whom I must leave the last word in this debate.

4.28 pm

Sir George Young: With the leave of the House, may I add a very brief footnote to what the Leader and the shadow Leader have just said? When the three sponsors of this debate were successful in securing the debate, there was a lot of sucking of teeth in various quarters of the House. This was a dangerous innovation. It had never been done before and, I was told, it would literally end in tears.

I am very glad we went ahead with the debate for two reasons. First, it has provided a structured framework within which those who wished to make a farewell speech have been able to do so without shoehorning it into some other debate. There have been some excellent speeches and the next Parliament would do well to look into some other debate. There have been some excellent speeches and on leaving this House after such a long time in it.

The second reason is this: we have had a useful counterbalance to what happened this morning. This morning we had a very lively and, at times, bad-tempered, harshly worded debate. It would have been sad if the morning we had a very lively and, at times, bad-tempered, harshly worded debate.

I thank all those who have taken part in the debate. I hope that succeeding Parliaments might tread in our footsteps.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming dissolution.

Michael Connarty (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (Lab):

On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I echo the sentiments expressed by the retiring Member, the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young).

Yesterday, while I was asking a question, you intervened, Mr Speaker, because a Conservative Member shouted, “SNP gain”. I could have said, “Well, that’s exactly what the Conservative Members want—more SNP Members down here”, but I did not respond because traditionally if a Member does not respond to a sedentary intervention, it does not get recorded. In fact, however, I find it was entered in Hansard in column 1429. I denied myself that political point, because I wanted to concentrate, as you know, on the serious question facing my constituents. Will you look at this matter again, Mr Speaker? It has been said that someone else referred to the incident three questions later and therefore it was entered into the record.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I understand that Hansard followed its usual policy to include an intervention from a sedentary position if it is commented upon in subsequent proceedings, as in this case. I note what the hon. Gentleman has said, but I am sure he will understand that we cannot take the matter further at this stage.

The sitting is suspended until 5 pm. Shortly before the sitting resumes, I shall cause the Division bells to be sounded.

4.31 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, 24 March).

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

5.6 pm

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to hear Her Majesty’s Commission; on their return, the Speaker sat in the Clerk’s place at the Table.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that the House has been to the House of Peers where a Commission under the Great Seal was read, authorising the Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2015
Finance Act 2015
International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015
Mutuals’ Deferred Shares Act 2015
House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015
Consumer Rights Act 2015
Specialist Printing Equipment and Materials (Offences) Act 2015
Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act 2015
Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015
Armed Forces (Service Complaints and Financial Assistance) Act 2015
Deregulation Act 2015
Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland) Act 2015
Local Government (Review of Decisions) Act 2015
Control of Horses Act 2015
House of Commons Commission Act 2015
Recall of MPs Act 2015
Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015
Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Act 2015
Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act 2015
Modern Slavery Act 2015
Her Majesty’s Most Gracious Speech

Mr Speaker: I have further to acquaint the House that the Leader of the House of Lords, one of the Lords Commissioners, delivered Her Majesty’s Most Gracious Speech to both Houses of Parliament, in pursuance of Her Majesty’s Command. For greater accuracy, I have obtained a copy, and also directed that the terms of the Speech be printed in the Journal of this House. Copies are being made available in the Vote Office.

The Speech was as follows:

**My Lords and Members of the House of Commons**

My Government’s legislative programme has been founded on a long-term plan to build a stronger economy and a fairer society.

Legislation passed in this session will support economic growth and help secure a better future for Britain. New Acts will make the United Kingdom the most attractive place to start, finance and grow a business and reduce the burden of excessive regulation on businesses, individuals and the taxpayer.

Legislation was passed to establish a simple set of consumer rights to promote competitive markets and economic growth. In addition, a new Act will simplify the collection of National Insurance contributions from the self-employed.

The creation of a modern infrastructure is vital in order to support economic growth.

A new Act will guarantee long-term investment in the road network, ensure new homes will be built to a zero carbon standard, reform planning law and enhance the United Kingdom’s energy security.

My Government continues to promote legislation to enable the building of the High Speed Two railway line.

My Ministers have made it a priority to reform the criminal justice system.

New legislation on serious crime includes provision to tackle child neglect, disrupt organised crime and strengthen powers to seize the proceeds of crime.

An Act was passed to make wide-ranging reforms to the justice system, to protect the public and reduce reoffending.

Groundbreaking legislation was passed to strengthen the powers to prevent modern slavery and help stamp out human trafficking.

Legislation passed in this session will provide that where a person acts heroically, responsibly or for the benefit of others, this will be taken into account by the courts.

My Ministers attach the highest importance to safeguarding national security whilst maintaining civil liberties. To this end, legislation was passed to ensure that the law enforcement agencies retain the capabilities to protect the public. In recognition of the security situation, legislation was also passed to disrupt terrorism and tackle the extremism that risks drawing people into terrorism.

An Act was passed to improve the complaints system in the Armed Forces through the creation of an ombudsman.

It has been a priority for my Government to help build a fairer society.

Legislation was enacted which will help working families with their childcare costs and also reduce the cost of Stamp Duty Land Tax for ninety-eight percent of people who pay the tax. To complement reforms begun earlier in the Parliament, legislation passed in this session will allow for innovation in the private pensions market to give greater control to employees.

My Ministers have taken forward a series of reforms to the constitution.

With regard to Parliament, Acts were passed to reform the House of Commons Commission, on the recall of Members of Parliament and to ensure that female Bishops sit in your Lordships’ House at the earliest opportunity.

My Ministers have pursued a programme of legislation to benefit people across the entire United Kingdom and have worked closely with the devolved administrations.

An Act was passed to enhance the devolution settlement in Wales and following the Stormont House agreement, legislation was enacted to devolve the power to set the rate of Corporation Tax in Northern Ireland.

Last year people in Scotland voted to remain part of the United Kingdom, and draft legislation was published setting out further devolution to the Scottish Parliament.

The Duke of Edinburgh and I were pleased to welcome His Excellency the President of Singapore and his wife, and His Excellency the President of Mexico and his wife on their visits to the United Kingdom. We enjoyed a warm welcome on our visit to France which coincided with an invitation to attend the 70th anniversary of the Normandy landings.

My Government has continued to pursue an active foreign policy, promoting British interests and values, and protecting British citizens abroad.

My Ministers contributed to a resolute NATO and European Union response to Russian actions in Ukraine. Through the NATO Summit in Wales, they achieved agreement on enhancing the Alliance’s rapid deployment capability to protect the United Kingdom’s allies.

The United Kingdom has been at the heart of the international coalition to degrade and ultimately destroy terrorism in the Middle East.

It has been a priority of my Ministers to reach an international agreement on practical steps to tackle the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war. My Government has led the international response to Ebola in Sierra Leone, helping to bring the disease under control.

My Ministers have continued to promote and foster British trade and investment around the world to support the prosperity of the United Kingdom. They have also supported British nationals through modern and efficient consular services.

In Europe, my Ministers continue to work for reform to secure a European Union that is flexible, more accountable, and better able to compete in the global economy.

Members of the House of Commons, I thank you for the provisions which you have made for the work and dignity of the Crown and for the public services.

**My Lords and Members of the House of Commons**

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

**PROROGATION**

Mr Speaker: The Commission was also for proroguing this present Parliament, and the Leader of the House of Lords said:

“My Lords and Members of the House of Commons:
By virtue of Her Majesty’s Commission which has now been read, we do, in Her Majesty's name, and in obedience to Her Majesty’s Commands, prorogue this Parliament to Monday the thirtieth day of this instant March to be then here holden, and this Parliament is accordingly prorogued to Monday the thirtieth day of this instant March.

End of the Fourth Session (opened on 4 June 2014) of the Fifty-Fifth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the Sixty-Fourth Year of the Reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second.
The Minister for Business and Enterprise (Matthew Hancock): As I set out in the statement to the House on 4 March, UK Coal Production Ltd (UK Coal) submitted to Government in January 2015 a request for public sector funding of £338 million to facilitate the safe and orderly closure of its two deep coal mines by 2018.

I know how important UK Coal mines are for the communities in which they are based, and that their closure will affect many people.

That is why the Government have already provided significant support to help the company in its efforts to deliver its plan for a managed closure of the mines in 2015. The Government provided a £4 million loan in September 2014, to help avert the company’s insolvency, and on 4 March 2015 I informed the House that, subject to the necessary EU clearances, the Government will meet the company’s concessionary fuel obligations to its employees, with an estimated value of £28 million. This week the House passed the necessary clauses to allow this to happen in the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, and we expect Royal Assent shortly.

Having carefully considered the case for providing significant additional funding, we have concluded that committing public sector funding on the scale necessary to extend the company’s closure plan by three years is not affordable and does not represent value for money to the taxpayer. The £338 million requested approximates to a cost of more than £75,000 per UK Coal employee per year over the three-year closure plan.

The company has also recently indicated an additional funding requirement of £10 million to keep its existing managed closure plan for 2015 on track. The Government remain committed to support the company in its efforts to deliver this plan. To this end, I can confirm that the Government are willing in principle to provide additional support to help deliver the plan, subject to conditions including state aid approval and appropriate support from other stakeholders. We are working with the company to determine the amount, timing and form this additional assistance could take.

The successful delivery of the company’s existing plan is important to ensure the taxpayer avoids significant losses and liabilities that would otherwise fall to the public sector in the event of an uncontrolled insolvency. We will support those affected as appropriate, including support for staff affected to find alternative sources of employment and if necessary to retrain.

I should also like to acknowledge the ongoing support the company is receiving from its work force, customers, suppliers and creditors during this challenging period.

Land Registration Rules Committee

The Minister for Business and Enterprise (Matthew Hancock): The commencement of the triennial review of the Land Registration Rules Committee was announced in Parliament on 11 December 2014 through a written ministerial statement. I can now announce the completion of the review.

The Land Registration Rules Committee is an advisory non-departmental public body which was established by section 127 of the Land Registration Act 2002. Its function is to advise on and assist in the making of land registration rules and land registration fee orders. These can be new rules or fee orders, as well as amendments to existing ones.

The review concludes that the functions performed by the Land Registration Rules Committee are still required and that it should be retained as an advisory non-departmental public body.

The review also examined the governance arrangements for the Land Registration Rules Committee in line with guidance on good corporate governance set out by the Cabinet Office. The review concluded that the Land Registration Rules Committee is complying with the vast majority of governance and accountability requirements which are placed on it by statute, regulation, BIS and governmental guidelines or best practice. However, the review team also identified areas where some action could usefully be taken to improve compliance further and have made recommendations to address these.

The full report of the review of the Land Registration Rules Committee can be found on the gov.uk website. Copies of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Statutory Register of Consultant Lobbyists

The Minister for the Constitution (Mr Sam Gyimah): Part I of the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014 provides for a statutory register of consultant lobbyists. I have made an order to commence the provisions necessary to bring the register into effect on 1 April.

From 1 April, organisations and individuals that engage in consultant lobbying, as defined by the Act, will be required to register, disclose the names of the clients, declare whether they subscribe to a code of conduct and comply with other relevant provisions of the Act.

The register will be maintained and updated by the independent Registrar of Consultant Lobbyists.

Homelessness

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Kris Hopkins): I would like to update hon. Members on measures that the coalition Government have taken to address homelessness and to reflect on progress made on this important agenda since May 2010.
This progress is framed by today’s publication of the ministerial working group on homelessness’ latest report “Addressing complex needs: Improving services for vulnerable homeless people”. Building on the commitment set out in last week’s Budget, the report affirms our aspiration to improve services and outcomes for homeless adults with complex, multiple needs in the next Parliament and beyond.

This Government’s approach to tackling homelessness has been focused on preventing homelessness, wherever possible, and ensuring those experiencing homelessness have the support they need to get back on their feet. We have invested more than £500 million to ensure that local authorities and voluntary sector partners are able to support vulnerable people. This commitment is confirmed today by £1.9 million of funding which will ensure that valuable voluntary sector organisations can continue to support homeless young people, rough sleepers and those fleeing domestic violence in 2015-16.

Our investment, backed by one of the strongest legislative safety nets in the world, ensures that no family should ever be without a roof over their heads and that vulnerable people facing a housing crisis receive support. Our policies are designed to increase local authority flexibility, test innovative new approaches and provide strategic support to front-line staff to deliver effective services.

For the first time, we prioritised concerted cross-government action to tackle homelessness, bringing together Departments across Whitehall through the ministerial working group on homelessness. Throughout this Parliament, Departments have worked together to co-ordinate action on the issues facing homeless people.

**Preventing homelessness**

We have maintained investment in local authority homelessness prevention services. Our £400 million has already helped authorities to prevent 730,200 households from becoming homeless since 2010.

Statutory homelessness is lower now than in 26 of the last 30 years, and around half the level it was under the last Administration.

We have also helped equip local authorities and others working on the vital homelessness front line with the skills and tools they need to support vulnerable people. We have:

- invested over £2 million in the gold standard programme delivered by the National Practitioner Support Service. The programme is supporting authorities to deliver cost effective and efficient homelessness prevention services;
- invested £10 million into the National Homelessness Advice Service to ensure that front-line staff are able to offer the best possible help to vulnerable people facing a wide range of housing issues;
- funded umbrella organisation Homeless Link to assist local authorities and the voluntary sector to work together to improve their effectiveness and capacity to tackle rough sleeping and homelessness. Our support will ensure that this work continues into 2015-16;
- helped 3,000 households remain in their homes with our £221 million mortgage rescue scheme. This has provided free advice to a further 60,000 in mortgage difficulty; and
- funded St Basils, a leading youth homelessness charity, to support councils to implement a specialist youth accommodation pathway model designed to help young people to remain in the family home where it is safe to do so and offer tailored support options for those needing to leave. Our funding will allow St Basils to continue this vital work into 2015-16.

As well as investing in homelessness prevention services, this Government also delivered almost 217,000 affordable homes in England between April 2010 and September 2014. Management information indicates that we have exceeded our target of delivering 170,000 new affordable homes between 2011 and 2015—it is estimated that by 20 March 173,800 homes had been delivered, with more expected. A further £38 billion of public and private investment will help ensure 275,000 new affordable homes are provided between 2015 and 2020. This means over the next Parliament we will build more new affordable homes than during any equivalent period in the last 20 years.

**Helping people off the streets**

We are committed to ensuring that anyone sleeping rough receives the help they need to move off the streets so that they do not become entrenched into a street lifestyle. We have:

- Driven forward the national roll-out of No Second Night Out, the Mayor of London’s approach to ensure that more rough sleepers are found quicker and given the help they need. Supported by the £20 million homelessness transition fund, No Second Night out means that rough sleepers now spend less time on the streets, with 67% of rough sleepers in key areas only spending one night out;
- Overhauled rough sleeping statistics, to provide more accurate figures. Our No Second Night Out initiative actively seeks to find the “hidden homeless”;
- Commissioned the pioneering StreetLink website, app and telephone line allowing members of the public to connect rough sleepers with local support services. Since it started in December 2012 StreetLink has made 24,500 rough sleeping referrals to councils to investigate, leading to 10,500 rough sleepers being found and connected with local services of which 2,000 resulted in a specific housing outcome. Our continued support means that StreetLink will continue to operate throughout 2015-16.

The majority of rough sleepers in London are foreign nationals. We also continue to work closely with the Greater London Authority, the Home Office, local authorities and charities to tackle migrant rough sleeping. We want people to be fully aware of the reality of life in the UK before coming to England so they do not end up destitute. Therefore we need to better target and focus homelessness prevention messages in home countries.

We want to ensure that when migrants end up on the streets they are offered help to return home, where appropriate, and that homelessness services can intervene quickly so rough sleeping is not an option. Foreign nationals who do not have a right to live in the UK, or who are not fulfilling the requirements for residence should leave and we will take enforcement action against the minority who do not depart voluntarily, refuse offers of help and continue to sleep rough.

**Supporting the recovery from homelessness**

Alongside preventing homelessness and stepping in to support people facing a housing crisis, this Government are determined to help vulnerable people to recover and move on with their lives. To help single homeless people to recover we have:

- invested £26.5 million over the course of this Parliament to support authorities to improve services for single homeless people. Our recent £8 million help for single homeless funding will support 22,000 people in 168 local authority areas through 34 local authority led projects;
England quite rightly has a strong international reputation for the excellent services provided by our local authorities and the voluntary sector, and for the strong safety net maintained by Government. But we are not complacent. There are still too many people facing homelessness and too many people struggling to access the support they need to move towards independence.

We are determined to maintain this momentum and build on these achievements into the next Parliament and beyond. The publication of today’s ministerial working group on homelessness sets out our aspiration to drive forward improvements for homeless adults with complex, multiple needs.

Although relatively small in number, around 60,000 adults in England face a combination of homelessness, offending and substance misuse problems which lead them to repeatedly use public services in a chaotic, and costly, way and live on the very margins of society. We strongly believe that there should be a life beyond homelessness for these very vulnerable individuals. With the right support to address their needs, many could move towards independence and engage more constructively with public services.

We have today also commissioned new work to explore the root causes of homelessness and examine what more can be done to improve services in the future.

These innovative new funding and commissioning models such as payment by results and social investment offer a real opportunity to break the cycle of homelessness for this group, and we look forward to seeing progress made on this agenda in the next Parliament.

[HCWS498]

**Housing and Planning Delivery**

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Eric Pickles): As this Parliament draws to an end, I would like to update hon. Members on the actions that my Department has put in place since May 2010 on housing and planning, as part of our long-term economic plan. We inherited a broken housing market that has been devastated by the great recession, but we have turned the economy and housing market around.

**Key achievements**

I am pleased to report the following key housing achievements:

- There are now 700,000 more new homes in England than at the end of 2009;
- Planning permission was granted for 253,000 new homes in England in 2014 (source: DCLG analysis of Glenigan data);
- The volume of all new housing construction orders has more than doubled since the first quarter of 2009 (source: Office for National Statistics);
- Housing starts in England in 2014 are at their highest annual level since 2007; Over 217,000 new affordable homes have been delivered from April 2010 to September 2014
- Our affordable housing programme aimed to deliver 170,000 homes from 2011 to 2015; by 20 March, we estimate that 173,800 homes have been delivered, with more expected (source: internal management information, official statistics will follow in June);
- Over 204,000 households have bought or reserved a new home through Government-backed schemes in the last 5 years;
Lending to first-time buyers in 2014 is its highest annual levels, in volume and value, since 2007. Some 311,500 home loans collectively worth £45 billion were handed out to first-time buyers in 2014; The number of mortgage repossessions fell to 4,200 in Q4 2014, the lowest since the quarterly series began in 2008 according to the Council of Mortgage Lenders; latest figures from the Bank of England show the number of cases of new mortgage arrears is at the lowest since the data series began in 2007; The Government have released enough surplus public sector land to build over 100,000 new homes; Council house building starts are now at a 23 year high and twice as many council homes have been built in the last 4 years than from 1997 to 2009; There has been a fall in the numbers of empty homes by 160,000 since the end of 2009, meaning the number of empty homes in England is now at a 10 year low; and Our action to tackle Labour’s deficit has kept mortgage rates at record lows, cutting the cost of owning a home.

**Delivering a locally led planning system**

This Government have reformed planning so it can deliver the homes and infrastructure people want and need, by working with, not against, local communities. Our planning reforms and the locally led planning process are delivering real results and speeding up the system. We have abolished Labour’s tiers of regional planning and unelected regional government.

The Localism Act strengthened the role of local plans. Our reforms have given local planning authorities more choice in how they develop their local plans and good progress continues to be made in bringing plans forward. 81% of councils have published a local plan. To place this in context, six years after the Labour Government’s 2004 Planning Act, by May 2010, only one in six local planning authorities had an adopted core strategy, reflecting how the tortuous regional planning process slowed down development and stymied local plan-making and local decision-making. We are working with the remaining local councils to help them deliver up to date plans. The number of planning appeals received and allowed has fallen, meaning more local decision-making.

Neighbourhood planning gives real power to local people allowing them to play a much stronger role in shaping their areas. Neighbourhood planning is proving very popular and over 1,400 communities, representing around 6 million people, have now applied for a neighbourhood area to be designated and 65 successful neighbourhood referendums have been held (with an average turn-out of 33% and an average “yes” vote of 88%). 42 neighbourhood plans are now fully in force, forming part of the statutory development plan, and giving communities real power to shape planning decisions.

**Protecting the green belt and open spaces**

As pledged in the coalition agreement, we have safeguarded national green belt protection and increased protection of important green spaces. We have:

- Abolished the Labour Government’s top-down regional strategies which sought to delete the green belt in and around 30 towns and cities;  
- Introduced a new local green space planning designation, which allows councils and neighbourhood plans to give added protection to valuable local green spaces;  
- Published the “National Planning Policy Framework” which re-affirms green belt protection;  
- Given councils stronger powers to tackle ‘garden grabbing’, and stopped gardens being classified as brownfield land;  
- Issued new waste planning policy which strengthens protection of the green belt;  
- Taken a series of steps on reforming traveller policy and guidance to protect the green belt and tackle unauthorised development; and  
- Published planning guidance which re-affirms the importance of the green belt during local plan preparation.

**Streamlining the planning system and removing unnecessary burdens**

The National Planning Policy Framework reduced over a 1000 pages of national policy to around 50, written simply and clearly. The planning guidance review streamlined planning guidance and reduced it from over 7,000 pages to a simple accessible online resource. Since this was launched, there have been over 7 million page views, illustrating how we have made the planning system more accessible to local residents, local firms and local councillors.

We have reformed the community infrastructure levy to make it fairer, more flexible and transparent. Amendments to the levy coming into effect next month will help boost affordable housing delivery by extending mandatory relief from the levy to cover such housing provided by a wider range of organisations, including charitable bodies.

We have reduced unfair, disproportionate costs on small sites by introducing a 10 unit threshold below which affordable housing and tariff-style section 106 contributions should not be sought. A lower threshold of five units applies in designated rural areas. This will help cause a surge in house building by small builders. We have also reduced Section 106 burdens on empty and redundant buildings being brought back into use.

The Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013 introduced legislation to designate under- performing local planning authorities. This power has intentionally been rarely used: three councils have been designated in this way, and two of those designations have been lifted following improvements in their service. The policy has helped to significantly improve performance, with latest figures showing that 77% of applications for major development are being processed on time. Alongside this, we have published new data on local planning authorities’ performance in meeting their statutory duty to process smaller planning applications within eight weeks.

We have introduced a legal requirement that local planning authority requests for additional information to support planning applications must be reasonable and removed the need to submit a design and access statement with most applications. We have also introduced changes to front-load the appeals process which have reduced the time taken to process appeals from around 23 weeks to 15. Changes to the civil procedure rules have reduced the time period for submission of judicial review applications against planning decisions to six weeks. A new Planning Court is speeding up the handling of such cases.

We abolished Labour’s unelected Infrastructure Planning Commission quango and returned decision making for the biggest developments back to accountable Ministers. At the same time, we expanded the scope of the nationally significant infrastructure regime to allow the developers of certain business and commercial projects to take advantage of a fixed timetable and obtain many of the
necessary non-planning consents at the same time. We reviewed the regime in 2014 which confirmed it is working well, but have built on this by further streamlining the process while still ensuring that local people continue to have their say.

We continue to augment these successful planning reforms with practical ways of removing excessive red tape, while ensuring environmental safeguards and continuing our locally led approach.

As part of our commitment to slashing red tape in the application process, a newly consolidated Development Management Procedure Order will come into force on 15 April. This will simplify and streamline the planning application process for local planning authorities, applicants, and other users of the planning system. It will also bring into force a number of important changes, including streamlining the process of statutory consultation and introduces a new “deemed discharge” of conditions to ensure that planning conditions are cleared on time so that homes granted planning permission can start on site without delay.

As well as changes in the Development Management Procedure Order, we have also introduced further measures to reduce and simplify the requirements to notify English Heritage and refer certain heritage applications to the Secretary of State. These will allow English Heritage’s resources and expertise to be focused where they can add most value, while still maintaining an effective level of protection for the historic environment.

New permitted development rights are encouraging better use of buildings and supporting town centres, the rural economy and providing much-needed homes. These include:

- providing new homes in offices, shops and agricultural buildings;
- supporting the establishment of state-funded schools and registered nurseries in a range of premises;
- promoting a diverse and vibrant high street with a two year temporary use and freeing up the change of shops to banks;
- and creating the opportunity for people to improve their homes, businesses and lives with larger extensions to homes, offices and shops.

To further deregulate the planning system, we are introducing from 15 April additional permitted development measures to provide greater planning freedom, support housing, the high streets and growth to:

- allow buildings used for storage and distribution to change to homes,
- support easier change of use between high street uses (excluding betting shops), and
- provide greater flexibilities to support location filming, and to support retailers in the provision of click and collect services.

In addition, we will meet our red tape challenge commitment by consolidating the General Permitted Development Order and its revisions into a single new order from 15 April.

We have made provision to remove the need to apply for planning permission for short-term letting of residential properties in London, through the Deregulation Bill. We have changed planning policy to actively encourage the provision of more parking spaces, to help local shops suffering from aggressive parking enforcement, and removed planning restrictions which discouraged the sharing of under-used parking spaces.

We made further commitments in the autumn statement 2014 to speed up the end-to-end planning process and support smaller house builders. We:

- will take forward measures to ensure that the principle of development need only be established once;
- are speeding up section 106 negotiations through: consulting on introducing tighter timescales for agreements and a new dispute resolution process; and revising guidance including seeking improved transparency on the use of section 106 funds;
- are keeping the speed of decisions on major applications under review, with the minimum performance threshold increasing to 50% of major decisions on time; and
- will work with industry and local planning authorities to test whether more can be done to support the approval of small sites in the planning system.

Furthermore, following the Budget 2015, we have published a consultation document on technical improvements to the compulsory purchase system to make it clearer, faster and fairer, together with updated guidance for comment.

We have also continued to ensure environmental safeguards. We have:

- Changed planning guidance to make it clear that the need for renewable energy does not automatically override environmental protections and the views of local communities should be listened to;
- Reformed the domestic implementation of the European environmental impact assessment regime, removing unnecessary gold-plating, reducing costs and providing more certainty for all interested parties. These changes do not affect the strong environmental protections set out in the National Planning Policy Framework;
- Strengthened existing planning policy by making it clear that from 6 April sustainable drainage systems should be provided in major new developments wherever this is appropriate.

**Consolidating the complex web of housing standards**

As outlined in my written statement yesterday, we have completed a major review of the plethora of technical standards currently applied to new housing by local planning authorities. We have removed duplication and contradiction and rationalised technical standards into a simpler, clearer set. Standards will continue to promote essential quality, sustainability and accessibility outcomes and span water efficiency, access, energy, security and space, and a new nationally described space standard. This new system will save around £100 million per annum for both developers and councils, freeing up resources to promote growth.

**Building more affordable housing**

As outlined above, we have beaten our affordable housing targets for this Parliament, bringing in £19.5 billion of public and private investment in affordable housing from 2011 to 2015. A further £38 billion public and private investment will help ensure 275,000 new affordable homes delivered between 2015 and 2020. This means over the next Parliament we will build more new affordable homes than during any equivalent period in the last twenty years.

But we have also given housing associations the tools they need to borrow and build more homes including the launch of our new £400 million Rent to Buy scheme—known as the London Housing Bank in Greater London—which will deliver affordable homes through a recoverable fund. In addition, we have also introduced the up to £3.5 billion Affordable Housing Guarantee Scheme which...
utilises the Government’s hard won fiscal credibility to deliver more affordable housing by making debt cheaper for affordable housing providers. In March 2015, a £194 million bond issuance achieved an all-in price of 2.92%, becoming the first bond in the sector to break the 3% barrier, and set a new record for the cheapest ever housing association bond and the cheapest debt of any kind for 27 years in the sector. To date, 35 registered providers have taken advantage of the cheap funding available which will enable them to deliver over 11,000 new additional affordable homes.

Following the autumn statement 2014, we published a consultation on a range of possible proposals to streamline the process for selling on shared ownership properties. The consultation closed on 28 February. The Government announced in the Budget, that following the consultation, the Homes and Communities Agency will amend guidance and model leases to help streamline the sales process for shared ownership properties which have staircased to outright ownership. Shared ownership is an integral part of the Affordable Homes Programme. Since 2010, around 30,000 new shared ownership homes have been delivered. This Government will also undertake a wider review of shared ownership in the summer.

The Right to Buy Scheme—including preserved Right to Buy—allowing eligible social tenants to buy their homes at a discount, has achieved over 40,000 council and housing association sales since April 2010. Over 33,000 of these sales have been achieved since the discounts were increased in April 2012.

We have made it easier than ever for people who can afford it to navigate through the process of buying their own home thanks to the new Right to Buy Agent Service. The service has responded to queries from over 33,000 tenants since its launch on 5 August 2014.

The reinvigorated Right to Buy ensures, for the first time, that the receipts from additional council sales, that is those over what was forecast prior to the change, are reinvested in helping to fund new affordable homes for rent nationally. A total of over £1.7 billion has been generated in Right to Buy receipts since April 2012. Of this about £730 million has been received by councils to be re-invested in house building—which in turn is expected to lever in a further £1.7 billion in investments in new stock over the next two years.

Building a new generation of council housing

In 2012, the coalition Government reformed the council house finance system, introducing self-financing for those local authorities that still own and manage their own housing. This system of self-financing has given local authorities greater freedoms and flexibilities to manage their housing and many are now starting to use those freedoms to build new council housing.

To further increase the supply of housing locally, we have allocated over £222 million of additional Housing Revenue Account borrowing to help 36 local authorities that need additional borrowing and will help to deliver over 3,000 new affordable homes quickly.

Over 90,000 social housing tenants across England are benefiting from the government’s Tenant Empowerment Programme which supports social housing tenants to engage in, manage or control local services by working together. We have allocated £1 million for 2015-16 to continue to help to create strong communities and to support social tenants to take control of their housing services.

The Government are working with Keith House and Natalie Elphicke to implement a Housing Finance Institute, as recommended by their review of the role of local authorities in housing supply in conjunction with the Local Government Association and businesses.

From April 2015, councils will be required to publish the most recent valuation of their social housing stock, annually to ensure it is being put to best use. The information will be published by postcode, indicating how much their stock is worth, how much is occupied and how much is standing empty.

The move will give people the information they need to ask questions of how their council is managing stock, and how selling more expensive vacant properties could provide the funds for councils to build more homes and reduce waiting times.

Championing home ownership

The Help to Buy programmes have been actively supporting home ownership and new house building across all parts of the country, especially outside London.

Since the start of Help to Buy in March 2012, over 88,000 people across the UK (over 81,000 in England) have purchased a home through the three schemes—Equity Loan, Mortgage Guarantee and NewBuy—allowing people to buy with a 5% deposit.

The Help to Buy: Equity Loan scheme is designed to support 74,000 families over first three years. The scheme was, in Budget 2014, extended to 2020 to help a further 120,000 families buy a new home—194,000 in total—and provides more certainty to housing developers to invest in building more homes. The scheme is targeted on new-build only and directly increases housing supply.

These show that there were 42,753 completed Equity Loan sales across England to January 2015. In total, over 54,000 families have reserved a new-build home since the scheme began.

The Help to Buy: NewBuy scheme, launched in March 2012, has also supported a further 5,588 households to purchase new build homes to 31 December 2014.

Since October 2013, the Help to Buy: Mortgage Guarantee scheme has provided up to £12 billion of Government guarantees to support people to buy with a 5% deposit. 40,079 (32,989 in England) families have been supported by the scheme so far.

At Budget 2015, we announced the Help to Buy: ISA which provides a 25% bonus on a final savings balance to contribute towards a first home, including the purchase of a Help to Buy home, with the Government contributing 25% of the amount saved—paying up to a maximum of £3,000 on savings of £12,000. We intend the scheme to be launched to first time buyers in autumn following Government consultation with industry experts.

We abolished Labour’s expensive and un-trusted home information packs, cutting the cost of moving home.

We have reformed stamp duty to cut the costs of purchasing all but the most expensive homes. By getting rid of the old system with one more like income tax, we have cut stamp duty for 98% of those who would have paid it. If you buy an average priced home of £275,000, you now pay £4,500 less in tax.

But the challenges facing young first time buyers remain significant and we want to do even more. This Government are determined to help young, hardworking people fulfil their aspirations of owning their own home. Too many have found themselves frozen out of the housing market and denied the opportunities their parents had to get started in their own homes.
Earlier this month, we announced an important new national starter homes exception site planning policy to make it easier for developers to gain planning permission for a new generation of starter homes on under-used commercial and industrial land not currently identified for housing. These starter homes will be offered exclusively to young first time buyers at a 20% discount below their open market value, with the requirement to pay section 106 affordable housing and tariff-style contributions removed to help finance this discount. We will also seek to exempt starter homes from the community infrastructure levy in the next Parliament.

We recognise that new homes should be of high quality and good design, and discounted starter homes should be no exception to this. This week we are publishing an initial set of starter homes exemplars - the outcome of early work by this Government’s Design Advisory Panel—to demonstrate high quality design and to encourage debate, and to be a first step in developing an agreed approach to deliver new, attractive starter homes that can meet the demands of modern life and stand the test of time. The Prime Minister has announced Conservative Party proposals to extend the starter homes programme further to 200,000 new homes.

Creating a better and bigger private rented sector

The Government are delivering on its commitment to kick-start a new market for institutional investment in the private rented sector. The Government’s Private Rented Sector Taskforce has been instrumental in building the market and has helped to generate aspirations to invest over £10 billion of domestic and foreign investment in the UK private rented sector.

Harnessing this momentum, the £1 billion Build to Rent Fund is providing development phase finance to large-scale private rented sector developments. The fund is supporting new high-quality developments purpose built for private rent and is on track to create up to 10,000 new homes. There has been immense appetite for the fund and we are making steady progress with 14 deals in contract worth £230 million and delivering over 3,000 homes for private rent. We estimate that the fund will this year be committed in full.

In order to encourage and support long-term investment in new private rented sector developments, like those created via the Build to Rent Fund, this Government are implementing a Private Rented Sector Housing Debt Guarantee Scheme. The Government have now awarded the licence for the Private Rented Sector Housing Guarantee Scheme to PRS Operations Ltd, a subsidiary of Venn Partners LLP. The guarantee uses the UK Government’s hard-earned fiscal credibility to facilitate a stream of investment in new build private rented sector homes across the UK. The guarantee will be available for up to £3.5 billion of debt (plus a potential share of an additional £3 billion held in reserve). We expect the scheme to approve its first borrowers in Spring 2015.

The coalition Government have not jeopardised investment in the sector by increasing red tape and unnecessary regulation. Instead we want to drive up investment in the sector by increasing red tape and supply and ultimately force up rents.

Reformed selective licensing schemes, giving councils more discretion to target action against by rogue landlords. At the same time, the new measures put tighter checks and balances on the introduction of blanket licensing, which increases costs on responsible landlords and drives up tenants’ rents;

Protected tenants against retaliatory eviction where they have a legitimate complaint and made the eviction process more straightforward in appropriate circumstances; and

Requiring landlords to install smoke alarms on every floor of their property, and test them at the start of every tenancy. Landlords would also need to install carbon monoxide alarms in high risk rooms - such as those where a solid fuel heating system is installed.

We believe the action we have taken strikes the right balance to ensure high standards, while avoiding excessive red tape which would reduce supply and force up rents.

Tackling homelessness and rough sleeping

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Kris Hopkins), is today publishing a written statement in parallel outlining this Government’s action to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping.

Providing infrastructure and development finance

The Growing Places Fund is providing £730 million to deliver the infrastructure needed to unlock stalled schemes that will promote economic growth, create jobs, build homes and support businesses in England. Local enterprise partnerships have used this funding to leverage £2.8 billion of extra investment including £1.8 billion from private sector organisations. The Growing Places Fund is supporting 323 projects across the country and 194 projects of these projects are underway—with local enterprise partnerships expecting these projects to create or support 2,500 businesses, over 150,000 jobs and deliver 69,500 housing units.

In July 2014 we announced Growth Deals with 39 Local Enterprise Partnerships which included over £6 billion of capital funding from the £12 billion Local Growth Fund for infrastructure/growth projects. In January this year, we confirmed an additional £1 billion from the Local Growth Fund for further Growth Deals with local enterprise partnerships. Local enterprise partnerships came forward with investment plans that combined better transport with more homes, recognising the importance of housing to their local economy. Over the lifetime of growth deals—six years from 2015 to 2021—the investment will unlock the land or finance that will support the delivery of more than 150,000 homes, just from the projects that will start in 2015-16.
We have taken a series of steps to get stalled sites building, steadily reducing the number of permissions were “on hold/shelved” across England from 90,331 in September 2011 to 34,000 by March 2015. This is at a time when the number of planning permissions has soared.

The Growth and Infrastructure Act 2013 introduced legislation unblocking stalled sites for development and reconsideration of unrealistic section 106 agreements: such onerous requirements mean no housing, no regeneration and no community benefits. Alongside this, the £3 million site delivery fund and the reform of planning rules are helping to tackle planning-related barriers that inhibit permitted schemes from starting on site.

We are investing £1.5 billion between 2013 and 2020 through our large sites programme to unlock or accelerate development on large housing sites that are struggling to move forward. It is expected that 100,000 homes will have been unlocked by the end of March 2015 through long-term loans for infrastructure, capacity funding and brokerage.

A further 200,000 homes could be unlocked or accelerated on the sites we have shortlisted for investment alongside the wider planning and technical support, capacity funding and brokerage on offer. In addition, the £50 million Local Growth Fund (Housing Infrastructure) (2015-16) is designed to help speed up and restart housing developments between 250 and 1,499 units supported by local enterprise partnerships.

Over 12,000 homes have been started on smaller sites through our £500 million Get Britain Building programme.

We are also providing £525 million through the Builders Finance Fund (over the period 2015-16 to 2016-17) to provide development finance to unlock stalled small housing sites. A shortlist of 165 small housing schemes was announced on 8 September with the first contract now in place and housing starts will well underway with many more to come over the next few months. The Builders Finance Fund has been opened up to support schemes as small as five units in size by small and medium-sized enterprises and very small building firms.

At Budget 2015 we designated 20 housing zones outside London to kick-start development on brownfield sites and are continuing to work with other eight shortlisted areas. In total these have the potential to deliver up to 45,000 new homes. Combined with housing zones in London, this could support the delivery of up to 95,000 homes.

We are creating an urban development corporation for the Ebbsfleet area to accelerate the construction of a locally led garden-city style development which will unlock up to 15,000 homes. Following Royal Assent to the Deregulation Bill today, we will lay statutory instruments creating the corporation and conferring planning powers on it. The corporation would be operational in April 2015 and have planning powers in July 2015.

Last week, we announced the five independent board members who will serve on the board of the corporation, under the chairmanship of Michael Cassidy CBE, and I can now announce that Robin Cooper, currently Deputy Chief Executive of Medway Council, is to be appointed as Chief Executive and ex-officio board member. I can also announce that Cllr Paul Carter CBE (Leader of Kent County Council), Cllr Jeremy Kite MBE (Leader of Dartford Borough Council) and, subject to ratification, Cllr John Burden (Leader of Gravesend Borough Council) will be appointed to serve on the corporation’s board.

We will shortly consult on a specification to deliver a masterplan at Ebbsfleet and have asked the corporation to work with the Government by the spending review on a prioritised list of infrastructure needs for Ebbsfleet.

A new Estate Regeneration Fund of £150 million of recoverable investment announced at Budget 2014 will help kick-start and accelerate the regeneration of some of our most deprived estates. Following the bidding round, Grahame Park, Blackwall Reach, Aylesbury Estate and New Union Wharf regeneration projects have all now been approved for funding, subject to due diligence and contract negotiations.

We continue to work with the Greater London Authority, London Borough of Barking and Dagenham and developers to unlock Barking Riverside, to support the construction of up to 11,000 homes. Transport for London will shortly launch the next public consultation on the proposed route of the railway extension. We are also working with the Greater London Authority to support the regeneration of Brent Cross, which could deliver 7,500 homes. We are also devolving responsibility for delivery of housing zones and the London Housing Bank to the Greater London Authority, giving them a leading role in unlocking housing supply and delivering more affordable housing. The legal agreement to support these programmes will be signed this week.

We announced in November the intention to devolve responsibility for a Housing Investment Fund to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, as part of the agreement for an elected Mayor. The intention is that the legal agreement to support this Housing Investment Fund will be signed this week.

The Government intend that the public sector will master plan and lead development of 8,500 homes on the Northstowe site near Cambridge. The Government expect that three quarters of the homes started on the private-sector owned site by 2020 will be built under direct contract with builders, with the rest in that period delivered through serviced plots in line with the public sector’s master plan.

We support Bicester’s ambitions to become a garden town, and will make capacity funding available to support its proposals. We will also work with Bicester on helping to meet its infrastructure needs, including through the potential for recoverable government investment, subject to a business case. The Government will also provide capacity funding to Basingstoke and North Northants to support their proposals for development on garden town principles.

Promoting self-build and custom-build

We are actively supporting the self-build and custom-build sectors, helping people design and build their own home, and we have exempted self-build from the community infrastructure levy. The £30 million investment fund for Custom Build Homes has so far £6 million of projects in contract.

We have exempted self-builders from community infrastructure levy and section 106 tariff charges.

We consulted in autumn 2014 on a new “Right to Build” to give self and custom builders a right to a plot of land from local authorities and have been working
with 11 councils to test how the Right to Build will work in practice. The consultation highlighted that there was strong support for the Right to Build among self and custom builders; and we have worked closely with the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) to ensure that his Government-supported Self-build and Custom House building Private Members’ Bill has successfully passed through Parliament, putting in place legislation for the first key part of the Right, the establishment of local custom build registers. In addition we have announced a new £150 million investment fund to help provide up to 10,000 serviced building plots.

**Getting empty and redundant land and property back into use**

Brownfield land that is suitable for housing has a vital role to play in meeting the need for new homes. The National Planning Policy Framework makes clear that planning should encourage the effective use of land by re-using brownfield land provided that it is not of high environmental value, and that councils can set locally appropriate targets for using brownfield land. We estimate up to 200,000 homes could be built on such land with local planning authorities challenged to have permissions in place on more than 90% of brownfield land suitable for new homes by 2020.

We are committed to supporting councils in their drive to deliver on this goal and have given them the opportunity to bid for a share of £4.4 million funding to develop local development orders for housing on brownfield land. Awards to a further nine councils have been returned to use.

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We have delivered a comprehensive package of policies to help get empty homes and buildings back into use and successfully reduced the number of empty homes to their lowest level since records began. We have:

- Provided over £200 million to fund innovative schemes run by community groups, councils and housing associations up and down the country to bring empty properties back into use. So far, our funding has enabled local groups to create almost 6,000 new homes from empty property—providing apprenticeship and training opportunities as well as more homes and better neighbourhoods for local people - with the potential to deliver more.

- Rewarded councils for bringing 100,000 empty homes back into use through the New Homes Bonus;

- Given councils new powers to remove council tax subsidies to empty homes, and use the funds to keep the overall rate of council tax down. We have also changed tax rules to discourage the use of corporate envelopes to invest in high value housing which may be left empty or underused to avoid paying tax;

- Cancelled the Labour Government’s Pathfinder programme which sought to demolish homes, instead of focusing on refurbishment and getting empty homes into use; and revoked associated pro-demolition guidance from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister;

- Taken forward the best practice recommendations produced by our independent empty homes adviser, George Clarke—such as refurbishment and upgrading of existing homes should be the first and preferred option, and that demolition of existing homes should be the last option after all forms of market testing and options for refurbishment are exhausted; we have embedded these principles in our housing programme funding schemes;

- Reform community infrastructure levy regulations to provide an increased incentive for brownfield development, extending exemptions for empty buildings being brought back into use. We have reduced Section 106 burdens on vacant buildings being returned to use.

- Introduced the Right to Contest, building on our existing Community Right to Reclaim Land, which lets communities ask that under-used or unused land owned by public bodies is brought back into beneficial use. This new right applies to central Government sites currently in use, but not vital for operations.

- Amended national planning policy through the National Planning Policy Framework to encourage councils to bring back empty properties back into use;

- Funded a new business rates reoccupation relief to help bring empty shops back into use; and

- Reformed permitted development rights in a number of ways to free up the planning system and facilitate the conversion of redundant and under-used non-residential buildings into new homes.

The Government have already released enough surplus public sector land to build over 100,000 new homes. We are committed to releasing land with capacity for up to 150,000 homes between 2015 and 2020 and will look to set departmental contributions by the Spending Round.

**Conclusion**

There is still more to do, but I hope this illustrates how this Government have delivered and cleaned up Labour’s mess. Our long-term economic plan is building more houses, giving more power to local communities, and helping people move onto and up the housing ladder.

[HCWS09]
Scrapped Labour’s plans for new bin taxes on family homes, which would have harmed the local environment by fuelling fly-tipping and backyard burning, taken action to stop both the levying of “backdoor bin charging” for the collection of household waste and new “tip taxes”, and scrapped the levying of unfair and arbitrary bin fines on families.

Rejected the Labour policy of encouraging higher parking charges and aggressive parking enforcement, and taken a series of measures to stop parking charges being used as a stealthy tax, including introducing new grace periods and stopping the industrial use of CCTV spy cars.

Centrally funded council tax relief for the victims of floods.

Helping local firms and shops with their business rates

As part of our long-term economic plan, we have helped local shops and local firms with their business rates, complementing the Government’s other cuts to national insurance and corporation tax. We have:

- Doubled small business rate relief scheme, to help the occupiers of 600,000 properties. From October 2010 to April 2016, small firms are receiving 100% rate relief (i.e. pay no business rates at all) on properties up to £6,000 rateable value, and a tapered rate relief from £6,000 to £12,000. An estimated 400,000 small firms are now paying no rates at all as a result, and a further 200,000 firms are benefiting from the lower rate relief.

- Introduced a new discount on business rates for retail premises— with a rateable value of up to £50,000—worth £1,000 in 2014-15 and £1,500 in 2015-16. This is helping 200,000 firms.

- Tackled Labour’s hikes in business rates which cut back empty property relief. We introduced a new reoccupation relief to bring empty shops back into use. This is providing 50% rate relief for 18 months for firms who move into retail premises that have been empty for a year or more. We are exempting empty new build property from business rates; this will help promote development and regeneration.

- Allowed firms to spread their business rate bills over 12 monthly payments, helping them with their cash flow.

- Centrally funded business rate relief for the victims of floods.

- Maintained the Government’s commitment to the annual retail price index (RPI) cap, meaning there has been no real terms increase in annual business rates. In 2014-15 and in 2015-16, business rates have been capped at 2%, helping 1.3 million ratepayers.

- Scrapped Labour’s ports tax—stopping retrospective business rates on firms in ports that threatened the whole export and manufacturing sector. £175 million of unfair rate demands have been cleared.

- Made it easier for small firms to get small business rate relief to which they are entitled. Our changes in Localism Act ensure all eligible ratepayers can automatically receive the small business multiplier, and we have removed the legal red tape requiring ratepayers to fill in paperwork to claim the relief. Small business rate relief has also been extended to including small firms taking on an additional second property— for up to a year—helping them expand.

- Given local councils new powers via the Localism Act to levy local business rate discounts, for example, to support local shops, community pubs, new business parks or vital local facilities. Under the local retention of business rates, central Government funds 50% of any local discount granted.

- Taken action to speed up business rate appeals, with a series of practical reforms and measures to tackle the previous backlog unresolved cases inherited from Labour’s last revaluation. Ensured that no new supplementary business rate can be imposed without a backing of local firms in a referendum, via the Localism Act. The supplementary rate introduced by the Labour Government allowed extra business rates to be imposed in some cases without the support of businesses.

- Rewarded councils for promoting local economic growth, by allowing them to keep the funds from locally raised business rates, rather than it being snatched back by Whitehall, through the Local Government Finance Act 2012. These reforms have been estimated to increase economic growth by £10 billion over seven years.

- Given councils the freedom to borrow against those extra business rates from additional new developments and infrastructure—so-called tax incremental funding—to help make such developments go ahead.

- Introduced 24 new enterprise zones across the country. Businesses in these zones will benefit from a 100% business rate discount worth up to £275,000 over a five-year period for firms who move into a zone over the course of this Parliament. All business rate growth within the zone will be retained and shared by the local enterprise partnership area for at least 25 years to help support local growth and investment.

- Postponed the business rates revaluation in England to 2017, which will prevent up to 800,000 firms from facing big hikes in their business rates bills—whereas only 300,000 would see a fall.

- Scrapped Labour’s plans for penalty business rates to be imposed on parking space at local supermarkets which would have forced up the cost of a family’s local shop.

Cutting red tape in local government

Abolished Labour’s unnecessary comprehensive area assessment inspection regime and scrapped the Audit Commission—a quango which became a creature of the Whitehall state under Labour. Replacing this with a localised audit regime will save £1.35 billion for taxpayers (over 10 years) and reduce the burden of unnecessary inspection on local councils. We have also abolished the interfering Tenants Services Authority.

- Scrapped Labour’s local area agreements, removing 4,700 top-down and bureaucratic Whitehall targets from local councils and abolished the Whitehall red tape of national indicator set, place surveys and local development framework monitoring.

- Cut back on the thousands of pieces of data that councils must report to a proliferation of departments and quangos, introducing instead a single, simple and transparent list for data collection reporting requirements for councils across all of Government.

- Abolished the Labour Government’s local government two-tier code that pushed up councils’ costs and hindered the voluntary and independent sector from delivering better value for money.

- Significantly reduced the ring-fencing of local government grants, giving councils power and discretion to focus their resources on front-line services.

- Allowed councils to embrace the 21st century, by removing century-old red tape that prevented from parish councils from using internet and telephone banking; and we have allowed councils to issue agendas and papers electronically.

Promoting local democracy and accountability

Localism should go hand in hand with greater local transparency, local accountability and robust democratic scrutiny. We have:

- Worked with councils to deliver a new era of town hall transparency, with town halls to publish online their spending, contracts, tenders, senior pay and property assets through a new transparency code. We have enhanced citizens’ rights to inspect council accounts, creating a new army of “armchair auditors”.

- Ensured greater transparency on councillors’ interests, including requiring councillors to declare trade union funding and pecuniary interests.

- Abolished the Standards Board, which fuelled petty and malicious complaints against councillors and discouraged freedom of speech.
Made it easier to create new town and parish councils, to help decentralise power down. Allowed councils to return to the committee system if they wish, which many have done. Introduced new guidelines to ensure elected councillors can approve or veto six-figure salaries in local government in the public glare of full council, and stop practices like “double dipping” which rip off the taxpayer. Given stronger rights to “citizen journalists” to report, blog, film or tweet from council meetings. Introduced tougher controls on unfair competition by local authority newspapers and taken action to stop the corrosive and wasteful practice of councils and quangos hiring lobbyists to lobby Government. Scrapped Labour’s expensive and time-consuming top-down imposition of unitary local government restructuring. Are taking forward proposals to remove the ‘volunteering tax’ on councillors through data protection registration fees; we would also have reformed the rules on travel expenses for councillors had the Opposition not just blocked this in this week’s wash up. Introduced new community rights for people to run local services, protect community assets and safeguard valuable green spaces. Tackled the serious and rare cases of systematic failure in local government, sending in Commissioners to turn around dysfunctional governance in Doncaster; to tackle alleged corruption and maladministration in Tower Hamlets; and to protect vulnerable children in Rotherham.

Supporting front-line services
We have had to pay off Labour’s deficit, but local government services have risen to the challenge, and residents’ satisfaction with local services has been maintained. Even with the savings that have been made to date, public satisfaction with services has been maintained and English local government still expects to spend over £115 billion in the current financial year. Net current expenditure by councils—including education due to the shift to academy funding—has risen in cash terms under this Government, moving from £70.9 billion in 2008-9 to an expected £78.9 billion in 2014-15. We ensured that savings in local authority funding were applied in a fair and sustainable way, to north and south, shire and city, rural and urban England, with the average spending power per dwelling for the 10% most deprived authorities still around 40% more than for the least deprived 10%.

We are pushing forward with plans to join up public services, and allow councils to pool resources across the public sector to tackle social problems—through new Community Budgets and Troubled Families. As of the end of February, the troubled families programme had already turned around the lives of over 105,000 families and over 10,000 of these families include an adult who is off benefits and in sustained work. The programme had already achieved 90% of this. A recent report of the work of seven exemplar areas showed the average reactive cost of families in the year before entering the programme was £26,200, with the average gross fiscal benefits achieved in the year following totalling £11,200 per family.

We have supported front-line services and sensible savings through our guidance, 50 ways to save. Our weekly collections support scheme has shown how councils can increase recycling and delivering savings without cutting the frequency of the service. We have actively supported weekly bin collections, which have disappeared in Labour-run Wales.

Scrapped regional government
We have championed England’s long-standing tiers of local government, and supported natural economic areas, as opposed to the arbitrary and distant government regions. We have:

Abolished the unelected regional assemblies and revoked their top-down regional strategies. Replaced the distant and unaccountable regional development agencies with 39 new local enterprise partnerships of local firms and councils working together. Closed all the unelected government offices for the regions—they are agents of Whitehall which interfere with local councils. This has saved £420 million over the spending review. Stopped the forced regionalisation of the fire service, and stopped Labour’s botched FireControl project—a project which wasted almost half a billion pounds. Tackled the waste and inefficiency of pan-national Euro regions in the EU’s INTERREG programme.

Empowering local councils to stand tall
We have given new freedoms to councils to help champion their areas. We have:

Granted councils a general power of competence via the Localism Act, allowing councils greater flexibility to work together, undertake joint ventures and improve local services. Allowed councils to keep the funds from locally raised business rates—via the Local Government Finance Act 2012. Overall, councils get to keep 50% of all business rates revenue and growth, giving them a real incentive to go for growth and encourage enterprise and job creation. These reforms are estimated to give a £10 billion boost to economic growth over seven years. Ensured 70% of local authority income is now raised locally. Localised council tax support, so councils are rewarded for getting people off the dole and welfare dependency and back into work. Reformed the housing revenue account via the Localism Act to give councils greater autonomy and freedom to run their own council housing budgets. Give councils stronger powers on licensing to tackle the alcohol-fuelled violence that plagues local high streets at night, and allow councils to recover fully all the costs of licensing so council taxpayers are not left with the bill. Strengthening local councils’ influence over the NHS by creating executive health and wellbeing boards to agree NHS commissioning plans, giving councils a lead role in public health, and ensuring more joint working between the NHS and social care. The better care fund from this next month joins up health and social care spending, with further integration being piloted in Greater Manchester.

Rolled out neighbourhood community budgets (allowing public services to be managed at a neighbourhood level) and whole-place community budgets (pooling local public services in an area)—including action on troubled families. Championed 39 growth deals, 24 enterprise zones, the £12 billion local growth fund and 28 city deals.

Championing common sense, not political correctness
We have stood up for British values of common sense. We have:

Allowed councils to disregard a challenge by aggressive secularists to stop the long-standing practice of prayers at meetings, thanks to the Localism Act and the new Local Government (Religious etc. Observances) Bill.
Issued guidance to stop the gold-plating of equality rules, and challenge the practice of local residents filling out intrusive questionnaires about their sexuality and religion in order to get out a library book or make a planning application.

Supported the royal wedding, diamond jubilee and VE day by cutting Whitehall and municipal red tape on holding street parties, and introduced new laws to cut “elf and safety” red tape on community events.

Backed British values and identity, flying the United Kingdom’s national and traditional county flags, and recognising England’s traditional boroughs, towns, cities and counties.

Revoked John Prescott’s 200 page planning guidance on equality and diversity in planning, which undermined the sense of fair play in the planning system by suggested special treatment for certain groups.

Supported teaching the English language rather than translating documents into foreign languages, and promoted a more integrated society, better equipped to reject extremism. We have championed united communities and British values.

Delivering on housing and planning

I am also laying a written ministerial statement in parallel outlining what we have done on housing and planning, including introducing a locally led planning system and abolishing top-down regional planning.

Conclusion

There is more to do to decentralise power, empower local communities and strengthen civic pride. But I believe we have transformed local democracy for the better—more efficient, more responsive and more innovative than before; we have delivered on the aspiration set out in the coalition agreement five years ago. [HCWS510]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

First World War Centenary Cathedral Repairs Fund

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Sajid Javid): I am today publishing the list of successful bidders to the third round of the first world war centenary cathedral repairs fund.

The £20 million fund, which was announced by the Chancellor of the Exchequer at Budget 2014, enables cathedrals to undertake urgent repair work. Cathedrals are powerful symbols of Britain’s shared history and are especially important as the nation comes together to commemorate the centenary of the first world war.

Decisions on funding allocations are taken by an expert panel, which considers the grant applications against the published criteria for the scheme and decides which cathedrals should receive funding. The panel is chaired by Sir Paul Ruddock and includes senior figures from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Church of England and the Catholic Church, as well as church architects, architectural historians and grant-giving experts.

I am pleased to confirm that the panel has decided to allocate funding of almost £6.9 million to 31 cathedrals in the third round. These are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cathedral</th>
<th>Denomination</th>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Award</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Surface fixing of westmorland slate to the cathedral exterior (Chapel of Unity) and repointing</td>
<td>£80,364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derby</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Refoisting the Song School and adjacent roofs</td>
<td>£124,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durham</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Repair and conservation of central tower upper parapet</td>
<td>£568,651</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ely</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Replacement of defective electrical cable to north side of cathedral</td>
<td>£150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Essential repair work, recording and conservation of east end</td>
<td>£275,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Conservation of masonry and glazing of Lady Chapel</td>
<td>£185,415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guildford</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Reroofing and repair of tower and transepts to prevent water ingress</td>
<td>£500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lichfield</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Essential relighting and rewiring</td>
<td>£800,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Repair to lantern glazing, and east and west entrances</td>
<td>£191,168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwich</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Repair of three roofs</td>
<td>£88,620</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwich</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Urgent roof relading</td>
<td>£179,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nottingham</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Improvement of drainage</td>
<td>£140,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peterborough</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Repairs to the tessaeae Presbytery floor</td>
<td>£200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plymouth</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Replacement of rainwater goods and associated repairs, conservation of west window and repointing of clerestory walls</td>
<td>£398,496</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Removal of cement pointing and completion of lime mortar pointing</td>
<td>£86,053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portsmouth</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>External masonry repairs</td>
<td>£79,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ripon</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Urgent repairs to the glazing of 35 windows</td>
<td>£19,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salisbury</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>External repair and conservation of elevations</td>
<td>£150,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheffield</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>To replace lighting in two contiguous chapels</td>
<td>£65,077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shrewsbury</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Disabled access for front porch</td>
<td>£280,866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>New rainwater disposal arrangements</td>
<td>£12,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Edmundsbury</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Reroofing and repairs to North Aisle to prevent water ingress and stone falls</td>
<td>£300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Paul’s</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Rectifying water penetration of the Stone Gallery</td>
<td>£200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wakefield</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Conservation and repair of three east end stained glass windows</td>
<td>£72,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wells</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Masonry and structural repairs to the North Quire</td>
<td>£160,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westminster</td>
<td>RC</td>
<td>Re-covering of chancel roof</td>
<td>£100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winchester</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Replacement of lighting and wiring system</td>
<td>£500,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worcester</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Urgent repairs to roof and rainwater goods</td>
<td>£116,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York Minster</td>
<td>CoE</td>
<td>Fabric repairs to the Camera Cantorum and urgent window repairs</td>
<td>£100,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: £6,898,396

[HCWS505]
DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Succession to the Crown Act 2013

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): Today the provisions of the Succession to the Crown Act 2013 come into force.

The Act removes the male bias in the line of succession, ending the system of male heirs automatically inheriting the throne over female heirs and removing this historical discrimination against women. The Act also ends another long-standing piece of discrimination, the bar on anyone who marries a Roman Catholic from becoming monarch, and replaces the outdated Royal Marriages Act 1772 such that only the first six in line to the throne need consent of the monarch to marry.

These changes were agreed at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Perth, Australia, in October 2011. This Government have worked closely with the 15 other countries where the Queen is Head of State to make the necessary arrangements to give effect to the changes. Today these changes have come into effect across every realm.

During the passage of the legislation the Advocate General undertook to update Parliament as to how each realm had given effect to the changes to royal succession. Six realms in addition to the United Kingdom chose to legislate for the changes: Australia, Barbados, Canada, New Zealand, St Kitts and Nevis, and St Vincent and the Grenadines. Nine realms concluded that the legislation was not necessary: Antigua and Barbuda, Bahamas, Belize, Grenada, Jamaica, Papua New Guinea, St Lucia, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu.

The Act reflects this Government’s emphasis on equality by removing centuries of discrimination on both religious and gender grounds. The Act puts in place succession laws that are fit for the 21st century and for a modern constitutional monarchy.

Section 155 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr Nick Clegg): As required under section 155 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), this statement confirms that the Government will not be making an order during the course of this Parliament to uplift certain sums and reporting thresholds for donations and loans to political parties, third party campaigners and others in line with inflation.

PPERA allows the Secretary of State or Lord President of the Council to amend the sums contained in Part 4, Part 4A, Schedule 11, section 95B(6), Schedule 11A, Schedule 15 and Schedule 19A of the Act in line with inflation, a statement must be made to Parliament explaining why. These specific provisions set the reporting thresholds and other sums that apply to donations and loans to political parties, third parties and others. The majority of these sums were previously raised from the levels set in PPERA by the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. The sums in section 95B(6) and Schedule 11A were introduced by the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Campaigning and Trade Union Administration Act 2014.

Parliamentary Boundary Commissions

The Minister for the Constitution (Mr Sam Gyimah): I am pleased to announce the completion of the triennial review of the four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions and publication of the final report. The triennial review was conducted in accordance with Government guidance for reviewing NDPBs. Stage 1 of the review considered whether there continues to be a need for the function, which the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions currently undertake, and whether the function could be more effectively delivered through a vehicle other than an NDPB. Stage 2 of the review scrutinised the current governance arrangements of the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions to ascertain whether they comply with the principles of good governance. The review concluded that there continues to be a need to provide the functions of the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions and that this should be done at arm’s length from Government, via a non-departmental public body. The review has made a number of recommendations for change and improvements in the functions, delivery and governance arrangements, which we will now pursue. I am grateful to all those who contributed to the review.

Attachments are available at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements/

DEFENCE

Iraq Update/Training the Syrian Moderate Opposition

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): Since the last written update on 13 October 2014, Official Report, column 9WS, UK military activity to degrade and ultimately defeat ISIL has continued. The UK continues to be the second largest contributor to the coalition airstrike campaign. Our Tornado aircraft and Reaper Remotely Piloted Air Systems have conducted 199 strikes up to 26 March 2015 and continue to gather vital intelligence alongside other assets like the Rivet Joint. The UK will also be deploying two Sentinel aircraft to provide further intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance support. Voyager has played a vital role refuelling UK and coalition aircraft, our C130 transport aircraft have continued to deliver essential equipment and resupplies and E3-D Sentry aircraft enhance the coalition’s capacity to provide airborne command and control.
control. There are now over 630 UK personnel directly contributing to the Coalition with around 150 UK personnel in Iraq.

Within the coalition’s training programme to build the capacity of the Iraqi Security Forces, the UK is co-ordinating Coalition counter-IED training with a small planning team in Baghdad and some 30 military trainers based in Erbil. The UK has trained over 1,100 Iraqi forces in infantry skills and in the use of the UK-gifted heavy machine guns.

As the Prime Minister has stated, ISIL needs to be defeated in Syria as well as Iraq. In Syria, coalition airstrikes have supported the liberation of Kobane and have disrupted ISIL’s resources and their ability to direct activity in Iraq. However, as with Iraq, the answer against ISIL ultimately lies with local forces, rather than air strikes. I refer to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence and the Foreign Secretary’s statement in the House on 16 Oct 2014, Official Report, column 470, that indicated we have been working with Coalition allies to look at how the UK can support the US-led programme to train the moderate Syrian opposition. This programme aims to train and equip thousands of screened members of the opposition over the next three years in regional training centres outside Syria. These forces will initially focus on defending Syrian communities against ISIL’s brutal attacks but will subsequently go on the offensive against ISIL. They will also help to promote the conditions for a political settlement to the conflict in Syria. The UK contribution will include around 75 trainers and headquarters staff. They will provide instruction in the use of small arms, infantry tactics and medical skills. Training is expected to begin in the next few weeks.

[HCWS501]

EDUCATION

Condition Improvement Fund

The Minister for Schools (Mr David Laws): Today I am announcing the outcome of the Condition Improvement Fund 2015-16, which provides funding for the improvement and expansion of existing academy and sixth-form college buildings. The Condition Improvement Fund replaces the Academies Capital Maintenance Fund and the Building Condition Improvement Fund for sixth-form colleges.

I am announcing funding for £367 million for 1,366 projects across 1,089 academies and sixth-form colleges, which will help to ensure that children across the country can enjoy school and sixth-form college buildings which are safe, good quality and fit for learning. We have also invited 79 projects that demonstrated a high project need and overall were not successful in this year’s bidding round to submit a revised application, which we will consider ahead of the full 2016-17 bidding round. Ensuring that there is a good local school place for every child, and that every child can benefit from a learning environment which is safe and fit for purpose, no matter where they live, are key priorities for this Government.

This follows on from the announcement my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and I made recently of over £6 billion of new investment to improve the condition of the school estate over the coming years. This Government have invested £18 billion in the education estate during this Parliament to provide new places and to help to ensure pupils will see their learning environments transformed. We know that being taught in school buildings in poor condition can have an adverse effect on pupils and staff and it is important that we continue to invest in improving our estate.

Details of today’s announcement are being sent to those receiving funding and a list of successful projects will be published on gov.uk. Copies will be placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS493]

Attachments can be viewed at www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Science Advisory Council/Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Rogerson): Today I am publishing the reports of the triennial reviews of DEFRA’s Science Advisory Council (SAC) and the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE), which were jointly launched on 25 March 2014. Triennial reviews of non-departmental public bodies are part of the Government’s commitment to ensuring accountability in public life.

DEFRA’s SAC was established administratively in 2004 to challenge and support DEFRA’s chief scientific adviser (CSA) in independently assuring the evidence underpinning DEFRA policies and ensuring commissioned evidence meets DEFRA’s needs.

ACRE is a statutory advisory committee appointed under section 124 of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. It advises the UK Government and the devolved Administrations on risks to human health and the environment from the release and marketing of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

The SAC review found a high level of support for the SAC’s overall function. All respondents who commented during the review agreed that an evidence-based Department needs independent scientific advice. This view is shared by DEFRA’s chief scientific adviser (CSA) and the Government CSA.

The review concluded that SAC’s overarching function is right, and essential to ensuring public trust in DEFRA’s policy process. To improve delivery of this function, the review recommended that:

SAC should focus at a high level, across all aspects of DEFRA’s evidence, not on the detail of specific evidence questions.

SAC’s role and remit should be more tightly and clearly defined focusing on advising and supporting the Department on an effective and efficient strategy for obtaining and using evidence and scientific advice; and overseeing and assuring evidence use.

SAC’s profile within the Department should be raised, and links with the devolved Administrations strengthened.

The review considered alternative models for delivery but concluded that an advisory NPDB is the most appropriate form to deliver SAC’s functions, as it is the only model which can deliver these functions independently and transparently, with the right governance and level of expertise.
The review of governance arrangements has found that they are appropriate to the size and functions of an advisory NDPB, however the governance structure should include a formal process to assess the SAC’s overall performance.

The ACRE review concludes that the committee is important in underpinning the Government’s policy of ensuring that GM technology is used in a safe and responsible way and therefore it is necessary for its functions to continue. Following consideration of stakeholder views, the review concludes that ACRE is effective and delivers a high-quality service and, following consideration of alternative models, it remains appropriate for ACRE to remain as an advisory NDPB.

Both SAC and ACRE meet the Cabinet Office principles of good corporate governance.

The review team worked closely with SAC and ACRE members throughout and are grateful for the invaluable support and information they provided.

The full report of the reviews of SAC and ACRE can be found on the gov.uk website, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Ministerial Correction

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I wish to make a correction to the verbal statement I made in response to a point made by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) on 17 March 2015, Official Report, column 727. The review of Shaker Aamer’s case currently being undertaken is not a judicial process, but an inter-agency review carried out by six US Government Departments.

Overseas Scholarship Schemes

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr Hugo Swire): On 8 January, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Department for International Development announced that they were to conduct a review of the Government’s overseas scholarship schemes. The review’s aims were to build on the triennial reviews of the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission and the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission, and examine those schemes together with the Chevening scholarship programme to assess:

- Whether there was scope for further efficiencies and synergies across the schemes;
- If so, what alterations in structure, administration or delivery might realise those improvements;
- The extent to which efficiencies have already been put in place in recent years.

The review is now complete, and copies are available in the Libraries of both Houses. Its main recommendation is that the three schemes should continue, but should sit side by side in a single FCO-sponsored NDPB, as a UK Government Scholarship Commission responsible for advising on and implementing UK Government scholarship strategy.

We endorse the review’s recommendations on the direction of travel: bringing better alignment of overall scholarships strategy, funding, partnership development, and alumni engagement, between the three programmes. We agree in principle to the main recommendations but recognise that there are legitimate questions about how best this alignment should be implemented while respecting the individual character of each scheme.

We therefore propose that further work should be undertaken, bringing all parties together to look more closely at the detail of the governance options that will protect the brands and objectives of each scheme.

The outcome of this second phase of the review will be completed in August and published and placed in the Libraries of both Houses in September 2015.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements

HCWS511

HEALTH

Advisory Non-departmental Public Bodies

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (George Freeman): The Department of Health has completed its triennial reviews of the British Pharmacopoeia Commission (BPC), the Commission on Human Medicines (CHM), the Administration of Radioactive Substances Advisory Committee (ARSAC), and the Independent Reconfiguration Panel (IRP), and is today publishing the associated review reports.

The four reviews, which each commenced on 30 October 2014, consulted with a wide range of stakeholders. Their key conclusions were that all these bodies perform necessary functions and should continue to operate as advisory non-department public bodies. The review reports each contain several further recommendations, intended to further improve performance, governance and efficiency.

Copies of the four reports can be found at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2015-03-26/HCWS500/

HCWS500

LEADER OF THE HOUSE

Legislation in the 2014-15 Session of Parliament

The First Secretary of State and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr William Hague): Following the conclusion of business in the House today, I expect Parliament to be prorogued prior to dissolution on 30 March under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. Subject to proceedings, 34 Bills will have received Royal Assent in the 2014-2015 Session.

Government Bills
- Armed Forces (Service Complaints and Financial Assistance)
- Childcare Payments
- Consumer Rights
- Corporation Tax (Northern Ireland)
- Counter-Terrorism and Security
- Criminal Justice and Courts
- Data Retention and Investigatory Powers
Deregulation
Finance
Finance (No.2)
House of Commons Commission
Infrastructure
Lords Spiritual (Women)
Modern Slavery
Pension Schemes
Recall of MPs
National Insurance Contributions
Serious Crime
Small Business, Enterprise and Employment
Social Action, Responsibility and Heroism
Stamp Duty Land Tax
Taxation of Pensions
Wales
Law Commission Bills taken forward by the Government
Insurance
Private Members’ Bills
Control of Horses
Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality)
Health Service Commissioner for England (Complaint Handling)
House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension)
International Development (Official Development Assistance Target)
Local Government (Religious etc. Observances)
Local Government (Review of Decisions)
Mutuals’ Deferred Shares
Self-build and Custom Housebuilding
Specialist Printing Equipment and Materials (Offences)
Hybrid Bills
The High Speed Rail (London-West Midlands) Bill will carry over into the next Parliament

**PRIME MINISTER**

Machinery of Government change: Architecture Policy

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This written ministerial statement confirms that responsibility for promoting high quality design in the built environment will transfer from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to the Department for Communities and Local Government. This change will be effective immediately.

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**ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE**


Mr Gary Streeter (Representing The Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission): The Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission is established under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act (PPERA) 2000. Under paragraph 14 of schedule 1 to the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000 and paragraph 11 of schedule 1 to the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 the Committee must review the Electoral Commission’s and Local Government Boundary Commission for England’s (LGBCE) estimates and decide whether it is satisfied that the estimates are consistent with the economical, efficient and effective discharge by the bodies with their functions.

The Committee has approved the Electoral Commission and LGBCE draft estimates without modification. In coming to its decisions the Committee has a statutory obligation to consider advice provided to it by HM Treasury and reports of the Comptroller and Auditor General on his examinations into the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which the Electoral Commission and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England have used their resources. The Committee is publishing those reports on its web pages at www.parliament.uk.

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**TRANSPORT**

Motoring Agencies Business Plans 2015-16

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): I am pleased to announce the publication of the 2015-16 business plans for the Department for Transport’s motoring executive agencies—the Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA), the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and the Vehicle Certification Agency (VCA).

The business plans set out:

- the services each agency will deliver and any significant changes they plan to make;
- the resources they require; and,
- the key performance indicators (KPIs) by which their performance will be assessed.

These plans allow service users and members of the public to assess how the agencies are performing in operating their key services, managing reforms and the agency finances.

The business plans will be available electronically on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments are available at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2015-03-26/HCWS496/

Cycling Delivery Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am today publishing the Government response to the informal consultation on the draft cycling delivery plan which sought views from interested parties on its content.

On 16 October 2014, I launched an informal consultation on a draft cycling delivery plan which set out how the Prime Minister’s ambition to “kick-start a cycling revolution” would be achieved over the next 10 years as well as our plans to increase walking.

The consultation, which was extended to a six-week period in total due to the high level of interest, sought general views on the content of the draft Delivery Plan.
via email, webchats and seven dedicated regional engagement events. Over 1,000 informal comments to the consultation were received from cycling and walking campaign groups, local government, transport and planning bodies and professionals, business, members of the public and others.

We received a wide range of comments, in particular, around the lack of a firm long-term funding commitment which was considered central to implementing aspirations and actions in the draft delivery plan. A further five common themes also arose during the consultation, including calls to give walking greater prominence, defining “cycle-proofing”; securing the future funding of the bikeability cycle training scheme, creating national standards for the design of cycling and walking infrastructure and providing greater clarity on the proposed call to action to local authorities to work in partnership with Government to increase local-level cycling and walking.

The Government response sets out our position on each of these matters and most notably makes clear our commitment to cycling and walking in the long term by placing a duty in the recently passed Infrastructure Act 2015 requiring Government to produce a cycling and walking investment strategy. The new duty requires us to put in place a strategy for England, which, among other things, must set out the financial resources which Government will make available towards meeting our cycling and walking objectives. This move has been warmly welcomed by our stakeholders.

Government are now considering how best to develop a long-term infrastructure programme for cycling and walking, drawing upon expert advice from cycling and walking stakeholders including the Active Travel Consortium.

It is also important to note that through the duties confirmed in the Infrastructure Act 2015, Government will be held to account by Parliament.

I will be placing a copy of this statement and the Government response to the consultation on the draft cycling delivery plan in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments are available at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I am pleased to announce the publication of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency’s (MCA) business plan for 2015-16.

The business plan sets out:

- the services that the agency will deliver and any significant changes it plans to make;
- the resources the agency requires; and,
- the key performance indicators (KPIs) by which the agency’s performance will be assessed.

This plan will allow service users and members of the public to assess how the MCA is performing in delivering its key services, managing reforms and finances.

The Business Plan will be available electronically on gov.uk and copies will be placed in the libraries of both Houses.

Attachments are available at http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements

Traffic Commissioners

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Claire Perry): The triennial review of the traffic commissioners was conducted in accordance with Cabinet Office guidance on reviews of non-departmental public bodies in late 2014 and early 2015 available at: https://www.gov.uk/public-bodies-reform

The review is formed of two parts:
- Phase 1—undertaken by the Department but with oversight by an independent industry figure.
- Phase 2—undertaken by an external consultancy (JMP Partners) which included extensive consultation with industry and key stakeholders.

The key conclusion is that the primary function of the commissioners is still necessary and that this is best delivered through the commissioners as non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs).

The review also identified a number of measures which, if implemented, should improve the bodies’ governance transparency and accountability. The Department for Transport will be taking these recommended measures forward over the coming months.

The report includes a number of representations from industry. The Department will evaluate these and develop a timetable for taking them forward.

The Department will continue to work closely with the traffic commissioners to ensure their processes and working structures leave them equipped to fulfil their important function.

I would like to thank those stakeholders who were involved during the course of the review.

The final report of this triennial review can be found on gov.uk and I have made available copies in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2015-03-26/HCWS506/
Petitions

Thursday 26 March 2015

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Traveller encampments in Brighton and Hove

The Petition of residents of Moulsecoomb, Woodingdean, Rottingdean & the wider Brighton area

Declares that Brighton and Hove City Council has powers to deal with unauthorised traveller encampments; further that the Petitioners believe that the views, concerns and needs of the existing, settled community on this issue too often seem to be ignored; and further notes that sensitive sites in the city seem to be repeatedly targeted every year, costing large amounts of taxpayers' money to clear up.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Brighton and Hove City Council to use the powers available to them to deal promptly with unauthorised traveller encampments in the city.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Simon Kirby, Official Report, 26 January 2015; Vol. 591, c. 698.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government:

The Government are very concerned about unauthorised Traveller encampments and the effect they can have on local communities.

In August 2013, the Government sent all councils in England a summary of the strong and extensive powers available to them to deal with unauthorised encampments and development—including their enhanced Temporary Stop Notice powers. We reminded councils of the need to be ready to take swift and decisive action to stop unauthorised encampments starting in the first place.

Public bodies should not gold-plate human rights and equalities legislation. Councils and the police have been given strong powers to deal with unauthorised encampments and when deciding whether to take action, they may want to consider for example, (a) the harm that such developments can cause to local amenities and the local environment, (b) the potential interference with the peaceful enjoyment of neighbouring property, (c) the need to maintain public order and safety and protect health—for example, by deterring fly-tipping and criminal damage, (d) any harm to good community relations, (e) that the state may enforce laws to control the use of an individual's property where that is in accordance with the general public interest.

If Brighton and Hove City Council has consciously chosen not to utilise its powers to the detriment of local residents, the council leadership should be held to account for their inaction.

EDUCATION

Compulsory CPR and Public Access Defibrillator education

The Petition of residents of Bolton West

Declares that all young people should leave school knowing how to save a life and further that the Petitioners believe that every child across the UK should be taught CPR and Public Access Defibrillator (PAD) awareness at secondary school in order to become part of a Nation of Lifesavers.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put measures in place to ensure that every child is taught CPR and Public Access Defibrillator awareness at secondary school.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julie Huppert, Official Report, 10 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 267.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Education:

Many schools already choose to include cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and defibrillator awareness as part of their personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) teaching in the introduction to the new National Curriculum. We have highlighted the expectation that PSHE should be taught. Improving the quality of PSHE teaching is an objective of this Government. We do not, however, want to prescribe exactly which issues schools should have to cover in PSHE or other related parts of the curriculum.

CPR is included in the non-statutory PSHE Programme of Study produced by the PSHE Association. This suggested programme of study, produced by some of the leading experts in PSHE teaching, currently includes teaching young people how to recognise and follow health and safety procedures, ways of reducing risk and minimising harm in risky situations, and how to use emergency and basic first aid.

Many schools also make use of organisations such as the Red Cross and St John Ambulance, to provide information to young people about first aid and dealing with emergencies. The British Heart Foundation has offered to provide free CPR training kits to every secondary school in the country, allowing young people to gain first-hand experience of this important life-saving skill.

We will work with the British Heart Foundation to promote these kits to schools and expect many schools to take up this offer.
The Government do recognise the vital difference that swift access to CPR and an automated external defibrillator (AED) can make in the event of a cardiac arrest. It is for this reason that we are encouraging all schools to consider purchasing one or more AEDs as part of their first-aid equipment.

On 26 November 2014, we announced new arrangements to allow all schools to purchase AEDs at a competitive price. We have also published advice on installing and maintaining AEDs on school premises, which has been developed drawing on the expertise of NHS ambulance services and a range of voluntary and community-sector organisations. It covers issues such as positioning, awareness training and maintenance, and is available online at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/automated-external-defibrillators-aeds-in-schools. The guide also draws schools’ attention to the offer from the British Heart Foundation to provide free CPR training kits to secondary schools.

You will also be aware that the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in his Budget speech on 18 March that the Government are setting aside £1 million to help buy defibrillators for public places, including schools, and to support training in their use. The detail of how this funding will be used is currently being considered.

HEALTH

Radiotherapy facility at Lister Hospital, Stevenage

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Hitchin and Harpenden,

Declares that patients who are residents of Hitchin, Harpenden, Redbourn, Sandridge, Wheathampstead and the surrounding villages have to travel to Mount Vernon Hospital in Hillingdon to receive radiotherapy treatment and that this journey is long and exacting and often has to be made on consecutive days.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons asks the Government to encourage NHS England to provide a radiotherapy facility at Lister Hospital in Stevenage in order to make the journey for radiotherapy treatment much easier for patients who live in the Hitchin and Harpenden constituency.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Peter Lilley, Official Report, 26 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 1541.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Health:

Decisions about local services should be made as close to patients as possible, by those who are best placed to work with the patients and the public to understand their needs. Because it is a specialised service, radiotherapy is commissioned directly by NHS England.

NHS England has carried out a high-level exercise to assess capacity and demand for External Beam Radiotherapy generally at a national level. A further phase of work will also take place at a local level shortly and will include the launch of a radiotherapy capacity and demand survey.

On 12 March 2015, the Public Accounts Committee published “Progress in improving cancer services and outcomes in England”. One of the recommendations in the report is that NHS England should set out how it will ensure a co-ordinated national approach to procuring replacement radiotherapy equipment so that sufficient capacity is available in the right places.

NHS England will develop a plan to respond to this recommendation and the radiotherapy capacity and demand survey will be the first step in this process.

NHS England will continue to review the need for additional radiotherapy facilities outside the current centres if it benefits sufficient numbers of patients and will ensure that any changes are economically viable and enhance the existing care pathways.

The hon. Members for Stevenage and North East Hertfordshire met NHS England representatives on 24 March 2015 to discuss the provision of radiotherapy services locally, which is the appropriate course of action.

Treatment for Gastroparesis

The Petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that Lauren Dobbe suffers from Gastroparesis which causes her to be sick and suffer pain 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and requires her to be tube fed which denies her a normal teenage life; further that NHS England is causing unnecessary suffering and misery to Lauren and her family by delaying the use of a proven medical intervention to treat her Gastroparesis; further that the Petitioners regret that NHS England has failed to properly assess the case for funding the fitting of a Gastric Stimulator which would act like a pacemaker helping to control symptoms and would allow Lauren to eat normally; and further that this has happened despite the recommendations of four specialists and the second opinion sought by NHS England confirming the recommendations of the specialists.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons asks the Government to urge NHS England to review the application and make funding available for the fitting of a Gastric Stimulator for Lauren Dobbe and further request that the House of Commons asks the Government to urge NHS England to recognise that a failure to provide the procedure would condemn Lauren to a life being fed by tube, ignoring her wishes as well as those of her family and the independent and expert advice of clinical specialists.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Paul Burstow, Official Report, 16 December 2014; Vol. 589, c. 1376.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Health:

The Government recognise that gastroparesis is a chronic disorder which can have a serious impact on a person’s quality of life. There are a number of treatment options for this condition, and in some cases clinicians may consider recommending a gastro-electrical stimulation device for a particular patient.

In May 2014 the National Institute for Health and Excellence (NICE) issued updated Interventional Procedure (IP) guidance on gastro-electrical stimulation for gastroparesis. The guidance can be found at the following link:

NICE is the independent organisation responsible for providing authoritative, evidence-based guidance to the NHS on the most effective ways to prevent, diagnose and treat disease and ill-health and reduce inequalities and variation in care.

Unlike NICE’s Technology Appraisal Guidance, which assesses cost effectiveness and makes recommendations on particular treatments, IP guidance assesses the efficacy and safety of interventional procedures, with the aim of protecting patients and helping clinicians, healthcare organisations and the NHS to introduce procedures appropriately. It does not consider how much the procedures would cost the NHS, or whether the NHS should allocate funding for them.

Decisions regarding the suitability of a patient for gastro-electrical stimulation should be made by clinicians on a case by case basis, taking into the account the individual circumstances of each patient and considering the available evidence, such as NICE guidance. The NHS Constitution states that patients have the right to expect decisions on the funding of drugs and treatments “to be made rationally following a proper consideration of the evidence.”

NHS England reviews individual funding requests (IFRs), such as the one made in this case, against criteria outlined in guidance the link below: http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/cp-03.pdf

The Government understand that NHS England has fully explained the IFR panel’s reasons for deciding not to fund a gastro-electrical stimulator in this instance.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Security at Jewish faith schools

The Petition of residents of the Hendon constituency,

Declares that security at Jewish faith schools is a major concern for families and schools; further that extra security had been funded by parents and others before Autumn 2010; and further that they welcome the additional funding for security provided by the current Government.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to continue funding extra security at Jewish faith schools after 2015.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Matthew Offord, Official Report, 18 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 7P]

[Po01463]

Observations from the Secretary of State for the Home Department:

A key responsibility for Government is to protect individuals and the communities in which they live. The Government take the security of the Jewish community extremely seriously, and deplore all forms of hate crime, including when it is fuelled by racial or religious hatred.

The Government are committed to stamping them out, and ensuring the safety and security of all our communities.

The appalling attacks in Brussels, Paris and Copenhagen have highlighted the particular risks faced by the Jewish community. The Government understand that these types of incidents are a cause for concern to many people, and action to tackle hate crime and extremism is being taken forward through our hate crime action plan and the Prevent strategy.

To address concerns, the police have responded to these incidents by implementing a range of protective security measures, including increased patrolling arrangements, and providing appropriate advice.

The Government’s School Security Grant has provided funding for private security guarding at Jewish state schools in England since 2010. On 18 March 2015, the Prime Minister announced a funding package to supplement existing measures to provide for security guarding at Jewish independent schools, synagogues and other community buildings, as well as equipment to boost the physical security of sites.

All Government funding beyond 2015-16 will be subject to a spending review, to be carried out after the election by the new Government. In the meantime, these and other security arrangements remain under review by Government and the police, and all appropriate measures will be put in place to combat any threats and to ensure the safety and security of all our communities.

TREASURY

Closure of NatWest branch in Eccleshall

The Petition of residents of the constituency of Stone in Staffordshire,

Declares that residents of Eccleshall object to the closure of NatWest branch in Eccleshall and further that this is the only remaining bank branch in Eccleshall.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills to encourage NatWest to keep the Eccleshall branch open.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Sir William Cash, Official Report, 3 March 2015; Vol. 593, c. 919.]

[Po01440]

Observations from the Chancellor of the Exchequer:

The Government thank the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) for his petition on the closure of the NatWest branch in Eccleshall.

The Government are sorry to hear about the disappointment that the closure of the local NatWest bank branch has caused to residents of Eccleshall.

Improving access to banking is a key part of the Government’s long-term economic plan. The Government continue to engage actively with the banking industry and consumer groups on these matters. Recently, the Economic Secretary for the Treasury has chaired a series of roundtable meetings alongside the Secretary of State for Business Innovation and Skills on access to banking. The UK’s banks and building societies have been tasked with enhancing and improving awareness of the banking services available through the Post Office. NatWest already has an arrangement with the Post Office to provide access to their bank accounts, where customers can withdraw money, deposit cash and cheques and check balances at all 11,500 Post Office branches in the UK.
While the range of services offered by the Post Office may be more limited than that offered in a traditional bank branch, the services provided through the Post Office’s extensive network ensures that essential banking facilities remain available in as many communities as possible. This Government have committed almost £2 billion to protect and modernise the Post Office network.

In addition, following local engagement with the hon. Member for Stone and the residents of Eccleshall, NatWest have re-aligned one of their Mobile Banking van routes so it will now visit Eccleshall. This will ensure face-to-face banking services are still available to the community of Eccleshall on designated days.

Although we can understand local residents’ concern, decisions on opening and closing agencies are taken by the management team of each bank on a commercial basis. As with other banking service providers, NatWest need to balance customer interests, market competition, and other commercial factors when considering their strategy and the Government do not seek to intervene in these decisions.
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not later than
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