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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 24 February 2016

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Cardiff City Deal

1. **Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): What discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues on proposals for a Cardiff city deal. [903619]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): The Cardiff city deal represents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to raise growth levels right across the region, securing Cardiff's position as one of the best capital cities in Europe and a fantastic place in which to do business. Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and I met leaders from the Cardiff capital region to discuss the city deal and to ensure that progress and momentum are being maintained.

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) has long championed the city deal to help deliver even greater success for Cardiff and Wales, but for it to succeed everyone must be as committed to delivering for Cardiff as he and the Secretary of State so clearly are. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to this city deal and particularly their commitment to funding it?

Stephen Crabb: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I discussed the Cardiff city deal proposal on Monday with the First Minister, and I am pleased and reassured that all parties are now strongly committed to it. I think that there are still some questions to be asked about the nature of the financial commitment coming from the Welsh Government, but there is now momentum behind the deal and we look forward to getting it secured as soon as possible.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): On financial commitment, last month, I asked the Secretary of State whether his Government would match the £580 million that the Welsh Government are putting towards the Cardiff city deal. Has he got a cheque from the Chancellor yet?

Stephen Crabb: I am slightly surprised by the hon. Lady's tone. We have already put £125 million on the table to help with rail electrification. The Welsh Government may want to put that into the pot. We have already put £50 million towards the compound semiconductor catapult

centre in Cardiff. There is no question mark over our commitment to securing an ambitious city deal for Cardiff. As I have said, there are some questions about the nature of the Welsh Government's financial support for such a deal, but I am sure that, with the correct attitude, we can work through those issues and land a deal.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I am sure the Secretary of State will join me in welcoming the massive announcement that Aston Martin will be building its new vehicle in south Wales. Does that not emphasise the important nature of the private sector involvement in the city deal, and what is he doing to ensure that the Welsh Government and local authorities engage with the private sector so that they lever in more money?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. First, though, let me put on record our congratulations to him and his wife, Clare, as it is a few days after the birth of their second child. It is wonderful to see him taking a break from paternity leave to stand here today championing the interests of his constituents in Cardiff. He is absolutely right on two counts. The first is on the success of bringing the Aston Martin deal to Wales, which is a great example of the Welsh and the UK Governments working together in a true team Wales approach. The second is on the importance of business and the fact that it is right at the heart not just of helping to create the city deal vision, but of delivering it as well.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): Let me pass on my congratulations to the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams). I also congratulate the workforce in the St Athan area—in the seat of the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Alun Cairns)—and the Welsh Labour Government on their support for that project, the Cardiff city deal and the Swansea city deal. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the support will be there for Cardiff and for the proposal by Terry Matthews for an “internet coast” that links Swansea and west Wales as well, as that is where we will drive the jobs into Wales?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman has raised a number of different initiatives all together in one question. The common thread running through them was the nature of partnership working, and we need to see more of that. I am talking about the Welsh Government, the UK Government and local partners all working together. The Aston Martin deal shows the fruit that can be borne when we have the right kind of attitude and commitment from the Prime Minister, the First Minister, the Ministry of Defence and excellent local MPs such as the Under-Secretary of State for Wales. I have discussed the Swansea city deal with Sir Terry Matthews. We are really interested in understanding it in a bit more detail, and we want to work with the Swansea city deal partners as well as our partners in Cardiff.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is it not the case that Aston Martin moved to St Athan in the Greater Cardiff region partly because of the success of organisations such as Superfast Cymru, which is delivering fast broadband, and particularly because of the skills that now exist in south Wales?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend, who has a great love for and knowledge of Wales, is right. The most important thing for securing big inward investment projects such as Aston Martin, or the continued inward investment of companies such as Airbus, is the excellence of the skills and the workforce that we have now in Wales. We are not complacent about that. There is more progress that could be achieved, but the reason that such companies choose Wales over locations all round the world is the quality of the skills of the workforce, the quality of the infrastructure and the UK Government's commitment to creating the best environment for economic growth.

Employment Levels

2. **Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of employment in Wales. [903620]

7. **Sir Henry Bellingham** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the level of employment in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [903626]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Employment in Wales is now at a record high, with more people than ever before having the security of a pay packet to provide for themselves and their family. Aston Martin has been mentioned. That is testimony to the significant investment that Wales is attracting.

Rehman Chishti: As a former student of Aberystwyth University, the oldest and the best law school in Wales, I have been pleased to see that more than 80% of employees in mid-Wales are now employed by small and medium-sized enterprises. Will the Minister join me in acknowledging the significance of that thriving community to the economy in Wales?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is right and he is a true champion of Aberystwyth and of mid-Wales. He will be pleased to hear that there are 3,500 additional small businesses in that area, with an extra 5,500 people going out to work every day since 2010 as a result of the economic stability we have brought about.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Does the Minister agree that the key to further enhancing employment in Wales is diversification and innovation in the rural economy, just as is happening in East Anglia? What specific measures does he have in mind to increase enterprise in Wales's more remote areas?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is a great expert on rural issues in relation to the success in his constituency in North West Norfolk, and I pay tribute to that. Employment growth in rural Wales has outperformed employment increases across the whole of Wales, which demonstrates the dynamism and the broad base on which those policies are being implemented. There is a range of initiatives such as the British Business Bank, the start-up loan scheme and the new enterprise allowance scheme on a UK Government basis, and we are keen to work with the Welsh Government to try to diversify further.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Now that it is official Government policy to support membership of the European Union in the referendum, will the Minister and the Secretary of State produce a report that shows the benefit of the European Union to jobs and investment in Wales?

Alun Cairns: Our position is clear. The Government support the deal that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has negotiated. Of course, Europe is important to our exporters and businesses, but it is also important because of the money repatriated from Europe to Wales and the United Kingdom through cohesion funding.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): As Aberystwyth's MP, I reiterate the comments of the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti). If we are serious about creating more jobs, and we are, that means real investment in real infrastructure. Why, then, has the Government's mobile infrastructure project been such a failure and delivered so little for rural Wales?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman raises this issue persistently. As a result of representations from him and others, I met Openreach earlier this week, as well as Broadband Delivery UK. I have plans to meet the mobile operators shortly to discuss what more can be done to improve the mobile infrastructure. With the 4G auction, at least 95% coverage will be gained in Wales. That contrasts significantly with the 3G auction and the low percentage that Wales was left with last time.

Guto Bebb (Aberconwy) (Con): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating my constituent, Mr Sean Taylor, on the further expansion of his company, Zip World? In four years this company has gone from no staff to 220 staff, revitalising the economy of rural north-west Wales, to the benefit of employment and diversification of the local economy.

Alun Cairns: Many Members will appreciate the difficulties that zip wires can present, but I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a true champion of zip wires and the success and diversification that they bring not only to his own constituency, but to Arfon. We are keen to see the further support and diversification of that business in his area.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Following the excellent news about Aston Martin, I pay tribute to that company, to our dynamic pro-business Welsh Labour Government and to everyone who was involved in securing the deal. As we are discussing trends in employment, and with around 200,000 jobs in Wales dependent on our EU membership, what does the Minister think would happen to trends in employment if we were daft enough to leave the EU?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for recognising the efforts that the UK Government have made to attract investment, particularly with the major Aston Martin investment in my constituency. I think those comments should be underlined. Of course, the Government do not plan to leave the European Union; the Prime Minister has made the case, having negotiated a strong deal, and we are confident that the British people will support that when the referendum comes.

Welsh Economy

3. **William Wragg** (Hazel Grove) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken to rebalance the economy in Wales. [903621]

5. **Craig Tracey** (North Warwickshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken to rebalance the economy in Wales. [903624]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): This Government know that supporting our manufacturing industry is vital for rebalancing the economy. Despite challenging global conditions, we have seen 12,000 new manufacturing jobs created by businesses in Wales since 2010, reversing the decline we saw under the previous Labour Government.

William Wragg: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. How will small businesses in my constituency and in the north-west of England be able to benefit from the economic recovery in north Wales?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the strength of the economic recovery in north Wales. When I travel around Wales, I see that much of what is innovative and exciting is happening in north Wales. We are clear that the economy of north Wales is integrated in a single entity with the economy of north-west England, so there are lots of opportunities for small and medium-sized businesses on both sides of the border to benefit from the emerging northern powerhouse vision. I met the North Wales Business Council earlier this month and, like businesses across north Wales, it is calling out to be part of the northern powerhouse.

Craig Tracey: Does the Secretary of State agree that the success of the manufacturing industry in Wales, and across the rest of the UK, reflects a growing global demand for our products and is further evidence of the success of the Government's ambitious Exporting is GREAT campaign?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; there is enormous and growing global demand for high-quality products manufactured in Wales. The Government have set ourselves really ambitious targets for increasing the level of UK exports, and I am clear that I want to see Welsh business sharing in that export surge. That is why UK Trade & Investment's Exporting is GREAT roadshow truck will be in Deeside in north Wales tomorrow, explaining to small businesses there what export opportunities there are around the world.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): One way to rebalance the economy is to decentralise enterprise and services. Therefore, why are the Government closing tax offices and courts in peripheral areas of Wales, given the impact that has on the economy? They talk about decentralisation, but they centralise services when they have the opportunity.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman should understand that the Government have a sacred duty to take care of how taxpayers' money is spent. Despite all the problems we were left with in 2010, the truth is that we maintain a very strong UK Government footprint in Wales, and the

growth in private sector jobs in Wales over the past five years far outstrips any reductions we have seen in public sector employment.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Partial income tax powers are of course a welcome step in helping the UK rebalance geographically, but it is vital that those powers are accompanied by a fiscal framework that genuinely preserves non-detriment to Wales. Given the Scottish Government's successful struggle to achieve a no-detriment agreement, what specific representations has the Secretary of State received from the Welsh Government on their chosen deduction method, and what is his chosen deduction method? Is it not the case that partial income tax powers make it more difficult to achieve genuine non-detriment?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is right about the need to get the details right—we have just seen a very prolonged negotiation on the Scottish fiscal framework—but that is further down the line. We still have an ongoing discussion with the Welsh Government. They want to avoid taking on any income tax powers whatsoever. They want to avoid the additional fiscal responsibility that that would entail. They are running from having that fuller financial accountability that we believe is really important for Welsh democracy.

14. [903633] **David T. C. Davies** (Monmouth) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Severn bridge is key to the economy of south Wales, that the debt will be paid back before the April 2018 prediction and that it offers a golden opportunity to reduce tolls for businesses and hard-pressed motorists in Wales?

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend, who chairs the Welsh Affairs Committee, has been persistent and effective in raising concerns about the burden imposed on businesses and motorists in Wales by the very high tolls on the Severn bridge. We have not made any final decisions about what will happen when the private sector concession ends at the end of 2017, but we and the Treasury will be very keen to hear any specific ideas that he and members of his Committee might have.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): Last year, the Secretary of State said his ambition was to secure more balanced growth in the Welsh economy, but on his watch we are seeing the loss of hundreds of jobs in our strategically important steel industry. The Government are being painfully slow to heed our warnings on cutting energy costs, and weak and disingenuous when it comes to standing up to Chinese dumping. With EU backing given in December, how much longer will the Government delay the energy compensation package the steel industry in Wales so desperately needs?

Stephen Crabb: I am really disappointed by the slightly tribal and partisan tone the shadow Secretary of State adopts on this issue. If she wants to talk about what has happened to steel jobs under Conservative and Labour Governments, I am happy to do that, and we can talk about the decline in steel jobs on the watch of previous Labour Governments. I am much more interested in getting answers now to the global storm facing the steel industry. This Government have taken a lead in Europe in changing procurement rules and arguing for protection

measures against Chinese dumping. We are making sure that the steel industry in Wales has the best possible chance of a sustainable and profitable future.

Nia Griffith: The Government also have a key role in commissioning large infrastructure projects, which can boost manufacturing and rebalance the economy. Manufacturers across Wales, who are gearing up in earnest to supply the Swansea bay tidal lagoon, share my deep concern that the Government are now planning a lengthy review, which could scupper the project altogether. Will the Secretary of State now give us an unequivocal guarantee that this vital project will not be sunk by his Government?

Stephen Crabb: I notice that the shadow Secretary of State did not stand up and welcome what we saw yesterday—Her Majesty the Queen naming and opening the new Elizabeth Crossrail line, which, by the way, uses 50,000 tonnes of steel made in Wales by Celsa Steel. The hon. Lady should be absolutely welcoming that as a good example of how UK infrastructure investment can drive growth in the steel industry. On the tidal lagoon review, the chief executive of the Swansea tidal lagoon has welcomed it himself. He welcomes the fact that we are looking into this and exploring all options to see whether the project can be financially viable.

Mr Speaker: We are all better informed, albeit at some length.

13. [903632] **John Howell** (Henley) (Con): Does the Minister share my view that a prime mover behind rebalancing the economy is the sense of fairness? Does he agree that the action taken by the Government in freeing generations of people in constituencies throughout Wales is about making the best use of their talents? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The House and the nation should have heard Mr Howell, and I fear they might not adequately have done so. *[Interruption.]* No, it will do for today—as long as the Secretary of State heard. But courtesy dictates.

Stephen Crabb: I did not hear the full question, but what I did hear was a really important point about fairness when it comes to rebalancing the economy. Unlike previous Labour Governments, who stood by while the economy of the United Kingdom became hopelessly imbalanced towards London and the south-east, we do not think that is good enough. We think that there are talents and resources in the north of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the west of England that need to be captured and enhanced to drive growth in the UK.

Air Passenger Duty

4. **Dr Liam Fox** (North Somerset) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of devolving air passenger duty to Wales. [903623]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): This Government have a proud record on devolution in Wales: establishing the Silk commission, devolving landmark new fiscal powers and taking forward the

St David's day agreement through the new Wales Bill. In that agreement, we committed to consider the case for devolving APD to Wales and this work is currently being undertaken and assessed by the Treasury.

Dr Fox: Devolving air passenger duty will create a market distortion favouring a state-owned airport against a private one. It will damage the economic viability of Bristol airport and have consequential detrimental effects in the south-west. When my right hon. Friend discusses this with the Chancellor, will he gently reflect on the fact that, had our colleagues not made such great gains in the south-west, there would not be a majority Conservative Government?

Stephen Crabb: I am sure that my right hon. Friend, like me, welcomes the fact that the Government are cutting APD in all parts of the UK. However, let us be clear: I want Cardiff airport to be a success story, but I also recognise that there are serious concerns about the effect APD devolution might have on competition issues in relation to Bristol airport.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Is the Secretary of State aware that north Wales's local airports are in Liverpool and Manchester? Will he pull his finger out and have meetings to improve connectivity to Manchester airport by rail from north Wales?

Stephen Crabb: I am very aware of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises. I recently met the north Wales business council precisely to talk about the importance of a rail link from north Wales into Manchester airport. He makes an important point that we are very mindful of.

Workless Households

6. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the proportion of households in Wales which are workless. [903625]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Wales is getting back to work. There are 58,000 fewer workless households in Wales since 2010. Our welfare reforms are benefiting the people of Wales, helping them into jobs that will provide a regular wage for themselves and their families.

Bob Blackman: Does my hon. Friend agree that the far-reaching benefit changes and reforms of the welfare state are encouraging people to get back to work and have the dignity of earning a living rather than living a life on benefits?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The unemployment rate in Wales has fallen by more than that in any part of the UK over the last quarter. Welfare reform is key to that. We are determined to deliver a low welfare, low tax, high wage economy.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): The Institute for Fiscal Studies warned this month that universal credit will tend to weaken the incentive for single parents to be in work. What assessment have the Government made of the effect that rolling out universal credit will have on the number of workless households in Wales?

Alun Cairns: Welfare reform needs to be taken in its totality. It is about incentivising work but also about increasing wages and lowering taxes. I would hope that the hon. Lady would reflect on the positive nature of welfare reform in turning around communities, families and society.

Large Infrastructure Projects

8. **David Rutley** (Macclesfield) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with stakeholders in Wales on future investment in large infrastructure projects in north Wales. [903627]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): The Secretary of State and I regularly meet stakeholders to discuss the Government's plans to deliver improvements in infrastructure across the whole of Wales. For instance, next week the Secretary of State will meet Hitachi to discuss its proposals for a new nuclear power station at Wylfa in more detail.

David Rutley: Can my hon. Friend confirm that bringing HS2 to Crewe six years early, as part of the Government's northern powerhouse, will directly benefit the people of north Wales and spur more economic development programmes in Wales, as well as in north-west England and Cheshire more generally?

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. He highlights the fact that the HS2 project is truly a national scheme. The Crewe hub offers significant potential to north Wales and to the northern powerhouse. I recently met the North Wales-Mersey Dee alliance rail taskforce, which also recognises the potential of north Wales for the northern powerhouse and the northern powerhouse for north Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Much is rightly made of trends in employment in Wales, but average full-time workers' pay in my constituency has dropped by 12% in the past two years. What is the Secretary of State doing to bring infrastructure projects, along with science and technology salaries, to Llanbedr and Trawsfynydd in Dwyfor Meirionnydd?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady is naturally a true champion not only of her own constituency but the whole of north Wales. She will welcome the significant investment in the prison in Wrexham and the £20 billion investment that Wylfa Newydd will bring. She has also shown interest in the modular nuclear projects at Trawsfynydd. I recently met the leader of Gwynedd Council to discuss the prospects that could result from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget making £250 million available for this scheme.

Macur Review

9. **Ann Clwyd** (Cynon Valley) (Lab): When he expects the report of the Macur review to be published. [903628]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Stephen Crabb): Lady Justice Macur's report is being considered as a matter of urgency with a view to publication as soon as possible.

Ann Clwyd: Eight young boys in my constituency were abused in the 1980s. They have waited all this time for some conclusions. It is ridiculous that in the past two months Government Departments have been sitting on Lady Macur's report. What is going on? I understand that redactions are taking place. What confidence can we have that when the report is eventually published it is a true report without interference from Government?

Stephen Crabb: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question. We are discussing something incredibly serious and sensitive. Let me put on record my thanks to her for the tireless work that she has put in over the years to fight for justice for those who have suffered horrendous abuse. We are talking about some of the most shameful episodes in the history of the nation of Wales.

We have the report, and it is being looked at by the Crown Prosecution Service, the Director of Public Prosecutions and the police. Lady Justice Macur recommended to the Government that certain redactions might need to be made. The commitment that I give to the right hon. Lady and the House today is that we will make redactions only where they are absolutely necessary, and we will provide a full explanation of why we are making those redactions. We owe that to the victims.

12. [903631] **Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): Does the Secretary of State agree that there is concern about attention in the report to the language issue? The only attention that was given to the language issue in the Waterhouse report was to say that the children swore a great deal, as well they might have.

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman is getting into a level of detail about the matter that we can perhaps discuss outside this place on another occasion. Perhaps he and I could meet to talk about that.

Hywel Williams: The Wales Council for Voluntary Action criminal records unit, which provides free disclosure and barring checks for the third sector, will close on 31 May. The last paper application will be accepted this Friday. The WCVA has provided a bilingual service, which will cease on Friday. Does the Secretary of State share my concern about that cut?

Stephen Crabb: The hon. Gentleman knows that I want the Welsh language to flourish and be used on a day-to-day basis. I am not familiar with the case that he has raised, but if he wants to drop me a note, I will make sure that it is looked into fully.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [903644] **Michelle Donelan** (Chippenham) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 24 February.

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): The House will be aware of the dreadful accident that occurred at Didcot power station yesterday afternoon, in which one person died and three are missing. I know that the whole House will join me in sending our condolences to the family and friends of the victim and our best wishes

to those who are still missing or injured. I pay tribute to the quick and incredibly brave actions of our emergency services, who dealt with the incident with typical professionalism. The Health and Safety Executive will carry out a full investigation to find out what led to the tragedy.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others, and, in addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Michelle Donelan: I would like to associate myself and the people of Wiltshire with the Prime Minister's sentiments about the occurrence in Didcot.

Wiltshire has successfully integrated a number of Syrian refugees, including babies and children, who might otherwise have frozen or starved to death in the camps. However, there has been a serious delay by the Home Office, despite Wiltshire Council's claims to have tried to introduce more refugees into the area. Will the Prime Minister tell us what more he can do on the matter? Will he look into it? Will he also outline what we can do to fulfil our moral duty to those desperate people?

The Prime Minister: Let me pay tribute to Wiltshire Council and to the many councils up and down our country that have done a magnificent job of integrating and taking in Syrian refugees and their families, finding them homes, finding them schools and, I hope, in time, finding them jobs, too. If we look at what has happened across Europe with the relocation and resettlement programme, we see that Britain has done far better than any other country. We said 1,000 by Christmas, and we have delivered 1,000 by Christmas.

My hon. Friend asked what more we can do. First of all, I will make sure that she can meet the Home Office to talk about how we can make sure the system works well. We will continue to invest in the Syrian refugee camps, not least with the \$11 billion that we raised at the landmark London conference. We will continue to do what we can to deliver the 20,000 Syrian refugees we said we would take into our country.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I want to echo the Prime Minister's tribute to all the emergency services in dealing with the major incident in Didcot. Our thoughts are with the families of the person who died and those who are missing or injured. We rely on our emergency services and we should make sure they are always there for all of us.

The NHS staff survey published yesterday shows that nine out of 10 junior doctors already work extra hours beyond their normal contract. The survey also showed falling morale among that vital group of staff. What does the Prime Minister think the Health Secretary's veto of a deal and the imposition of a contract will do to their morale?

The Prime Minister: First, the Health Secretary did not veto a deal. For four years we have had discussions about how important it is to have an NHS that works on a more seven-day basis. Let me pay tribute to the fact that so many in the NHS work so hard already at the weekends, but what matters is making sure we can have a genuine seven-day NHS.

What I would say to junior doctors is that no junior doctor working legal hours will receive a pay cut. This contract will not impose longer hours. In fact, it has tougher safeguards to make sure it reduces the hours that are worked. We are not seeking to save money from the new contract. Nights, Saturday evenings and Sundays continue to attract unsocial hours payments. This is a good deal from a Government that are putting £10 billion more into our NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn: This dispute with the junior doctors has been on the basis of misrepresented research about weekend mortality. I will read the Prime Minister what the researchers themselves say:

"It is not possible to ascertain the extent to which these excess deaths may be preventable; to assume that they are avoidable would be rash and misleading."

Are the Prime Minister and his Health Secretary being "rash and misleading" with these figures?

The Prime Minister: Let me agree with the right hon. Gentleman about something, which is that this dispute has been plagued by scaremongering and inaccurate statistics. The British Medical Association, in its first intervention, said that this was a 30% pay cut. That was completely untrue. In fact, it was so untrue that it had to take its pay calculator off its website, and it never put it back up again.

Let me answer very directly the question about excess deaths. The 6,000 figure for excess deaths was based on a question asked by the Health Secretary of Sir Bruce Keogh, the medical director of the NHS. Now that we have had time to go into these figures in more detail, I can tell the House this: the Health Secretary was indeed guilty—he was guilty of an understatement. The true figure for excess deaths at the weekend are 11,000, not 6,000. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will now withdraw his totally unjustified attack on the Health Secretary. Will he withdraw it, now he knows the figures?

Jeremy Corbyn: It is just worth reflecting for one moment that there is no dispute with the junior doctors in Scotland or in Wales, because their Governments have had the sense to reach an agreement with the junior doctors. The Prime Minister must also be aware that the vast majority of the public in England are on the side of the junior doctors, not the Secretary of State.

The situation actually gets worse. A freedom of information request by the BBC today reveals that, when asked for the source of the Health Secretary's statistics, civil servants in the Department of Health decided to

"offer up the most bland statement possible, that would neither confirm nor contradict"

the Health Secretary's "statement."

Is it not time that the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary actually apologise for what they have done and correct these statements, and indeed, while they are about it, reach an honourable settlement with the junior doctors?

The Prime Minister: I think the best that can be said is that the right hon. Gentleman wrote that question before he heard my answer. I have given the fullest possible description of how the figure of 6,000 excess

deaths was arrived at—the true figure being 11,000—but I note that there is absolutely no withdrawal of his accusation against the Health Secretary, even after he gets those figures.

The right hon. Gentleman says there is no dispute in Scotland and Wales with the junior doctors. The reason for that is that Scotland and Wales are not trying to create more of a seven-day NHS. That seven-day NHS was not only in our manifesto—I want to make sure that hard-working people can access health services at an equal rate right through the week, because they do not just get ill on weekdays; but if he reads his own party's report on its election defeat, he will see that it admits that the concept of a seven-day NHS was a very popular concept, and it is.

The right hon. Gentleman can see that in England, we are putting £10 billion more into the NHS, we have got 10,000 more doctors and 10,000 more nurses, we are treating more patients, we have a settlement of the GP contract and we now have a settlement of the junior doctors contract. We are building a strong NHS for patients—that is what this is about.

Jeremy Corbyn: We all want a strong and successful NHS, but that will not be achieved by provoking industrial action, misrepresenting research or failing to get a grip on the cost of agency staff in the NHS, which now amounts to £4 billion. Indeed, the Prime Minister's own local NHS trust has overspent on staffing costs by £11 million this year, yet has managed to spend £30 million on agency staff. Will the chair of the Oxford anti-austerity campaign be writing another letter to himself on behalf of his constituents, asking for the Health Secretary to intervene to support his local NHS?

The Prime Minister: I am very proud of the NHS in Oxfordshire and everyone who works in it. Having met the head of the Oxford Radcliffe trust recently, I know that he supports the move towards more seven-day services. That is absolutely vital.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Ask your mother!

The Prime Minister: Ask my mother? I know what my mother would say. She would look across the Dispatch Box and say, "Put on a proper suit, do up your tie and sing the national anthem."

Jeremy Corbyn: If we are talking of motherly advice, my late mother would have said, "Stand up for the principle of a health service free at the point of use for everybody." That is what she dedicated her life to, as did many of her generation.

We are more than three quarters of the way into this financial year. The NHS deficit is already £2.26 billion, and 53% of NHS trust finance directors say that the quality of care in their local area has worsened this year. What will the deficit be by the end of next month?

The Prime Minister: We will get deficits down because we are clamping down on the staffing agencies and expensive management consultants, and introducing better public procurement.

The right hon. Gentleman has to recognise that we said we would back the Simon Stevens plan, which meant at least £8 billion more going into the NHS, but we have put £10 billion more into the NHS. At the last

election and subsequently, Labour has refused to back that extra money. My mother is as proud of the NHS as I am, and she would be pleased to know that in the NHS today, there are 1.9 million more people going to A&E, 1.6 million more operations, 10,700 more doctors and 11,800 more nurses. I think that if Nye Bevan were here today, he would want a seven-day NHS, because he knew that the NHS was for patients up and down our country.

Jeremy Corbyn: Nye Bevan would be turning in his grave if he could hear the Prime Minister's attitude towards the NHS. He was a man with vision who wanted a health service for the good of all. I tell you, Mr Speaker, our health service is run by brilliant people—brilliant doctors, brilliant nurses and brilliant staff. I have a question for the Prime Minister from one of those brilliant doctors, whose name is Ashraf:

"As a doctor I know full well the stresses on the NHS and the shortcomings. We already have a 7 day emergency service. How does increasing elective work improve safety at the weekend? If a truly 7 day NHS is wanted, we need more nurses, admin staff, porters, radiographers, physios"—

all the other vital workers. Will the Prime Minister today commit to publishing the Department of Health's analysis of the real cost of introducing a seven-day NHS? Is he prepared to pay for it, rather than picking a fight with the junior doctors who want to deliver it?

The Prime Minister: What I think is not clear is whether or not Labour supports a seven-day NHS. We support a seven-day NHS and that is why we are putting in £10 billion, 10,000 more doctors, and 11,000 more nurses. Crucially, yes, that is why we are looking at the contracts in the NHS to ensure that it can work on more of a seven-day basis. The truth is this that there are hospitals today in our country, such as the Salford Royal in the north-west of England, that already operate on a seven-day basis within existing budgets. That is good, because they are using all the equipment on a seven-day basis, they are carrying out consultations seven days a week and they carry out some operations seven days a week. That is good for the hospital, good for the staff working in it and, above all, good for patients. We do not just get ill Monday to Friday. I want a world-class NHS. We are funding a world-class NHS. We have world-class people working in our NHS and together we will build that seven-day NHS.

Q3. [903646] Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): With such a large number of schools in Brecon and Radnorshire facing the prospect of closure, what can my right hon. Friend do to encourage the Welsh Assembly to convert state schools into free schools and academies so that my constituents can benefit from the improvements to education that English pupils are seeing and so that we hopefully save these excellent schools from closure?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, education is devolved in Wales and the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government. I urge them to focus on how a good education depends not only on the finance, which is there because of the way that the Barnett formula works and because of the decisions we have taken about funding the NHS in England, but on high standards and the publication of league tables, so that people can

see how their children are doing. Crucially, it requires structural reforms—free schools, academies—introducing some diversity and competition in getting organisations that are passionate about education to provide state education. We want all the best organisations in there providing the best education for our children.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by associating the Scottish National party with the comments made by the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party about the tragedy in Didcot? Our thoughts are with all those who have been affected.

Will the Prime Minister congratulate the Scottish Government and his own colleagues who secured a deal on financial arrangements for the next phase of Scottish devolution? The Treasury position initially endangered £7 billion of public funding in Scotland. At the beginning of this week, that was reduced to £3 billion and yesterday morning it was £2.5 billion. What changed the mind of the Treasury and helped it agree to a deal that will make Scotland no worse off?

The Prime Minister: Let me agree with the right hon. Gentleman that this is an excellent deal. It is an excellent deal for Scotland, but it is also an excellent deal for the United Kingdom. For those of us who want to keep the United Kingdom together, we have just demonstrated that we can have full-on devolution with a powerhouse Parliament and a fair fiscal settlement inside the United Kingdom, and that is something to be celebrated. Now we will move to a situation in which the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament will have to start talking about policies and decisions rather than processes. I am happy that the negotiations went as they did, I am happy that we have a good outcome, and I am happy that Lord Smith, who is responsible for so much of this work, put out a statement saying that this delivers Smith and the principles “in full”. No more grievance, no more fussing about process, no more arguments about the arrangements: now is the time to get on and govern.

Angus Robertson: We are indebted to Scotland’s Finance Secretary, John Swinney, and to First Minister Nicola Sturgeon for securing a no-detriment deal for Scotland. The Prime Minister is right that all parties will have to lay out their plans in advance of the May election, so will he answer this question? Is it true that in this time of austerity his party, the Conservative party, is planning tax cuts for higher earners in Scotland?

The Prime Minister: It will be Ruth Davidson, who is the only proper Opposition figure in Scotland, who will be sending out the plans. If someone in Scotland is worried about having a bit of a one-party state and a lack of accountability, and if they think that the Labour party in Scotland has lost its way, there is only one choice, and that is Ruth. I think there are opportunities to cut taxes, sharpen incentives and attract businesses and people into Scotland, and I am sure that Ruth will be making those arguments. As she does, and whatever she decides, she will have my full and unequivocal support.

Q5. [903648] **Alberto Costa** (South Leicestershire) (Con): A recent survey undertaken by Blaby District Council showed that 96% of the 1,100 residents surveyed were

satisfied with my council’s services. Will my right hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to the Conservative leader of the council, Terry Richardson, his councillor colleagues, and all the officers in Blaby District Council who, while making savings that are necessary, are continuing to deliver a first-class service to the residents of South Leicestershire?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in doing that, and he makes an important point. Yes, we had to make difficult spending decisions, not least over the past five years, but satisfaction with local government services actually went up. I think that proves a larger point, which is that we can reduce spending levels, find efficiencies, and provide better services at the same time.

Q2. [903645] **Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): My constituent Frank Wason is on long-term sick leave due to severe depression, but he is no longer entitled to sick pay. He was turned down for employment and support allowance, and he cannot claim jobseeker’s allowance due to his job being kept open for him. Mr Wason cannot leave his highly skilled job as a chef due to the threat of punitive sanctions, leaving him with no income. Will the Prime Minister consider Mr Wason’s case specifically, as well as the wider issue of expecting people with mental health issues who are unable to work to live on fresh air?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to look at the individual case, because the way that our benefit system should work is clear: if someone is unable to work, but with help could work, they should go on to employment and support allowance and the work-related activity group and get that help. If they are unable to work, they go on to the support group and get a higher amount of money that is not means tested or time limited. For people who have mental health issues and difficulties there is the new personal independence payment system, which can address some of those issues. Quite rightly for a generous and compassionate country, we have a benefit system that supports those who cannot work, while ensuring that those who can work are encouraged to do so.

Q6. [903649] **Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): It is fantastic news that unemployment in my constituency has fallen by 62% since 2010, but I am committed to helping even more residents back into work as we work towards our target of full employment. That is why on 18 March I will be holding a community and jobs fair, bringing together employers and the voluntary sector, for residents to find out the many ways that they can get suitable employment and support from charities. I invite the Prime Minister to come along to that event and see for himself the resources that the residents of Erewash have.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. I am sure I will be touring the country quite a lot in the weeks to come, and perhaps a visit to Erewash would be very worth while. I have visited her constituency before. We now have a much lower unemployment rate, and looking across Europe, our rate of just above 5% is one of the lowest in Europe. Even at that rate, there is still a lot more to do to match the jobs that are being created to the people who want to work, and jobs fairs, apprenticeships

and training programmes are absolutely essential so that we deliver on what we promised, which is full employment.

Q4. [903647] **Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): The Prime Minister likes to go on about the importance of returning sovereignty to this House. May I remind him that on 7 January we debated the women's state pension and the fact that women are being discriminated against by the pace of the state pension increase. The House divided that day with 158 votes to zero, and it asked the Government to mitigate the effects of that measure. Why have the Government not respected the sovereignty of the vote of this Parliament?

The Prime Minister: First, I would argue very strongly that we are not discriminating against women. We are ensuring that there is an equal age of retirement, which is right. Women have been discriminated against in the pension system in the past, and the single-tier pension means that many more women will be retiring with a full pension. As they do so, they have the triple lock of knowing that pensions will always go up by wages, prices or 2.5%, whichever is the highest. That is why pensioner poverty is at a record low, and why pensioners know that they can live in security and dignity in our country.

Q7. [903650] **Craig Mackinlay** (South Thanet) (Con): South Thanet lags behind much of the south-east across very many indices. I have launched a new body locally, the Ramsgate regeneration alliance, which brings together businesses and community groups. May I invite my right hon. Friend and the Minister responsibility for coastal communities to this gem on our doorstep to see for themselves what it could and indeed should be?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to put Ramsgate on my tour list for the coming months. We all remember the historic battle my hon. Friend fought in that constituency. We have set up the coastal communities fund and have a dedicated Minister in the Government to try to help coastal communities. I will make sure that officials from his Department meet the new alliance and the Ramsgate coastal community team to see what they can do to help.

Q8. [903651] **Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): For two years, my constituents and I campaigned against the development of a luxury skyscraper. The local councillors listened and rejected the plans, but then the Conservative Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government called in the decision and overturned the wishes of the community, showing utter disrespect for local democracy. The Prime Minister preaches localism, but will he finally admit that his Government believe only in the devolution of blame for cuts, not the devolution of actual power to local communities?

The Prime Minister: We have a long-standing system not only for local planning but for being able to call in decisions. That system operated the whole time under the previous Labour Government. If anything, our local planning system is actually putting more power in the hands of local people, because once they have completed their local plan it is then much easier to say yes to developments that are within that plan and no to developments that are outside it.

Q9. [903652] **Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Last Friday, I made separate visits to three families, all of whom have a child suffering from acute mental health difficulties that the families felt had not been adequately assessed at the early stages by child and adolescent mental health services. Colleagues from across the Chamber will be all too familiar with such visits. I welcome the Prime Minister's recent commitment to reform mental health provision for young people. Will he consider reviewing the provision of initial stage treatment and continue to be the champion for these vulnerable and brave children?

The Prime Minister: Let me thank my hon. Friend for his question. He is right that children and young people's mental health is a priority for the Government. I think we can all agree across this House that for many years this area has not had adequate attention or adequate investment. I would highlight in particular the problems of psychosis, sometimes caused by drug use. I would also raise the huge problem of eating disorders; we are seeing a rapid increase in the number of people suffering. We have gone a long way in increasing the number of talking therapies. Something like 740,000 more people are accessing those therapies than when the Government came into office. We recognise that there is more to be done and that is why we are investing £1.4 billion in system-wide transformation across child and adolescent mental health services.

Q10. [903653] **Richard Arkless** (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Last week, Scottish Power refused to attend an evidence session with the all-party parliamentary group on Scottish Power cashback mis-selling, where crucial new evidence was uncovered. As a former consumer litigator, I am utterly convinced that more than 2,000 of my constituents and more than 500,000 people in the UK are owed cashback from Scottish Power. Given that this is potentially a scandal of huge proportions, will the Prime Minister agree to meet me and the cross-party group to discuss how we can ensure that these ordinary hard-working people receive the cashback they were promised from Scottish Power?

The Prime Minister: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised this. It has been raised on previous occasions by my hon. Friend the Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb) and I know the cross-party group has done some very useful work. My understanding is that any alleged wrongdoing should be fully investigated. Ofgem can impose fines if it finds companies have breached their licence. I am very happy to arrange for a meeting between him and other members of the all-party group with the relevant Ministers in the Department of Energy and Climate Change, so that we can try to get this fixed.

Q11. [903654] **Michael Ellis** (Northampton North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that with the NATO summit in Warsaw pending, the threat of expansionism from Putin's Russia and the national security threat from Daesh, the Government are right to support putting 2% of our GDP towards defence? Is he not shocked at the failure of the Labour party to do likewise?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point—we face an insecure and unstable world, particularly given what Putin has done in the Ukraine and particularly

in view of what we see in Syria. That is why I think 2% spending on defence and making sure we renew our nuclear deterrent is the right answer.

To be fair to the Labour party, it has an answer. It is not going to spend 2% and it is not going to renew our Trident submarines, but it has come up with a really brilliant answer. They are bringing back as their spokesman and spin doctor Damian McBride. Six months ago, the Leader of the Opposition said:

“We can win in 2020, but only if we spend the next five years building this movement and putting forward a vision for the new kind of politics: honest, kinder and more caring.”

Six months on, Damian McBride is back. That says it all. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues are calling for more; there will be more.

Q12. [903655] **Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Lab): Last week, together with several of my hon. Friends, I visited Palestine, where we went to the home of Nora and her family, who have lived in the old city of East Jerusalem since 1953. Israeli settlers, however, are now trying to force Nora from her home of over 60 years. There are many other cases like that. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that illegal settlements and constructions are a major roadblock that hinder peaceful negotiations? What are this Government doing to help prevent these infringements into Palestinian lives and land?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman’s question is incredibly important. I am well known as a strong friend of Israel, but I have to say that the first time I visited Jerusalem, had a proper tour around that wonderful city and saw what has happened with the effective encirclement of East Jerusalem—occupied East Jerusalem—I found it genuinely shocking. What this Government have consistently done and go on doing is to say that we are supporters of Israel, but we do not support illegal settlements and we do not support what is happening in East Jerusalem. It is very important for this capital city to be maintained in the way it was in the past.

Q14. [903657] **Kelly Tolhurst** (Rochester and Strood) (Con): One of my constituents, Alex Bagnall, is fighting to have his son brought back to the UK after he was taken to Poland by the mother illegally, as per The Hague convention. Will the Prime Minister outline what interventions the Government can make on the EU and Polish authorities with regard to The Hague convention in order to help British families with the safe return of their abducted children, offering hope to devastated families such as my constituents, the Bagnalls?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise a case like this. Sadly, there are far too many of them in our country. The straight answer is that the return decision is, of course, for the Polish court, and Governments cannot interfere in the decisions or processes of another country’s justice system. However, we have the International Child Abduction and Contact Unit at the Ministry of Justice, and it has been in constant touch with Mr Bagnall. It is processing his paperwork and chasing its counterparts in Poland for

information. I will make sure that the Foreign Secretary is made aware of this case and does everything he can to help my hon. Friend and her constituent.

Q13. [903656] **Callum McCaig** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Oil and gas has contributed over £300 billion to Treasury coffers. The Scottish Government, trade unions and Oil and Gas UK are calling for reductions to the headline rate of tax to support the industry in its hour of need. Yet instead of the so-called “broad shoulders” of the UK, what we see are the slopey shoulders of the Prime Minister, repeatedly dodging his responsibilities. Will he commit to reduce the tax level on oil and gas, and support this vital industry?

The Prime Minister: In the Budget last year, we reduced the burden of tax on oil and gas—something that we were able to do because of the broad shoulders of the UK. Now let us just examine what has happened since that time. Oil and gas revenues are down by 94%. If it were not for the broad shoulders of the UK Government and if instead this was a genuinely fiscally independent Scotland, there would be a massive black hole in its budget, and it would be cutting welfare, cutting spending, putting up taxes and facing a financial catastrophe.

Q15. [903658] **Nusrat Ghani** (Wealden) (Con): Every week two women are killed in England and Wales by a current or former partner. The perpetrator is the problem: the question is not “Why doesn’t she leave?” but “Why doesn’t he stop?”

The Sussex police and crime commissioner is piloting a programme called Drive, which aims to change the behaviour of offenders. In advance of his new strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating Katy Bourne on tackling domestic violence throughout Sussex?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that issue. We have got better at tackling the crime of domestic violence, but there is still so much more to do. Katy Bourne, whom I know, does an excellent job as the police and crime commissioner. I think that police and crime commissioners, who have a higher profile than police authorities ever had, can give a real lead on this sort of thing, and I urge others around the country to do exactly that. We also need to make sure that we are policing these incidents properly, and we need to change the culture, but I think that police and crime commissioners such as Katy Bourne can help to lead the way.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): As the Prime Minister knows, resources were ring-fenced following the fresh start agreement in November to help Northern Ireland to deal with legacy cases. Will the Prime Minister consider releasing some of that money—this has been hinted at by the Secretary of State—to help the Police Service of Northern Ireland as it faces increasing pressures on front-line policing? Will he also take this opportunity to reaffirm that there will be no rewriting of the past in Northern Ireland to legitimatise terrorism, or to promote a pernicious narrative that tries to make the security forces equivalent to terrorists?

The Prime Minister: The fresh start agreement was a good agreement, and an important part of it was dealing with legacy cases and ensuring that they were dealt with more quickly. To me, it has always been about trying to heal the hurt of the legacy cases rather than trying to write new narratives.

I shall consider carefully what the right hon. Gentleman has said about resources. We need to make sure that the policing of Northern Ireland continues to be properly resourced, not least because we still face a terrorist threat today.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): The United Kingdom endorses the Code of Good Practice on Referendums, published by the European Commission for Democracy through Law, which states:

“Equality of opportunity must be guaranteed for the supporters and opponents of the proposal being voted on.”

It also states:

“Equality must be ensured in terms of public subsidies and other forms of backing.”

Yesterday, Sir Jeremy Heywood sent a letter to Departments preventing Ministers from having access to civil service briefings. Has the Prime Minister checked whether that letter was compatible with the guidelines on neutrality?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy with the letter that was sent out, for this reason. The Government have a position on this issue: the Government’s position is that we would be better off in a reformed European Union. Ministers are able to depart from that position, and campaign in a personal capacity. That is, I think, a very important statement. It is right in terms of how we go about it, but it does not mean that the Government are neutral. It does not mean that the civil service is neutral. The Government have a policy from which people can depart.

As for the funding of the referendum campaign, we now have very clear laws and rules in place—and the Electoral Commission—to make sure that both campaigns are funded properly, and I think that that is good for our democracy.

Scotland's Fiscal Framework

12.39 pm

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the new fiscal framework for Scotland, which was agreed yesterday by the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments.

I begin by paying tribute to everyone who has worked so hard to arrive at this point: my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney, who have led these negotiations with skill; my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, Lord Dunlop, whose contribution has been invaluable; and the dedicated teams of officials from Her Majesty's Treasury and the Scottish Government who have worked tirelessly on behalf of their respective Governments. They can be proud of what has been achieved and the service they have given.

This is a truly historic deal that will pave the way for the Scottish Parliament to become one of the most powerful and accountable devolved Parliaments in the world. We have respected all the principles set out in the cross-party Smith agreement and delivered a deal that is fair for Scotland and fair for the whole United Kingdom. As Lord Smith said himself yesterday evening:

"When the Smith Agreement was passed to the Prime Minister and First Minister both gave their word that they would deliver it into law—they have met that promise in full".

Scotland's two Governments will give more details in the coming days, but I would like to set out a few key elements of the deal.

The Scottish Government will retain all the revenue from the taxes that are being devolved or assigned, including around £12 billion of income tax and around £5 billion of VAT. The Scottish Government block grant will be adjusted to reflect the devolution and assignment of further taxes and the devolution of further spending responsibilities. We have kept our commitment to retain the Barnett formula, extending it to cover areas of devolved welfare. For tax, we will use the UK Government's preferred funding model. Under that model the Scottish Government hold all Scotland-specific risks in relation to devolved and assigned taxes, just like they do for devolved spending under the Barnett formula. That is fair to Scotland and fair to the rest of the UK.

However, for a transitional period covering the next Scottish Parliament, the Governments have agreed to share those Scotland-specific risks as these powers are implemented. Specifically, the Scottish Government will hold the economic risks while the UK Government will hold the population risks, so the Scottish Government will not receive a penny less than Barnett funding over the course of the spending review simply due to different population growth. By the end of 2021, a review of the framework will be informed by an independent report so we can ensure that we are continuing to deliver Smith in full, with the Scottish Government being responsible for the full range of opportunities and risks associated with their new responsibilities.

We have also agreed that the Scottish Government will have additional new borrowing powers. That will ensure that the Scottish Government can manage their budget effectively and invest up to £3 billion in vital

infrastructure. In line with the recommendation of the Smith agreement, we will provide the Scottish Government with £200 million to set up the new powers they will control.

The Government have delivered more powers to the Scottish people, ensuring that they have one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world and the economic and national security that comes from being part of our United Kingdom. That is what we have agreed and that is what we have delivered in full. Now that we have agreed this historic devolution deal, the conversation must move on to how these new powers are to be used.

The Scottish Government will have extensive powers on tax, welfare and spending. They will have control over income tax and be able to change the rates and thresholds. They will be able to create new benefits, and of course the permanence of the Scottish Parliament is put beyond any doubt.

The people of Scotland voted for these new powers, and they deserve to hear from the parties in Scotland how they will use them. They are new powers that, if used well, can grow Scotland's economy, and indeed population, and bring greater opportunity and prosperity. Now that we have agreed this fiscal framework, I hope and trust that this House and the other place will welcome it, while of course subjecting it to full scrutiny. I commend this statement to the House.

12.44pm

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance notice of his statement, and indeed for coming to the House yesterday to indicate he would be making it today. I begin by welcoming unequivocally the news that an agreement has been reached on the fiscal framework, and I would also like to echo the thanks to both Governments, the Deputy First Minister, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, who is in his place, and of course the Secretary of State himself for working so hard to secure this historic deal. Our heartfelt thanks also go out to the officials of both Governments, who we all know are the people who do the real work in these negotiations.

Yesterday's agreement marks the removal of the final obstacle to the transfer of significant and substantial powers to Scotland, and, as Lord Smith himself has said, the agreement

"sees the recommendations of the Smith commission delivered in full."

Importantly, the vow stipulated clearly that the Barnett formula should remain the key mechanism for calculating Scotland's budget. That has now been agreed and Barnett has been secured.

I note the Secretary of State's commitment to publishing details of the agreement by the end of this week, and I welcome that commitment, but can he indicate whether this House will have time to scrutinise the agreement in detail? I have been saying for some time that greater transparency is required in the way these deals are negotiated. This process has highlighted the fact that future intergovernmental relationships must be improved to make these powers work for Scotland. Lord Smith's recommendations that both Governments need

"to work together to create a more productive, robust, visible and transparent relationship"

and that the Joint Ministerial Committee

“must be reformed as a matter of urgency”

echo in this process. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this will be done?

We all know that the major stumbling block was the indexation method used for the block grant adjustment. Under the compromise reached, there will be a five-year transitional period, which will cover the full term of the next Scottish Parliament. Towards the end of that period, an independent review and recommendation will be published that will form the basis of a more permanent solution. When he gave evidence to the Scottish Parliament's devolution Committee last night, the Secretary of State suggested that the period between the review being published and the transitional period ending at the end of March 2022 could be as little as 12 weeks. If no agreement is reached, what happens then?

On the transitional period itself, it is my understanding that the Scottish Fiscal Commission will carry out the necessary forecasts of Scottish GDP and tax revenues. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, under the terms of the fiscal framework negotiations, those forecasts will be fully independent of the Scottish Government? Last week, the Scottish Finance Committee voted against allowing for that independence.

There also seems to be some confusion over the block grant adjustment during the transitional period to 2022. The First Minister said it would be done according to the Treasury's favoured method but with the Scottish Government's favoured outcome. Can the Secretary of State confirm what method will be used? Will it be the catchily named tax capacity adjusted levels deduction, which I understand was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury's latest offer?

Further clarity is also needed on the timeframe for the devolution of powers. The Secretary of State has said that the new income tax powers will be available by April 2017. However, the Deputy First Minister has said he does not agree that that timeframe is realistic. Is the Secretary of State able to confirm that the new tax powers will be transferred by April 2017?

Today the Scottish Government are passing the Scottish budget. Twelve months from now, at the time of the next Scottish budget, we want them to have full control of income tax and air passenger duty and the deployment of 50% of Scotland's VAT revenues. We also want them to have the considerable powers over welfare, which will allow us to design a new social security system for Scotland.

I welcome the review and the fact that it will be fully independent. I have stated several times that impartial oversight and, if necessary, arbitration should be an established part of intergovernmental relations. Will the Secretary of State tell us how the review body will be chosen, and can he confirm that it will be done in a spirit of consensus with the full agreement of both Governments? Will he also tell us to what extent the recommendations of the review will influence the decision taken on the long-term solution for block grant adjustment?

I close by welcoming once again the agreement that has been reached. Today marks an historic date in Scotland's devolution journey: the creation of one of the most powerful devolved Parliaments in the world. The promises made to Scotland in 2014 have been met—the Smith agreement implemented, Barnett protected, powers transferred, the vow delivered. Scottish politics

will never be the same again thanks to these new powers. We have entered a new and exciting era of devolution. What an opportunity to transform Scotland for everyone—an opportunity that my party will grasp with both hands.

David Mundell: I agree with most of what the hon. Gentleman said about the opportunity this presents to change Scottish politics. I think the people of Scotland want us to move on from discussing process to discussing policies and the difference that we can make for them with these extensive new powers. It is my full expectation that the agreement and associated details should be available tomorrow, and I very much hope that that will afford the maximum amount of scrutiny. It will of course be open to Committees of this House to scrutinise the arrangements as they see fit.

For understandable reasons, the hon. Gentleman makes reference to intergovernmental relations, but it is important to look at what Lord Smith said about how this agreement was arrived at. He said:

“It is difficult to imagine a bigger test of inter-governmental relationships and while it was obviously a very tough negotiation, what matters is that an agreement was reached.

He continued:

“This provides an excellent basis for constructive engagement between the governments long into the future.”

I accept that fully. I believe that when the transition period is over and the independent reports have been published, it will be possible for the Governments to reach agreement.

The hon. Gentleman has asked many times why it has taken so long, but many important agreements are reached at the eleventh hour, just by the very nature of doing a deal. I am sure that we will be able, on the basis we have set out, to ensure that that is the case at the end of the transitional period. The independent review, to which he referred, will indeed be a matter for agreement between the two Governments, but as he is well aware, many people in Scotland hold themselves out as being independent but are perhaps not as independent as they superficially seem. It is therefore important that there is agreement between the two Governments as to how that independent review should go forward.

On the Fiscal Commission, the agreement with the Scottish Government is that its forecasts will be fully independent. Finally, this Government will place no impediment on the transfer of powers. Obviously we cannot impose the income tax powers on the Scottish Government, and we would not seek to do so, but I would have thought and hoped that they would want to take them on as soon as possible, and that is the end to which we will be working.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): First, I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his apparent success in achieving a settlement of this difficult issue—we look forward to the details tomorrow. Can he assure the House that when the settlement is implemented, it will not only give a strong Scottish Government the powers they need to conduct their devolved affairs properly, but do nothing whatever to impair the ability of United Kingdom Governments to maintain financial discipline and healthy public finances for the British economy? That, surely, is an essential condition for the future growth and prosperity of the English, British, Welsh, Irish—United Kingdom—economy.

David Mundell: I am very happy to give my right hon. and learned Friend the assurance he seeks. The Scottish fiscal framework will be consistent with the UK fiscal framework.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): May I begin by thanking the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement and indeed for the conversations he had yesterday, given the constraints of parliamentary time and being able to make a statement only today? We appreciate his having done so.

I speak on behalf of all Scottish National party Members in welcoming the agreement on the fiscal framework, and we all look forward to the draft heads of agreement being published for parliamentary scrutiny in this place and in the Scottish Parliament later this week. My SNP colleagues in the Scottish Government were clear throughout these protracted negotiations that they would not sign a deal that included a threat to the Scottish budget. Members on the SNP Benches here, too, pursued the UK Government's commitment to the principle of "no detriment", a promise made during the Smith commission negotiations and a promise that the SNP has ensured has been delivered.

When negotiations began, Scotland's budget faced a threat from the Treasury of a cut of £7 billion. This week, it was £3 billion, and yesterday morning it was £2.5 billion, but last night my colleagues in the Scottish Government secured a deal that will ensure that Scotland will not be a pound or even a penny worse off, and that the new powers that were promised will be delivered. I pay tribute to the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, and the Deputy First Minister, John Swinney, for their efforts to stand up for Scotland and for being stronger for Scotland.

I welcome the fact that the UK Government will guarantee that the outcome of the Scottish Government's preferred funding model—the per capita indexed deduction—is delivered in each of the next six years. I understand that a transitional funding arrangement will be reviewed following the UK and Scottish parliamentary elections in 2020 and 2021 respectively. The review will be informed by an independent report, with recommendations presented to both Governments by the end of 2021. In that context, let me say this: the Smith report was crystal clear that the fiscal framework had to be agreed by both the UK and Scottish Governments. The Treasury tried to engineer an agreement that would have allowed it to impose a model of indexation in five years' time—those are the facts of the matter. That would have seen billions cut from Scotland's budget. Let me therefore ask the Secretary of State the following questions: will he confirm that the Treasury no longer has the power to impose a method of indexation? Will he confirm that the review will go ahead without prejudice to the outcome? And will he confirm that there is no default indexation option and that the Scottish Government's agreement is required before any new indexation model can be adopted?

David Mundell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the parts of the agreement that he did. This has been a negotiation, and this is the point arrived at in the agreement; it is not possible for the Treasury or the UK Government to have engineered an agreement, as what was needed was the agreement of the Scottish Government, and that is what has been achieved. The two

parties have been able to reach an agreement on a fiscal framework that is both fair to Scotland and fair to the people of Scotland.

I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that the review will go ahead on an independent basis, without prejudice or a predetermined outcome, and it will be concluded by the end of 2021. There will be no imposition of any formula at the end of that period, and what happens will be by way of agreement. As I said in my previous comments, when I quoted what Lord Smith said, I believe that this process, through some of the most difficult types of negotiation, gives us confidence that in a maturing relationship the UK Government and the Scottish Government will be able to reach such an agreement.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Extrapolating recent population trends, what is the additional cost to England, Wales and Northern Ireland of the transitional arrangements on population?

David Mundell: There will be no additional cost to England, Wales and Northern Ireland from the powers being transferred compared with if we were not proceeding with this devolution settlement, because the sum being delivered to the Scottish Government is exactly the same as would have been delivered under the Barnett formula.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The Scottish Government have committed to halving air passenger duty in 2018, if still in government. That leaves Newcastle airport, in my constituency, most at risk from cross-border tax competition. Following today's statement, when can we expect a decision from the Government on support for regional airports, as promised by the Prime Minister? Ongoing uncertainty is very damaging to regional economies, and an approach of "wait and see" is not acceptable.

David Mundell: I note what the hon. Lady says. Of course people in Scotland will know that the SNP position used to be to abolish air passenger duty completely, so there is somewhat of a change there. None the less, she makes an important point. There is a review, and I am sure that those issues will be considered as the Budget process goes ahead in this Parliament.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Is not the measure of statesmanship the imagination to give to others what one demands for oneself? For centuries, the English have demanded full control over our spending and taxation. Why should the Scottish people feel any different? Does the Secretary of State not realise that there must be some merit in the argument that as long as we maintain the outmoded, outdated and unfair Barnett formula, which thoroughly disadvantages the English, we will simply stoke up resentment on both sides of the border, and that will ultimately lead to more calls for independence?

David Mundell: My hon. Friend, as we well know, is the staunchest advocate of full fiscal freedom in this Chamber—more staunchly so than those on the SNP Benches when he moved his amendment for complete fiscal freedom. My response is that the people of Scotland would not respond well to having a £10 billion annual

black hole in their finances, and that full fiscal freedom is not the answer. Further devolution as set out in the Scotland Bill to create a powerhouse Parliament is what the people of Scotland want and it is what this Government are delivering.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Let me congratulate all the parties involved on managing to agree on a position that got us here, which is that principle of no detriment. I also thank the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Deputy First Minister for attending the Scottish Affairs Committee. I hope that the Chief Secretary will agree to attend the Committee again to explain a little bit more about the details of this fiscal framework. At the beginning of the process, we heard that the Treasury intended to cut £7 billion from the Scottish budget. Why did the Treasury intend to cut billions of pounds from the Scottish budget, and what did he, as the Secretary of State for Scotland, attempt to do about it?

David Mundell: I know the hon. Gentleman does not understand the concept of negotiation, in which two sides work together to get an agreement. Assertion and soundbites sound good, but they do not deliver for the people of Scotland. What delivers for the people of Scotland is the two Governments working together to produce a sustainable agreement. That is what we have done; we have an agreement that underpins the Scotland Bill, which means that Scotland can get these extensive new powers over tax and welfare. People will now want to move on from the process debate to hear the policy ideas.

Maggie Throup (Erewhash) (Con): During the inquiry of the Scottish Affairs Committee into the fiscal framework, we asked searching questions of our witnesses about the new welfare powers that have been devolved to Scotland. Has my right hon. Friend heard any details from the Scottish Government about how they plan to use the new welfare powers?

David Mundell: I very much welcome the fact that the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister have indicated that they do plan to set out how they intend to use the powers. It was interesting to hear some of the media reports in Scotland that suggest that the SNP plans to increase significantly the tax burden on middle income earners in Scotland. Obviously, we will have to await the detail in the manifesto. What is the case is that there will be no excuses now. SNP Members can come here and complain about certain welfare changes, but they will have the ability within Scotland to set their own welfare arrangements.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Scottish Government have been able to achieve their chosen deduction method through their vigorous and skilled negotiation strategy. What advice will the Secretary of State give to the Welsh Government when it comes to negotiating the fiscal framework for Wales? Does he think that the Labour Government's usual passive compliance with the Treasury will work?

David Mundell: What I am clear about is that the position in Wales will be as it is in Scotland: the people of Wales will benefit most when the Welsh Government and the United Kingdom Government work constructively together for their benefit.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Is it not time that we heard from the Scottish Government detailed plans to devolve power down to the Scottish communities? Devolution should not stop at Holyrood.

David Mundell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I am sure that he will have read my speech of 21 December delivered in Glasgow City chambers making exactly the case for devolution within Scotland. Unfortunately, in recent times, Scotland has become one of the most centralised countries in terms of government. The new Scottish Government that will be elected in May should devolve further powers. The best way to achieve that is to elect more Conservative MSPs under Ruth Davidson's leadership.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): How great it is to follow that remark from the Secretary of State!

How does the amount agreed by the UK Government for the implementation costs compare with the Government's current calculations for implementing the deal agreed at last week's EU summit on benefits for foreign workers in the UK?

David Mundell: I welcome the hon. Lady's question, because of course she and I were both Scottish Conservative candidates for the Scottish Parliament in the dim and distant past—[*Interruption.*] I am sure that the detail of this agreement and the issues that she raises will stand up to scrutiny.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is a moderately unedifying spectacle when such large numbers of Members are quite so vociferous. The saving grace is that all of them do have a very notable smile on their face, so at least there is good humour in the Chamber.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Mr Mak, you wish to give the House the benefit of your views.

Mr Mak: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Does he agree that the conclusion of this new agreement shows that Scotland's two Governments can work together? Will he undertake to keep pressing the Scottish Government to reveal details of how they will use these new powers?

David Mundell: I certainly do agree with my hon. Friend, and I have, on a number of occasions in this Chamber, paid particular and sincere tribute to the Deputy First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney. He and I have had numerous conversations throughout this process and, although at times we have been in disagreement, they have always been cordial and civil. That is the basis of the relationship that I want to see with the Scottish Government. My hon. Friend is right: what this agreement means is that the Scotland Bill can pass through this House and, hopefully, receive the legislative consent motion at Holyrood. There will then be no hiding place on these issues for the Scottish Government. If they want to spend more, they will have the tax powers to do so, and if they want higher welfare, they will have the ability to achieve that.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My constituents will welcome this agreement. In particular, they will welcome the fact that the Scottish Government were able to persuade the Treasury to abandon its initial position, which would have meant £7 billion of cuts to Scottish finances, and to come to the Smith position that there should be no detriment. They will observe though that had that been the original position for the Treasury, we might have been able to get this agreement before Christmas rather than spend all this time on it. Will the Secretary of State confirm that it is now the case, beyond doubt, that the principle of no detriment to the Scottish budget is enshrined in his Government's thinking both now and in the future?

David Mundell: Yes, as is the other element of the Smith commission consideration of no detriment, which is taxpayer fairness—not just in Scotland, but across the UK.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): The vow was very clear that Barnett would be retained. That has been done, and rightly so. The starting point for public spending in Scotland now is 115% of the UK average. Can the Secretary of State tell the House, in terms of his modelling, what that percentage per capita will be at the end of this Parliament?

David Mundell: As my hon. Friend asks for complex calculations, I will certainly be happy to write to him in that regard. Although I respect his strongly held views in relation to the Barnett formula, I have to say that the Government's clear position is that the Barnett formula is being retained.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Following yesterday's devastating votes on the Lords amendments to the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, can the Secretary of State say a little more about when welfare powers will be transferred to Scotland, so that at least in Scotland we can do something to prevent the appalling effects of poverty on children and disabled people?

David Mundell: Obviously, I do not agree with the hon. Lady's perspective on specific policies, but she is right that the Scottish Parliament will now have specific and detailed responsibilities in relation to welfare. We have a joint ministerial group on welfare, which includes myself and Scottish Ministers Alex Neil and Roseanna Cunningham, and we look to work through that group on the transfer of the specific powers. We do not want a transfer of power without new arrangements being in place, because the people in receipt of the benefits must be our prime concern. We will work closely together. An enormous amount of work has been done by officials to date and I am confident that once we know what the Scottish Government's proposals are—we do not know fully—we will be able to make an effective transition.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): In his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the Secretary of State seemed to confirm that the Treasury's opening bid in these negotiations—the so-called level deductions approach, which would have led to a £7 billion cumulative cut in Scottish spending—was merely a negotiating ploy. If that is the case, will the

Secretary of State confirm that it was disrespectful of the negotiations to start with a position so far from the vow, and will he confirm that that will never happen again?

David Mundell: What complete and utter nonsense. A deal is done that is good for Scotland and good for the United Kingdom, and hon. Members on the Scottish National party Benches have to trawl through newspaper reports to find something that they can complain about. This is a good deal for Scotland which gives Scotland new powers. Let us talk about how we use those powers for the benefit of Scotland, and let us put the grievance agenda to bed once and for all.

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I have no desire to sour the tone of consensus on an historic day for Scotland, but many of my constituents believe that the funding arrangements for Scotland, and specifically the operation of the Barnett formula, are unfair to northern England. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that grievance and how does the new fiscal framework change that?

David Mundell: I acknowledge that people have those feelings. A number of people on both sides of the House have raised issues about the Barnett formula. That is their job as representatives of different parts of the United Kingdom. My position is clear: the Barnett formula is good for Scotland, and this Government are keeping the Barnett formula.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Can the Secretary of State name some of the devolved assemblies around the world that will now be less powerful than the Scottish Parliament?

David Mundell: I can produce a list and send it to the hon. Gentleman. I am not focused on other assemblies around the world. I am focused on the Scottish Parliament and making it a powerhouse Parliament with the powers that make a difference in Scotland. That is the state of the debate. The hon. Gentleman's constituents will not want to hear about Parliaments in South America and other parts of the world: they will want to hear about what his party intends to do on income tax and welfare.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We have had a particularly mild November, December and January because the Secretary of State for Scotland promised the Scottish Affairs Committee an agreement by the autumn. Can he let us know when he expects the Bill to complete its passage through the House of Lords; when he expects it to come back to the House of Commons; and when he expects it to get Royal Assent?

David Mundell: In respect of the first two questions, I expect that to be March. I hope Royal Assent will be achievable in March but it may be April. I am also respectful of the Scottish Parliament process and the need for a legislative consent motion.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I note that he mentions the UK Government holding population risks. Will he concede that the limited powers available to the Scottish Government do not allow for population growth? Will he now listen to calls for a Scottish post-study work scheme?

David Mundell: On the latter subject, I have had the pleasure of appearing before the Scottish Affairs Committee and being grilled by the hon. Lady on the issue of student work visas. I made it clear that I would look closely at the report produced by the Committee, and I repeat that undertaking. However, I do not accept the premise of her question. I believe that, properly used, the tax and other powers that the Scottish Government have will allow them to grow the Scottish economy, create jobs and grow the population of Scotland.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Secretary of State talks about negotiations. This is an important point. When the Treasury first considered making £7 billion worth of cuts to the Scottish budget, can the Secretary of State—Scotland's man in the Cabinet—tell us what personal interventions he made to the Treasury to protect Scotland?

David Mundell: I have been closely involved in these discussions throughout, but they are negotiations—they are not about the Treasury imposing. As Lord Smith recognises, they are about the two Governments coming together in difficult circumstances to negotiate about money, which is often the most contentious thing that is ever the subject of negotiations. We have demonstrated that both Governments had the maturity to reach a deal which is good for Scotland and good for the rest of the United Kingdom.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Secretary of State for Scotland has just confirmed that the initial proposal put forward by the Treasury of a £7 billion cut to Scotland's budget was not an opening negotiation position, but a serious proposal. In the light

of that, does he consider himself Scotland's man in the Cabinet, or the Cabinet's man in Scotland?

David Mundell: What complete and utter nonsense. This was a negotiation. Of course, it was conducted not by SNP MPs, but by John Swinney, who adopted a completely different tone—a civil and cordial tone—throughout. I respect his objective of getting the best deal for Scotland. That is my objective too, but we had to get an agreement, and we got one. It is a good agreement. It is an opportunity to move away from the grievance agenda, but this afternoon's proceedings leave me in doubt that, even with these extensive new powers, the SNP will be able to leave that grievance agenda behind.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Secretary of State has repeatedly criticised the SNP for allegedly failing to set out how it will use the new powers contained in the legislation, yet barely an hour ago the Prime Minister floundered badly when asked whether the Scottish Conservatives would reduce the tax rate on high earners. I am sure the Secretary of State will want to avoid suggestions of hypocrisy and extend his criticism to his boss.

David Mundell: I have nothing but admiration for Ruth Davidson. She is the one person in the Scottish Parliament who can stand up to the SNP and hold it to account. If people do not want a one-party state in Scotland, the way to achieve that is by voting Scottish Conservative. The Prime Minister did not flounder; he told us exactly what the position was. Ruth will set out the tax proposals and they certainly will not be the same as the SNP's proposals, revealed in the Scottish press today to hit middle earners hard.

Points of Order

1.18 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your forbearance, I would like to raise a matter that was addressed in the Adjournment debate on Monday evening. During the debate, I asked the Minister about negotiations that might have taken place ahead of a proposal to allow ship-to-ship transfers in the Cromarty firth. Specifically, I asked whether Marine Scotland, representing the Scottish Government, had been consulted. The Minister replied:

“The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber mentioned the Cromarty firth oil transfer licence. Marine Scotland was directly consulted on 10 December, and on 8 February, when the consultation ended, it had not responded. When it was asked whether it intended to respond, the answer was no. I hope that that clarifies that point.”—[*Official Report*, 22 February 2016; Vol. 606, c. 123.]

That was a very clear statement, and I was very surprised to hear the Minister make it, because I would have expected that Marine Scotland, on behalf of the Scottish Government, had responded to the consultation. I therefore checked the situation with the Scottish Government and received the following response:

“The Scottish Government is not aware of being directly approached by the UK Government during the consultation on the Cromarty Firth Oil Transfers. Marine Scotland was made aware of the proposal through informal contact by the Port of Cromarty Firth.”

It is safe to say that Marine Scotland was not contacted by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency or by the UK Government.

That is a very worrying statement, because it leaves open the suggestion that the Government have perhaps been economical with the truth at the very least in what has been said in the House. That is a very serious

matter, not least because of the potential threat to people in my community of ship-to-ship transfers taking place, and of the Scottish Government not being adequately consulted on their responsibilities for environmental protection. I therefore seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I may deal with this matter and whether it would be appropriate for the Minister to correct the record.

Mr Speaker: It is open to any Member who believes that he or she has made a mistake to correct the record voluntarily. It is not the responsibility of the Chair to arbitrate between competing claims about a sequence of events, and nor is it my responsibility to interpret what the Minister might have meant in responding to the hon. Gentleman at the time. The hon. Gentleman has made his point with force and alacrity—we would expect no less of him. If the Secretary of State wishes to respond, he is perfectly at liberty to do so, but he is under no obligation.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have noted what the hon. Gentleman has said and will have the matter investigated.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State has kindly said that he will have the matter investigated. I ought to emphasise, for the avoidance of doubt, that he was not the Minister who answered in the debate. I hope that the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is satisfied with his prodigious efforts for the day and that we might now move on to other fare. I know that he will be absolutely delighted that we can now move on to the ten-minute rule motion, to be put forward by his hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry). I am sure that he is sitting expectantly with that in mind.

Consumer Protection (Distance Selling Delivery Charges)

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

1.22 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require distance sellers to provide purchasers with a lowest available delivery cost option; to introduce a scheme for a fair delivery quality mark for responsible retailers; to establish penalties where vendors advertise free delivery but subsequently impose charges or conditions; and for connected purposes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring in the Bill, for this is indeed an issue that my constituents deal with on a daily basis and tell me about regularly. I know that the Minister for Skills is aware of our concerns, and I am grateful to him for his engagement so far. There is consumer appetite for improved online shopping throughout our communities, but there are areas that are being badly served by some retailers and carriers. Online shopping is a growing market, and it is particularly important to rural communities, and paying more in rural areas—the highlands and islands, for example—is unfair.

We know that the costs of delivery will always vary, but that is not what this is about; this is about people feeling excluded because of a disproportionately narrow and costly range of delivery options. Even people living in cities such as Inverness are being charged punitive surcharges for the delivery of goods. One of my constituents was asked to pay £90 for the delivery of a mobile phone. Current legislation is not working.

I am grateful for the support of hon. Members from all the nations of the UK who have experienced similar issues. For example, 43% of consumers in Northern Ireland have encountered a delivery surcharge, and it is estimated that shoppers there can pay, on average, an additional £7.93 on top of standard UK delivery costs. For goods delivered to the highlands and islands, 53% of retailers apply a delivery surcharge and consumers have to pay, on average, an additional £14.71.

Unfairness is not only wrong; it is bad for business. Resentful customers are created when seven in 10 consumers reluctantly pay a surcharge for delivery of their item, and they will look elsewhere next time. There are those who will tell us that these are just market forces at work, but in this connected world it has already been accepted that there is a need for universal services in broadband provision, to allow everyone to participate. Why does that not extend to the product at the end of the process?

If all this seems like small beer to some people, it should be remembered that this type of injustice lives longest in the memory and the higher the price in loss of trust through disconnect. Because of their postcodes, people are considered to be in the minority, to be unimportant and to be left behind. Why should we allow that prejudice? Many are already asked to pay more for fuel and heating, and among them are often the more vulnerable consumers. That is why it needs to be our collective responsibility, when talking about the delivery of goods, to first deliver the principle of fairness.

Let us now shine a light on good retailers and carriers. The Bill calls for the introduction of a kitemark or quality mark. Many companies work hard to ensure

that they provide a good service across our nations, and they should be celebrated and recognised. Highlighting their good practices will allow them to access and help those currently being discriminated against, and they in turn will benefit from increased business. The really good news for companies is that those consumers are proven to be exceptionally loyal, and they will buy again.

There is a reason why operators such as eBay have introduced a “premium seller” badge for their vendors: it makes good business sense. Indeed, the principles that eBay seeks to apply to its traders are very similar to those that I am proposing today for the wider market. A key part of eBay’s rating is based on delivery and shipping costs, and sellers lose their “premium seller” rating when they have poor feedback. In this example there is a consequence for poor behaviour.

However, the wider distance selling market has no such rewards, and there are no clearly understood consequences for bad practice, or indeed for mis-selling of delivery. The introduction of an industry-wide kitemark or quality mark will allow consumers easily to identify those traders and carriers that can be trusted. That can be industry-led. Of course it will need careful thought, but there are no barriers that cannot be overcome.

The Consumer Rights Act 2015 aimed to make consumer law clearer, but recent research has shown that a number of retailers are still unsure of their responsibilities. Greater awareness is needed to better support retailers. This is not an isolated problem. In preparing the Bill, I spoke with consumer groups, trading standards, retailers and couriers, and they all agree that there is a lack of clarity. Current legislation sets out that consumers should have

“upfront disclosure of pertinent delivery information at an early stage in the transaction process”.

But that is not happening. Seven in 10 consumers do try to seek out that information prior to checkout, but recent research by Citizens Advice Scotland and the Consumer Council for Northern Ireland has shown that some retailers are still not complying fully with new consumer legislation.

When vendors or delivery companies unfairly discriminate based on location, there needs to be a clear understanding of the rights of the consumers and the redress that they would have in relation to such unfairness and false advertising. Existing laws are often unenforced and are too cumbersome, so opportunities for administrative penalties need to be considered.

Of course, online retailers have the right to choose where they supply their goods or services, but consumers should also have the right to know before they get to the last page of their transaction what they will be charged. Up-front information should include prominent and transparent key contract terms, including the total price of the goods and services and all delivery charges, not misleading terms. For example, people are told that they can take advantage of free delivery within the UK when that is not true.

In the highlands and in my constituency there are many mysteries, such as the location of the Loch Ness monster, but the biggest mystery has to be why Inverness, one of the fastest growing cities in Europe, and towns such as Nairn are apparently not on the mainland, at least according to some couriers. People are

[Drew Hendry]

not buying boxes to be sent to Brigadoon; they are asking for things to be sent to a modern city.

The discrimination test has been failed, sometimes unintentionally, but couriers can make the situation worse for retailers by using out-of-date postcode software. There is an inconsistent and variable approach by some retailers to the disclosure of delivery information, which can lead to confusion, shopping fatigue, cart abandonment and, ultimately, lost revenue for the retailers themselves.

There must be a greater understanding among consumers, retailers and couriers of their rights and of the consequences of bad practice. It is not just me saying that: organisations such as Citizens Advice Scotland are calling for greater intervention and education.

The Bill also sets out the need for greater consumer choice over delivery options. People often do not have choices. Again, why are people in the highlands and islands paying nearly £15 more for delivery when we have a universal Royal Mail service? They should have that as a clear option. Alternatively, they should be able to have goods sent to recognised collection points or to arrange pick-up directly from the vendor. The answer is simple: give the consumer the right to choose.

As a former retailer, I know that that will mean a change in working practices, but barriers can always be overcome, and that will result in better business. Companies make adjustments all the time to improve, and I am sure that exciting new business opportunities could be explored, including the use of delivery brokers or working with other companies to maximise potential.

In introducing the Bill, we offer to work with the Government, business and others to establish change and to provide not just yet another set of promises, but a set of solutions. Let us recognise the good work of fair retailers and delivery companies through a kitemark. Let us make sure that there is clarity about the expectations in current legislation, and let us consider the option of administrative penalties for continued abuse. We should give consumers the choice over delivery and let them decide whether they want the universal service.

There are challenges, but let us decide to support those who find themselves in the position I have described. They are not asking for the unattainable. They do not expect to be treated with undue favour. They should not continue to be ignored. They deserve to be listened to. This is the time to extend inclusion and end exclusion. We have the opportunity here, with this Bill, to take action.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Drew Hendry, Brendan O'Hara, Gavin Robinson, Caroline Lucas, Dr Paul Monaghan, Mark Durkan, Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil, Patricia Gibson, Ian Blackford, Mike Weir, Hywel Williams and Chris Law present the Bill.

Drew Hendry accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 March, and to be printed (Bill 140).

Opposition Day

[19TH ALLOTTED DAY]

Transitional State Pension Arrangements for Women

1.33 pm

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that the e-petition 110776, Make fair transitional state pension arrangements for 1950s women, has attracted more than 150,000 signatures; and calls on the Government to bring forward proposals for transitional arrangements for women adversely affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age.

I want to start today's important debate by saying how lucky I am to come from a family in which there have always been such strong and hard-working women—my mother and grandmothers, and now my wife and daughter. If there is one thing I have learned from all of them, it is that no one should ever try to pull the wool over their eyes—to take them for fools—because I guarantee they will always be found out.

That is a lesson the Tories really should have learned back in 1991—when they first started planning to equalise the pension age for women with that for men—because that is precisely what has happened: they have been found out. They have been found to have failed in their duty to inform women properly about the changes that were planned. They have been found to have left hundreds of thousands of women ill-prepared for a decision that would see the worst affected lose up to £36,000 in pension payments. They were found to have compounded their error in 2011, when a further delay to the pension age—to 66—was rammed through with barely two years' notice. In the words of their current Pensions Minister, they have been found to have “pulled the rug” from under 2.6 million British women. Today, Labour will speak for those 2.6 million women and demand that the Government tell us what they plan to do to make amends.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Before we get too party political about this, it can indeed be said that an individual notice should have been given back in 1995. However, shortly after that, Labour came in, and there were perhaps a dozen Labour Pensions Ministers during all of Labour's time in office. We are 20 years on. Can the hon. Gentleman not accept that we all have lessons to learn? An individual notice should have been sent out by at least one of those Governments—by the Conservative Government or the Labour Government. The hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to do that over all those years.

Owen Smith: With respect, I did not have an opportunity because I was not here at the time. The hon. Gentleman is right that successive Governments have lessons to learn from this sorry affair, but the truth, as I intend to spell out, is that a change was first mooted in 1991, and the then Tory Government made no substantive efforts between 1991 and 1997, when they left office, to offer people a proper notice. Thereafter, the Labour Government did attempt to do that, and I will enumerate exactly the ways we tried to make amends. However, the problem was compounded by the coalition Government's actions in 2011. If anybody has lessons to learn, it is the

Conservative party, which has the greatest responsibility for these changes, and which now has a duty to make amends.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Owen Smith: I will make some progress if I may, and then I will give way.

These things started back in 1991. That was when the Tory Government first consulted on their intention to shift the state pension age for women to 65 from 60, where it had been since the 1940s. Then, in the 1993 Budget, the Chancellor formally stated his intention to make this move, and he legislated for it through 1994 and 1995. The Pensions Act 1995 stipulated that the pension age would rise by five years during the decade from 2010 to 2020. That meant that women born between April 1950 and December 1959 would have to wait between one month and five years more before they could draw their pensions.

One would have thought that such a massive change—the biggest change to women’s pensions in half a century—would have been communicated with great care and, in truth, fanfare, but it was not. Some of the women concerned were as young as 39 at the time, so it is unlikely that they were looking carefully at the financial papers or paying much attention to the Government’s scant efforts to tell them about the changes.

John Glen: Will the hon. Gentleman accept that, in 2004, the Work and Pensions Committee found that three quarters of women between the ages of 45 and 54 at the time were aware of the changes in the 1995 Act? I accept that there were mistakes by parties on both sides of the House in terms of communication, but three quarters of women knew 12 years ago about the changes.

Owen Smith: I am pleased to swap stories about what people knew at the time, because the truth is that the question asked in that 2004 survey by the then Labour Government, who were concerned that the previous Tory Government had not made proper provision for women, was, unfortunately, not as straightforward as it should have been. Other surveys—five or six—from academics and others in the pensions world found that about 70% to 80% of the women involved did not know that the changes were taking place. It is no surprise they did not know, because the Conservative Government at the time spent very little money advertising the change. There were a few adverts in the newspapers, and letters were available to individuals if they requested them, but many did not.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Owen Smith: I will quote one of those letters when I have given way to my hon. Friends.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Constituents have written to me saying that they have been at their current address for the last 20, 30 or 40 years, but that they have received nothing to tell them about the changes.

Owen Smith: That is an extremely common experience for MPs, because the letters sent out in 1995 by the then Tory Government were neither use nor ornament. I have

got one here that was sent to a woman on 13 June 1995. This letter has five pages, and not one of them mentions that the pension age is going to rise to 65. In fact, every single page refers to the fact that the state pension age for women is 60. The final page offers the extraordinary suggestion that

“a form inviting you to claim your State Retirement Pension will be sent to you”

a few

“months before you reach 60.”

This happened in the very month that the Bill that became the 1995 Act was going through this House under that Government. That is a measure of what a desperately poor job they did of informing people.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I have lost count of the number of constituents who have contacted me to say that they had absolutely no idea about these pension changes and heard about them on the radio or the TV. Fortunately, we are raising the profile of this issue on the Government’s behalf. Is it not insulting of Government Members to suggest that these women are wrong, or lying, or that there is something wrong with them, when ultimately it is the Government’s responsibility to communicate these changes?

Owen Smith: It is wrong, it is insulting, and it compounds the more fundamental insult that women who, by and large, have smaller pensions because they had lower earnings throughout their entire lifetime while bearing a burden for the rest of us have been told that they cannot access their pension. That is the real insult that we should be worried about.

My hon. Friend is right that it is completely insulting to suggest that proper notice was given, because the truth is that it was a botched job from start to finish. We know that because the current Conservative Pensions Minister in the House of Lords says so. She says quite clearly that

“until recently, many of these women were expecting to receive their state pension at age 60, since they were unaware of the changes made in 1995”.

The Government are damned out of their own mouths.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I am going to be unusually helpful to the Opposition spokesman. I am one of these women. I have never received a letter, I have never been notified, and I think the Department might know where I live.

Owen Smith: I cannot believe for a minute that the hon. Lady is old enough to be one of the women concerned. It tests the credibility of the House that that could be so. I am nevertheless grateful for her intervention.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend recognise that there are a lot of women like Jayne Manners in my constituency, who assumed she was going to retire at 60, is now disabled, and has no ability whatsoever to make up the difference for the six years she has lost because of these changes?

Owen Smith: That is the case for thousands of women across this country. That is why this is more than a small campaign: there is a fundamental injustice that must be changed.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. Increasing numbers of women in my constituency have been coming to my surgery and writing to me about this, many of whom I have known for many years because I was born and bred in the constituency. I am absolutely convinced of their sincerity and that they knew nothing about this because of the lack of notification. We saw earlier at Prime Minister's Question Time the Prime Minister's complete lack of understanding, or even care, for these women.

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend is of course entirely right. He will know, because he was part of the previous Labour Government, that we tried to improve this set of circumstances. We conducted the survey that showed that there was a worryingly low level of understanding. Between 2004 and 2009, the then Labour Government instituted several million-pound advertising campaigns and sent out 800,000 personalised letters to the affected women, such as the one I have here, which, in stark contrast to the Tory letter I cited, says on the first page that the addressee will be affected by the change in age from 60 to 65.

The reality is testified to by many of my hon. Friends and by the brilliant women of the WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—campaign, whose tenacity and truth-telling we should pay tribute to right across this House, because they speak for hundreds of thousands of women who did not know that they were in the firing line.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): A total of 4,465 women in my constituency are going to be affected by this. Does my hon. Friend agree that it has been caused by an historical inequality in the system?

Owen Smith: Of course it has, because historical inequalities existed then and persist now. The gender pay gap affects women. Women often do not have the full stamp because of their caring duties, and that is why it is doubly unjust that they should now be asked to pay a price in their retirement.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that this generation of women are doubly disadvantaged, because many were at work before the Equal Pay Act 1970 came into force and had to take low-paid part-time jobs because of lack of childcare, and the Government are now heaping insult upon injury in disadvantaging them again in retirement?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend spoke with great eloquence in the recent Westminster Hall debate after a petition of 155,000 signatures was brought to this place, with more signatures from the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) than anywhere else in the country—a magnificent job by the women of Leigh.

I will quote once more the current Pensions Minister, who said:

“Across the country I'm hearing from women who are enduring that sudden sickening realisation that their destiny in retirement is not in their own hands—this is not about fairytale luxury retirement villas, this is about affording the basics.”

That is the view of the current Pensions Minister, and the Government cannot run from it.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I would like to challenge the figure that was quoted by a Member on the Government Benches. The Opposition spokesman might have the correct figure, but the figure reported from the Department for Work and Pensions investigation in 2004 was just above 40%, not 75%. Surely, given such a cataclysmic change, every single one of these women should have had a simple letter on the doormat in 1995.

Owen Smith: The hon. Lady is entirely right. Even if 40% of women were unaware, that is 40% too many. As I said, five or six other surveys were done by academics and those in other institutions that suggested that 80% of women were unaware that they were going to be affected, so the reality is that the number was far greater.

The scale of this problem only truly started to dawn on people when the Government decided to double down on their calamity with the Pensions Act 2011.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): My hon. Friend is about to come on to the injustice of the 2011 Act. Is not the real issue not only that these ladies have been hit not once but twice by an increase in their state pension age, but that no transitional arrangement was put in place? Is that not why it is absolutely right that we support the Labour motion to get the Government off the fence and provide these ladies with the transitional arrangement they deserve?

Owen Smith: This House and Government Members would do well to heed the words of my hon. Friend, because, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), he has been the doughtiest campaigner in this House on behalf of these women. He speaks the truth when he says that Members from across the House should back our motion to provide transitional protections for them.

The 2011 Act not only broke the Government's promise that the pension age for women was not going to rise until 2020, but broke the promise that no rises would occur without at least 10 years' notice, because the women who suffered the double blow were given just two years' notice. The former Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, has described that decision as an ill-informed “mistake”. He tried to make up for it in office, and secured some mitigation for 300,000 of the women who were due to see their state pension age go up by more than 18 months. The Minister on the Front Bench will no doubt mention this shortly, telling us that it cost £1.1 billion, but I bet he will not remind us that his predecessor was looking for £3 billion in order to offer these transitional protections. I suspect he may only say sotto voce that half of that £1 billion went not to women but to men.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I support the motion, because I support the WASPI women and I support transitional arrangements, but I have to say that the hon. Gentleman is making it more difficult for me and for colleagues to vote for the motion by making the matter so partisan. Thirteen years of Labour government did not help the situation. May I therefore suggest that in the spirit of the motion, which I support, he could give more details of what those transitional arrangements should be, so that we can at

last start the dialogue that the Government should have started some time ago to see whether there is a middle way and a compromise to help the women who desperately need it?

Owen Smith: I am sorry if I am bruising the hon. Gentleman's feelings with my remarks. I am pleased that he has supported the campaign, and I know that he has been brave enough to speak in favour of it on several occasions. I am positive that a man of his resolve will not be put off by a few words across the Dispatch Box and will vote for the motion, irrespective of what I say; at least, I trust that he will. I will come on to talk about precisely the sorts of transitional arrangements that the Government should put in place.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): This is the third opportunity we have had to debate this important matter in the Chamber and Westminster Hall. Notwithstanding the mistakes of the past or who made them, the Government have an opportunity to do the right thing by the women of this country. Why do they not just grasp the opportunity with both hands and deliver that for those women?

Owen Smith: Why do they not do so? The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions occasionally comes to the Chamber to answer questions, but he has ducked out of the last five debates, and he is not here today. I have suggested before that we ought to sanction him for failing to turn up to work, and I think that may be a good idea. The truth is that the Government are not offering any further suggestions about how they might do what the Secretary of State promised in 2011. He said at the Dispatch Box that transitional arrangements would be put in place for these women, but he has not offered any such arrangements. The Government have offered nothing but defensive positions.

I hate to be partisan; it is really not in my nature. However, I cannot but draw Members' attention to the guidance on the Whips' note about Women Against State Pension Inequality that has been handed around to Government Members. It states quite clearly that the WASPI campaign is demanding that

"all women born after April 1951...be given their pension at age 60"

and that

"no one will see any reduction in their income as a result of the changes to the state pension age".

It claims that the rise in the state pension age has been "widely communicated" and states, as the Minister will, no doubt, repeat in a moment, that absolutely nothing more can be done.

On every point, the crib sheet and the Government are wrong. Women affected have lost income—the state pension income that they would have been paid under the previous arrangements. The changes were not widely communicated, as I have made clear today. The WASPI women are not opposed to the equalisation of the state pension age. Their petition, which had 155,000 signatures, said so explicitly. They support it, but they want what the Government promised: transitional arrangements.

Jo Cox (Batley and Spen) (Lab): One of the 4,100 women in my constituency affected by the changes recently told me that throughout her life a number of

changes have impacted on her and the many thousands of women of her generation, such as unequal pay, the ability of employers to dismiss women because they were pregnant, and a lack of childcare. Does my hon. Friend agree that there is still time for the Government to correct that injustice and, in the interests of being non-partisan, to do the right thing and put in place transitional measures?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Women have suffered a million and one other injustices in the workplace and on payday for generations, and this is another injustice being heaped upon them.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): Will the hon. Gentleman take this opportunity to acknowledge the serious injustice suffered by women who were born in the 1950s who have been offered and have accepted retirement packages from their employers that included figures based on the assumption that the retirement age would be 60?

Owen Smith: It is no surprise that the hon. Lady, who speaks with great erudition, has highlighted yet another injustice that women have suffered. I say again that the Government must recognise that and bring forward some suggestions. There are myriad ways in which they could mitigate the problem. There are lots of transitional arrangements that could be put in place, and I will list six of them.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The case that my hon. Friend is making is absolutely right. The point is that Governments, on occasion, make mistakes. It is not too late for Ministers to stand at the Dispatch Box, put things right and end the misery of thousands of people—not only women, but their husbands, who are equally affected financially by the impact on the household. The Government could put that right.

Owen Smith: The Government could do so, and the Minister has five minutes or so to come up with what he wants to say to put it right. In case he has no ideas written down, I will give him six suggestions. The Government could delay the pension age increase until 2020 so that the pension age reached 66 by 2021. That option is favoured by the Pensions Minister in the House of Lords. The Government could cap the maximum state pension age increase from the 2011 Act at 12 months, which the predecessor of the Pensions Minister advocated. The Government could keep the qualifying age for pension credit on the previous timetable, which would help out some of the poorest women in that category, as Labour suggested in 2011. The Government could allow those affected to take a reduced state pension at an earlier age during the transition, as Alan Higham has suggested. The Government could extend the timetable for increasing the overall state pension age by 18 months so that it reaches 66 by April 2022, as John Ralfe has suggested. Finally, the Government could simply pay a lower state pension for a longer period throughout the pensionable age of the women affected. All those things would involve costs, but they are all ways in which the Government could act. What we need from the Government is not more carping but the will to get on and do something.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The six points that my hon. Friend has just raised would be helpful to the 3,450 women in my constituency—

Nadine Dorries: All six of them?

Mr Mahmood: All six points, yes. They would be important for the woman who wrote to me this morning to say that she never received the letter and she only found out what was going on through her workplace pension. Unfortunately, she is now unemployed and has been for 20 months. She is trying hard to get a job, but she is extremely worried about how much longer she will have to work to make up for the lost contributions. She is in a very difficult position and has no guidance from anybody. Why do the Government not help her?

Owen Smith: My hon. Friend speaks with passion and knowledge about the 4,000-odd women in his constituency who are affected. There are thousands of women in a similar position in all our constituencies, and my hon. Friend's point is clear: one of the transitional measures must be put in place.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Constituents such as Mrs Cox in my constituency do not object to the principle of equalisation, but they object, as my hon. Friend is quite rightly saying, to the speed and scale of the changes. That is why his points about transitional arrangements are so important to Mrs Cox and many others. Will he also deal with the insidious evasion of responsibility among some Conservative Members, who are trying to blame the European Union rather than their own Government's decision for the measures that have been taken? The same thing is not happening in other countries. It is the Government's decision, and no one else's.

Owen Smith: I expect that the Secretary of State is out in Europe somewhere right now blaming the European Union for his sins of inaction. Mrs Cox speaks for all the women in the WASPI campaign who are not opposed to the equalisation of the state pension age at 65 or 66, but who are opposed to the injustices that are being visited on them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Owen Smith: I am going to make a little more progress, and then I will give way. The truth is that we have had quite enough talk. The sins of omission and commission are well known, and the Government should now act. The Bills in 1995 and 2011 were their Bills, and the mistakes were their mistakes, so it is for them to put things right. Women in Britain have suffered inequality in the workplace and on payday for far too long. No Government should compound that fact when the carers and the grafters in our society, on whom we rely for so much, reach their retirement day.

There is a Budget in three weeks, and the Chancellor has a golden opportunity to rise to the challenge and put in place one of the six variants of transitional arrangements that I have talked about. He would be well advised to do so.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentions the Budget. Does he agree that, given the corporation tax cuts and the cuts to inheritance tax

in the Chancellor's most recent Budget, the Chancellor clearly has the will to spend and should now pay attention to the WASPI campaign?

Owen Smith: At the last Budget, the Chancellor happened to find £27 billion extra in tax revenues, which was a very handy little windfall to find down the back of the sofa, but the WASPI women will have heard that he did not spend a red cent of it—not a penny—on them, as he could have done. If he continues to play the WASPI women for fools and continues to take our pensioners for granted, then, as Baroness Altmann has told him already, he will live to regret it.

That is a sentiment that we can share right across the House. It is why not a single Conservative Member chose to vote against either of the previous calls for transitional arrangements in any of the debates we have held. It is why so many Conservative Back Benchers have pledged their support to the WASPI campaign. It is why this issue will not go away without action from the Government.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Owen Smith: I give way to the doughty campaigner from Eccles.

Barbara Keeley: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way at this point because I want to make sure that we are not given the same excuses by the Minister, when he speaks in a moment, that he has previously given. We heard:

"Equalisation was necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law".—[*Official Report*, 2 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 145WH.]

Conservative Members have been writing that out, but it is not true. I have raised this in a number of debates. The interesting thing in relation to changing previous legislation is that Poland is now introducing legislation to reverse its previous reforms. Its Government clearly realised that they had got it wrong, just as this Government have got it wrong.

Owen Smith: Poland has realised that it had moved too fast. France has done the same, as has Germany. Countries across Europe, Governments across Europe—including right-wing Governments in parts of Europe—have acknowledged that they made a mistake and are backtracking. Only this Government refuse to acknowledge any mistake, and refuse to acknowledge that they have any culpability or responsibility.

This issue will not go away, and when the Minister stands at the Dispatch Box in a moment, he should offer a glint of sunlight and some hope for the WASPI women that the Government have heard their campaign and will do something about it. If the Government do not, I will urge all Back-Bench Members to do so on their behalf.

2.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Mr Shailesh Vara): The hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) has just made a speech more of politics than of substance. Given that he has declared himself a contender in the event of a Labour leadership

contest, it is clear that his choice of audience was more about getting nominated as a contender than about dealing with the substance of the matter at hand. *[Interruption.]* Labour Front Benchers are chuntering, “What about the women?” Precisely—what about the women? What about focusing the debate on the women? What about some substance? I will move on to that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Vara: I wish to make a little progress.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Vara: I will give way, but I first wish to make a little progress.

Hon. Members will be aware that the women’s state pension age was changed in 1995 to equalise it with the state pension age for men. Equalisation was then accelerated in the Pensions Act 2011, following extensive debates in both Houses of Parliament. Those changes were about bringing gender equality to pensions for the first time, about reflecting rises in life expectancy—it continues to rise for both men and women—and about taking spending on pensions to more sustainable levels.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, because I wanted to point out to him that the audience today is the huge number of women across the country who are adversely affected by the changes. One of them wrote to me:

“When equalization for pensions was first introduced in 1995 I was informed I could collect my State Pension at 64...however this was changed again in 2011 to...66. This is very unfair to me and the many other women it affects bearing the brunt of the changes twice”.

Labour has recognised that, which is why we have tabled a motion calling for transitional arrangements. Why is the Minister not backing us and the WASPI women on this?

Mr Vara: As far as the hon. Lady’s question—or her speech, which had a question at the end of it—is concerned, I will address those issues later in my speech. However, she is absolutely right that the audience for this debate is the women concerned. In my speech, I intend to address the substance of the subject, rather than the politics of it, which we heard earlier.

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): Was the Minister struck, as I was, by the fact that the shadow Secretary of State, during the 30 minutes he took to set out the challenges we face, did not actually tell us what the Labour party would do, which of the six changes he would commit to, or whether he would commit to all six of them?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The shadow Secretary of State’s speech was full of bluster and specified no options. He failed to recognise or to speak about the cost, and to explain why the issue was not in the Labour party manifesto. The luxury for the Opposition is the ability to spend money for which they are not accountable and for which they have no responsibility. The difficulty for the Government is to deal with taxpayers’ money and to take the hard decisions that are necessary.

Alison McGovern: The Minister is speaking as though we did nothing to bring this issue to the Government’s attention during the last Parliament. That is straightforwardly not true. I participated in debate after debate with my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), who brought it to the Government’s attention time and again. As we have had so many debates about it, can we not just get on with talking about what we are going to do about it?

Mr Vara: I will come on to the debate we had in 2011 later in my speech. If the hon. Lady wants to talk about previous Governments, may I gently remind her of the 13 years of Labour Government, with the 10 Pensions Ministers—one Minister had the job twice—and the nine Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions? In the interests of fairness, she, along with everyone else, might wish to acknowledge the limited work, if any, that was done during the 13 years of the Labour Government to put matters right, as they put it.

Owen Smith: The Minister says that the Labour Government did limited work. May I point out that, following a freedom of information request to the Government just a couple of weeks ago, it was conceded that Labour spent more than £5 million advertising the changes and sent out 800,000 letters? That was in stark contrast to the previous Tory Government, which, frankly, did damn all.

Mr Vara: If the hon. Gentleman is so proud of what the Labour Government did, why does he stand up to complain? They obviously did very little, and it must have had very little impact, because otherwise we would not be hearing the comments that Labour Members are making today.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): When it comes to equalisation, how much leeway do the UK Government have under EU law?

Mr Vara: EU law does require us to equalise pension ages. Later in my speech, I will mention countries that have already achieved what we are still endeavouring to achieve. Incidentally, the shadow Secretary of State was wrong in what he said about Germany. German has already achieved equalisation.

Helen Jones: The hon. Gentleman ought to recognise that although EU law requires the equalisation of pension ages, it also allows for transitional arrangements while reaching that stage. Frankly, it is disingenuous to suggest otherwise.

Mr Vara: I will come to transitional arrangements a little later on.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): There are women in Northumberland who are likely to be in serious financial difficulty as a result of these changes. It will not be most of those affected, but it will be a few. My concern is for that small number of women. I would be most grateful if the Minister would agree to meet me and other Government Members to look at the small group of women who face such financial pressures.

Mr Vara: Ministers are always pleased to have meetings with colleagues, and I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and others.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Vara: I want to make some progress, because I am still on my first page.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way, but then I want to make some progress.

Sir Peter Bottomley: My hon. Friend is saying some fair things about the Opposition and they do not like it. Will he turn his mind to a fair thing that I want to say about the women who are directly affected? The issue is that people who were born within 12 months of each other can have retirement ages nearly three years apart. That is where better transitional arrangements are needed. We all know that this Government have had to put right many things that previous Governments have got wrong, but this is something we need to get right for ourselves.

Mr Vara: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. If I am allowed to make some progress, I will talk about transitional arrangements and what we are doing.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way later, but I wish to make some progress.

There has been much debate about this issue, and we have had several debates about it in recent weeks. It comes down to two fundamental issues. First, there have been calls to undo the 2011 pension changes. The cost of that would be more than £30 billion. Secondly, there are calls by some to go even further and unravel the 1995 pension reforms.

Helen Jones: Nobody's asking for that.

Mr Vara: Yes, there are many people, including people in WASPI, who want to unravel the 1995 reforms. It is out there on the internet for people to see, so let us not try to deny the two options that are being debated out there. I said at the outset that I was going to talk about the substance of the matter, and I will talk about both those options.

Owen Smith: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will give way in a moment, but I wish to continue.

If we unravel the 1995 pension reforms, as many people outside this place want us to do, it would cost £77 billion up to 2020-21, and the costs would continue to accrue after that period.

Owen Smith: The Minister repeats the calumny that the WASPI women are saying, "Do not equalise pensions, and get rid of the 1995 Act." That is exactly what the Whips' crib sheet says, but he knows it is not true. That was one comment made by one woman among the

hundreds of thousands on Facebook. It is not what WASPI said to the Work and Pensions Committee, and it is not what it said in its petition. It is not true. Will he withdraw it?

Mr Vara: I am simply speaking from my personal experience of speaking to women. There are women who have said to me that they want the restoration of the 1995 rules. Colleagues in this House have had people in their surgeries speaking of 1995. The hon. Gentleman may not have had that—he may be out of touch, but the rest of us are not. When we talk of £77 billion or even £30 billion, we are not talking about a few million pounds or a few billion pounds. In both contexts, we are talking of tens of billions of pounds. That situation is simply not sustainable.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): When the hon. Gentleman says that £30 billion was saved as a result of the 2011 changes, what he is saying is that there was a transfer from one of the poorest groups in our society, which is women in their 50s. That group of women saw the largest growth in unemployment under the coalition Government and are more likely to have to work after retirement than men. When they do so, two thirds of them work on the lowest wage levels, unlike men who work after retirement, two thirds of whom work on the highest wage levels. What does he have to say about picking the pockets of the poorest women in our society?

Mr Vara: I will address some of the points that the right hon. Lady makes, because there is a broader context to this debate, rather than simply the issue of the pension age. Given the opportunity, I would like to make some progress.

People are living longer and leading healthier lives. Of course, that is to be welcomed, but it does increase the pressure on the state pension scheme. As a Government, we have a responsibility to keep it affordable and sustainable for future generations.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP) *rose*—

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh *rose*—

Mr Vara: I would like to make some progress.

The changes that have been made are important in making the state pension scheme affordable and sustainable. They also reflect the way in which men and women lead their lives now, rather than the way they led them in the 1940s. I will come back to that point later.

First, I want to tackle one issue head-on. Many hon. Members have talked about the need for transitional arrangements. I point them towards the extensive debates and discussions that took place when the legislation passed through Parliament. Let me quote *Hansard* from the day on which the Pensions Bill received its Second Reading in June 2011. The Secretary of State made it very clear that equalisation of the state pension age would take place in 2018. He said that

"we have no plans to change equalisation in 2018, or the age of 66 for both men and women in 2020, but we will consider transitional arrangements."—[*Official Report*, 20 June 2011; Vol. 530, c. 52.]

Yes, he said,

"we will consider transitional arrangements."

Four months after the Secretary of State said those words, and after he had considered the matter further, a concession or a transitional arrangement—call it what you will—was indeed considered by this House and included on Report. That transitional arrangement was worth over £1 billion and reduced the delay that anyone would experience in claiming their state pension from two years to 18 months. So when people say that transitional arrangements should have been made, I simply ask them to look back at the record, to consider what was said and to consider what was subsequently done four months later. There were transitional arrangements. They passed through the House, there was extensive debate, there was extensive engagement with the relevant stakeholders and it was done.

Neil Gray: I think that this is the fourth debate I have attended in which the Minister has responded on these issues, and his answers on this injustice are still woefully inadequate. Talking of injustice, will he answer my constituent, Shiona Airlie, who is four months outside this measure and was only notified in 2012 that she would have to wait a further four years—less than a year before her 60th birthday? Where is the justice in that? How is it fair after she has paid into the system for all of her working life?

Mr Vara: I will address the issue of notification later.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The Minister's description of *Hansard* and the discussions that took place in this House was extensive, but the ladies concerned do not know about that. It is surely unreasonable to expect them to read *Hansard* to understand what their pension arrangements should be. Women in my constituency are coming to my surgery to tell me of the significant changes that they and their families will experience because of this policy. It is not good enough and the Minister must listen and act.

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the public are uninterested in *Hansard*. My point was that people in this House who are speaking in this debate should read *Hansard*. Rather than simply saying, "Where are the transitional arrangements?", they should recognise that transitional arrangements were made.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): Is it not a fact that people were not aware of the Pensions Act 1995? We had 13 years of a Labour Government that spent £5 million on communication. Is it not the complete failure of the previous Labour Government that failed the women involved?

Mr Vara: My hon. Friend is right. In 13 years of government, Labour—with 10 Pensions Ministers and nine Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions—completely failed these women and now refuses to accept any responsibility or to acknowledge the arithmetic of the pensions budget. Labour Members seek to put the blame on those at this Dispatch Box without making any contrary proposals. They refuse to commit themselves. As I said earlier, the luxury of opposition is being able to speak about spending huge sums of money without having the responsibility of taking the political decisions that we have to take.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Vara: I have given way many times and I am afraid that we are now getting to a stage at which MPs are simply repeating points that have already been raised. I am mindful that many hon. Members wish to speak. Nobody can accuse me of not being generous in giving way, but I wish to make progress.

The changes that were made, and the transitional arrangements made in 2011, benefited a quarter of a million women who would have otherwise had a delay of up to two years. For more than 80% of those affected, the increase in the time period will be no more than 12 months. The House voted for this amendment to the Bill and a concession was called for. A concession was considered by the Government, proposed by the Government and accepted and voted for by this House. The Government promised to consider transitional arrangements in 2011 when the legislation was going through, and that is exactly what the Government delivered—a reduction in the time period from two years to 18 months at a cost of £1.1 billion. That shows that the Government were listening to the concerns of Members and responded to them at the time.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Exactly how much of that money went to the women concerned?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady needs to appreciate that the concept of dealing with pensions and money is that the concession was made—

Carolyn Harris: I know the answer. How much?

Mr Vara: That concession was made by the taxpayer—*[Interruption.]* It was made by the taxpayer, and the total cost was £1.1 billion—

Carolyn Harris: How much?

Mr Vara: As I have said, and I am sorry that the hon. Lady has not got the message yet, and that she does not appreciate that the time was shortened by six months—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. There is a lot of shouting out now. If the Minister wants to take an intervention, he will, but if we could stop shouting it would help us proceed with the debate.

Mr Vara: Another reason that some have called for the legislation to be revisited is that they felt that notification needs to be reconsidered. I simply do not accept that the Government have failed to make every effort to notify the women affected.

Catherine McKinnell: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will not give way, as I wish to make progress.

Following the 2011 Act, we wrote to all those directly affected to inform them of the change to their state pension age. About 5 million letters were sent by the DWP and the sending of the letters to those affected was completed between January 2012 and November 2013. Letters to those whose state pension age was set by the 1995 Act only were sent between April 2009, when Labour was still in government, and March 2011, when that process was finished by the coalition Government. As a result of those efforts, in 2012 a survey by the DWP found that only 6% of

[Mr Vara]

women who were within 10 years of receiving their pension thought that their state pension age was still 60.

The shadow Work and Pensions Secretary mentioned several surveys and was somewhat selective in those to which he referred. The one done by the DWP, which runs and is in charge of the pension scheme, has a fair amount of validity and, as I say, only 6% of women who were within 10 years of receiving their pension thought that their state pension age was still 60. As for the original 1995 changes to the state pension age, in 2004 nearly three quarters of those between 45 and 54 were aware of changes to women's state pensions. Our communications campaign has focused on raising general awareness of the changes and encouraging those closest to the state pension age to get a personalised state pension statement.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and, despite the chuntering from those on the Labour Front Bench, I can assure him and everyone else that this is my question. We heard earlier from the shadow Secretary of State that he believed that the communication on this been absolutely appalling. He overlooked the fact that his own Government estimated that 75% of women had been informed. He also overlooked the fact that according to evidence to the Select Committee there were 600 mentions of the 1995 Act found in the media at that time. According to the briefing on the state pension legislation, 17 million automatic forecasts were issued by the Labour Government between 2004 and 2006—[HON. MEMBERS: "Speech!"] Does my hon. Friend agree that although undoubtedly some women were not informed, many were?

Mr Vara: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for putting those facts on the record. I am, however, sorry that as he was making those points of substance, all he got was the yah-boo politics that we can expect from the Opposition. I am afraid that the truth is, as anyone watching this debate at home can see for themselves, that the Opposition do not want to know the substance or the facts. All they are interested in is the politics, but this is far too important an issue to be treated with the political naivety with which some Opposition Members are treating it. This is an important subject and the Government are dealing with it and treating it with the seriousness it deserves.

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the Minister for giving way, and he is clearly in a difficult corner, but I wondered whether he could clarify whether the Government now accept that women—well, anybody—need at least 10 years' notification of a pension change in order to plan and prepare. If the Government now accept that, will he explain why that does not apply to this group of women?

Mr Vara: The hon. Lady will be aware that Governments have to take difficult decisions at times. Considering the state of the economy and the financial position that this Government came into—she will be aware that one of her own colleagues said that there was no money left—and considering the longevity of both men and women, the Government had to take difficult decisions, as all

Governments of both shades have to. This Government had to take difficult decisions and we took them because they needed to be taken.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): The women of this country will be watching this debate and listening to the Minister's comments with a mixture of concern and disappointment. He is given us history lessons and is trying to apportion blame. We have a material problem now that the Government need to address, so he should stop looking backwards and start looking forwards, and start caring for the women of this country. This House has already said by an overwhelming majority that it wants the Government to look again at the transitional arrangements: has the Minister looked again at them, has his position changed since the last time this House debated the subject and will he tell us what his change of position is?

Mr Vara: If hon. Members did not give mini speeches in the middle of my speech, I could reach my conclusions. I will answer the hon. Gentleman's question in due course. We cannot look at the changes to women's state pension age in isolation without acknowledging the significant changes in life expectancy in recent years, the huge progress made in opening up employment opportunities for women and the wider package of reforms. First, on life expectancy, the reason for all these significant reforms is that people are not just living longer but are staying healthy for longer. In just a decade, the length of time for which 65-year-olds will live in good health has surged by more than a year. That is welcome news, but it puts increasing pressure on the state pension scheme, and the Government—any Government—have a duty to ensure the sustainability of the state pension system. It would have been irresponsible for this Government, or the then coalition Government, to have ignored those developments.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that all Governments have the responsibility to be fair to the people of this country? Women are affected by the goal posts moving, and the benefits that they would get at retirement age have gone as well. This is a double whammy for that group of women who have worked hard all their lives.

Mr Vara: The Government have a duty to all their citizens, and they have to take difficult decisions and perform a balancing act. It is important to bear that in mind when people are talking about spending £30 billion-plus, or £77 billion. Those are serious sums of money, and difficult decisions have to be taken to achieve that balancing act.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Vara: I will make progress. The landscape for women and employment has completely changed since the 1940s. Female employment is now at record levels, with more than 14 million women in work—a record rate of nearly 70%. The number of older women aged 50 to 64 in work is also at a record high, with over 100,000 more older women in work than this time last year. Indeed, over the past decade, women have on average stopped working later than 60. In 2015, the average age was 63, and we know that more women than men would prefer to work flexibly or part-time before retiring.

Mr Kevan Jones: My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) just said to the Minister that we need at least 10 years for these notifications to be brought in. Is he confirming that this group of women, some of the poorest people in the country, are paying for the planned deficit reduction? What does he say to my constituent, Jayne Manners, who is disabled and cannot make up the six years that she has lost from this scheme? What transitional help can he give her?

Mr Vara: The hon. Gentleman in part repeated a question that was asked earlier, and I refer him to my previous answer. I will turn to other issues later, given the opportunity to make progress with my speech.

We need a pensions system that recognises the changes that have been made, in the same way that we have responded to the need to support older workers in the labour market. We have abolished the default retirement age and extended the right to request flexible working to all employees, and we are working with businesses to encourage the employment and retention of older workers.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): On transitional funding, is it about time that the Government started tackling rich corporate tax dodgers and stopped dodging poor women pensioners?

Mr Vara: I am sure the hon. Gentleman is delighted that he was able to score his cheap political point.

Let me turn to our wider reforms. We inherited one of the most complex state pension systems in the world, and too many people did not understand what they could expect upon retiring. From April this year, we are introducing a simpler state pension that will give people a clear picture of what the state will provide so that they can build their own savings. We have a triple lock, so that pensioners will see their basic state pension go up by at least 2.5% every year, as it has since 2011. That means that from this April, pensioners will receive a basic state pension that is more than £1,100 higher a year than at the start of the last Parliament. It is important for people to look at matters in a broader context, rather than in the single-issue context that many colleagues seem to be speaking about.

Lady Hermon: I am genuinely grateful to the Minister for at long last allowing me to intervene. In response to an earlier intervention by a Conservative Member who has now left the Chamber, the Minister replied that Ministers are always happy to meet party colleagues to discuss difficult cases. Unlike the Minister for Pensions, who sits in the other place, this Minister has refused to come to Northern Ireland and meet women who were born in the 1950s and who are adversely affected by this change. Will he please have the good grace to agree to come to Northern Ireland and meet my constituents in North Down, and other women affected by this issue, and explain why the Government will not introduce transitional measures?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before the Minister replies, 25 Members wish to catch my eye and we are hoping to have a Division at about 4:50 pm. We still have another Front-Bench opening speech, and we are getting tight on time. Interventions

have been very long, but if the Minister could start concluding his remarks, we might be able to get everybody in.

Mr Vara: I take on board what you say, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I am coming to a conclusion. I am more than happy to meet colleagues, but I am afraid the venue would have to be negotiated. It is not every day that I go to Northern Ireland, but if the hon. Lady wants a meeting with me I am more than happy to meet her here in London.

We have ensured that more people are saving for their retirement by requiring employers to enrol their staff on to a pension with our auto-enrolment scheme. In addition to those reforms, we have continued to protect and build on a range of other pensioner benefits, including a permanent increase to cold weather payments, protection of winter fuel payments, and protection of free bus passes.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Vara: I will not give way. Hopefully the hon. Lady heard what Madam Deputy Speaker directed.

We are providing greater security and choice for people in retirement, while also ensuring that the system is sustainable for the future. That is a record on pensions and pensioners of which Conservative Members can be proud. Parliament has extensively debated accelerating the changes to the state pension age. We listened to all arguments for and against at the time of the Pensions Act 2011, and we made transitional arrangements.

We are far behind other countries in Europe on equalisation—Germany, Denmark, the Czech Republic and Greece have already equalised the pension age for men and women. We must look to the future, not persist in looking backwards. These changes are about putting our pensions system on a secure financial footing, rather than continuous confusion for those affected and further debate. We should build on the high levels of awareness that we already have, and continue to promote flexibility, choice and security for older people. There are no plans on the part of the Government to make policy changes.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Before I call the SNP spokesperson, I will impose a four-minute time limit on Back-Bench speeches. If too many interventions go on for too long, I will have to bring that down.

2.38 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Having listened to the Minister for 35 minutes, I cannot think of a time when I have been in the Chamber and felt so utterly depressed by what I have heard—35 minutes to say absolutely nothing and to give absolutely no hope to those women who are facing pension inequality. Talk about a Government who are out of touch!

The game was given away by one of the Minister's hon. Friends, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), who told the Government that she is one of the ladies who are caught up in this. The Government know who she is, where she lives and her age, but she has heard nothing. Does the Minister have anything to

[*Ian Blackford*]

say to her? Absolutely nothing—just sheer contempt from this Government for the WASPI women and the WASPI campaign. He and the Government should be utterly, utterly ashamed of themselves.

A Conservative MP asked me last night, “Why are we having yet another debate on this issue?”, and I have some sympathy with his view. We should not be having this debate for the simple and straightforward reason that the Government should have acted by now to end this injustice.

Let us just remind ourselves of the fundamentals. We in the Scottish National party, I am sure along with everybody else in this Chamber, agree with pension equalisation—we are not debating that—but we do not support the unfair manner in which the changes have been made. The Government must explore options for transitional arrangements to protect retirement plans for the females adversely affected. The Minister tossed out the figure of £30 billion, but what he did not say is that that is £30 billion over the years up to 2026. Let me give him one suggestion. The Government are consulting on pension tax relief, which costs a gross £35 billion. Why do they not readjust that to give some hope and to deal with the problem that women pensioners are facing?

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way later, but I want to make some progress because I am aware of the time constraints.

Parliament voted unanimously on 7 January for a motion that the Government should put into place mitigation for the women affected. The Prime Minister speaks about the sovereignty of this House. Why have the Government ignored that vote? Why have they ignored the will of the House? Whose sovereignty now? They cannot ignore the will of the House at random on the legitimate demands of the WASPI people. The Government are treating this House and the people of this country with contempt. Where is parliamentary democracy?

Catherine McKinnell: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the Minister has, basically, confirmed from the Dispatch Box that this disgraceful discrimination is a price worth paying for deficit reduction?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. The women in the WASPI campaign are paying for the failures of the economic policy of this Government.

Let me remind the House that what we have is a Conservative Government—

Richard Graham: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The hon. Gentleman did not give way earlier. I needed to correct him on a point of fact. The evidence given to the Work and Pensions—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. That is not a point of order. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) can give way if he wants to, but he does not have to.

Ian Blackford: I will indeed give way because I will treat this House with respect; respect that has not been shown to the WASPI women by this Government. The hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) is correct.

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way. I will answer the point and then give way.

Austerity is a political choice. In the election campaign, we argued that if the Government increased spending by 0.5% per annum in each year of the Parliament, they would increase spending by £140 billion but still reduce the deficit to 2% of net national income by the end of the Parliament. That is the responsible way. That would mean the Government would not be punishing the women who are affected by this. Show some leadership, Minister. Take some action and address this properly.

Richard Graham: The hon. Gentleman said earlier that the cost would be some £29 billion by 2026. He is completely wrong. The evidence to the Select Committee is that the bill in 2016-17 would be £29 billion and the total cost £77 billion. In Westminster Hall, the hon. Gentleman said that his party would commit to the policy of changing that if it were ever in the unlikely position of having responsibility for running these things itself. Will he confirm that his party leader will say, on the record, that if the SNP ever had responsibility for this, it would commit £77 billion?

Ian Blackford: Good grief! Have I ever heard such nonsense as I have just heard from the hon. Gentleman? I never committed the SNP to anything. What I did was make suggestions about what the Government may do. To toss around the £77 billion figure, which refers to the 1995 Act, is something I have never done. House of Commons Library figures show that the cost of reversing the 2011 Act would be £30 billion by 2026. Let us get the facts right. Rather than the nonsense from the Conservative Benches, we will tell the truth; they can spin the nonsense.

The Government keep telling us that this matter was decided in 2011 and we should just meekly accept that. What arrogance! I, and every other Member elected in May 2015, was sent to this place not to accept whatever went before. We were sent here to represent the views of our constituents in this Parliament. If we want to change the 2011 Act, we can do it. The Minister should stop hiding behind that. We cannot be bound by the mistakes of past Parliaments. We are here to speak up for our constituents, to hold the Government to account and to make sure they right this wrong. My heavens, the ways of this place are archaic! It is little wonder that people in Scotland see Westminster as out of touch and irrelevant.

Although the Government and the Minister are yet to repent, the pensions Minister in the previous Government, Steve Webb, admitted recently that the Government made a bad decision on state pension age rises. It is time not just for Steve Webb but for the Government to repent. When the Minister responsible for piloting the Bill through Parliament can see the error of his ways, surely the Treasury can recognise it has to act in the best interests of the women affected.

When I think of the intransigence of the Treasury in not recognising its responsibility to do the right thing, I am reminded of a line that I am sure could be used in a school report card for the Chancellor of the Exchequer: we thought George had reached rock bottom; sadly, he has kept digging. This is one hole that the Government have to dig themselves out of. Many Conservative Members are hoping that this issue and the WASPI women are just going to go away. That is not going to happen. We will keep fighting for the WASPI women, because it is the right thing to do. The Chancellor has refused to act—the iron Chancellor in his bunker.

When we start to pay national insurance, we are entering a contract with the state to receive a pension. The Government have an obligation to meet that commitment. There has to be fairness and transparency, and that is what is lacking in this case. We are asking for the Government to put in place mitigation to reflect and recognise that the pace of the pension age increase is far too steep. It is a pity, in the week that they are welcoming the fiscal framework that would allow us to proceed with the Scotland Bill, that we are not seeing pensions provision come to Scotland. One thing is crystal clear: if we had powers over pensions in Scotland we would do the right thing for our pensioners.

Graham Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm to the House whether the SNP is making a £26 billion spending commitment?

Ian Blackford: I never realised the Tories were so hard of hearing. I thought I made that quite clear in my earlier remarks, but I will do it again. We are asking for the Government to make clear what they will offer in mitigation for pensioners. I gave the example of the review of pension tax relief. If they can find the money for £176 billion for weapons of mass destruction, they can find the money to do the right thing for pensioners.

John Glen: I recognise the passion the hon. Gentleman is bringing to the debate, but I am very concerned that the WASPI campaigners will be misled and be unable to understand clearly what the SNP will commit to if it is to bring forward the amelioration it says is so necessary. If he and his party want to be taken seriously, it is incumbent upon them to have a clear, costed proposal to bring to the House today.

Ian Blackford: This is remarkable. The difference between our Government in Scotland and the Tory Government in London is that we have a Government who are popular and responsible. There is a very easy answer to this: give us the powers over pensions. Give us our independence and we will do the right thing for our people and rectify the wrong that has been done by the Conservative Government.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): Conservative Members keep talking about money. That is very important, but there is another issue—fairness. Maybe you do not know, but a third of the women between the age of 55 and 59 do not work. Do you know why they do not work? Because they have ill health or are disabled. The other half are either carers or looking after people. The reality is—

Graham Evans: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will you remind the House of the rules about Members making contributions when they were not in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): The hon. Gentleman has been in and out of the Chamber. He was here at the beginning of the debate. May I use this opportunity to calm things a little bit, so we can move on? A very large number of Members want to speak. If Members make interventions, please keep them short. May I also remind Members that they are speaking through the Chair? When they say “you” they are addressing the Chair, not hon. Members.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I very much agree with the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), who makes very good points. It is all about unfairness to women who are really struggling, women with ill health and women who cannot work; and it is about the Government accepting their responsibilities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I have already taken a lot of interventions and I am aware that many Members want to speak, so I shall try to get through my points as quickly as I can.

Let me deal with the real case of women born in the early 1950s. This is something I have said before, but it needs repetition. Let us talk about women born on 10 February and let us look at the different experiences as they apply to each of the years of the early 1950s. Someone born on 10 February 1950 would have retired at age 60 in 2010. Women born a year later, however, would have had to wait almost two years longer to have retired on 6 January 2012. A woman born on 10 February 1952 would have reached state pension age on 6 January 2014, aged 61 years, 10 months and 27 days. Such a woman has had to wait an additional two years in comparison with a woman born in 1950.

If that were not bad enough, the increase for women born in 1953 and 1954 gets much worse. Someone born in 1953 would have retired in January this year, aged nearly 63, whereas a woman born in 1954 will not reach pensionable age until 6 July 2019, when she will be aged 65 years, four months and 26 days. A woman born in 1954 has to wait two and a half years longer for their pension than someone born a year earlier. We should dwell on that point.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that as this plays out to the public, many women in the WASPI campaign who are watching our proceedings today, no doubt with huge disappointment, will be even more disappointed to see that the Tory Benches are populated almost exclusively by men, who are explaining why women born in the 1950s should not be able to access their pension? *[Interruption.]* I said “almost exclusively”. They are watching these detached, remote, middle-aged men explaining why they cannot access their pensions.

Ian Blackford: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I think we should all, whether we be men or women, should reflect on the unfairness. It is an issue that we should see as simply wrong, and we should deal with it, whether we be male or female.

[*Ian Blackford*]

Let us dwell on the point. Someone born in 1953 has now retired, while someone born in 1954 has to wait until 2019. Where is the fairness in that? Let me ask Conservative Members who among them is going to defend it. I ask a Minister, a Back Bencher or any Conservative to rise to defend what the Government are doing. Why should some people have to wait so long?

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman seriously believe, given that my constituents in Blackpool North and Cleveleys want me to be here, that I should leave the Chamber and not participate in the debate because I am a man?

Ian Blackford: I am sorry to hear that approach taken by the hon. Gentleman. I was looking for someone to defend the Government. I provided the opportunity for a Conservative Member to do so, and the hon. Gentleman failed. Everyone in this Chamber has the right to defend the interests of their constituents—we would all support that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress.

We shall see whether the House divides on the motion later, but Tory Back Benchers may well meekly trot through the Lobbies and do nothing other than support the Government over an issue that is, in our view, completely untenable. This is a debate, so I ask Conservative Members whether they will defend the Government. I will happily give way to any Tory Member who is prepared to stand up for the WASPI women in this country.

Nadine Dorries: I point out that we would like to speak in the debate when the opening speeches are over.

Ian Blackford: To defend what the Government are doing is to defend the indefensible. It is wrong; it is mean-spirited. Conservative Members should not just troop through the Lobbies without reflecting on the situation of women who in some cases are losing tens of thousands of pounds of their entitlement.

I have talked so far about women born up to. A woman born in 1955 will not retire until 10 February 2021, aged 66 years. That cannot be right. It is far too steep an increase over a short period, and the Government must put mitigation in place. You Government Members should examine your consciences. You will have women from the WASPI campaign coming to see you—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. The hon. Gentleman is speaking through the Chair. When he says “you”, he is speaking to me, but I am not directly participating in the debate. I would be grateful if he would address his comments in the third person.

Ian Blackford: I apologise most sincerely for my oversight, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I will make sure it does not happen again.

Conservative Members will have women from the WASPI campaign coming to their surgeries. Let us look at what some of the woman affected have said about their real-life experiences of these changes. Here is one example:

“My husband and I got married in 1974, he is 12 years older than me. I like to think we planned life in the right way. The pension law has put all our plans out the window. I had been planning all my available options, when my husband retired, and in 2011, I requested my state pension forecast. It stated that if I deferred till 2020 I should receive a £14,621 lump sum. I thought this may allow me the option to work two days and still enjoy my family, but thanks to the changes I will no longer receive this. Also, I hadn’t anticipated that my age might make me a prime candidate for redundancy. Losing my job in 2014, was a massive blow. The government may have changed the law, but it turns out many industries don’t want 60+ women. They are effectively retiring us, and forcing us to use our lifetime savings on daily living costs, as no one wants to hire us!”

There are so many points to dwell on there, but most importantly, it speaks of the crushing of so many hopes and dreams.

It is also the case that many women are being forced to work on beyond their expected retirement date, and this brings its own challenges in terms of the availability of suitable employment, and many are sadly experiencing ill health. What has been the response of the Government? It is that other benefits are available. What a response! You have worked hard, paid your dues to society, met your side of the bargain in paying national insurance and expected to receive a pension, yet this callous, heartless Government are ripping that contract up and telling folk to claim benefits. Is that really the answer? You can get means-tested benefits, which will cost the Exchequer, but you are being denied what is rightfully yours. Welcome to “Osborne’s Britain”—callous, cold and undignified.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Is not the crux of the issue that we see a clear breach of contract? If this were a private pension company that unilaterally changed the pension conditions of 2.6 million ladies in this country, this House would quite rightly be up in arms. Those ladies want only to have that contract mitigated fairly. Surely the Government should listen to the 2.6 million ladies in this country, and act now.

Ian Blackford: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. We were talking earlier about the Financial Conduct Authority and consumer protection, yet here are consumers being ripped off by their own Government, who are ripping up entitlements to the state pension. Conservative Members should be up in arms over this; they should defend the rights of their constituents.

Let me provide just one other example, as I am conscious of the time. Here it is:

“My husband will be 78 by the time I can retire. I had been looking forward to slowing down at 60 and enjoying putting my family, husband, children and grandchildren at the centre of my life. In Cameron’s speech on why families matter in 2014 he stated that he wanted to do ‘everything possible to help support and strengthen family life in Britain today’. Had I been available for my grandchildren, my daughter and her husband would not have had to pay £1700 a month for her two children to go to nursery, putting them in debt. They are both teachers and could not manage their mortgage on one salary. As you can see the changes to the state pension have not supported or strengthened our family, the changes have left us in a state of disarray”—

all thanks to this Conservative Government. That is the reality.

As I sum up—[*Interruption.*] Well, I could quite happily go on if you want! What are Conservative MPs going to say to women who are going to have to wait six

years longer than anticipated for their pension? This is a breach of trust between the Government and the women who have earned the right to a pension. We should recall the advice from the Turner report that such measures should be brought in over a 15-year period to mitigate the impact of any such changes.

We have heard about the failure of communication, which it could be argued means that the start of the 15-year process should be the beginning of the changes in 2010. That means there will effectively be a retirement age of 63 for women as of April this year. The Government could, for example, look at smoothing the increase in pensionable age for women to 2025. The Government should do the right thing and immediately introduce mitigation. Now is the time to act; if not, we will be coming back to this place and fighting for the women who deserve our protection.

2.59 pm

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I rise—finally—to express disappointment—huge disappointment. This has not been a good debate so far, and I imagine that many of the WASPI women who have been watching it on television may have switched off long ago, because the party political point-scoring on all sides has been pretty embarrassing.

Real women are affected by this, and have real issues. It is a fact that in 1995, following the first legislative change, the Labour party had 13 years during which it did not act: it did not inform women. It is also a fact that my own party has failed women in terms of communication. As for the Scottish National party, it was not even here. So yes, there have been failures on both sides of the House. I stand here as a WASPI woman, and I have received no communication whatsoever. It is not true to say that women have been informed. It is also not true to say that there has been a wide campaign of advertisements and information on this subject. The campaign of advertisements and information was about general pension changes; it did not specifically target the group of women who have been so badly affected.

What I want to talk about—during the very few minutes that I have left, after all the party political point-scoring—are the issues that are really affecting those women. I am going to use some words that will probably make the men cringe. Many people will think that I should not talk about such matters in the House. The fact is, however, that many women, when they reach a certain age, have health issues that men do not have to deal with. None of that is taken into consideration. If I had been here when the equalisation of the pension age was about to be introduced, I would not have supported it, because women have to deal with issues later in life that men simply do not have to deal with. Women are carers, and women in their fifties and sixties are more likely to be carers than women of any other age. It is a fact that 47.7% of breast cancer diagnoses are given to women in their fifties and sixties. Those are the real issues faced by the women out there who are affected by this legislation.

What do we say to the woman who has had breast cancer, has had 10 courses of chemotherapy and radiotherapy, and who has now been told that she cannot retire when she thought she was going to, but has to go back to work when she is half the weight she

has been at any time in her life, and is sick, and is facing worse diagnoses in the future? What do we say to women who have lost their insurance and have been blitzed with one issue after another because of their illness? There are women like that in my constituency. There is a woman in my constituency who was told by the Department for Work and Pensions that she should have been sent a letter, that in fact she had been sent a letter, and that she was telling lies. She now lives in the house that she was born in.

These women are facing dreadful problems. They are spending hours on the telephone, trying to find out from the DWP how they are affected and what is going to happen to them. Those are the complaints that women are making. It is not about who should have done what and when, it is not about which party is to blame, it is not about who is at fault; it is about the problems that these women are facing. This is what they want, and this is what I would ask of the Minister if he had the grace to listen to my speech, as I listened to his, rather than talking to his neighbour on the Front Bench. What I would like the Minister to do, on behalf of those women, is to stand at the Dispatch Box today and make a commitment that, at the very least—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

3.3 pm

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Women who work for fair transitional pension arrangements have been accused by some of being emotional. There is certainly one emotion that unites most of them, and that is anger: anger about the incompetence and stubbornness that have failed to address these issues over many years, and anger about the fact that the arrangements that they made for their retirement were based on either wrong information or no information at all from the Government, and have now been overturned.

Who are the women most affected? Many of them are carers; one lady who wrote to me is caring for a mother in her nineties. Others are women who have had to retire early because of ill health. Yet others are women who have been made redundant in their late fifties and early sixties, and there were a lot of those under the coalition Government. All of them thought that they could just about manage until their state pensions kicked in, only to find that the Government had moved the goalposts, a fact of which they had been totally unaware.

These are also women who have been disadvantaged throughout their working lives. Many of them started work before the Equal Pay Act 1970, and certainly before the cases involving equal pay for work of equal value. Many brought up their children when there was very little childcare, and a number had to take low-paid part-time jobs to fit in with their children's school hours. As for those who gave up work to look after their children, they were, at that time, given no pension credits for their caring responsibilities, and when they went back to work they found themselves without enough time to build up a decent private pension. Many women have now found themselves redundant, but are being kept in the workforce and put through the Work programme as if they were workshy layabouts, although they have worked all their lives.

[Helen Jones]

Ministers ought to hang their heads in shame for the way they have treated these women. It is not enough, apparently, for this Government to damage women's prospects in every Budget they have introduced and make them bear the biggest burden of cuts; they also have to damage their retirement prospects—and this is the Government who tell us that they are on the side of strivers. Not if those strivers are women, they aren't. They have put nearly 2.5 million women in an impossible position. So contemptuous of those women are they that the Secretary of State does not even come here to respond to debates. No doubt he is out fabricating some new fantasy about how our security is threatened by countries like Belgium and Luxembourg, those well-known bellicose nations.

However, the real culprit, whom we have never seen at all, is the Chancellor. Like Macavity the Mystery Cat, whenever there is trouble, he is not here. It is he who decided that women should bear an unfair burden of the cuts. It is he who has made sure that they are paying the price for this Government's policies. In future, Ministers should listen. They should come to the Dispatch Box with more than the platitudes that we have heard before from this Minister—

Dr Huq: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Helen Jones: I am sorry; I do not have time.

Ministers should come here and introduce transitional arrangements for these women. They have been the backbone of this country for years, many of them are saving us millions by caring for others, and they have been treated with gross unfairness and contempt by this Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Given that a great many Members want to speak, it would be helpful if Members did not intervene, because if they want to make speeches later, we shall be in an impossible position. If Members could shave just a little bit off their speeches, I shall try to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak.

3.8 pm

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): I shall do my utmost, Mr Deputy Speaker.

I am embarrassed to be in the Chamber today, because this debate has shamed us all. I am deeply, deeply disappointed by what I have heard. I came here today to speak on behalf of the constituents I have met who are affected by this issue. I wanted to speak about their financial security, about why it matters to them, and about why they want to be resilient and protected from unexpected shocks.

All those I have met have been both reasonable and very frustrated. Some have been intensely angry, and understandably so. I have no doubt that more could have been done by all parties to improve communication. I am sorry that the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) is laughing at me. I wish that she would not laugh at me. This is not a laughing matter. I am desperately trying to explain that I think more needs to be done on behalf of the people affected. We can review what has been done by way of communication, but that will not help those individuals.

I wanted to look carefully at what WASPI is calling for, because of the strength of their campaign. Their petition is quite clear: it calls on the Government

“to put all women in their 50s...and affected by the changes to the state pension age in exactly the same financial position they would have been in had they been born on or before 5 April 1950”

My understanding, and I ask to be corrected by WASPI members themselves if I am wrong, is that that would effectively mean the restoration of the state pension age to 60 for that cohort of women. If that is the case, it is a perfectly valid argument to make, but one I cannot agree with because the cost would be too great for the Exchequer to bear.

That does not mean that the answer is that we should do nothing. There are many ways of looking at what the transitional arrangements could be. I listened carefully to the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), who called for mitigation and transitional arrangements, but I was not clear what they amounted to. When I have had debates in the Chamber with the shadow Secretary of State, I have always found him to be a very reasonable man. From the first time we met to discuss epilepsy, I have always had a high regard for him. He came up with six options, some of which are mutually exclusive, and none of which had a price tag. Nor did he select a particular preference. However, I thought it was a useful starting point.

I urge Members on both sides of the House to take account of this point: the more information we have, the more we can start to select which are the most appropriate methods to make progress. What problem are we trying to solve here? What are the most proportionate means of solving it? Not all those six options will address all the concerns that have been expressed to me. Some may be too costly, some may not, but we should be open to that information. The more the options can be costed, the better.

I want to make another point to WASPI. In its evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, it perhaps made an error of judgment in that it appeared to rule out the prospect of any use of either means-tested benefits or other pensioner benefits to adjust for some of the problems that people face. That was a mistake, because there is potential to discuss how, once people are in receipt of their pension, some way could be found to mitigate or adjust for the impact. The age at which people can claim could be brought forward, but the amount that they claim reduced. I hope that we can also look at whether the changes need to be universal or could be means-tested. Many of my most vulnerable pensioners—my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) made this point clear—are going to be the least well off. I therefore hope we can start to have a wider debate.

3.12 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I start by offering you, Mr Deputy Speaker, and the House my apologies, because unfortunately I will not be able to be here for the winding-up speeches—I am on Front-Bench duty in Westminster Hall from 4 o'clock. No discourtesy is intended either to the shadow Minister or the Minister who will be closing the debate.

As always, it is a pleasure to take part in the debate, although I am a little saddened by the Minister's response to what is a fairly clear motion tabled by the Labour

Front-Bench team. We are calling on the Government to set out a process of transitional arrangements for the group of women affected, who have been served a real injustice. I am not concerned about the who, where, how or what. When my kids are squabbling, they get put on the naughty step; I am not bothered about the who, why, where or what. We are where we are, as the WASPI women appreciate. The real injustice is that they have been denied fair transitional arrangements.

When we were discussing the pension scheme for Members of Parliament, we put in place, I accept through an independent system, a 10-year transitional arrangement, so that right hon. and hon. Members who were within 10 years of their normal retirement age were able to remain on the old House of Commons system, and the rest of us were moved on to the new IPSA system. I say to the Minister that if it is good enough for us, it is good enough for those women, and they deserve the freedom to have enough time to make alternative arrangements. Those were the arguments that were made when our pension changes came before us. There should not be one rule for us and one rule for people outside this Chamber. I argue, reasonably, that they should expect the same treatment that we expected when there were changes to our pension system.

I realise that the Minister currently sitting on the Front Bench is not the Pensions Minister; the Pensions Minister is in the other place. I have to say, being kind to the Minister, who seemed tetchy in his response, that the fact that he was not the Pensions Minister probably showed. I will tell him what the WASPI women are calling for—I quote from their petition:

“The Government must make fair transitional arrangements for all women born on or after 6th April 1951 who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age”.

They are not asking for changes to legislation; they are asking for fairness. That brings me back to the motion, which will be voted on. We all have the chance in the Division Lobby later today not just to offer platitudes to the women affected but to show that we mean it. In the motion we call on the Government

“to bring forward proposals for transitional arrangements for” those women, because they deserve fairness. That is why we called for this debate. I commend the shadow Secretary of State for securing it, because it allows us to have a vote and to show these women that we mean what we say.

3.16 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate. I rise to represent the views of Linda Anderson and others from the WASPI campaign group in Salisbury who came to see me just last week. It was clear from their representations that they feel a grave sense of injustice. They have had different experiences in what they have received over the years and in their understanding of the different entitlements they should have had, but I too have been disappointed by the lack of clarity in the alternatives that have been presented in this debate. We had a powerful speech by the SNP Front-Bench spokesman, but we did not have clarity or costings on the amelioration that his party proposes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard) said, the Opposition spokesman offered a menu of options, but we did not have any price tags and we did not have any choices.

I want to set out what I would do and say how much it would cost, because it is important that we have some integrity in addressing the campaigners who have come to see all of us. There has been far too much emotive talk from people trying to get alongside the WASPI campaigners by saying, “It is my party that will do something about this”, and making grave accusations about a Government who have made significant changes to raise pensioners’ standard of living and to put in place mechanisms to ensure that changes in life expectancy are reflected in the provision that the Government make for senior citizens.

It is clear that the pathway to equalisation was set a long time ago, and that there was some communication after the legislation was passed in 1995, but I want to go back to the Work and Pensions Committee report in 2004. There is no ambiguity in what that report said about the Omnibus survey of women in 2004 aged 45 to 54. That survey found that 73%—nearly three quarters—of those women were aware of the changes. That was 12 years ago. I say that not to deflect from the sense of injustice of the WASPI campaigners but to suggest that there has been a range of experiences and different levels of awareness of the changes. It is therefore difficult to get absolute clarity on who knew what when.

However, there does seem to be a real injustice for that group of people, who are now very near their pensionable age, or what they thought would be their pensionable age, which has now been extended. Their lifestyle will be compromised. Their partners or husbands are often already retired, and there will be grave implications for their quality of life. So what I propose is that the group of pensioners in that early-50s cohort are given the option to take their pension earlier. Their pension would be reduced, but it would be a relatively small amount for two or three years, and it should be cost-neutral to the Government even taking into account the cost of the administrative changes involved. That is a reasonable approach, because it says, “There’s a good chance that three quarters of you will have heard about this, but if you didn’t, this option exists.” I urge the Front-Bench team to consider that and come back at the end of the debate with its response.

3.19 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this debate because I have heard in so many cases how the changes brought in by the Pensions Act 2011 affect the lives of millions of women born throughout the 1950s. They are unfairly bearing the burden of the personal costs of the Government’s increases to the state pension age, because many find themselves without a job, without a pension or pensioner benefits, and without money to live on, and that must focus our minds. Many of the 1950s-born women affected by the changes are living in real financial hardship.

In our last debate on this, I asked the Minister where the work or suitable support is for women affected by the state pension age increases his Government brought in. There are 2.6 million women born in the 1950s affected by the Government’s changes, but finding suitable employment in our 60s is not the same as looking for work in our teens and 20s. The experience of my constituents is that suitable work or support programmes do not exist. These facts were known about in 2011 when the legislation went through.

[Barbara Keeley]

The Minister was pilloried even by MPs of his own party when he read out a list of benefits available to 1950s-born women affected by the Government's changes. I say to the Minister that he does not realise what it means to have to go to a job centre or to be pushed on to the Work programme or to have an assessment for ESA. My constituents have told me how they feel about having to go to job centres; they feel there is no dignity in having to do that as women in their 60s, after a lifetime of working, bringing up children, and paying national insurance contributions for 40 years or more. One of my constituents told me she was pleased they had taken her off ESA

"because it is making me ill to keep dealing with them...the way you are dealt with."

I have a constituent who is forced to attend the Work programme. She feels that it fails to take into account her previous experience, which is a very common feeling. She is worried about being "parked" on a programme where she has to work for free or face sanctions.

WASPI campaign supporters have shared other stories about poor practice by Work programme providers when working with 1950s-born women. One 62-year-old woman with a full work history has reported being escorted by staff of the provider Seetec around a shopping centre with a CV to make speculative applications to managers in shops there, but the woman involved did not recognize her CV because it had been changed by the Work programme provider to disguise her age by removing her date of birth and full work history. That raises legal issues as such misrepresentation can make an employment contract void, but putting them aside we see that the Government's acceleration of state pension age changes is pushing some women who become unemployed into such situations.

Women affected have described the whole process as "degrading", being "frogmarched" with a falsified CV around a shopping centre and constantly under observation. It was also humiliating for women on this programme when the same provider offered inappropriate incentives such as sweets or chocolates to "encourage" the women to apply for jobs. Women fear they will be subject to sanctions if they refuse to participate.

We should be ashamed to have a system that treats women born in the 1950s in this way when they have worked all their lives. I have asked before why the Government have not considered different schemes to support people in their 60s. The Government have changed the situation and they should do that. Why have they not looked at a bridge pension scheme, or offering concessionary travel, or winter fuel payments?

Throughout their lives, 1950s-born women have been disadvantaged in terms of pay and pensions. They deserve better after a lifetime of work than being frogmarched around shopping centres or offered sweets to fill in job applications. They deserve proper consideration of a lifetime of work and NI contributions: they deserve fair transitional arrangements.

3.24 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) on the measured way in which she made her comments.

I support this motion, opportunistic though it is, and it gives me no pleasure to say that I will have to vote against the Government, which is not something I make a habit of. I will do so out of loyalty to WASPI, out of support for transitional arrangements which I agree with, and because legislation needs to be fair and proportionate, and these pension changes are unfair and have fallen disproportionately on a small number of women.

Never in my time in the House have I ever known there to be a debate on the same subject five times in the space of just two months; it has been unprecedented. There was standing room only in Westminster Hall in the last debate.

I welcome the six options put forward by the shadow Front Bench. They are fraught with problems, but they are a starting point, and the one thing the Government have not done is come up with some options and offer to help to model them. I hope and ask for a dialogue and that we may have detail and definition. There is genuine cross-party support for getting this problem sorted out. The problem is not going to go away, as we have said before. I ask the Minister to agree that the Secretary of State will meet a cross-party delegation of hon. Members with key members of the WASPI campaign and—with the help of civil servants—cost some possible models and give their implications, so at least we can have some facts about how impractical or practical some of these things might be. That would be a helpful way forward.

Given the time, I just want to read from a couple of letters from constituents that speak much more eloquently than I could. One of them is from a lady who said:

"2 years before I was due to retire at 60 I found out that I had to wait till I was 66. Like many other women, not exactly what I had planned for. In fact when I started work at 15 I was always going to work till I was 60, so everything was planned for that time..."

I come from a family who believed in work, to save for the future and be independent. Despite being widowed at 22, and left with a small baby, I never accepted handouts, the only thing I had was child benefit. As a single mother, I worked and supported my son for 6 years—no tax credits. I was lucky enough to remarry when my son was 7 but still continued to work and be independent financially, which was important to me...Unfortunately after 2 bouts of cancer I finally had to stop working when I was in my mid-50s, and much against my ethos, had to claim incapacity benefit, but was again reassured that after 5 years I would receive my pension. So it was a complete shock that 2 years before I was due to receive it I find I will not get it till I am 66—if I live that long!"

Another constituent writes:

"I have worked as a nurse for 40 years, presently as a Macmillan Cancer Specialist.

When I was young, I believed that my Government would look after me when I reached retirement age of 60, and I believe they had a contract with me which they have now broken, as I will be 65 years and 9 months old when I receive my State pension.

This will cause me hardship as I grow older, and after working many years in the NHS, I really feel let down. My pension age has been changed twice, and I cannot believe that a woman born 2 years before me already receives her pension."

Another lady ended up after making a similar impassioned plea saying:

"It seems that we older women who have contributed to society are considered unimportant and not worth the financial support that we have earned over the years."

I agree. We need to send out a very strong message to those women that we do care, and that there has been a disproportionate effect from perfectly well-intentioned changes to the pension age. Nobody disagrees with equalisation—nobody says that we need to go back to a pre-1995 level—but there is a deal to be done and a compromise to be reached. Common sense needs to break out and the Government need to listen to those on both sides of this House and to these women, because we value them and they have been affected most disproportionately by well-intentioned changes. I hope that the Minister will take away that message and that we will now be able to open a dialogue, because we are talking about real women facing real hardship after hard-working lives, when they were doing the sort of thing we encourage our constituents to do every day of the week.

3.28 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Today, we again debate the need for transitional arrangements following the equalisation of the state pension age. Contrary to what the Minister said, everyone—including the women affected—accepts the equalisation of the state pension age for men and women in principle. However, in practice it is clear that these changes have had such a detrimental effect on the lives of a particular group of women born in the 1950s—many thousands of them up and down the country—that we must look at transitional arrangements. We can ignore this no longer.

Like many others in the Chamber today, I have had many women from WASPI contact me at my surgeries, or via email or social media, to raise their concerns about the impact that the lack of transitional arrangements will have on their lives. In recent weeks and months, we have had many debates on this important matter, yet time and again the Government have failed to move an inch in their position and have continued to ignore the concerns of these women.

The common theme of all the many letters I have received from constituents has been that the escalation in the equalisation of the state pension age has ruined these women's plans, savings and, in some cases, lives. One constituent's case stands out in particular. She was born in 1957. I will not name her, but she explained to me that she saw these changes mentioned on the news a few times but as she never received a letter, she assumed they must not affect her, as she would surely have been told if they did. She eventually received a letter in 2014. She thought it was a routine pension calculation, but it showed her state pension age as taking effect in 2023. She thought it must be an error and was horrified later to discover that it was not. What that meant for her was that instead of retiring next year, as expected and as she planned for, she has to work a further six years. She is in very bad health and could just about envisage coping until next year, when she thought her state pension age applied. However, upon the realisation of the enormity of this information and what it meant to her and her life; her health rapidly deteriorated. She became severely depressed and required medication, and I would hazard that she may never be the same again.

No one here has a magic wand, not even the Minister, and none of us can turn back time, but just for a second, can the Minister put himself in that lady's

position? Imagine being that lady and finding out that news in that way—imagine how that would feel and imagine the shock! We—this institution, this Parliament—did that. Lots of us were not MPs in 1995, but some of us were in 2011, and the laws of the land that we make here affect people out there. Was it not our duty to ensure that these women, to whom we were about to deliver this great life-altering shock, at least knew about it? Should we not have ensured that they knew when they heard it on the news that it did indeed affect them, not because they had researched the small print themselves, but because the Department for Work and Pensions wrote to them and personally told them in good time, not as late as 2014? Surely that was the least the DWP should have done and we, Parliament, should have insisted upon it.

As I have said, we cannot turn back time and we cannot wave the magic wand that a lot of people think we have, because we do not have one—it does not exist. But we can do something today: we can insist that the Government do something. The Minister must go away and draft, with haste, transitional arrangements for this group of WASPI women who have been failed by the system and failed by these changes. We cannot fail them today. Parliament is at its best when using its powers for the good of its people. Parliament is speaking very clearly today to the Government. It is saying, “Go away, sort this out and bring forward transitional arrangements so that these women are not left destitute in what should have been their well-earned retirement.”

3.32 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Nobody in this House can doubt the sincerity of the WASPI campaign or the number of women who have signed the petition, but as this is the fifth debate, we should start with what has changed since the last one. Today's motion is all about bringing forward “transitional arrangements”, and those are the precise words used on the WASPI campaign's petition. They sound fairly harmless, but what are these transitional arrangements?

In the last debate, the shadow Pensions Minister, who is in her place, included a specific proposal—a perfectly reasonable one—about extending pension credit. However, that had been specifically ruled out by WASPI spokeswomen in evidence to the Select Committee. Today, the shadow Work and Pensions Secretary, like the Scottish National party spokesman, talked passionately about doing the right thing, but they did not say what that was, what their commitment is or what their parties would do if they were ever in the position—in some cases, that is unlikely—of actually being responsible for the finances of the pension arrangements for the United Kingdom. There is a serious danger of Opposition Members, in their sympathy for the cause of the WASPI campaign, leading these women up the garden path—encouraging them with sympathy but giving no commitment whatsoever.

It is important that the House understands what these women's main ask is. It is exactly as I spelled it out from their Facebook page in the last debate. It is to ask for

“all women born in the 50s”—

to be—

“in the same financial position they would have been in had they been born on or before...April 1950.”

[Richard Graham]

That is their main ask and it would reverse the 1995 Act in important ways. What would that cost? Since the last debate, the Department for Work and Pensions has provided data to the Select Committee, showing that the cost is much, much greater than any of us imagined. There would be an immediate cost of £29 billion in 2016-17—bigger than the entire budget for Scotland. The total cost up to 2020 alone would be £77 billion.

When I discuss this issue with my wife and my sisters and others born in the 1950s and I explain to them that pensions are paid every year not out of some magic protected pot called national insurance, but out of general taxpayer-provided revenue paid by the next generation—our children and our grandchildren—none of them believes that that cost of £77 billion is remotely practicable.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con) Will my hon. Friend give way?

Richard Graham: I had better not.

That is why the Opposition will never make that proposal or agree to it under any circumstances. The question is whether any other arrangements are possible. The other potential arrangements are being considered by the Select Committee in a report on the new state pension Act, which will include a section specifically on the WASPI campaign. Members should wait until that report has come out—it will be only about three weeks from now—and the conclusions may be seen and studied by everyone, and then they will see the real impact and the real cost of some of the suggestions that have been made today.

We should be clear about this: the WASPI campaign is genuine and it is principled. Its members care passionately. They feel that they have been badly treated, but this House has an obligation not to mislead them and pretend that things will be done when they will never be done. That is why the main ask is not possible.

3.36 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Sometimes a campaign captures the mood of this nation, and the WASPI campaigners have done just that. Like so much of this Government's agenda, the speed of the transition arrangements for women's state pensions betrays a rush to pinch pennies at too great a human expense, but the WASPI women have stung back—even more so than other groups that have been hit hard by austerity—and the wave of public support for their cause speaks volumes.

We have a strong tradition of equality campaigning in this country. I think of the Suffragettes and their determination to give women a voice whatever the cost; the Chartists and their drive for universal suffrage and a fairer deal for working people; and the Ford Dagenham workers and their demand for equal pay for equal work. I think, too, of Stonewall and its tireless challenging of homophobia in law, schools and the workplace; and the Fawcett Society and its provocative challenge that, "This is what a feminist looks like." Well, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me say, "This is what a feminist looks like." Each of those campaigns was

driven by anger at injustice; anger at unfairness; and anger at the unreasonableness of those in positions of power to listen to a reasonable case.

As we have heard, moving the goalposts on state pension age equalisation so rapidly is the latest affront to a generation of women whose working lives have already been too challenging. This is a generation of women who had patchy access to maternity leave and fair pay; who had no access to shared parental leave; who often experienced harassment, bullying and discrimination in the workplace; and who regularly settled for low-paid, low-skilled jobs beneath their potential, because quality flexible working was not then an option for them. They are the generation of women who account for too few seats in the boardroom and for too few positions in industries such as engineering and construction; who finished their working lives earning significantly less than their male counterparts; and who have paid their dues and deserve a decent retirement. They deserve, at a minimum, to be able to plan their retirement with the certainty and the expectation that others have.

It is right that the retirement age for the state pension should be the same for men and women. The WASPI campaign does not dispute that, but the pace of this change has robbed people of the time to prepare; the time to make informed decisions; and the time to honour other commitments without placing themselves in financial jeopardy. All those things have been robbed from the WASPI campaigners. Reasonable decisions about their family futures have been lost to a forced hand. More than 3,800 of my constituents are believed to be affected by this legislation—more than 5% of my electorate. Of those, a considerable 2,000 will experience a year's increase to state pension age, and as many as 450 will experience the full 18-month delay. Several of them have contacted me to express their concerns. They include Gail Jones of Hyde and Barbara Evans of Mossley. They are women who have contributed to both the Exchequer and their communities throughout their lives, and they are now being short-changed.

This Government have at times proven that they can acknowledge when they have misjudged a policy by retreating from their attempts to cut tax credits and to make further cuts to police numbers. The cynics among us would say that that tends to happen when the Chancellor feels it will affect his career prospects, but it is still the case that the Government have on occasions performed a U-turn. I trust that on this occasion the Minister will finally listen to the strength of feeling of Labour Members and indeed of those on both sides of the House, but especially to the passionate appeals by the WASPI campaigners, and agree to revisit the arrangements. Let us respect those women who have contributed so much to both the national purse and the national fabric.

I hope that when the Minister comes to sum up, he will show from the Dispatch Box today that he is what a feminist looks like and will pledge to think again.

3.40 pm

Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): This has been an interesting debate. Parts of it have been quite poor, but it is clearly of great interest to many of our constituents.

Many of us came into politics to do the right thing and to look after the right sorts of people. I joined the Conservative party because I wanted to ensure that

people who do the right thing, go out to work and save for their future are protected and looked after in their old age. It runs deep through the Conservative party that we should look after those who have been out there and worked hard, or those who have stayed at home, looked after their children and made sure their children set off on the right path.

Today's debate has been a sad reflection on women who find themselves in difficult circumstances. We had to listen to 30 minutes from the Labour Front Bench of blatant party politicking about the issues and the challenges we face, without a single commitment saying what the Opposition would do. They talked about six options that were available and committed to none of them. They did not say whether they would do one of those, two or all six. It is a great shame that they did not nail their flag to the mast and say what they would do if they were in the hot seat. They left us in the hot seat.

To be fair to the Blair Government, with the Pensions Act, they tried to engage with those people who found themselves in a difficult position, but they did not go far enough. They did not recognise the enormous time bomb that was coming as a result of demographic change, and they left us in 2010 with an enormous mountain to climb to solve the challenges arising from the fact that we all live longer and healthier lives. The coalition Government tried to close the gap by introducing the Pensions Act 2011.

It is extremely challenging for those who find themselves on the wrong side of the line, but a line had to be drawn somewhere so that we could move the pension age up over time. I recognise that some people find themselves in difficult circumstances. I will listen to the Minister to hear whether there are ways in which we can mitigate some of the challenges that they face. We should recognise that changes have already taken place: there has been more than £1 billion of mitigation since our time in office to try to smooth the way for those people. I am enormously sympathetic to the challenges that they face, and I shall meet some of them very soon in my constituency. This debate will continue for a long time.

3.43 pm

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): When I heard that we were to debate this issue again, I thought, "What am I going to talk about?" Everything is already on the record. We have already discussed how the new single tier state pension is irrelevant to the women in question and will not solve the problem. We went to great lengths to explain how nobody disagrees with equalisation and nobody is calling for Acts to be repealed.

Then I came across a document that was sent by a Conservative MP to a woman affected. On the front page it says that the Government cannot do anything because WASPI is campaigning for all women born after April 1951 to be given their state pension from age 60. No, that is not what WASPI is asking for. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) talked about misleading people. That is misleading. Nobody is against equalisation.

On Monday I attended a media training course, where we were taught how to look at the camera, where to put our hands and so on. One of the guys taking the course said, "If you, as politicians, ever find ourselves

in a difficult situation where you realise you're in the wrong and you need to get through an interview, just start talking about what you want to talk about." It struck me immediately that that is what this Government are doing; every single time we talk about this, they start talk about things that are completely irrelevant.

The second page of the document states: "The national insurance credits are available for many people to help them build entitlement towards state pension. National insurance payments also impact on entitlement to a range of other benefits." Pensions are not a benefit; they are a right. One of my constituents described them as a contract, and that is exactly what they are. Let me make this very simple. Everybody here has a phone—in fact, some of us are sitting with our iPads right now—and we all have contracts for those. If O2, Virgin or Three were to change the terms and conditions of our contracts, we would have something to say about it. If they waited 14 years to tell us about those changes, we would definitely have something to say about it. If they said, on top of that, that we would be forced to live off our life savings as a result of those changes, we would be up in arms about it, and rightly so. So why are pensions any different?

We hear all the time, "Where is the money going to come from for that?" The truth is that this comes down to austerity, and it is austerity of choice. Those on the Government Front Bench can roll their eyes all they want, but this is a choice. I am yet to hear a general or a Defence Minister say, "We can't bomb that country because we've exceeded our budget." When we want to bomb Syria, we can find the money. When we want to refurbish Westminster, we can find the money. But when it comes to giving our pensioners their pensions, we cannot find the money? I just do not accept that.

This debate reminds me of the tax credits debate. We were making all these arguments about how unfair the situation was, and the Government responded with exactly the same argument: "We don't have the money." Then, when the heat was turned up and political pressure was put on them, all of a sudden they put their hand down the back of the couch and said, "Okay, we can afford it now, so let's just do a U-turn," and rightly so.

That brings me to my last point. How can we ignore the will of this House? We have debated this matter in this Chamber and voted by 158 to 0. How can we ignore that? We debated it in Westminster Hall, which was packed to the gunnels, and almost everybody who spoke was against the Government. They cannot continue to ignore the will of this House. I am no fan of Westminster—that will come as no surprise—because I think it is more about ego than it is about issue, but the truth is that even the most politically savvy minds must be able to see that this is not party political. We have a chance to come together and do something that will earn us respect. I think that the Government should take that chance and act.

3.47 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): In the past few months I have met a number of constituents who have been impacted by these changes. They detailed how the increases in the state pension age have had an impact on them owing to their being on the wrong side of the dateline. I have every sympathy with them, and I understand their frustration.

[*Huw Merriman*]

I spoke during the Back-Bench business debate on this matter on 7 January, and I congratulated the WASPI campaign on driving the debate. Although it is true that any criteria changes regarding pensions, benefits or taxation in general are always going to have an impact on some people, I am conscious that many of the individuals we are talking about have worked for decades on the basis that they would receive their pensions at a prescribed time. However, I am also conscious that when actuaries calculated life expectancy, and therefore the number of years for which a pension would pay out, they did not expect it to reach the level that many currently enjoy, and they would not have anticipated the current rising levels of health. Those factors have driven successive Governments, and most OECD nations, to increase the pension age.

The issue I have with the motion is that it deals with legislation that was settled in previous Parliaments. It implores the use of

“transitional arrangements for women adversely affected”.

My understanding is that when the last set of changes were made in 2011, a transitional programme was implemented, to the tune of over £1 billion. In order to manage expectations, it would be better if the motion had recognised that changing these rules for those impacted would cost £39 billion and then outlined where the additional money would be saved in Government spending in order to pay for it to be delivered. I spoke earlier today about the need for the Government to continue to support spending on mental health provision, particularly for young people. Would that be hit? Would it be the police budget, the subject of the next Opposition day motion, which is critical about the lack of funding?

I stood on a manifesto commitment pledging the delivery of a budget surplus by 2020, which means that compensation in this matter would have to be paid for by another group of my constituents. Opposition parties also attempted to cost their commitments in their manifestos. I do not recall finding a commitment to reverse this policy, and it concerns me that we are not managing expectations. This issue is already settled, and none of the parties seeking to reopen it have explained where the £39 billion hit would be taken were we to rip up the equalisation rules.

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, because it enables me to make the point that I wanted to make to the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black). To put this in context, if we compare the £39 billion with the approximately £120 billion annual spend on the NHS, we begin to see how difficult it is to make the sums add up. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Huw Merriman: I absolutely do. When it comes to footing the bill, I also have concerns about another age group in my constituency—those in their 20s and 30s. They are sometimes referred to as the packhorse generation because they are saddled with debts from university, which I, and many others of my age group and those older than me did not have to endure; they are less likely to be in receipt of occupational pension schemes; they are paying high rents and struggling to afford a home of

their own; and they are likely to be the subject of pension changes in decades to come, if life expectancy continues to increase.

Half-measured mitigation, even if it were introduced, would reveal the next pension age group to be impacted, and we would never be able to move on. The issue of pensions is becoming increasingly vexed. Post-retirement life expectancy is undoubtedly much greater than was envisaged when pensions calculators were put in place. Additionally, with advances allowing those in their sixties and beyond are working in a manner that was not envisaged when those pensions calculators were put in place.

There has been a general change in life and working-age expectancy, which we all rightly celebrate because it shows that many people are living longer and leading fitter lives in their advanced years. However, it also means that there is a funding gap, and to avoid placing a financial obligation on those in their 20s and 30s, who are struggling to get on, the country has had to revise the pension age to take into account the changes in life and work expectancy.

This is a settled matter. Until it can be explained to me which of the current spending commitments will be axed to cover the cost of this £39 billion change, I cannot support this motion.

3.52 pm

Kate Hollern (Blackburn) (Lab): It has been interesting to hear the passionate arguments on this issue. The first thing we have to point out is that this is a political decision: you guys in government decided where the cuts would come. We are not asking Ministers to put £39 billion in; we are saying, “Don’t take it out. Have a transitional arrangement.”

Over the last few months, people have been queuing up at my surgery. The 3,800 in Blackburn affected by this change feel that the Government have moved the goalposts; they thought they had a contract with the Government, but it seems not. These are the same women who had to give up their jobs in their early working lives. There was no such thing as maternity pay; women gave up their job and applied for it when they were ready to go back and if one was available. These are the same women who were not protected by equal pay—who earned a lot less than their male counterparts—and who were less able to join a private pension scheme. Nevertheless, these women recognised the problem and tried to fill the gap. They did not want to be a burden on society, so they made arrangements. After working 45 years, they are entitled to a pension they were promised—but it seems the Government do not think so.

The people I have spoken to feel they have been misled, misinformed and, in a number of cases, not informed at all. They feel the Government are forcing changes on them. As everyone else has said, nobody is objecting to equality. What we are objecting to is thousands of people having difficult financial circumstances imposed on them.

One of my constituents, Kath, came to see me. She was very upset. She felt frustrated that the Minister did not understand the impact the changes would have on her life. She said:

“Had I been born 12 months earlier my retirement age would have been 4 years sooner. Can that be right?”

Why is the burden of the increase falling over such a short period? That cannot be right and it is unfair—surely any intelligent person can see that. Kath has an additional problem: the DWP cannot predict her pension because for a number of years she was in an opt-out situation. Is that fair? Kath is a widow and has worked all her life in a range of jobs, from the NHS to the banking sector to self-employment. She now finds that everything she has worked for has been put on hold and she will have to struggle on for a few more years. She feels that this is a very sad state of affairs and wants to know why this Government are penalising her for working hard all her life.

Some transitional arrangements must be put in place, because women all over the country have been put in the same difficult circumstances as those in Blackburn. It is not too late for these women; it is not too late to right the wrong. Transitional arrangements should be made, and should be made now.

3.55 pm

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): The need for equalisation of the state pension age is evident. We have an ageing population. People are living healthier, longer lives, with an ever-greater proportion of the population drawing a pension while an ever-smaller proportion are contributing through national insurance. Without equalisation, the system risks becoming increasingly difficult to afford. At my help and advice surgery in Frodsham last month, a constituent of mine, Barbara, came to speak to me about this issue. Barbara is 59, turning 60 this year, and she had been expecting to retire at 62. It was not until recently that she realised she would have to wait until she was 66 to retire. The majority of the anger at these changes lies in the lack of notification.

Following the changes of 1995, the DWP issued a leaflet, among other press and publicity measures, including direct mail, to advise the public of those changes. In 2004, it ran an information campaign, distributing over 2 million pension information guides, alongside adverts in the press and women's magazines, to complement an interactive online state pension age calculator. In addition, all state pension statements issued from 2001 included the new state pension age, as determined by the 1995 changes, as standard. Since then, over 11 million statements have been issued. Those affected by the 2011 changes were written to directly. This involved sending out more than 5 million letters between January 2012 and November 2013. I note that for those of us due to retire at 65, within the past three years the age has gone from 65 to 66, and it is now 67 for men and women born in the 1960s and onwards. Had those efforts been fully successful, however, we would likely not be here now debating this subject, and I believe that this is the fourth debate we have had on it in as many months.

The WASPI campaign has called on the Government “to put all women in their 50's affected by the changes to their state pension in exactly the same financial position they would have been in had they been born on or before 5 April 1950.”

Those who plan towards their retirement want to live the retirement they planned for. Following the 2011 changes, the Government passed an amendment to the legislation that provided £1.1 billion of transitional funding and delayed the equalisation of the state pension

age, on top of bringing the new state pension forward by a full year. However, undoing the 2011 changes would cost £30 billion, in addition to a loss of £8 billion in tax revenue, and undoing the 1995 changes would cost several times that—£70 billion-plus. The new state pension, which has been brought forward by a year, will come into effect in April this year. It will see many women significantly better off than they would have been under the old system, with £416 a year more than they would have had. Likewise, the introduction of the triple lock, which ensures that the state pension goes up by whichever is highest out of inflation, wages or 2.5% means that the basic state pension will be over £1,100 higher than it was at the start of the previous Parliament.

The lesson to be learned by Governments of all colours is that of effective communication. Pensions are complicated at the best of times, and I have a huge amount of sympathy with that. I believe that it is the fault of Governments of all colours, not just the Conservative Government. WASPI women will receive an improved pension before the men and women who will now retire at the age of 67. WASPI women will live longer, on average, than men. The Government's pension reforms are fair for those who receive them and for the younger generation who will have to pay for them.

3.59 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Usually, when somebody says to me, “So-and-so is being a bit waspy,” it is a signal to tread with some care, so when I was told that a load of women who were concerned about this issue were coming to see me at my surgery on Friday, I trod with sufficient care. I was able to tell them that I spoke on Second Reading of the 2011 Act to point out that the women who left Foxhills comprehensive in my constituency in 1970 were the very women who would be affected, that it was not fair and that, frankly, there needed to be a better deal than two months' transitional mudge.

I am aware that we are short of time, so I will just give a voice to those women. Marie Spikings said to me:

“My personal story began when I was 15 years old, leaving school at Easter with no qualifications. From the start of my working life at 15 years I paid a full National Insurance stamp believing that I was entering into a contract.”

That is a common belief. She continued:

“I understand the need for equality, however the 2011 Act has given me no time to prepare for working until I am 66! Not only have I lost thousands of pounds but also the benefits that come with the state pension e.g. heating allowance and bus pass etc.”

That is a key point about the other allowances, from which those women are now debarred. She told me:

“I am a single parent through no fault of my own. Day to day life is a struggle as I have a dependent child, and a disabled dependent adult child. I am tired and the thought of having to work for another 5 years is daunting to say the least.”

Christine said to me: “I feel trapped.” Her choices have been taken away from her.

Annette said to me:

“I was born in May 1954 and my state pension date has been moved twice, the first time I was informed in writing that it was changing from my 60th birthday to my 64th year. Since then I had heard nothing until someone told me to check the website by entering my DOB. The date for my state pension then came up as January 2021 another 18 months on. I am sure you will agree this is completely unfair”.

[*Nic Dakin*]

That is an example of the poor communication that we have heard about. Another woman pointed out to me that her older sister, who was born in April 1952, has already received her state pension. The woman who wrote to me is 22 months younger than her sister and has to wait an extra five years and five months—not fair and not reasonable. I could go on to give many similar examples.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): There are 3,540 women affected by the changes in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the 1995 changes were reasonably well communicated, but the 2011 changes were badly communicated? Some women who are affected by the 1995 changes were also affected by the 2011 changes, which compounded the issue.

Nic Dakin: My hon. Friend has it spot on. Communication, as the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) said, is one of the issues at the heart of the matter. What happened in 2011 compounded what had happened previously, and the situation is totally unfair.

The debate has been quite good since we got to the Back-Bench speeches, although my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) did a good job of kicking things off. I welcome the comments of the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), who drew attention to my hon. Friend's six suggestions and said that they were a good starting point. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said that there was a deal to be done, and I think he is right. The hon. Members for Salisbury (John Glen) and for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) encouraged Ministers to find a way to put right the injustices.

The women we are talking about are not asking for the world. They are not even asking for the things that some people have suggested that they are asking for. They are simply asking for a reasonable settlement and a reasonable deal, which is what they deserve.

4.4 pm

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Women of a certain age, of which I am one, from right across the United Kingdom are very angry about the position they find themselves in. If they were born in March 1953, like Jill in the Jack and Jill twins scenario, they will be absolutely livid, because Jack will get £155 a week under the single-tier state pension, while Jill will get £131, because she was born a woman. Where is the justice in Jack getting £20,000 more over 20 years than his sister Jill? That is just ridiculous.

We all know women who do not have access to a private pension and who find themselves being forced to look for work or—if they take the advice of the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who is no longer in his place—they can sign on for JSA. It is a slap in the face for every woman who has dedicated themselves to being the backbone of this country. The absence of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—my eyes tell me he is loitering outside the Chamber, but he is obviously unwilling to come in to defend his Government's policies—is an absolute insult to these women.

I am aware of a 60-year-old woman who has had to find employment as a bus escort for a special needs school. That involves physically manoeuvring youngsters from the vehicle into the building. It is hard, heavy and demanding work. How do I know that? Because I did that job in my thirties; I could not do it now.

The changes to women's pensions are categorically unfair and unjust. Everyone in the Chamber, and indeed everyone across the country, will have heard about the WASPI campaign. We have heard all the analogies about a sting in the tail and a buzz in the air, but did any of us really think that in three short months we would have debated this issue so many times? That is the power of this lobby. It has proved time and again that it is fighting on a platform that resonates right across this country.

Everyone will know at least one woman affected by this injustice. Such women are only asking for fairness. They have been betrayed, they have been discriminated against and they have been seen as a soft option by this Government. They were seen as the one group that could be pushed to one side to rush through the transition to equal retirement ages. The Government thought they would save money, but in reality they have lost credibility and respect, and they have been exposed by this wonderful group of strong women as petty, arrogant and, quite frankly, ridiculous.

4.7 pm

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Mr Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I thank the women of the WASPI campaign for their tireless efforts in persisting in bringing this issue to the Government's attention. I want to speak for the women in my constituency of Burnley, and for the thousands of women who will be affected. There has been much talk about the financial impact of the change and what the cost will be, but let us not forget that these women are taxpayers who have worked hard and paid in. They are asking not for a benefit, but for a right to which they are entitled.

I want to talk about the impact on people. I have talked to women in my constituency who are physically struggling every day to cope with their physical jobs. One lady I spoke to during my surgery at the weekend was in tears as she told me about her many years of working in an engineering foundry. She is staggering on towards her retirement age. She is in bed at 7.30 every night, having been barely able to make it to the bus station to get the bus home. She has spent long years working on the minimum wage, and the only light at the end of the tunnel was retirement at the age of 60. She thought that she might just be able to stagger on until then. However, not only have the goalposts been moved, but there just has not been any communication with her. Let us not get into the blame game of arguing about whose fault it was or was not that she did not know, but the fact is that she did not know.

There has been a lot of talk about what happened in 2011 and in 1995. I was not a Member of Parliament then. I would say that we are where we are. Let us tackle the problem we have in front of us now. Hon. Members on both sides of the House have made sensible suggestions about sitting down together with the WASPI women,

around the table, on a cross-party basis and without scoring political points, to work out a solution to this terrible mess.

4.9 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate WASPI on its highly effective campaign, particularly all the women from my constituency who have contacted me or come to my surgeries. Women across the UK have been hit hard by the changes. To the surprise and dismay of many of them, the plans that they had made have been disrupted. Often, they face unemployment, with little hope of getting a job—a bleak life on benefits at a time when they should be enjoying the fruits of their long years of work.

Plaid Cymru supports the principle of equalising the pension age. Equalisation is another step towards recognising how radically circumstances have changed since the pension was brought in by my predecessor as the Member for Caernarfon, Lloyd George, when men worked for the money and generally supported women, and women worked at home for free. Those are not the circumstances now. It is not equalisation that is so unfair but the way in which the Government are bringing it in.

The Government say that they are making these changes in response to the increase in life expectancy. As one woman who contacted me said, “That’s all right then—it’s our fault for living longer.” Both life expectancy and life experience vary significantly depending on class and, crucially, on where one lives. Women in Wales will be hit particularly hard by the changes. Life expectancy is generally lower in Wales than in England—there is a difference of up to 11 years. Welsh women and Welsh men therefore have less opportunity to enjoy their retirement. Incomes in Wales are also low, so they have already suffered a disproportionate disadvantage. There are fewer job opportunities and jobs are more insecure, particularly in some constituencies.

On Monday, I asked the Prime Minister about the fate of the EU convergence funding that we in Wales won after a long and hard fight. He smiled sympathetically and went on to talk about Romania and Bulgaria. Disgracefully, that is where the incomes of women and men in Wales are—on a par with those in Romania and Bulgaria. Wales has the lowest income per head of all the UK nations and regions.

The equal treatment of women and men in respect of the state pension is good, but the way in which the Government have handled the matter is not. In fact, it is a disgrace.

4.11 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Mr Deputy Speaker, 1950s-born women are not usually seen as a militant group. They were born and raised in the era of “Hi honey, I’m home,” spotless perfection, domestic bliss and Formica, but the situation they now find themselves in is far from perfect.

I have only been an MP since May, but, as several Members have mentioned, including the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black), this feels a bit like groundhog day. This is the third time I have raised the matter, and at other times I could not even get into Westminster Hall because it was standing

room only. The TV show “Desperate Housewives” comes to mind, although the valiant WASPI women are far from desperate.

The Government have to act. The public are making their voices heard, and the Government are on the wrong side of public opinion. It feels like groundhog day because not only is what we are saying falling on deaf ears, but there is a broken record routine in the way we are told that there is no money left. At the same time, we constantly hear that economic growth is returning and things are looking rosy. The two things cannot be reconciled with each other.

The people we are talking about have been hit twice, as everyone has said. “Double-whammy” is the phrase that keeps coming up in the emails that I receive. They were hit in 1995 and 2011. I have heard the rejoinder from Government Members that the 1997 Labour Government did not do anything about the 1995 changes, but surely the Conservative Government and civil service of that time should have put a work plan in place. We hear that not all people were notified, but there should have been some provision in place for that to keep happening. Presumably because that Government were saving money on their communications strategy or something, that did not happen. Anyway, as many people have said, we are where we are.

Like many Members here, I have received representations from many people, including Michele Carlile, who was born in 1954, and Linda Gregory, who was born in 1953. Some have pointed out that they started work at 15. One of them said to me, “That’s probably a good 10 years before you did, my dear.” The circumstances that these people faced was different from what happens today. We must remember that the Equal Pay Act 1970 did not come into force until a Labour Government made it happen in 1976. These people brought up children before the free childcare and nurseries and all the other things that Labour Governments have brought in. We should therefore be sympathetic to their plight.

I think that in this debate people have confused the WASPI petition and the wording of the motion. Nobody is arguing against equality. Nobody is saying that there should be compensation at the levels that these people would have received. All that is being asked for is transitional arrangements to soften the blow. Some of the people in the campaign have been neutral money people, such as Paul Lewis of the BBC’s “Money Box”, a former constituent of mine, and Martin Lewis of moneysavingexpert.com.

I urge Government Members to vote with us tonight, simply for transitional arrangements, since this Government have found so much money down the back of the sofa for so many things. The former Pensions Minister in the coalition, Steve Webb, has admitted that people are hard done by, so in the 17 seconds that I have left, let me say that this great pensions swindle must end now.

4.15 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I welcome the opportunity to make another contribution on this matter. I also want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the WASPI campaign for refusing to lie down and for continuing to fight for a transitional arrangement that will protect against the most damaging consequences of the rushed equalisation of the state pension.

[Gavin Newlands]

All these women are asking for is fairness, and I commend them for keeping the issue alive. This is the fourth time that it has been debated in the House, which shows the strength of feeling, exposes the injustice of the situation and highlights the struggles that many women face daily from the delay in receiving the state pension. I accept that a lot of the damage was done in the 1995 Act, but the coalition Government exacerbated the situation and this Government's refusal to rectify the blunder is not only political folly but plain wrong.

These women have paid into the system all their lives, and it is only right that the Government should step in to right this wrong. Responding to the motion, the Minister shamefully chose to repeat the accusation that WASPI is against the equalisation of the pension age for men and women. No, it is not. The Minister knows that. To use that line of argument again does a disservice to today's debate, to the women sitting in the Gallery right now and those watching the debate at home, and to the struggles that they face as a result of the rug being pulled from under their feet just when they needed the support most. Furthermore, I was hoping that the Minister would give Members and, more importantly, the WASPI women a better response to today's debate than the quite frankly pitiful response given in the petition debate in Westminster Hall. Sadly, I was wrong.

I run 13 surgeries a month across Paisley and Renfrewshire North, and over the past two to three months the majority of people attending them have raised this very issue. On this occasion, I want to take a little more time to highlight some of the heartbreaking stories I have heard. Many women were looking forward to having some more time to themselves, only to find out with a couple of months' notice that they were not retiring at 60 as they had thought.

There are two ladies whose stories I want to highlight. One, who did not want her name mentioned, recently came to see me at a surgery. She has worked all her life, from the age of 17, and built a career for herself that she had to give up to care for her husband. Even while she was caring she worked part time, and she has never been on benefits. She stopped working at 58 because of her health, thinking that she would get both her state pension and her small civil service pension at 60. She has never received any letters from the DWP and only found out about the changes to her pension age through word of mouth.

Another constituent, Ms Millar, also received no letter. The changes have had a devastating impact on her finances, forcing her to sell her car and her house to be able to cut down on her work in the future. She has suffered from ME since she was 30, which makes it difficult for her to continue working as a teacher. Is the Minister listening to this? No. I think that he owes Ms Millar the courtesy of listening to my speech. She will now have to work a lot longer than she had anticipated, and she also has caring responsibilities, caring for her mum three days a week. The fact that she now needs to work six years longer than expected means that she has six fewer years to spend full time with her mum.

I challenge the Minister to respond to my constituents and advise them what they should do to ease their financial worries, bearing in mind their poor health and

personal circumstances. My constituents are watching the debate, WASPI campaigners are watching the debate and the women in the Public Gallery are watching the debate. We are all waiting for the Government finally to wake up to the situation, show some humility and respond appropriately.

4.19 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Previous speakers have already said that pensions are not a benefit but a contract, and the Government have broken that contract. If that were done by a private company, it would be sued for mis-selling. When the terms of a contract change, there must be notification—actual notification, not Westminster politicians talking to each other—and mitigation when someone is disadvantaged. In this case, the Government must take responsibility and correct that.

What is the future for our pensions system if citizens cannot trust Government promises that when they pay in, they will receive their due amount at an agreed time? The situation reminds me and my constituents of someone who buys a car from a used-car salesman, but the car turns out to be dodgy. They bring it back, and the used-car salesman looks at it, scratches his head, and says, "I'd really like to help you out, but I just can't."

We are told that the Government will not move to put in appropriate transitional measures, but the greater cost of not acting is that of betraying all those women, many of whom spent a lifetime in low pay—we are literally picking their pockets and further alienating people from the cosy, Westminster establishment. We are told that money for transitional arrangements cannot be found, but I suspect that if companies such as Google paid their taxes, the Government would find that they had more money in the pot. Choices, choices—politics is nothing if it is not about choices. If the Government do not act on this issue, they have no alternative but to hang their head in shame.

The WASPI campaigners are calling for a review into the way that changes to the state pension age were implemented under the Pensions Acts of 1995 and 2011. What is wrong with that? Other European Governments have brought in pension equalisation arrangements without the distress, chaos and rammy created by this Government as they try to pick women's pockets. Why is that? It is because other European Governments have not made a Horlicks of it. This is both cock-up and incompetence writ large.

I am sick to the back teeth of hearing Government Ministers boasting of a new flat-rate pension of £155.65 a week. Apart from the fact that that is utterly irrelevant to this debate, many people who reach pension age will receive much less than that because they will not have paid enough national insurance. Those in the private sector, the low-paid and those earning less than £15,000 a year will be hit hardest, and those people are much more likely to be female than male.

An independent commission is required to prevent further gender inequalities and ensure a fair universal pension system that looks at the looming injustices coming down the track in the form of the flat-rate pension, which will leave many low-paid people on lower pensions than they would otherwise have benefited from. So far, the Government have not listened to the

WASPI campaigners or to votes taken in this House, but I urge them to do so. We require fairness and natural justice, and it is time that the Government held their head up and faced these women.

4.23 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This is the fourth WASPI campaign debate that I have spoken in, and it is hard to find something new to say. I note that the Minister had the same problem, because his earlier performance at the Dispatch Box was a disgrace. He said that he would talk about transitional arrangements, but he did not—he avoided the matter the whole time, took interventions and fudged the issue. Let me remind him of a suggestion that he made in a previous answer to an oral question, when he said that women could use the pension freedoms to help themselves bridge the gap and transition to state pension age. For me, that shows that he does not understand that women are less likely to have pensions, and that the pensions they do have are more likely to be low in value. To suggest that women should blow their savings as a remedial measure, instead of the Government helping out, is crazy and irresponsible.

I also want to make the Minister aware of another ongoing issue that could compound matters and affect people's choice, namely the exit payment gap in the Enterprise Bill. The cap in its current format will further limit the choices for people considering early retirement or voluntary redundancy. The £95,000 cap will affect not the so-called fat cats but long-serving, lower paid workers. The cap in its current format covers the strain on pension funds that an employer requires to pay for early and ill-health retirement. That means that people taking ill-health retirement might have the money due to them capped because of this Government. That compounds matters. The exit cap prevents councils, such as the local authority I was a councillor for, from operating schemes such as Teacher Refresh, which allows higher paid experienced teachers to opt for early retirement. That allows younger teachers to be employed, saving the taxpayer money overall and creating jobs for younger teachers. Combine the cap with the increased retirement age and we have a bad deal for individuals—mainly women—a bad deal for local authorities, and a bad deal for the taxpayer overall.

Another impact of the increase in the state pension age in the 2011 Act is that it can make women more dependent on male partners. That is bad for personal esteem, bad for relationships and potentially damaging in cases of domestic abuse where women feel trapped financially. Women are concerned and are feeling stress due to the bombshell that has been dropped on them. Instead of ignoring what is going on and ignoring the four debates, the Government should think about the consequences and do something about them.

The Government hide behind the £30 billion estimate to fully reverse the 2011 Act. People today are asking for transitional arrangements, but the £30 billion to do a full reversal could be found. The Government found an extra £16 billion in the defence review for Trident, to add to the £167 billion that had already been committed. They have allocated £12 billion for the right to buy social housing. They could introduce a bank levy and a mansion tax. They could reverse the inheritance tax and stop adding more people to the other place. Those are all choices to spend more money or subsidise other policies, while introducing austerity in other ways.

The Government have already lost court cases relating to the personal independence payment and the bedroom tax. There is a great chance they will lose another court case due to the unfairness of this measure and the lack of notice given to women. As has been said, this is a breach of contract. I ask the Minister to please take that into account and to put in place some transitional arrangements.

4.27 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I am pleased to finally be able to take part in this debate on transitional state pension arrangements. As many hon. Members have pointed out, we have had many debates recently on the subject of women's state pension age inequality. Now, however, we are talking about practical solutions and considering seriously transitional arrangements. Remember, this is transition—it is not for ever and it will not cost £30 billion or £39 billion, or whatever other figure has been floating around the Chamber. Transitional payments will help all the women born in the 1950s who have suffered the double whammy of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. Those women have emailed, written, phoned, Facebooked and tweeted me, and many of my fellow MPs, on seeing their retirement plans disintegrate.

The basic issue here is fairness. All we are asking is for the women affected to be treated fairly. This group of women have not been communicated with properly. Many of them tell me that they either did not receive letters or that the letters they did receive were unclear. Contrary to the view held by some in this Chamber, the WASPI campaign is not asking to go back to receiving state pensions at 60. What they are asking for is simply fair treatment. These are women who work part time and who were not even eligible for their occupational pension schemes when they started work. These are women who gave up work to bring up children, which affected their personal occupational pension if they were lucky enough to have one. These are women who have worked in difficult conditions, many of whom have had to retire early because of ill health. These are women who, as well as bringing up children, are now shouldering the burden of caring for elderly relatives in their later lives. These women have all been through the doors of my surgeries in my constituency, and I am sure their story is familiar to all right hon. and hon. Members. My constituents frequently urge me to take this argument to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—[*Interruption.*] I have extreme difficulty doing so, because he has not attended a single one of the many debates we have had on this subject.

Jackie, one of my constituents, introduced herself to me as “June '54 and furious!” She made the valid point that denying her access to her state pension until she is 66 also denies her entitlement to concessionary travel and the winter fuel allowance. Jackie started work in 1971, but had to take early retirement from the police service in order to care for an elderly relative.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith), the shadow Secretary of State, has made six helpful suggestions about how fair transition could be put in place to help women such as Jackie. Let us stop prevaricating. I await the Minister's response to those sensible and reasonable suggestions, which—I might add—have been supported by many

[Liz McInnes]

Government Members. Let us help to turn Jackie from being “June ’54 and furious!” to “June ’54 and finally fairly transitioned”.

4.31 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): In common with others, I regret that much of the debate from the Dispatch Box was focused on fixing the blame rather than fixing the problem, but at least the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) put forward a six-pack of options, which he rightly asked the Government to consider. Let us remember that the salient point about the motion is that it

“calls on the Government to bring forward proposals for transitional arrangements for women adversely affected by the acceleration of the increase in the state pension age.”

That is logical, reasonable and compelling, which is why the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) is prepared to support it. I ask some of his hon. Friends to join him in supporting it, not least those who valiantly fought over Equitable Life and called on the taxpayer to restore Equitable Life members to some position of equivalence. If they were prepared to fight for the Equitable Members Action Group and were indignant over Equitable Life, they should not be indifferent to the WASPI women and what they face. We should respond to them with justice.

It is not just a matter of a breach of trust and a breach of contract, because there is also the question of moral hazard. If Parliament says, “We can be quite capricious with the state pension”, we send out a signal to all the private pension providers that they can do what they want, that politicians will be in no place to reprimand them and that the regulator will not be able to interfere. We send out a very dangerous signal, too, to those younger people who were encouraged to have confidence and show responsibility in their pension planning. We send out a signal to them that what happened to their mothers shows that even when provision for pensions is made, people do not get what they thought they were going to get. It says that the pensions rules can be changed, so younger people will ask why bother with them—just see what they get when they get there.

We should not offer the mixture of conceit and deceit that we heard from some Conservative Members. We were told by the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) that the matter is settled and therefore cannot be touched. When was it settled? It was settled by Parliament in 2011, and he argued that it was the settled will of Parliament, which cannot be touched. These are the same people who tell us about parliamentary sovereignty and how one Parliament cannot bind another. They tell us that they want to stand up to the EU all over the place, but they are of course hiding behind a completely false explanation of EU rules and EU requirements in defence of this injustice.

This is an intentional injustice that has been visited on these women. It is not just, as the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) tried to tell us, that a line has to be drawn somewhere. These are not just haphazard victims of a drive-by cut in the name of austerity; they have been carefully selected and calculated as the victims. Why? These women have been used to inequality and

injustice all their lives; they have been on the receiving end of inequality in respect of gender pay gaps and denial of access to second pensions at a time when their male colleagues were given access to them. The aim now seems to be, “Let’s give them one more twist of injustice in the name of equalisation as they come to the end of their working lives.” That is an absolutely travesty; it offers people stone for bread. This Parliament should be doing better than that.

As for the “settled will”, legislation that is currently going through Parliament will change legislation that was passed in the last Parliament. The Financial Services Act 2012 and the Financial Services (Banking Reform) Act 2013 were passed in the last Parliament, and they are being changed by legislation that is going through the House now. The Enterprise Bill is changing legislation that was passed in the last Parliament. The Trade Union Bill is changing legislation that was passed in the last Parliament. Yesterday we debated the Welfare Reform and Work Bill, which, of course, is also changing legislation that was passed in the last Parliament. The Government can change legislation to introduce cuts, but they cannot change legislation to bring justice to people.

We should compare the present position with the position in 2011. What we have now are pension freedoms, and a tax windfall for the Treasury. The Government should bear in mind the new fiscal ambit that comes with those pension freedoms, and use it to introduce pension justice—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I call the shadow Minister.

4.35 pm

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): It is absolutely great to follow the excellent speech made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan).

Enormous interest has been expressed in this issue by Members on both sides of the House, not least thanks to the sterling work of the WASPI campaigners and the 154,000 people who signed their petition. As the Minister knows, there was standing room only during the Westminster Hall debate on the subject—it was the first Westminster Hall debate in which I took part as the shadow Minister—because the subject was of significance to all Members. We heard from many about the women who feel ill-prepared and short-changed by the failure to communicate and to deliver full transitional arrangements.

Members have made some excellent points today, illustrating the stark reality that is faced by the many women who are trying to plan for their retirement in the context of these changes. Members in all parts of the House made passionate speeches on behalf of their constituents. I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) and for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), and the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands). I also thank the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). There has been cross-party support for the WASPI women, and understanding of the difficulties that they face.

I know that it is sometimes difficult for Conservative Members to speak out against the Government, and I give particular credit to those who have done so: the hon.

Members for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries), for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), for Salisbury (John Glen), and for East Worthing and Shoreham. I know that it is difficult to make passionate speeches of that kind, and I thank those Members for their contributions.

I would say this to the Tories—I am sorry, the Members opposite—[HON. MEMBERS: “They are the Tories.”] That is what we call them locally. I am being nice when I call them the Members opposite. I am referring to the hon. Members for Gloucester (Richard Graham), for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), and for Sherwood (Mark Spencer). This is not a question of racing back to the 1950s, and it is not about the 1995 changes. I say to Members, “Please read the motion.” We have offered options, and I have asked the Minister many times to give me costings for transitional arrangements. I urge Members to examine their consciences, to take account of the passionate debate that we have had, and to vote in favour of the motion.

Let me briefly mention my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds)—who is apparently a great feminist, although not as much of one as I am—[*Interruption.*] All right, I am sorry: perhaps he is. Let me also mention my hon. Friends the Members for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin), for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), for Burnley (Julie Cooper), for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), and for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). Others who spoke in support of the motion were the hon. Members for Arfon (Hywel Williams), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North, for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), and for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Alan Brown). I am so relieved that I got all those constituencies right! That, not the Minister, kept me awake at night.

Despite the views that were expressed by Members in all parts of the House, however, the Secretary of State has still refused to consider transitional protections for these women. Of course, hindsight is a wonderful thing, but it is crucial that we learn from the mistakes of the past and act accordingly. We know that the Minister’s predecessor had hoped that about a tenth of the direct savings of £3 billion would be put aside for transitional arrangements. The option that was eventually put forward as a concession—the 18-month cap—cost about a third of that. So we have a missing £2 billion, which has gone to the Treasury along with the rest of the savings. There are different options for transitional protection, and many Members on both sides of the House have suggested them today, but the Government have again failed to respond.

Sir Peter Bottomley: The hon. Lady has referred to the £1.1 billion, which brought the extension down from two years to 18 months and, we are told, dealt with 81% of the women affected. So only 20% roughly are left at 18 months and the cost would be up £200 million. Can we put it to Government that that £200 million would have bought the loyalty of the rest of us this evening, but it won’t if they don’t?

Angela Rayner: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I hope that the Minister will answer that question. Just over a £1 billion was put in. According to my research, over half of that was for men.

This is not the first time that Labour Members have asked the Government to consider these changes. As I have said, I would like to see and hear what the Government have done to look at transitional arrangements. We have had many debates in the House on the matter and, as Members have rightly said, this issue crosses party lines.

People watching this debate today are incredibly proud of where I have come from. I was a home help and many women who pushed me into coming into the House of Commons will be watching the debate and are affected by the changes. When I stood for Parliament, I was asked, “What is your proudest moment?” I would say it is delivering equal pay and standing up for women’s rights. We have a choice today and we must do the right thing. Many Members have said that. I hope that the Minister has listened to the debate and that the Government do the right thing.

4.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People (Justin Tomlinson): I am sorry that the limited time available prevents me from paying credit to all the Members who have spoken today. There has been real passion, and well thought out and measured responses on both sides of the House, drawing on the challenges we face, the concerns raised directly by residents and the work of the WASPI campaign, to which many Members are paying close attention.

I pay credit to the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Burnley (Julie Cooper), who made the shortest speech today and gave some people some extra time. I understand the challenge that my hon. Friends the Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and for Mid Bedfordshire (Nadine Dorries) have found themselves in. It is a difficult decision, particularly to go against your own Government. My hon. Friends the Members for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard), for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), for Salisbury (John Glen) and for Gloucester (Richard Graham) set out in great detail the wider issues and challenges we face. The key to that was eloquently put by my hon. Friends the Members for Sherwood (Mark Spencer) and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman).

The Opposition have set out six options, which are very attractive. How simple life would be if we could simply say yes to all six, or any number of those six options. However, the challenge is that not a single one has been costed. Not a single one has suggested what we should not be doing. There is occasionally vague guesswork on what could pay for something. I was in two debates yesterday in Westminster Hall. The same vague ideas were expressed on how things could be paid for.

Barbara Keeley: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: Because of the lack of time, I will not give way.

We have to look at the acceleration of state pension age equalisation, which is being introduced by this Government in order to achieve gender equality in state pension provision and to provide a sustainable system that can work for future generations. Often that is forgotten. It is always about now, not those future

[Justin Tomlinson]

generations, our children and our children's children, to whom all too often politicians have bequeathed yet more debt.

In recent years, because of higher life expectancy and the difference in state pension ages, women on average have been receiving considerably more state pension over their lifetime than men. Not only was equalisation necessary to meet the UK's obligations under EU law, but it provides the foundations for a fairer state pension that treats men and women equally.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way?

Justin Tomlinson: I apologise to those who want to intervene. Those who debated with me in Westminster Hall know that I will always try to answer as many questions and interventions as possible. We simply do not have time today.

Equalisation provides the foundations for a fairer state pension that treats men and women equally. That is something we can all agree on, on both sides of the House. The changes to state pension age were fully considered when the 2011 Act was passed. The Government listened to concerns at the time and adopted a concession worth over £1 billion, which benefited almost a quarter of a million women. Eighty-one per cent. of women affected will experience a delay of 12 months or less, compared with the previously legislated timetable.

The Government are also committed to helping older workers stay in the labour market and have extended the right of flexible working to all employees to help achieve this. We are now seeing record numbers of women in employment—over 1 million more since 2010. With the introduction of the national living wage, over two thirds of those who will directly benefit will be women. That is something we can all be proud of. For those who are having difficulties working, the Government provide the same support for women as for men of the same age—in work, out of work, and disability benefits.

I also appreciate the comments made about Government communication. My hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) made great play of this. All Governments of all political colours have always wrestled with the question of the best way to communicate. The DWP did write directly to all the individuals affected by the 2011 Act using the address details recorded by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs at the time. More than 5 million letters were sent at the time. A service has also been available for individuals to request their state pension estimates, and this service has been providing individuals with their state pension age since 1995. We have taken these lessons on board with the auto-enrolment scheme, with which we are seeing very successful engagement.

We must view these changes as part of the wider pension reforms. Those reaching state pension age from April of this year onwards will receive the new state pension, a reformed system that particularly benefits women who would have had poor outcomes under the current system. Over 3 million women stand to gain an average of £11 per week as a result of the changes by 2030.

In conclusion, I remind the House of the reasons for the reform of our state pension system. To function effectively, it has to be fair, affordable and sustainable. These changes made to the state pension age under the Pensions Act 2011 make an important contribution to achieving these aims.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 265, Noes 289.

Division No. 199]

[4.46 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Cunningham, Mr Jim
Abrahams, Debbie	Dakin, Nic
Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina	David, Wayne
Alexander, Heidi	Day, Martyn
Allen, Mr Graham	De Piero, Gloria
Anderson, Mr David	Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Arkless, Richard	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Ashworth, Jonathan	Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Austin, Ian	Donaldson, Stuart Blair
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Dorries, Nadine
Bardell, Hannah	Doughty, Stephen
Barron, rh Kevin	Dowd, Jim
Beckett, rh Margaret	Dowd, Peter
Benn, rh Hilary	Dromey, Jack
Berger, Luciana	Durkan, Mark
Betts, Mr Clive	Eagle, Ms Angela
Black, Mhairi	Edwards, Jonathan
Blackford, Ian	Efford, Clive
Blackman, Kirsty	Elliott, Julie
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Elliott, Tom
Blomfield, Paul	Ellman, Mrs Louise
Boswell, Philip	Esterson, Bill
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Evans, Chris
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben	Fellows, Marion
Brake, rh Tom	Ferrier, Margaret
Brennan, Kevin	Field, rh Frank
Brock, Deidre	Fitzpatrick, Jim
Brown, Alan	Fletcher, Colleen
Brown, Lyn	Flint, rh Caroline
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Flynn, Paul
Bryant, Chris	Fovargue, Yvonne
Buck, Ms Karen	Gardiner, Barry
Burden, Richard	Gethins, Stephen
Burgon, Richard	Gibson, Patricia
Burnham, rh Andy	Goodman, Helen
Butler, Dawn	Grady, Patrick
Byrne, rh Liam	Gray, Neil
Cadbury, Ruth	Green, Kate
Cameron, Dr Lisa	Greenwood, Lilian
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Greenwood, Margaret
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Griffith, Nia
Chapman, Jenny	Gwynne, Andrew
Cherry, Joanna	Haigh, Louise
Clwyd, rh Ann	Hanson, rh Mr David
Coffey, Ann	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Cooper, Julie	Harris, Carolyn
Cooper, Rosie	Hayes, Helen
Cooper, rh Yvette	Healey, rh John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Henderson, Gordon
Cowan, Ronnie	Hendry, Drew
Cox, Jo	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Coyle, Neil	Hermon, Lady
Crausby, Mr David	Hillier, Meg
Crawley, Angela	Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Creagh, Mary	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Creasy, Stella	Hoey, Kate
Cruddas, Jon	Hollern, Kate
Cummins, Judith	Hollobone, Mr Philip
Cunningham, Alex	Hopkins, Kelvin

Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Graham
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Clive
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Loughton, Tim
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCartney, Jason
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, John
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGinn, Conor
 McGovern, Alison
 McInnes, Liz
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahan, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Nandy, Lisa
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi

Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Pugh, John
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reeves, Rachel
 Reynolds, Emma
 Reynolds, Jonathan
 Rimmer, Marie
 Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Robinson, Gavin
 Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Starmer, Keir
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas, Mr Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, rh Keith
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Whitehead, Dr Alan
 Whitford, Dr Philippa
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Sammy
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
 Wishart, Pete

Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jeff Smith and
Sue Hayman

NOES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burt, rh Alistair
 Cairns, Alun
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartledge, James
 Cash, Sir William
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Cleverly, James
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davies, Philip
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenege, Caroline

Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
 Donelan, Michelle
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Phillip
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evennett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Hald, Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris

Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick

McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll
 Newton, Sarah
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Parish, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David

Scully, Paul
 Selous, Andrew
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael

Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vaizey, Mr Edward
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggins, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and
Guy Opperman

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I have now to announce the result of two deferred Divisions. In respect of the Question relating to road traffic, the Ayes were 299 and the Noes were 226, so the Question was agreed to. In respect of the Question relating to estimates, the Ayes were 301 and the Noes were 60, so the Question was agreed to.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

Police Funding, Crime and Community Safety

5 pm

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recalls that the Chancellor announced in the Autumn Statement 2015 that there would be real-terms protection for police funding; notes that, based on the scale of cuts proposed, police budgets will fall by between nine and ten per cent over four years in real terms; further notes that the failure to provide real-terms protection for the police budget will lead to further cuts in police numbers in addition to the 18,357 police officers already lost since 2010; notes that the inclusion of cybercrime in crime statistics will show that crime has doubled; notes the heightened threat of a terrorist attack in the UK and the operational role of neighbourhood police in preventing such an attack; and calls on the Government to honour the Chancellor's statement to the House and provide real-terms protection for the police budget.

We called this debate for one simple reason: the public have not been told the truth about police funding or crime figures. With the second police and crime commissioner elections just weeks away, people need the facts so this evening we set the record straight.

A matter of weeks ago the Chancellor of the Exchequer stood at the Dispatch Box and made this explicit promise to the police and to the public:

"There will be real-terms protection for police funding. The police protect us, and we are going to protect the police."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1373.]

I am sure Conservative Members remember that because they waved their Order Papers. It could not have been clearer—"real-terms protection". That was not an off-the-cuff remark or a slip of the tongue. It was the centrepiece announcement of the Chancellor's autumn spending review statement, made with the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister at his side; it was the traditional rabbit out of the hat that we have come to expect on such occasions, designed to produce mass waving of Order Papers.

There was once a time when, if the Chancellor of the Exchequer made a statement of that kind in that way to this House, it would have meant something more than just a grab for the next day's headlines. People could trust it to be true, because it had been said by a Chancellor of the Exchequer at the Dispatch Box in the House of Commons, but it seems that we live in different times. Ministers these days, from the Prime Minister downwards, are decidedly less attentive than they used to be to the veracity of what they say at the Dispatch Box. Every Member of this House should worry, because in the end it goes to the heart of trust in this place and what we all do.

Surely, of all public services, the police should be able to trust the word of Ministers of the Crown when commitments are given here. Would it not be a sign of disrespect to people who put themselves in harm's way on our behalf day in, day out if the Chancellor was writing cheques that he knew he would not be able to cash? You would think so, wouldn't you, but in today's politics Ministers think they can say what they like and get away with it.

This evening I will present to the House new analysis which shows that the Chancellor has broken his promise to the police and to the public. He has failed to provide real-terms protection for police budgets in 2016-17. In fact, he is about to cut those police budgets yet again,

for the sixth year in a row. For the six years that he has been Chancellor and the six years that the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) has been Home Secretary, we have had six years of cuts to the police. What a record! And to think that the Conservatives used to call themselves the party of law and order.

The issue before the House tonight is this: are we prepared to let the Government think that they can get away with making promises to this House and then breaking them within days, or are we going to do something about it? Are we going to hold them to account and make them honour the promise they made to our local police forces?

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I do not want to go too far back in history, but if my right hon. Friend looks at 3 February 2010 he will see that there were 18,000 more police officers under the Labour Government, but the increase in the budget for 2010-11 was 2.7%, and the Conservative party felt that it was not enough at the time.

Andy Burnham: I was just about to make that very point. The cuts that we are now facing come on top of the loss of 18,000 police officers over the previous Parliament, as my right hon. Friend has just said, and 12,000 of them were front-line officers. Thousands of police community support officers and civilian staff have lost their jobs. We have begun to see the break-up of neighbourhood policing, which was a great achievement of the previous Labour Government, bringing police out of their stations and cars and back into communities, restoring trust and bringing down crime. That is a record that Labour should be proud of.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Is my right hon. Friend also aware that commitments were given that the sale of police stations and other buildings would help to ensure that there were additional police officers on the frontline? In my constituency we have lost St John's Wood police station and Harrow Road police station, and I understand that Paddington Green police station has now been sold, yet our police numbers are still nearly 30% down on where they were in 2011.

Andy Burnham: The same story is repeated all over the country. I ask my hon. Friend to think about the cuts that have been made to other services alongside the police, such as those to councils, mental health services, social care, disability benefits, ambulance services and fire services. All those cuts pile extra pressure on our overstretched police forces. That is what we are seeing. The cuts now being planned come at a time when this country is facing multiple challenges on many fronts, and when the threat level has never been higher, so something has to give.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a stark contrast with the approach that the Welsh Labour Government are taking, with funding for hundreds of extra PCSOs in Wales making up for the shortfall they have seen as a result of cuts elsewhere?

Andy Burnham: I think that people will hear what my hon. Friend has said and make their own judgment. Who protects community safety? Who stands up for the

[*Andy Burnham*]

police? When people come to vote this May, there is the evidence that when Labour is in government, when we run councils and when we have Labour police and crime commissioners, we protect front-line and neighbourhood policing and we improve community safety. My hon. Friend makes that point very well.

The question we have to ask the Home Secretary today is this: how many more consecutive years of cuts can police forces take before public safety is seriously compromised? England and Wales already have far fewer police officers per head of population compared with international counterparts. If the ratio drops even lower, there are real fears that were a Paris-style attack to happen here, and, importantly, were it to happen outside London, there would simply not be the ability to surge enough police officers—specifically, fire arms officers and specialist units—on to the streets quickly enough to protect the public.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I understand that the right hon. Gentleman is giving this a bit of welly as part of his rehabilitation, but I am confused about two things. First, I have yet to hear him acknowledge that over the past seven years crime has continued to fall quite significantly. Secondly, I have yet to hear him refer to his own recommendation of 10% cuts in police funding, which he made not six months ago. Would he care to enlighten the House on both points?

Andy Burnham: I will come on to both points. I am doing fine, thanks. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can see that I will be standing up for police forces, even if he is not. I will come on to both points he raises, because I do not think that his Government are telling the correct story about what they are doing to the police. They are not providing real-terms protection; they are cutting the police. Ministers also stand at the Dispatch Box and say crime is falling; the Policing Minister said it just days ago—complacently. They fail to point out that the crime figures they quote do not include online crime, which is about to come into the crime statistics for the first time. In the last six years, crime has changed—it has moved online—but the relevant figures have not been counted, so I would not be so complacent if I were him.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned what was said at the autumn statement about what I was meant to have said. What I would say to him is that there is far too much spin coming from the Government Dispatch Box. He should look at what I actually said. I am about to come straight to that issue.

I have talked about the specialist and firearms units we need to protect the public. However, neighbourhood policing is crucial, is it not, if we are to collect the intelligence to combat the terror threat. My worry is that if the Government proceed in this Parliament with year-on-year cuts, they will break up the neighbourhood teams. Let me take the House in detail through what I am saying and through the figures we are presenting.

Analysis by the House of Commons Library of next year's police grant settlement to individual forces shows that they will not be protected in real terms; in fact, they will not even be cash-protected. In 2015-16, the overall allocation to individual forces, excluding special payments

to London, was £7,452 million. In 2016-17, it will be £7,421 million—a £30 million cash reduction, or £160 million in real terms.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): A few moments ago, the right hon. Gentleman rightly said that the level of threat is severe, and we are all aware of that. May I make the same invitation to him that I made to his Front-Bench colleague, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), in the previous policing debate? The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of armed police officers. The Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that, in his vision of policing, even if those officers are armed, they will not be allowed to use their weapons. Will the shadow Home Secretary admit that that is a dereliction of duty? Will he take this opportunity, while he is speaking from the Dispatch Box, to clarify the Opposition's position?

Andy Burnham: I can tell the hon. Gentleman now that the Leader of the Opposition said that that was simply not the case. There is no change whatever to long-established policy when it comes to the police keeping the public safe.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in addition to the cuts, the 4.6% police precept rise in the west midlands, which was apparently negotiated by the hon. Members for Solihull (Julian Knight) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood), amounts to nothing more than local people paying more money for less police?

Andy Burnham: The Government are cutting the police at national level, making local people in the west midlands—and in Greater Manchester too—pick up the bill, but people are getting less in terms of police on their streets. We know, do we not, that the Government are very good at making cuts in urban areas such as Greater Manchester and the west midlands and at taking money elsewhere. That is the reality: our constituents will be paying more for less. The Chancellor and the Home Secretary have broken their police promise to our constituents.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): Talking about cuts, we have lost 108 police officers and 104 PCSOs in my constituency since 2010. The only increase we have seen has been in voluntary special constables—and that was 98. The Government are trying to police using volunteers, not police officers.

Andy Burnham: I will come to that as well. The Bill we will debate in a week or so is all about having a part-time police force to deal with the growing threat we face from online crime and fraud and from terror. That is simply not an answer to the challenges of the future, and I will come to that before I finish.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Andy Burnham: I will make a little more progress, and then I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Let us just get the facts on the record: 36 of the 43 police forces in England and Wales have now received their grant allocations from the Home Office, and these

show a cut in cash terms. How does that deliver the Chancellor's pledge of real-terms protection? Worse, all police forces in England face real-terms cuts next year. If the same level of cuts is sustained over the spending review period, as we suspect it will be, that will equate to overall real-terms cuts in the police budget of between 9% and 10%.

The House will recall that right up until the spending review—[*Interruption.*] I am coming to the point. Right up until the spending review, the police had been told to expect cuts of over 20%. Senior police officers say that they were still expecting cuts of over 20% the day before the spending review settlement. The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) nods because he knows I am right about that. It was sustained pressure from Labour Members that forced a rethink from the Government.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May) *rose*—

Andy Burnham: I will give way to the Home Secretary in a moment.

After the Paris attacks, the whole question of police funding had to be looked at in a new light. I wrote to the Home Secretary and said that while of course efficiencies could be made, anything over 5% cuts in real terms over the course of this Parliament would be dangerous. That was completely misrepresented by the Chancellor in his autumn statement, and I am pleased to correct the record today.

Mrs May: When my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who was a distinguished deputy Mayor for policing here in London, referred to the 10% figure that the right hon. Gentleman had quoted, the right hon. Gentleman said that there was far too much spin from the Government side of the House. The figure actually came from a Labour party press release where he said:

“Of course, savings can be found. The police say five to ten per cent over the Parliament is just about do-able”.

He accepted 10%, so why is he now so worried about cuts in funding?

Andy Burnham: When that press release was issued I said that up to 5% would be do-able—[*Interruption.*] No, I have said this consistently, if the Home Secretary will just listen. I said that up to 5% cuts would be doable, and we stand by that; that up to 10% would be difficult; and that over 10% would be dangerous. She was threatening to cut the police by over 20%, so let us get the facts straight. She will recall that she asked Cobra to review police funding in the light of the Paris attacks. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey)—the shadow Policing Minister—and I also consulted the police in the light of the Paris attacks. We listened to what they had to say, as the Home Secretary will have done. They said that over 5% would be difficult, if not dangerous, and I put that in a letter to her before the autumn statement. Let us get this right so that the public are not misinformed and there is no spin from the Government Dispatch Box.

In his desperation to play politics in the autumn statement, the Chancellor tried to misrepresent my position, but he outdid himself, because he misrepresented not

just my position but the Government's position. He dressed up a 10% cut as budget protection, and we now know that it is nothing of the sort. No doubt the Government's defence will rest on the claim that they gave councils extra freedom to increase the police precept to make up the shortfall, but that does not hold water. For the Chancellor to give the guarantee in this House as he did, he would have needed firm agreements from local councils and PCCs that they would raise the extra cash locally, but he did not have those agreements—not even from Conservative PCCs. The Devon and Cornwall and Cambridgeshire forces will not be raising their precepts by the full amount recommended by the Government, and Hertfordshire is actually shown to have lowered its precept. [*Interruption.*] The Home Secretary says, “It's their decision”, but let me tell her again: she promised real-terms protection for police budgets, and she is not delivering real-terms protection for police budgets. She has broken her promise to the police. I am afraid that she cannot just shrug that fact off. The Conservative PCC for Devon and Cornwall, Tony Hogg, says this about the implications of the spending review for his force:

“While I completely welcome the Government's changed position on Police funding, it remains a fact that central Government funding to Devon and Cornwall Police in 2020 is estimated to be 19% less in cash terms (real terms 32% less) than it was when I commenced office in November 2012.”

A 32% cut in real terms, with 43 officers going next year and 28 police staff going too, is not on, and the Government cannot just shrug it off.

The next claim that the Government will no doubt make is that authorities that have used the precept freedoms to the full will have been able to protect their budgets, but that is not true either. The Hampshire independent PCC, Simon Hayes, said:

“The Medium Term Financial Strategy...shows an estimated budget shortfall of £6m by 2019/20 assuming 1.99% council tax precept increases from 2016/17 onwards.”

He cannot make up the shortfall from his precept.

Let me apply the same test to the Home Secretary's police force and my own. Next year, Thames Valley police will see a real-terms cut in central Government funding of £5 million. The income raised by the full use of the precept does not cover that shortfall. Forces such as Thames Valley also have to contend with other cost burdens loaded on to them by the Chancellor, including the apprenticeship levy and the extra national insurance contributions. In the case of Thames Valley, those amount to more than £6 million. That is money out of front-line policing. What is the net effect of that in the Home Secretary's police force? She should listen to this: 95 officers going next year, as well as 51 police community support officers and 161 staff. There we have it. The Home Secretary has broken her own police pledge to her constituents.

Let us look at my force, Greater Manchester police. According to figures from the Library, central Government funding will be down by £8 million in real terms next year. The force has made full use of the freedoms from the precept, but that will not make up the shortfall. As my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) said, the force will be paying more for less. As the PCC for Greater Manchester, Tony Lloyd, puts it:

“Contrary to the Chancellor's rhetoric, this is a cuts budget.”

Catherine McKinnell: My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and highlighting the differential impacts, as well as the impact across the board. I want to give the House the example of Northumbria police. Just 12% of its revenue comes from the council tax precept. That is far below the national average of 25%, and that hampers its ability to make up for the shortfall. Northumbria is the worst hit of all forces, with local residents paying more for less.

Andy Burnham: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The more deprived parts of the country have less ability to raise money from their council tax base, so they cannot make up for the Government's cuts. I am sorry to tell her that the situation could be about to get even worse. *The Guardian* reported yesterday that the Home Secretary is about to bring forward a new police funding formula—after the mess that the Policing Minister made of the last one—which will divert funding away from urban forces towards rural ones.

Mrs May indicated dissent.

Andy Burnham: The Home Secretary is shaking her head, and I am glad; I hope that she will tell me that that is not true. Recently, £300 million was miraculously made available for local government in England at the last minute, but—surprise, surprise—barely a penny went to any council represented by Labour. It all went to councils represented by the Conservatives. If the police funding formula did the same, it would add insult to injury and make a complete and utter mockery of the Government's already dubious commitment to creating a northern powerhouse.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have listened carefully to the shadow Home Secretary for 22 minutes, and his entire assessment of how the police are doing is based on the amount of money that the Government have given them. There has been absolutely no mention of smarter policing, better procurement or better use of technology. We heard yesterday in the Home Affairs Committee from a former Labour Member of this House and former Minister who is now the PCC for Merseyside. She has managed to halve the budget for her office compared with that of the former police authority, and all that money has gone into front-line policing. There is more to policing than the amount of money that the police receive from central office.

Andy Burnham: I could not have put it better myself. Vote Labour. Vote for a Labour PCC. Labour PCCs will work cleverly to protect front-line policing, and they will drive innovation and reform. Protect our police by voting Labour in May. I thank the hon. Gentleman for making my point better than I could have done.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): On the point about additional funding for policing to plug some of the gaps that the right hon. Gentleman has talked about, as he knows, the reductions are over five years, during which time some PCCs may take control of their fire authorities. Does he believe that it would be right or wrong for PCCs to use fire budgets to plug perceived gaps in their police budgets?

Andy Burnham: I think it would be wrong, and I am very worried about the proposal to put fire under the control of the PCCs, because fire will be the poor

relation. Already, thousands of firefighters, fire pumps and fire stations are at risk from the local government settlement. I put it to the hon. Gentleman and all Conservative Members that considering the cuts to the police, and to the fire service as well, we must all ask ourselves the question: is there adequate emergency cover in all parts of the country? I believe we are getting to the point at which some people will say that that is no longer the case. We need to look at those two things together. Putting two underfunded services together will not necessarily create a financially viable or safe service.

I want to move on to the crime figures, because I am conscious of the time. The Government's alibi for their police cuts so far has been that it is okay to cut the police because crime is falling. That is basically the argument made by the hon. Member for North West Hampshire, who formerly had responsibility for policing in London—but is it true? The latest recorded crime statistics in January showed large increases in violent crime, knife crime, hate crime and sexual offences.

As ever, Ministers will say, "Look at the British crime survey," but as I have said, crime has changed: it has migrated online. We might see a downward trend in the traditional volume crimes such as burglary and theft in the British crime survey, but when we ask the British public whether they have been the victim of online crime, they will probably say, "Yes, I have been." If those figures are not included in the British crime survey, it is no wonder that we do not have an accurate picture of crime.

Kit Malthouse *rose*—

Andy Burnham: I will give way one final time.

Kit Malthouse: I recognise the issue that the right hon. Gentleman raises, but will he accept that we cannot patrol to prevent online crime? The solution to online crime is not throwing bodies at it but about throwing technology at it, which can be done either relatively cheaply or much more efficiently.

Andy Burnham: What we should not do is to throw volunteers at it, which is the Home Secretary's idea. *[Interruption.]* I will come on to explain that. This is about both technology and people. We need sophisticated teams to deal with it. It is fair to say that most police forces do not have such a capability at the moment, and they will not get that capability by having their numbers and their budgets cut. We need a sophisticated response to online crime.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) is trying to suggest that there is no link between crime and the reduction in support and funding for police services. In Greater Manchester, £8.5 million and 1,600 staff have been cut, and we know that there has been an increase in crime. In my constituency, the number of burglaries has doubled year on year. Is that not the effect of what the Government are doing?

Andy Burnham: That is directly the effect of what the Government have done, compared with what they inherited. How on earth can that police force now develop the

capability to deal with the threats we will face in the future? The argument that crime is falling so we can cut the police will not work any more. Ministers are going to have to get a new script. It is not safe to cut the police, because crime is becoming more complex.

Mrs May: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for giving way to me a second time. He is making an argument about the importance of accuracy in reporting figures. May I therefore ask him why, in relation to a Labour party press release on crime statistics issued in January, under the heading “crime up 6 per cent, the biggest increase”, the UK Statistics Authority wrote to my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) to say that

“by focusing on police recorded crime without appropriate caveats, and omitting evidence from the more complete and reliable source (for most violent crimes) of the Crime Survey for England and Wales, it may have given, in parts, a misleading impression”?

Will the right hon. Gentleman now apologise?

Andy Burnham: No, I will not, because, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington said, the figures were accurately reported. The challenge today is for the Home Secretary to explain her claim that crime is falling, because I am afraid the recorded crime figures do not show that, and some experts say that the British crime survey is about to show that crime has in fact doubled. That is the issue that she has to explain, and she will have to work hard to do so.

Tackling online crime is one of the biggest challenges we face, but as I have said, forces do not have the capability. The question is, how are they going to do that with these further cuts? To be fair, the Home Secretary has floated one idea, which I have just mentioned. She told the BBC website in January that she was planning to recruit a new army of volunteers to help solve cybercrimes. She said that

“volunteers who specialise in accountancy or computing”,
as well as IT professionals,

“could work alongside police officers to investigate cyber or financial crime”.

I ask in all honesty, is that really the best the Government can come up with to crack the complex crime challenges of the future—Theresa’s temps, a Dad’s Army of retired accountants to take on and defeat the sophisticated international organised crime and fraud networks?

The week after next, we will debate the Home Secretary’s Bill, which will propose that powers be given to volunteers without their becoming special constables. Is that really the answer—a part-time police force? It does not equate to a vision for policing in England and Wales that is up to the challenges of the future. A part-time police force is no answer to the growing threats we face from cybercrime and terrorism. When it is the only answer that the Government can come up with, it is a sure sign that their cuts have gone way too far.

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): It was suggested by the former deputy Mayor that these things can be done by sophisticated algorithms that can filter out such crimes. Actually, the victims of such crimes still feel that they need a police officer to come

round and speak to them. That is the problem, especially when 1,000 front-line police officers in Merseyside are being cut.

Andy Burnham: We have seen this cost cutting and privatisation elsewhere, haven’t we? Take NHS 111, which was going to solve everything because of the algorithms that the call handlers would use. Has the service to the public been better than under NHS Direct? In no way. My hon. Friend has got it absolutely right. The Government suggest that it can all be done on the cheap, but people know it cannot.

In conclusion, the official line from the Government has been, “We’re protecting the police and crime is falling,” but that claim is something that should be added to the growing fraud statistics. The truth is the opposite: the police are being cut while crime is rising. They are cutting the fire service and the Border Force even more deeply—Tory cuts that are putting people’s safety at risk. That is the message that we will take into the PCC elections. Our police do a difficult job in a dangerous world. They deserve our thanks and respect, particularly those of the Government of the day. If promises are made to them, they should be kept. As we have shown, Labour is prepared to stand up for the police and protect community safety. That is what we are asking the House to do tonight by making this arrogant Government honour their commitment to the police. Real-terms protection should mean just that. What better way is there for Members on both sides of the House to show their appreciation for their local police forces than by voting for the Opposition motion tonight?

5.32 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Let me start by paying tribute to the police, the fire and rescue services and all those who attended the incident at Didcot power station yesterday. In doing so, they showed the courage and professionalism that police officers and firefighters show day in and day out.

The right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) called for a debate on police funding, crime and community safety. I am delighted that he did so and I will set out the steps the Government are taking to continue cutting crime, keep people safe from terrorism and reform our police and emergency services in a moment, but before I do, I would like to address the motion before us. He said that he called this debate to expose “Tory lies”, but the truth is that the motion contains nothing but inaccuracies and misleading statements. I will address each in turn.

The right hon. Gentleman says in the motion that “police budgets will fall by between nine and ten per cent over four years in real terms”.

That is, frankly, not true. As the Chancellor set out in the autumn statement, overall police spending will increase from nearly £11.4 billion this year to £12.3 billion at the end of the spending review period—an increase of just under 8% or £900 million in cash terms. There will be protection in real terms over the course of this Parliament if police and crime commissioners maximise their precept. The funding for individual PCC budgets, which includes funding from central Government and local taxpayers through the precept, will be protected in cash terms.

[Mrs Theresa May]

We will provide substantial additional investment over the period in transformation funding to improve police capabilities to deal with modern threats such as terrorist firearms attacks, cybercrime and other emerging threats.

When the right hon. Gentleman calls on the Government to provide real-terms protection for the policing budget, I can happily tell Members that we have done just that. That is in stark contrast to the right hon. Gentleman himself. Earlier, I referred to a Labour party press release, but addressing the Labour party conference last year the shadow Home Secretary made it clear that he would support cutting the police by

“5 per cent to 10 per cent over the Parliament”.

It is one thing to criticise the Government for imaginary spending cuts, but it is quite another to do so after arguing for significant spending reductions.

The right hon. Gentleman also argues that police forces might make further reductions to the number of police officers and staff. Notwithstanding the point that police budgets have been protected for the spending review period, decisions on the size and composition of a police force's workforce are for individual chief officers working closely with their police and crime commissioners. The lesson of the past five years is that what matters is how officers are deployed, not how many of them there are.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I have heard the Home Secretary comment that she is not particularly concerned about the numbers, but I wonder whether she is concerned about the fact that Humberside police force has the lowest level of police officers since the 1970s. Does that not concern her at all?

Mrs May: The point that I am making is very simple and I am happy to repeat it to the hon. Lady. The Labour party consistently looks at the amount of money that is spent and at the number of police officers, but what we need to look at is how money is being spent and how the officers are being deployed. It is not just me who is saying that. Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary has made it clear that there is no simple link between officer numbers and crime levels, between numbers and the visibility of police in the community or between numbers and the quality of service provided.

Andy Burnham: I am listening carefully to what the Home Secretary is saying and she has repeated the claim that she is protecting the police in real terms. Is she therefore denying the figures from the House of Commons Library that show 36 out of 43 police forces in England and Wales receiving cash cuts in their allocation from the Home Office for 2016-17?

Mrs May: When the right hon. Gentleman looks at figures for overall police spending he needs to look at figures for overall police spending, because they include the money being spent. He was very careful. He said when he looked at his figures that he was not looking, for example, at the extra grants for London through the capital city grant. He was not looking at the money being spent on the emergency services mobile

scheme that we are introducing to replace Airwave. He needs to look more carefully at the figures that he is citing.

Richard Fuller: The Home Secretary makes a very good point; this is not just about the total money but about how money is spent. The problems on the Labour side also come down to a local level, not just a national level. Does not my right hon. Friend agree that although we understand the problems with financing policing in Bedfordshire, it undermines the case when the PCC for Bedfordshire has one of the highest proportions of commissioned police officers in staff roles rather than on the frontline and when he does not spend the budget allocated to him, for example, on counter-terrorism?

Mrs May: I agree with my hon. Friend, and it is very striking when we look at the figures for Bedfordshire how many officers are not on the frontline but in the back office. That is one of the things that most police forces have changed over the years, but there is clearly more scope for that to take place in Bedfordshire. Under a different police and crime commissioner—a Conservative police and crime commissioner—I am sure that it would.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I want to pick up on that point about the financial management of Labour police and crime commissioners. In the West Midlands, for instance, the Labour PCC, David Jamieson, has reported £100 million in reserves, yet he chose before the spending review to fire huge swathes of vital PCSOs in a highly politicised move and then had to reverse the decision after the spending review. The message is, “If you want to play politics with the police, vote Labour.”

Mrs May: I have to say that I agree with my hon. Friend. If we look at the figures, we see that the cash change in resource reserves since March 2014 in the West Midlands is £27 million. The choice has been made to put that money in reserve—into the bank balance—rather than into officers on the frontline.

Andy Burnham: I thank the Home Secretary for giving way one more time, because this is an important debate and people need the truth. They will have heard that she did not answer my last question about Home Office cash cuts to 36 police forces, so let me ask another question. She loves to read out what I said—5%, 10%—but I have already gone through what I said and the letter I wrote to her. Let us get the facts straight. Why did David Jamieson put forward those plans? It was because until the day before the spending review, the Home Secretary was telling the police that they could expect 25% cuts. That is what she was telling them; that is what they were planning for. What happened to make her change her mind the day before the spending review, and back down on the 25% cuts that she was planning?

Mrs May: The right hon. Gentleman is trying to make an argument where there is none, because he knows full well the processes of determining the comprehensive spending review, and the discussions that take place between Departments and the Treasury that result in the final figures that the Chancellor announces. In truth, the Labour party decided what its line was going to be on police funding, and when the Chancellor

stood up and protected police budgets, instead of sensibly changing that line, it decided to carry on with it anyway because one should never let the facts get in the way of an argument.

The right hon. Gentleman argues that the inclusion of cybercrime in the crime statistics will show that crime has doubled, but the uncomfortable truth for the Opposition is that crime has fallen by more than a quarter since 2010, according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. That is one of the most authoritative surveys of victims of crime in the world. It is administered by the independent Office for National Statistics, which captures the experience of more than 30,000 households. The survey dates back to the 1980s and shows that crime is at historic lows. People in this country are as safe as they have ever been.

The ONS has been clear: its preliminary estimate on fraud and cybercrime does not mean that crime is rising, and certainly not that it has doubled. In fact, it confirms what we have long known, which is that such crimes have for too long gone unreported and unrecorded. That is why the Government welcome the work of the ONS to capture those crimes.

The right hon. Gentleman notes the heightened threat of a terrorist attack and the important role of the police in preventing such attacks, and I will go on to speak about that.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): The Chancellor is not present, but will the right hon. Lady confirm that his pledge to protect the police relies on an assumed increase of £369 million in local taxes?

Mrs May: I described accurately in my speech what was said about real-terms figures and maximising the precept, and that in cash terms there will be virtually a £900 million increase in funding for police budgets.

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend surprised, as I am, that on the one hand Labour Members seem to be arguing that the Chancellor protected funding because of their campaign, and on the other hand that funding is going down?

Mrs May: My hon. Friend is absolutely right—they cannot have it all ways, and that is exactly what the shadow Home Secretary is trying to argue. He is saying, “Isn’t it great? It is all because of us that police funding is protected—ooh, whoops, no, we think it’s going down.” He really needs to get his own lines straight before he stands up and speaks in this Chamber.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab) *rose*—

Mrs May: I want to speak about terrorism so I hope the hon. Gentleman will excuse me. The threat from terrorism is real and growing. As I said when I was in Washington last week, the threat from Daesh requires us to act with greater urgency and joint resolve, both at home and internationally, more than ever before. An effective counter-terrorism response relies on the police and agencies working together with the right tools, capabilities and powers. That is precisely why the Government took the decision to protect overall police spending in real terms last autumn, why they have always supported neighbourhood policing as part of that joint effort, and why they protected counter-terrorism policing budgets and increased funding for the security

and intelligence agencies. We are introducing vital legislation to ensure that the police and agencies continue to investigate crime and protect our national security in the digital age.

Stephen Doughty: I have spoken to the Home Secretary previously about this, and the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice was good enough to meet me recently to discuss the specific concerns facing Cardiff—as a capital city—and its neighbouring regions, particularly when dealing with the threat from terrorism. Will she look closely and generously at the specific needs facing Cardiff when she considers the resources that she is speaking about?

Mrs May: There are two aspects to this. There is the request that Cardiff has made for capital city grant, in the same way that London receives capital city grant. This has been looked at very carefully on a number of occasions. In overall policing terms, London has specific responsibilities and issues to address that are not reflected in Cardiff as a capital city. Separately, there is the whole question of counter-terrorism policing. The counter-terrorism policing budget is separate. We have been able to not just protect it but increase it for such issues as the provision of firearms officers. I recognise the points the hon. Gentleman has made to me and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice about ensuring that proper counter-terrorism resource is available in the Cardiff area for policing.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I agree with the Home Secretary about the fight to combat terrorism. Safer neighbourhood teams have a pivotal role. In my constituency, the most diverse in the UK, we have lost 104 PCSOs. They cannot be replaced by volunteers. Does that concern the Home Secretary as much as it concerns me?

Mrs May: I will make two points to the hon. Lady. First, the percentage of officers in front-line duties has actually increased, I think from 89% to 92%, under this Government. Secondly, if we compare the actions of Labour police and crime commissioners with Conservative police and crime commissioners, Conservative PCCs have largely protected their local police officers, whereas Labour PCCs have been cutting them more significantly. I therefore suggest she looks at that.

Clive Efford: Will the Home Secretary give way?

Mrs May: I am going to make some more progress, because we have limited time for this debate.

I cannot agree with many of the contentions put forward in today’s motion, but I welcome the opportunity to set out the reforms that the Government have pursued since 2010 to improve policing, deliver better value for money for taxpayers, and better protect people and communities from crime. When we came to power in 2010, it was not only the country’s finances that the Labour party had left in a mess. The financial crisis made public spending cuts across the board necessary. We had just been through the worst financial crisis since the second world war and had the biggest budget deficit in our peacetime history—bigger than that in Portugal and bigger, even, than the one in Greece.

[Mrs May]

Even without the pressing financial imperative, however, the problems in policing were glaring. Police forces were bloated with bureaucracy. Officers' productivity was held back by targets and red tape. Local policing priorities were dictated from Whitehall. Police pay and conditions were hopelessly out of date, and, while police forces were supposedly held to account by police authorities, in reality only 7% of the public knew that those unelected committees even existed.

We brought in a radical programme of police reform to transform inadequate structures and institutions, bringing much-needed changes to open up the workforce, reform pay and conditions, overhaul outdated systems and technology, and make policing properly accountable. We cut red tape and freed up about 4.5 million hours of police time, the equivalent of 2,100 full-time police officers. We took steps to root out the waste and inefficiency that existed in police procurement and IT. We set up the College of Policing to improve police standards and training. We established the National Crime Agency to co-ordinate the response to serious and organised crime.

In 2011, we introduced police and crime commissioners to bring real local accountability to policing in a way that was never possible under invisible and faceless police authorities. In just a few months' time, the public will have the opportunity to hold policing in their area to account in the strongest way possible—at the ballot box. For those pioneering PCCs standing for re-election, they will be defending their record and will be judged on their record over the last three-and-a-half years. Those standing for the first time will be judged on their ideas to improve policing in their areas. All will have a direct, democratic mandate to hold their local police force to account, to cut crime and to keep people safe.

When I introduced my programme of reform, those on the Opposition Benches claimed it would lead to a perfect storm of more crime, lower confidence and less visible policing. However, thanks to the hard work of police officers and police staff, and thanks to the leadership of chief constables and police and crime commissioners up and down the country, none of those predictions has come true. As I said earlier, crime is down by more than a quarter since 2010, according to the independent Crime Survey for England and Wales. Labour Members can shake their heads, but this Government have done more than any other to ensure that crime statistics are accurate and can be trusted by the public. In 2012, I transferred responsibility for crime statistics from the Home Office to the Office for National Statistics to ensure that they are properly independent. In 2013, I commissioned Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary to inspect crime recording practices in all forces in England and Wales. In 2014, it published a report on each force, as well as an overview of its findings. As a result of its scrutiny, we are already seeing more accurate crime recording.

I have made previously hidden and under-reported crimes a priority, and I hope Members of all parties will welcome the fact that today we see more victims of sexual and violent offences having the confidence to come forward and report those crimes. While crime has fallen, public confidence has been maintained and the proportion of police officers on the front line has increased.

Debbie Abrahams *rose—*

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab)
rose—

Mrs May: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Debbie Abrahams: Unfortunately, my constituents are not at all happy. Burglary has increased by 100% over the last year, according to police recorded crime figures. What is the Home Secretary doing to monitor the potential increase in vigilantism?

Mrs May: I am sorry, but I thought the hon. Lady said “invigilantism”. It is very clear—HMIC is very clear about it—that the police have the resources they need to do the job they need to keep people safe and secure. They are doing that on a day-to-day basis across the country. Public perceptions of crime are improving nationally and locally. Fewer people are worried about burglary, and more people believe the criminal justice system is effective.

Neil Coyle *rose—*

Mrs May: I am sorry, but I am conscious that there is only limited time for this debate, and I am coming to the end of my remarks.

As I said earlier, the proportion of officers on the front line has increased from 89% to 92% since March 2010. That has been achieved at the same time as we have set about the urgent task of repairing the country's finances, reducing the deficit and ensuring the long-term health of our economy. That task is not yet finished. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor made clear in the autumn statement, over the course of the last Parliament, we made huge progress in rescuing the economy. Now we must rebuild it and we must protect our economic security in an uncertain world. We must also ensure that we have the resources to respond to the growing and emerging threats that we face. We have done that by protecting police funding in real terms, once the local precept is taken into account.

This is not the first time that the right hon. Member for Leigh and his party have made tall claims about crime and public safety. In 2011, the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) argued in this House that our reforms would lead to “a perfect storm” of higher crime, lower confidence and less visible policing. None of those predictions came true.

In 2012, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) said that the model of community policing was being denigrated by the Government. In fact, we have always supported a model of community policing, and we put PCCs in place to ensure that local priorities were taken into account. As I have just indicated, Conservative PCCs are doing a better job in that area than Labour PCCs are.

In 2013, the Labour party's review of policing, led by Lord Stevens, warned of “a danger of the police being forced to retreat to a discredited model of reactive policing”.

As I have said, however, a greater proportion of officers are now on the front line. In 2014, the then Leader of the Opposition claimed that abolishing direct democracy through police and crime commissioners was a “sensible” saving. Yet in three months' time, the Labour Party will stand candidates in elections for every single police force area in the country.

In 2015, the Labour crime and justice manifesto suggested that

“a further 30,000 police officers could be lost after the election under the Conservatives”.

HMIC has been clear, however, that every force has the resources it needs to deliver effective policing and to continue cutting crime.

Andy Burnham *rose*—

Mrs May: Given that it is the right hon. Gentleman, I will give way one last time, but I am virtually at the end.

Andy Burnham: I am very grateful to the Home Secretary. She has just said something that goes to the heart of our debate today. She said that the Government had protected police budgets in real terms, once the police precept is taken into account—she said something along those lines. Will she accept that that caveat was not in the Chancellor’s autumn statement?

Mrs May: No. I am sorry, but we have been through this, and I am not going to go over it again for the right hon. Gentleman.

At every release of the independent Crime Survey for England and Wales, the Labour party has ignored the most authoritative measure for crime in this country, because it does not show what it wants it to show. As I said earlier, Labour decided what its campaign would be six years ago, and they have doggedly stuck to it ever since. They operate on the basis that if you say something enough times, people will believe it, regardless of the facts—[*Interruption.*] They ignore the evidence that points to lower crime, safer communities and police reform that is working. [*Interruption.*]

Neil Coyle *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Members must allow the Home Secretary to conclude her speech.

Mrs May: The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) may well be able to catch the eye of the Chair if he wishes to speak later.

There is an important debate to be had on policing in this country. It is a debate on how best to keep individuals, communities and businesses safe from crime, how best to ensure that the police can adapt to changing crime and emerging threats, and how best to drive better collaboration, joint working and local accountability in law enforcement and wider public services. I urge the shadow Home Secretary to focus on those issues, rather than repeating the same discredited claims that his predecessors repeated throughout the last Parliament. Keeping communities safe from crime, and ensuring that the police can adapt to that changing crime and those emerging threats, are what the public care about and what this Government will deliver.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak, and we have only an hour left. After the spokesman for the Scottish National party has made his contribution, there will be a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

5.56 pm

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I assure Members that I have no intention of taking up any more time than is absolutely necessary.

Let me begin by echoing the words of the Home Secretary, and making it clear that my hon. Friends and I are forever thankful for the tireless work that our police services do on our behalf to keep our streets safe. They are indeed indispensable. Since my election, I have been hugely impressed by the officers whom I have met. They are all completely dedicated to protecting the public, which is how it should be. I think we need to make it clear in this debate that all police staff on both sides of the border have our full and unequivocal support as they go about their very important duties.

The motion is predicated on the Chancellor’s announcement in the autumn statement that police budgets in England and Wales would be fully protected. I will remember the waving of Order Papers and the near-hysteria of Conservative Members, who presumably thought that full protection was the right course of action; it certainly seemed to be their view. The occasion followed a Back-Bench police debate in which I led for the SNP. During that debate, Labour called for cuts to be restricted to 10%—or 5%; it depends on whom we believe today. The Government made no commitment that day, although, somewhat predictably, they outflanked the Labour party in the autumn statement.

As always with this Government, the devil may well be in the detail. We now learn—from a response to a written question, no less—that this much-celebrated protection may not extend to the transport, defence and nuclear police. I remember the Chancellor’s words clearly, and if the response to the written question is correct—and there seems to be some debate about that today—his statement could be described as disingenuous. Given that policing is devolved, it is not for me, or the SNP, to argue the points that are made in the motion. I merely point out that I witnessed the Chancellor’s assurances, and that in any area of policy, devolved or not, it is imperative that the public can rely on clear statements in this place.

The motion does not stipulate Scotland specifically, which is a pleasant surprise. Perhaps the Labour party is learning that bashing Scotland and her democratically elected Government does its electoral chances in Scotland no good whatsoever. My party will therefore abstain in the vote, and will leave the debate to the MPs from England and Wales. Accordingly, my comments will not take up too much time. I do not wish to restrict the right of England and Wales Members to a say.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when it comes to policing, it is not just a question of money but a question of structure? Will he acknowledge that the SNP Government made a mistake in reducing their police to a single force?

Richard Arkless: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the proposal was in the SNP manifesto, the Conservative manifesto, and the Labour manifesto at the last Scottish parliamentary election. It seems a bit rich to claim after the event that making the move was the wrong thing to do, given that all the parties were advocating such a move.

[Richard Arkless]

I am a Member of this House and my party is the third party in it. In that context, it is worth while briefly highlighting the approach that Scotland has taken to budget police cuts. I express my pride that the Scottish Government have done what is necessary to protect a commitment for 1,000 additional officers since 2007. That commitment has been delivered in full. We have delivered savings and maintained an impressive reduction in crime figures. We did it all in the face of the harsh austerity agenda against us. Most importantly, we kept officers on the streets, protecting communities effectively. Sure there have been challenges but all organisational upheaval of that extent will have those teething problems.

Since 2007 in Scotland, we have increased the number of officers by 6.3%, while in England and Wales in the same period the number has dropped by 10.8%. It is dangerous to risk security in that way, yet the Government insist on pursuing the line that they are making the UK safer. How you spend what you have and your spending priorities are often as important as the underlying spend. It is about time that the rest of the UK caught up with the standards set by the Scottish Government in achieving the lowest crime rate in four decades. We have driven savings and upheld the priority of combating new and more sophisticated forms of crime, including cybercrime, financial crime and terrorism. Having said that, I believe it is fundamentally unfair that the Scottish Police Authority has yet to be awarded the VAT status that every other police force in the UK enjoys. That alone would be enough to ease the burden on the force to the tune of £23 million.

Jake Berry: I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would confirm that the Scottish Government were advised, before they made the changes to the Scottish policing structure, that they would lose their special status on VAT. If so, why did they still proceed to make the change?

Richard Arkless: I can confirm that that was the case, but we made our protestations abundantly clear at that time, and we also made it clear that we would campaign on the issue. There is an old saying: if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, the chances are it is a duck. That looks unfair, it feels unfair and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that it is unfair. Surely that cannot be right.

Mr Speaker: I discern that the hon. Gentleman has finished his speech. We are very obliged to him.

6.2 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I am pleased to see your happy countenance, Mr Speaker, for I rise depressed. I thought coming to this place that I would avoid tedious arguments about inputs and instead participate in a debate about results, policy and methods. In 2008, when I became deputy mayor for policing in London, I inherited a police force that had lost its way but was awash with cash. At that time in the capital, significant crime types were rising, not least teenage murder. During my four years, I helped, cajoled, bullied and persuaded the police to refocus at the same time as

cutting significant amounts of money from the police budget. During that entire period crime fell, particularly some important crime types such as teenage murder. In my first year, there were 29. In my final year there were eight. It convinced me there and then that there is little connection between resource and output and results in policing. It is much more about focus.

What is depressing about the argument that the right hon. Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) has made today is that it fundamentally misunderstands the nature of modern policing and modern crime. Government and many police and crime commissioners throughout the country are trying to refocus the police on some of the challenges that they face.

Andy Burnham: The hon. Gentleman has mentioned the Met he inherited in 2008. I would not argue that it was perfect, but does he accept that the Metropolitan police of 2008 were a universe away from the Metropolitan police of 1997, who failed properly to investigate the murder of Stephen Lawrence?

Kit Malthouse: I will accept that there have been significant changes in the Metropolitan police—that is absolutely right—but I think it is universally accepted that, when we got into office in 2008, under the then commissioner the force had lost focus. The point I am making is that it was not delivering while at the same time it was receiving significant budget increases. It was literally awash with cash. That position had to be corrected. That has to happen across the whole country.

In my entire time in the policing community, I never came across a police force that had adopted what are in many ways the four pillars needed for modern policing. The first of them is investment in intelligence. About 80% of the time the police know just about where, when and by whom a crime is going to be committed, yet they never invest as much as they should in intelligence. Technology is changing the face of crime fighting. Automatic number plate recognition, data analysis, facial recognition, advanced forensics: no police force in the UK invests enough in them.

I have yet to find a police force that measures the efficiency of investigation. Murder in London fell from a high of 211 back in 2005 to just 101 in my final year. Should we still be investing the same number of police officers in murder? Of course not. There has to be some kind of peace dividend and efficiency saving.

There is also innovation. If police forces are really going to grasp the challenge of the future, they have to invest in innovation. There is not a single police force in the country that has an innovation officer spreading new methods and techniques across the force.

Finally, I want to say a word on cybercrime. The right hon. Member for Leigh made much of that. It is a prime example of where technology is going to solve the problem. When I was a kid, anyone could open my grandad's Mk2 Escort by thumping the door with their thigh. Now car crime is negligible in police terms because of changes in technology. Cars got better. The truth is that banks and financial services organisations invest in technology to prevent and detect crime, and the police have to do the same. One programmer—one smart programme—will solve more cybercrime than 1,000 police officers ever could; that is what I call efficiency.

6.6 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you are known as the Back Bencher's champion, and I hope the shadow Home Secretary will not feel I am criticising him too much, but I think that for him to have spent 35 minutes—over a quarter of the entire allocated time for this debate—on his speech is a discourtesy to Members on both sides who have come here to talk about this important issue.

I want just to say the following. My concern, and that of the Home Affairs Committee, is not so much about the settlement, because we said in our last report, published on 11 December, that the Chancellor was right to have done what he did, but that is only half the story. Our concern is over the funding formula. Of course the Policing Minister was right to look again at the formula and re-evaluate it, and we have noted the fact that that whole process ended in a shambles because of the Home Office's failure to properly calculate the data, and it took an official in Devon and Cornwall to assess that something had gone wrong.

We published our report on 11 December. The Government's response to this very important issue is now 13 days late. Chief constables and police and crime commissioners up and down the country have been waiting for this response, and for the consultation to begin. The fact is that unless we have the new formula, even the decisions made on the settlement will not give certainty to the various police forces in this country.

We had a letter from the Policing Minister in the middle of the last debate in which he said he was going to respond very swiftly, but there is a debate on Tuesday about the Committee's report, by which time I hope we will have begun the consultation. Yesterday in our deliberations, five PCCs as well as Lord Wasserman gave evidence on PCCs, and they all said that none of them had been contacted by the Home Office about this critical issue. This has been mirrored in the emails we have received at the Committee office from other chief constables.

I ask the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister to ensure that when the Minister comes to wind up—I assume another half hour of this debate will be taken up with wind-ups—he should please tell us when the consultation process will begin. I hope he will use the examples we have given in our report so that there is an independent element to the consultation process. If that happens, we will get a formula that can be accepted by all the police forces in this country, and a formula that can remain in place for many years to come.

6.9 pm

Jake Berry (Rossendale and Darwen) (Con): Robert Peel's vision for the police was that

“the police are the public and the public are the police”.

That could not be embodied any better than in the enormous contribution made by special constables to police forces across the country. The latest statistics show that 18,000 special constables were working alongside police officers and saving an estimated £75 million last year in man hours. It is impossible for anyone to speak in this debate without acknowledging the huge challenges that police forces have faced in relation to their budgets. In that environment, we are clearly going to place increasing reliance on special constables. They are volunteers

who come from all walks of life and all backgrounds. If we were having a conversation with a special constable on the street, we probably could not tell him from any other officer. He is a warranted officer, he has had the same training and he stands shoulder to shoulder with other officers. Special constables are invaluable and they give up their free time to keep us safe on our streets.

With that in mind, I wanted to discuss the case of Andrew Blades, a constituent who was a special constable in Lancashire. He worked as a special for six years, giving more than 2,500 hours to the people in Rossendale, Darwen, Burnley and beyond in east Lancashire, keeping us safe. He moved an unmarked police car across a road to block the way of an oncoming unlicensed, un-MOTed, uninsured scrambler motorbike that had been terrorising the neighbourhood. We should be lauding him as a hero, because not only did he stop a crime being committed, but he protected a fellow officer. Unfortunately, however, his payment for that—for taking those brave, split-second decisions on our behalf as a volunteer—was to be prosecuted for dangerous driving, a case he admitted and for which he has been sentenced to a year's ban.

The case was well covered in the newspapers and I wish to read out a comment from someone in an online newspaper. This person had probably come home from work and was looking at the online newspapers, and they said:

“It really isn't often I feel outrage but tonight reading this story has left me outraged and speechless”.

Guess what, I agree with him and so do 1,500 readers of the newspaper. When the Minister comes to the Dispatch Box, I would be grateful if he would take the opportunity to inform the House of what further steps he will take to protect special constables, particularly bearing in mind the unanimous resolution of the Police Federation to extend its protection to special constables? I also ask him to see what the Government can do about paying their Police Federation subs for them.

6.12 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): Let me start by paying tribute to my local police, particularly Inspector Tom Horner. He works tirelessly, along with his team, to keep my community and my constituents safe, as does the regional police force. West Yorkshire's force has lost a considerable amount of funding and more than 20% of its officers, and it is now likely to be asked to find savings, despite having a “protected budget”.

Bradford is not like the leafy suburbs of some southern counties where funding has increased over the past six years. We deal with complex issues that create vulnerability. In the past few weeks, we saw the conviction of 12 people from a grooming gang in Keighley, and such cases affect the wider budget of a local police force. In our area, we have to deal with terrorism and with women who have fled with their children to Syria.

What I want from the Home Secretary today is an explanation of how she and the Chancellor will ensure that he will take all these complexities into account, including terrorism, alcohol, domestic violence and mental health issues. On the one hand, cuts mean austerity, which has an impact on people's lives within their homes, while on the other there is an increase in poverty and crime: there is a correlation. We cannot deny that.

[*Naz Shah*]

I would really like to understand how this Government are going to ensure that they take into account places like my constituency, where the issues are complex: we need extra funding to tackle terrorism and we have extra vulnerabilities. We are also looking at integration, as just a few weeks ago Britain First came to my area, and the English Defence League has also been. I worked closely with the police on both occasions. I am not convinced that the police funding formula will address all the issues, and that is my real concern. I would like to see some understanding of constituencies such as Bradford West. Ultimately, we need to be cutting crime, not cutting costs.

6.14 pm

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): The police seem to be a popular subject in this House, as we have discussed them on several occasions, and I must say Labour's arguments have not really moved on. Today's debate gives me an opportunity to reiterate some comments and observations that I have made in previous such debates. It is important that we now look forward and not back. There are two key issues, one of which is financial and the other more general. The first is the police funding formula and the future consultation, and the second is leadership and innovation within police forces—new ideas and new thinking between them and within them.

On the police funding formula, the previous proposals were clearly not particularly popular in Cumbria. In fact, they would have had a devastating effect on the Cumbrian police force. I was very pleased when they were changed, because the support for retaining the Cumbrian police force is extremely strong within Cumbria. Therefore, the funding formula matters. If Cumbria is to retain an independent police force, the funding formula must be set out in a way that makes it financially viable. Under the proposed funding formula, that was clearly not the case, which is why I welcome the new consultation.

I accept that there are other possibilities. I referred earlier to the implementation of the Scottish formula, which saw the number of forces going down from eight to one. I think it is recognised that that was flawed and a mistake. In England, there are 43 forces. I know that there is a view that some of those could be merged or amalgamated, but that is not appropriate for Cumbria.

Cumbria is a large county in which local knowledge really does matter. It has a small population of half a million people. The terrain is challenging and the infrastructure poor, and the distance to major urban centres is considerable. As I have always said, the key issues are rurality and sparsity, and I very much hope that they will be central to the consultation on the funding formula going forward.

On leadership and innovation, I genuinely believe that the election of police and crime and commissioners has been an innovative and successful policy. It has been great for Cumbria. Richard Rhodes has been an excellent PCC. As we move forward, new PCCs will be elected and others will be re-elected. Things will improve, as PCCs innovate and bring the police force into the 21st century. I completely support the Government in

that policy. I look forward to the new consultation, and we must make sure that a Cumbrian police force continues to exist.

6.17 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Many of my hon. Friends have spoken about the cuts to their local police force areas. Since 2010, the Northumbria police force has suffered some of the worst financial cuts of any force in the UK. I want to use what little time I have to share some of my personal stories, which show just how fantastic our police really are.

In my previous career as a child protection social worker, I was followed home by violent clients and, as a result, had security measures in my home. I was placed on high alert with the local police station and taken to and from work under secure guard.

I remember being pinned against the wall by an angry father while holding his screaming child in my arms. I remember being jumped on, attacked and punched in the face by another parent. I remember the terror of being in a house filled with more than 20 men, all drunk and high on drugs, as I was trying to rescue a young baby who was crawling around the floor, unclothed, among the broken glass, alcohol, ash and drug remnants. Her mother and all of the men were in my face shouting at me, making threats and blocking my exit from the home.

I remember vividly—I wish that I did not—every child and adult who ever disclosed emotional, physical and sexual abuse to me. The one constant in all of those situations was the police. For anyone who has ever been in a dangerous or frightening situation, the relief felt at the sound and sight of police arriving on the scene is almost impossible to put into words. That is often the unseen side of our police force, a side that many of us, thankfully, will never have to encounter. Every day, officers are doing that work, making our communities safer, protecting children and adults from harm and working collaboratively with other agencies.

In our area we have lost 762 officers, against the backdrop of a 60% increase in sexual offences and a 29% increase in violent crime. Our excellent police and crime commissioner, Vera Baird, and her team of officers are doing a sterling job of managing the cuts and protecting our communities, but they desperately need a fairer settlement. If I was in my old job, that level of cuts would worry me. Response times and capacity were vital in the stories that I have just briefly shared with the House, and I know better than most that I can always rely on our police. It is a shame that the police cannot rely on this Government.

6.20 pm

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): I have listened intently to the Labour party's propositions and arguments, and I am stunned and, frankly, disappointed by the one-sided and misleading portrayal of this issue. The shadow Home Secretary talked about cuts to services, cuts to funding and cuts to the police, but he totally ignored the remarkable cut in crime that this country has seen since 2010. Crime has fallen by about 25% since 2010. He challenged the crime survey statistics, but all the independent reports and all the facts show the same decline in crime, with a fall of more

than 25%. The statistics from the Office for National Statistics are clear that the crime rate is now 64% below its peak in 1995.

Those figures are backed up in the regions. For example, in Hampshire, my county, we have seen an 11% drop in crime over the past year alone, making a fall of more than 30% since 2010. A recent study from Cardiff University showed a 10% fall in the number of people seeking treatment for violent crime injuries in hospital accident and emergency departments, which again reinforces the downward trend in violent crime.

The shadow Home Secretary says that those statistics are overshadowed by the rise in cybercrime, so let us look at what the Government are doing to tackle cybercrime. I sat on the Joint Committee on the Draft Investigatory Powers Bill, which had 22 public evidence sessions and received thousands of pages of written evidence. We visited and met professionals on the frontline. The Bill will provide vital powers and necessary transparency and accountability to our online forces. Having talked to the professionals and listened to what they want, I can say that they want more powers to intercept online communications, interfere with equipment and track internet connection records.

Last week we heard about paedophiles using secret Facebook groups to exchange imagery online and terrorists using WhatsApp, text and email to carry out their crimes. Although the technology is welcome, we need to ensure that encryption is not used against our law enforcement services, which are struggling to keep up with the criminals. The Bill will provide vital powers to ensure that they can tackle cybercrime. To echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), it focuses on methodology and technique rather than just throwing cash at the problem. That is what the professionals on the frontline want and what they are asking for, and that is what this Government are delivering.

6.23 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is becoming increasingly apparent that we are not safe with the Tories. With underinvestment in the NHS, social care and local roads, with what is happening to the environment and the economy, and with the downward pressure on the pound, we are under threat from the Tories. We are not safe with them. Now, in our communities, there are attacks on the police, and all the Prime Minister can do is refer to the Leader of the Opposition's tie. How pathetic is that?

The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) talked about intelligence playing a crucial role in the police service. Of course it does, and significant amounts of that intelligence, certainly in my police force, come from neighbourhood policing, which is under the cosh. He talked about intelligence being important, but the very service that helps significantly with that at the neighbourhood level is under threat.

The hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) talked about special constables. They do a fantastic job, but they are additional to, not instead of, the police—that is absolutely crucial.

Jake Berry: My grandfather spent 25 years patrolling the streets of Bootle as a police officer, and he would say—as I would—that we must focus on ensuring that

police officers are on the streets of Bootle, not sat behind desks in police headquarters doing work that non-warranted individuals can do.

Peter Dowd: I am really pleased that the hon. Gentleman says that, because I was just coming to that very point in relation to Merseyside police. A fantastic job is being done by the police and crime commissioner, Jane Kennedy; the chief constable, John Murphy; and my local commander, Peter Costello, and all his officers, who spend as much time as they can on the streets, against the odds.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I am sure my hon. Friend, as a fellow Merseyside MP, is aware of the fact that we lost 19% of our police officers on Merseyside between 2010 and 2015—something the grandfather of the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) would be very upset to hear. Workloads are soaring, and the officers who are left have to do a huge amount more with less and less. Does my hon. Friend agree that the recent Police Federation survey showing that 1,500 officers are off with stress or depression every day is an extremely worrying development and something we should all be concerned about?

Peter Dowd: I completely agree, and it surprises me that there are not even more police officers off with stress, given the pressures they are under.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) referred to the cumulative effect of the cuts to local government and local services such as the fire service on the police's ability to do their job. That endangers the resilience of the police service, because officers are being taken away to do things that are not their responsibility. Huge amounts of their time are taken up with mental health cases because of the stress on local authorities and the NHS, and that should not be the case.

In 2010, we had 7,300 police officers in my area; that is now down by 1,600. We are not making those figures up; the police and crime commissioner, the chief constable and the local commanders are not making them up, and they are not just taking those officers out of the system because they feel like it.

What we have with this Government is jiggery-pokery finance and jiggery-pokery figures. For years, we were told we really could not put the council tax precept up by more than 2%, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer is now almost demanding that in relation to social care, and the Home Secretary is virtually demanding it. [Interruption.] She may well laugh, but that is the reality. She and her colleagues have told us over the years that we are spending too much through tax, but they then demand, for the sake of the Chancellor's jiggery-pokery economics, that we put the precept up by 2%. That amounts to a fiddle; as my right hon. Friend said, it would amount to fraud in other circumstances, and those involved would be arrested.

My local police and crime commissioner has used £2.1 million of reserves, and there are now another £3.3 million of savings to be made, with £27 million of savings to be made by 2019-20. We also have to contend with the deferred blunder in the formula, which will come back to haunt us.

At the same time, crime is up. Hate crime is up, sexual offences are up, violent crime against women is up and

[Peter Dowd]

knife crime is up. We will have to face those increases with less and less financial and human resource, notwithstanding the fact that Merseyside police service collaborates with the fire service in a joint command and control centre. We are doing what we can, but the police service can only do so much.

The Scottish Nationalist party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (Richard Arkless), asked how what happens with the British Transport police, the Ministry of Defence police and the Civil Nuclear Constabulary will interplay with the effects on local forces. We need more answers.

Margaret Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that those of us who work in this building every day—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) extended a generosity that it was not within his capacity to grant. It was very decent of him, but he gave time that he did not possess.

6.29 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Leigh (Andy Burnham) for opening this debate and allowing so many interventions. We have been able to take part in a very active and constructive debate.

As much as we talk about numbers, it is important that we talk about the crux of the issue, which is how it affects the people we are here to represent and their everyday experience of the changes to the police service. I have wondered throughout the debate what the Home Secretary thinks is the measure of success, because I am struggling to understand it. We talk about police numbers, which are important for some but not for others. We talk about crime figures, and some will say they are accurate and some will say not. We talk about the number of police stations and facilities, but are they important or not? It is very difficult for me and for a lot of people in the community to fully understand what on earth is going on with policing in this country.

I can say, though, that in Greater Manchester the number of police cut is now over 2,000. The Minister knows that, because the House of Commons Library has provided that information and so it is on the public record, but he might not know that the number of police stations in Oldham borough has gone down dramatically. The police station in Royton has closed, the police station in Failsworth has closed, the Limeside police post has closed, the Chadderton police post has closed, Uppermill police station has been downgraded, and the custody cells at Oldham police station have been closed. On top of that—of course, justice is not isolated to the police—the magistrates court and the county court are closing. The Minister will not know how many police stations are closing in Oldham, because when I wrote to the Home Office to ask whether it collated information on that, it said it did not, so it does not even know how many police stations are open. That is very significant. Tomorrow, the police station in Failsworth will be sold to the highest bidder at public auction. The irony is that just down the road is Failsworth

lodge, which Sir Robert Peel attended to be taught as a private school-educated youngster, and now the police station in that town is being sold.

Crime is up by 14% in Greater Manchester. Sexual offences are up by 46%, violent crime is up by 36%, shoplifting is up by 9%, vehicle crime is up by 8%, and theft is up by 5%—little wonder, with fewer police and fewer police stations, and £200 million taken from Greater Manchester police. Were it not for the police and crime commissioner, Tony Lloyd—a fantastic advocate for policing—and the hard-working and dedicated police officers, the situation would no doubt be far worse. It cannot continue, because on top of all that we have lost community centres, youth centres and youth workers. We talk about prevention, and that community infrastructure is absolutely crucial for finding out what is happening on the ground to help the police service do what it does best.

6.32 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I want to pay tribute to the hard work of the police in my constituency, which often goes above and beyond the call of duty. In addition to investigating crime, apprehending criminals and keeping us safe, in the current context of cuts to other public services, the police are too often the service of last resort for residents with severe mental illness and other vulnerabilities. Yet in London our hard-working officers are being let down and undermined by the current Mayor. We have seen enormous cuts to policing in London over the past five years, with the loss of more than 5,600 uniformed officers, including PCSOs.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Does the hon. Lady accept from me—I spent 32 years as a police officer—that the issue with mental health is not a new phenomenon but has always been the case?

Helen Hayes: The officers in my constituency tell me that the problem is more acute at the moment than it has been for many, many years, and that is my experience.

While I welcome the change in recruitment policy by the Metropolitan police to recruit only Londoners, the cuts are clearly limiting the progress that this policy has the potential to make in terms of black and minority ethnic representation in the Met, which still stands at only 11.5%. Much of the reduction in officer numbers is being achieved by not replacing retiring officers. Without new recruitment, the diversity of the Met will continue to lag behind that of the population it serves.

The devastating cuts have had a major impact. Every police officer I speak to is stretched more than they can ever recall having been in their working lives. Violent crime is going up, and last week HMIC announced that the Met requires improvement. Of all the reforms that the hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) has made, the reorganisation of safer neighbourhood policing into the local policing model is the most damaging. Through that reform, the police are losing visibility, vital sources of intelligence and the ability to address minor problems before they escalate.

The Dulwich area of my constituency was recently dubbed the UK's burglary hotspot on the basis of data from insurance claims relating to burglary. I have spoken

to many residents who have been the victim of that horrible crime in recent months. Many have had windows and doors smashed in during broad daylight. In one shocking attack, a resident had the contents of a petrol canister poured over him. In that context, our local police have been forced to be reactive instead of proactive, visiting the victims after the crimes had taken place and responding to emergency call-outs. However, a proactive approach, through neighbourhood policing, is vital to addressing some of the most serious and pressing challenges that we face, such as gun and youth crime, sexual exploitation, radicalisation and terrorism, forced marriage and honour-based violence. To investigate and prevent those crimes, the police require a depth of knowledge and relationship with the communities that they serve, which cannot be fabricated in the heat of a rapid response once a crime has been committed.

One community activist in Brixton, who has engaged with the police for many years, said at a Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime roadshow meeting that the erosion of safer neighbourhood teams had "taken the heart out of policing".

Margaret Greenwood: Neighbourhood policing, which is the eyes and ears of policing, is important in tackling terrorism. Every day, Members of the House walk past monitors that tell us that the level of threat is "severe". Does my hon. Friend agree that this is the wrong time to be making cuts to our police?

Helen Hayes: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. When communities know their officers and officers know their patch, the police have a public face at a local level. When that is taken away, public confidence all too often depends on headlines, high-profile cases and the individual experiences of people who have, sadly, already been the victims of crime. Neighbourhood policing should not be regarded as the softer side of policing. It should be regarded not as a luxury to be cut in a time of austerity, but as a vital relationship-building bridge between the police and the communities that they serve, and as the key to resolving and preventing many of the serious crimes that can threaten the security and stability of our communities.

Naz Shah: Is my hon. Friend aware that Her Majesty's inspector of constabularies, Zoë Billingham, who led HMIC's police effectiveness inspection, the report of which was published last week, described neighbourhood policing as

"the cornerstone of the British policing model"

and said

"I need to raise a warning flag here. Forces' good performance in preventing crimes is at risk if neighbourhood policing is further eroded."

Helen Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which supports the case I am making. In London, we need a Labour Mayor to restore neighbourhood policing, as my hon. Friend has just said, as a cornerstone of the Met.

6.38 pm

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): We have heard this evening about crime going up, workloads going up, police numbers going down and police support staff

numbers going down. HMIC reports that neighbourhood policing is suffering. The Government cannot cull 35,000 posts from the police service and seek to maintain the protection of the public without any impact. The obvious impact of doing that is to put the public at risk. We need more resources to protect neighbourhood policing, not fewer.

HMIC recognises that neighbourhood policing is, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has said, the cornerstone of crime prevention. That is something that the front-line police service have been telling Government for years. Neighbourhood policing enables officers to serve the public, remain vigilant to threats, gather the most accurate intelligence about terrorism and gain crucial local-to-global intelligence, whether for use in the fight against terror or the fight against child sexual exploitation.

To turn specifically to Wales, a really concerning picture is developing. Last week, HMIC concluded in its report that Dyfed-Powys police could do more to keep people safe and to reduce crime. Its report on police effectiveness found that the approach to investigating crimes and supporting the vulnerable and victims required improvement. It also highlighted Dyfed-Powys's allocation of complex crimes, sexual offences and high-risk domestic abuse to officers who did not have adequate training.

Across Wales, we have seen a reduction of 783 police officers and even more support staff. Those cuts are akin to wiping three quarters of the entire Gwent police force off the face of the map. Police are now going back into offices to do administrative work. Such work has to be done and cannot be ignored—it is crucial to how policing works—but police officers need to be on the streets to build trust and relationships with local communities.

In Wales, the Welsh Government have created 500 PCSOs not to replace police officers, but to backfill the gaps left by the 20% cuts to policing imposed by the Government since 2010. HMIC has stated that cuts should not be more than 12%, but that has been ignored by the previous coalition and the current Government. The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice has said that

"Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners have no excuse whatsoever not to deliver at least good quality policing in their areas."

I think that they have every excuse, given the cuts to their budgets. South Wales police, in my own area, will have a cash cut of nearly £3.5 million in real terms in its budget for 2016-17, compared with last year.

The police are now spread so thinly that they are struggling to act as eyes and ears on our streets, which undermines their ability to do their job. At the same time, the Home Secretary is talking about risks to national security and the threat from terrorism is at an extreme level.

Steve McCabe: I agree with my hon. Friend that such threats are multiplying. The Home Secretary suggested earlier that crime was down and all was well, but she seems to have overlooked the fact that violent crime is actually rising and that in some parts of the country—Birmingham, for example—gun crime is rampant. Is this not the wrong time to cut special resources for policing?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Knife crime has gone up again this year, and we have seen the figures released last week.

The police are now spread so thinly that they cannot do their job. We talk about risks and threats to national security and efforts to counter the threat we face from terrorism. This is a time when we need more police, not less. There is only one thing that you get for less—and that is less.

6.42 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Neighbourhood policing was one of Labour's greatest achievements—a proud legacy. When we were in government, we built on the British model of policing by consent. My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) was absolutely right to say that when Labour left office, there were record numbers of police on the street: 17,000 more than in 1997 and, in addition, nearly 17,000 PCSOs. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said, neighbourhood policing is popular with the public. It is local policing with local roots, underpinned by local crime and safety partnerships, and it provides a local say.

The British model of policing is now under threat, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) rightly said. The HMIC report by Zoë Billingham describes how neighbourhood policing is

“the cornerstone of the British policing model”.

However, she says:

“I need to raise a warning flag here.”

She goes on to talk about the dangers

“if neighbourhood policing is further eroded.”

She warns against losing

“our eyes and ears in the community”.

Crucially, she singles out her concern about limiting the ability of neighbourhood policing teams to identify and disrupt threats such as organised crime and terrorism. Indeed, both the current head of counter-terrorism and his predecessor have warned about the dangers of hollowing out neighbourhood policing because it is vital to intelligence gathering.

Mrs May: The hon. Gentleman quotes Her Majesty's inspector of constabulary Zoë Billingham, but she actually said:

“We don't think it should be inevitable that the preventative neighbourhood presence should be eroded”,

because the Government's funding settlement for the police means there is an opportunity for the police chiefs “to review their decision”.

Jack Dromey: The Home Secretary can, if she wishes, misinterpret what the report says. I have reported the inspector's warnings that she is ignoring. The Government are ignoring the warnings from the police and the mounting concern of the public that they no longer see their police.

Having cut the police service by 25% in the last Parliament, right up until the night before the comprehensive spending review, the Government were threatening to cut it by at least another 22%. With the Home Secretary failing to stand up for the police service,

we were on the brink of catastrophe, but under pressure from Labour, the public and the police, the Chancellor staged, in what can only be described as a shambles, a last-minute U-turn and a promise was made. “Read my lips,” he intimated,

“I am today announcing that there will be no cuts in the police budget at all. There will be real-terms protection for police funding. The police protect us, and we are going to protect the police.”—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2015; Vol. 602, c. 1373.]

That promise to the public and the police has been broken. The Chancellor said he would protect the police, but now we know that police budgets are still being cut—a broken promise. It is just like in 2010 when the Prime Minister said that he would protect the frontline. Since then, 12,000 front-line officers have been lost—a broken promise. To add insult to injury, not only are the Tories continuing to slash police funding, but they expect the public to pay more to make up for it. The Tory sums rely on local people being charged an extra £389 million in council tax—a Tory police tax. The public are paying more for less.

The shadow Secretary of State, and my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and other Members spoke of the reality in the communities that they serve. Neighbourhood policing is being hollowed out: 18,000 officers have gone and 4,500 PCSOs have been lost in the last five bleak years. Some 1,300 have gone in the last six months alone—the equivalent of a whole force—and many more will go over the next 12 months. Hugh Orde was right when he said that a generation of progress is being reversed.

There has been a major increase in knife crime, which is up by 9%, and a 27% rise in violent crime, including a 14% increase in the murder rate; sexual offences have gone up by 36% and reported rape is at its highest level since 2003; and victims are being let down, with half of all cases being closed without a suspect being identified. Resources are diminishing just when demand is soaring. Police in the 21st century face the triple challenges of terrorism, cybercrime and child sexual exploitation. The threats to British security in the 21st century demand a modernised, more responsive and better equipped police service, not a smaller one.

The shambles of the comprehensive spending review was followed by the omnishambles over the funding formula, in which the Home Office used the wrong figures to misallocate hundreds of millions of pounds of police funding, meaning that the doomed review of the unfair funding formula has been delayed for a further year. “Sorry,” said the Policing Minister, “we used the wrong figures and we should have got it right.” That means that there is a stopgap settlement for only a year—more uncertainty and more unfairness. West Midlands police, my local force, and Northumbria police will continue to receive double the cuts that Surrey receives.

The truth is that police budgets have not been protected. The truth is that crime is not falling, but changing. People are now more likely to be mugged online than in the street, yet in the words of the Office for National Statistics,

“fraud and cyber crime are not currently included in the headline Crime Survey for England and Wales estimates”.

They will now be included. The ONS states:

“Preliminary results from this field trial indicate that there were an estimated 5.1 million incidents of fraud”.

When the statistics finally tell the truth on crime, we will see crime nearly doubled under this Government, robbing them of the alibi they have used over the past five years: “We have cut the police, but we have cut crime.”

In conclusion, the thin blue line is being stretched ever thinner. Our police service has been nothing short of heroic. The powerful contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) showed the day in, day out experience we all have. I see it in my constituency, ranging from, on the one hand, outstanding initiatives to engage young people, such as the formation by the police of a canoeing club that built excellent relationships with local young people and that helped to divert them from crime and helped to get information about those who were carrying out burglaries, to, on the other hand, the case of Lucy Lawton, a young mum who had her two children kidnapped by a fleeing bank robber—they were tracked down and the kids were returned to their distraught mother. These are good men and women, ordinary men and women doing extraordinary things, often in the most difficult circumstances, but they are being let down by this Government. Now is not the time to press ahead with the biggest cuts to any police service in Europe. The safety and security of our citizens comes first. That is why Labour, the party that built neighbourhood policing, will be the champion of neighbourhood policing and the champion of public safety and the police.

6.50 pm

The Minister for Policing, Crime and Criminal Justice (Mike Penning): I was laughing at the shadow Policing Minister, Mr Speaker, and I apologise for doing so as this is a very serious day and a very serious debate. Like the Home Secretary, I pay tribute to the emergency services that are still on the scene at the former power station at Didcot. I spoke to the chief fire officer earlier today and, on behalf of the House, expressed gratitude for the work that they are doing at the incident, which is very harrowing for them as well as for the loved ones and families of those who are still missing and those who have been injured and killed.

I listened carefully to the speeches made by the shadow Home Secretary and by the shadow Policing Minister. I think that I might have heard his speech before—perhaps before the election, before the shadow Home Secretary wanted a 10% cut to policing, or perhaps I heard it last week, and perhaps I will hear it again next week. The shame about having this debate, curtailed as it is, is that we will have a debate next week, led by the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, on the Committee’s report. I bet that I hear an almost identical speech then from the shadow Policing Minister.

When we look carefully at what the Labour party is saying, we can see that on the one hand they are saying that we should have allowed cuts of 10% to policing until 2020 whereas, on the other hand, we hear speeches galore from Labour Back Benchers saying, “These cuts are not good.” What cuts? The cuts that happened between 2010 and 2015? Or those that would have happened had this country been foolish enough to elect a Labour Government?

The shadow Home Secretary is trying to say that we should not have taken into consideration the precept

that is allowed—the 2% or 5%. Every Home Secretary has done that and every Chancellor has done that, when we look at how we fund the police. All of a sudden, we have a completely different narrative—“We want to cut it, and we want to cut it even more.” It fascinated me.

Andy Burnham *rose*—

Mike Penning: No, I will not give way. I am afraid that the shadow Home Secretary went on for far too long, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee said. Perhaps next week we might hear the same speech again.

Neil Coyle *rose*—

Mike Penning: If I have time, I will give way to the hon. Gentleman. He has a very important constituency issue that I have been trying to help him with and I will give way if I have time.

It is very important that we also take into consideration what was said by the third party in this House, the Scottish National party, complaining about the fact that VAT at 20% is not allowed to be deducted. It was part of the business plan when the SNP put the plan together for one force in Scotland. That was physically part of the plan. Is this a new type of politics that is happening in Scotland, in which the SNP put a business plan together, get agreement, and afterwards say that it does not like it and wants to change it—a bit like with a referendum that took place not so long ago, which it is not very happy with either?

I listened very carefully to the Opposition spokesmen, especially the shadow Policing Minister, who made a very powerful case for canoeing activities in his constituency—

Jack Dromey: For the prevention of crime.

Mike Penning: Absolutely, so perhaps the police and crime commissioner could explain why he has not spent part of the £153 million reserve in the West Midlands on that. Perhaps we should look at the polling in May when, as we have heard, the Labour party will have candidates in all 43 PCC areas. In its manifesto it said that it would not do that—it was going to abolish PCCs because they were wrong, expensive and unnecessary. It did not want them.

Jack Dromey *rose*—

Mike Penning: No. Perhaps Paddy Tipping and Vera Baird convinced the Labour party that they would not accept being abolished. It is entirely up the electorate in England and Wales who to elect, but we should look carefully at the record of some PCCs around the country, especially Labour PCCs, where the cuts to front-line police have been the greatest.

Jack Dromey *rose*—

Mike Penning: No. Perhaps we should look carefully at the only force in the country that is cutting the precept—Hertfordshire, in my part of the world. Why is it cutting it? Because part of the reserves that have been built up over the years will be used.

Jim McMahon *rose*—

Jack Dromey rose—

Mike Penning: I will not give way.

We have complaints when we use the precept, and complaints when we cut it. We should be talking about what is delivering the best policing in this country. Has crime dropped since 2000? Yes. For the first time we have a Conservative Government who have the courage to include new types of crime in the statistics. These crimes have not just suddenly appeared in 2010 or 2015. They have been going on for years, but the previous Labour Administration refused to include them in the statistics. Will it be difficult for some forces? Yes, it will. Is it the right thing to do? Yes, and that is crucial.

We have heard today quite a lot of scaremongering. There has been an increase in reporting domestic violence—quite rightly, I hope we will all agree. Every time I am at this Dispatch Box I say that we want people to have the confidence to come forward and report domestic violence, and it was not being reported correctly when we first came to government. We changed the reporting rules for how crime is reported.

Jake Berry: In the short time remaining, will the Minister address my concerns about what further protections can be given to special constables, and say whether the Government will act to extend the protection of the Police Federation to them?

Mike Penning: I was just coming on to special constables, because they were derided by the Opposition. Volunteers—what a terrible thing to have in a police force! Our specials are the most important people in the community. They come forward and do not get paid and only receive expenses. In my constituency, a special was attacked when on duty one evening. They laid his leg across the kerb, jumped on it and snapped his leg. The sort of protection that we should have—we will look at this, because it is vital—should mean that a special constable or a warranted officer has exactly the same protection as any other police officer in this country, and I speak weekly with the Police Federation about that.

I will respond as soon as I can to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), because I want to get this right. A lot of work is going on, particularly with the chief constables, about how we can get better collaboration on capabilities going forward. It is not possible to come up with new formulas until I understand fully where the chief constables will stand on capabilities. The right hon. Gentleman said that the chief constables had not been in contact with me, but I have met three chief officers in the past seven days, including PCCs, and discussed the issue face to face. I have not spoken to all 43 since the report, but I will ensure that I meet them all.

On Monday I have been asked to go to Didcot by the chief fire officer to thank the emergency services, and I am sure the whole House will join me in that. I hope that the country and the House will not listen to scaremongering from Labour Members who wanted to cut police funding by 10% or more.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 193, Noes 279.

Division No. 200]

[6.59 pm

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane	Hanson, rh Mr David
Abrahams, Debbie	Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Alexander, Heidi	Harris, Carolyn
Allen, Mr Graham	Hayes, Helen
Anderson, Mr David	Hayman, Sue
Austin, Ian	Healey, rh John
Bailey, Mr Adrian	Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Barron, rh Kevin	Hillier, Meg
Beckett, rh Margaret	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Benn, rh Hilary	Hoey, Kate
Betts, Mr Clive	Hollern, Kate
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta	Hopkins, Kelvin
Blomfield, Paul	Howarth, rh Mr George
Brown, Lyn	Huq, Dr Rupa
Bryant, Chris	Hussain, Imran
Buck, Ms Karen	Irranca-Davies, Huw
Burden, Richard	Jarvis, Dan
Burgon, Richard	Johnson, Diana
Burnham, rh Andy	Jones, Gerald
Butler, Dawn	Jones, Graham
Byrne, rh Liam	Jones, Helen
Cadbury, Ruth	Jones, Mr Kevan
Campbell, rh Mr Alan	Jones, Susan Elan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie	Kane, Mike
Champion, Sarah	Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
Chapman, Jenny	Keeley, Barbara
Coffey, Ann	Kendall, Liz
Cooper, Julie	Kinnock, Stephen
Cooper, Rosie	Kyle, Peter
Cooper, rh Yvette	Lammy, rh Mr David
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Lavery, Ian
Cox, Jo	Leslie, Chris
Coyle, Neil	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Crausby, Mr David	Lewis, Clive
Creagh, Mary	Lewis, Mr Ivan
Creasy, Stella	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Cruddas, Jon	Lucas, Ian C.
Cummins, Judith	Mactaggart, rh Fiona
Cunningham, Alex	Madders, Justin
Cunningham, Mr Jim	Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Dakin, Nic	Mahmood, Shabana
David, Wayne	Malhotra, Seema
Doughty, Stephen	Mann, John
Dowd, Jim	Marris, Rob
Dowd, Peter	Marsden, Mr Gordon
Dromey, Jack	Maskell, Rachael
Eagle, Ms Angela	McCabe, Steve
Edwards, Jonathan	McCarthy, Kerry
Efford, Clive	McDonagh, Siobhain
Elliott, Julie	McDonald, Andy
Elliott, Tom	McDonnell, John
Ellman, Mrs Louise	McFadden, rh Mr Pat
Esterson, Bill	McGinn, Conor
Evans, Chris	McGovern, Alison
Farron, Tim	McInnes, Liz
Field, rh Frank	McKinnell, Catherine
Fitzpatrick, Jim	McMahon, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen	Meale, Sir Alan
Flint, rh Caroline	Mearns, Ian
Flynn, Paul	Miliband, rh Edward
Fovargue, Yvonne	Morden, Jessica
Gardiner, Barry	Morris, Grahame M.
Goodman, Helen	Mulholland, Greg
Green, Kate	Murray, Ian
Greenwood, Lillian	Onn, Melanie
Greenwood, Margaret	Onwurah, Chi
Griffith, Nia	Osamor, Kate
Gwynne, Andrew	Owen, Albert
Haigh, Louise	Pearce, Teresa

Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smith, rh Mr Andrew
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Spellar, rh Mr John
Starmer, Keir
Stevens, Jo

Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Watson, Mr Tom
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Winnick, Mr David
Winterton, rh Dame Rosie
Woodcock, John
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Holly Lynch and
Jeff Smith

NOES

Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burns, Conor
Burns, rh Sir Simon
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, Alun
Carmichael, Neil

Cartledge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishty, Rehman
Chope, Mr Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Cleverly, James
Collins, Damian
Colville, Oliver
Costa, Alberto
Cox, Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Davies, Byron
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Dr James
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Donaldson, rh Mr Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drax, Richard
Drummond, Mrs Flick
Duddridge, James
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Graham

Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Michael
Fernandes, Suella
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fuller, Richard
Fysh, Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Gauke, Mr David
Ghani, Nusrat
Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
Glen, John
Gove, rh Michael
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffiths, Andrew
Gummer, Ben
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, Stephen
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Hart, Simon
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
Heald, Sir Oliver
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hinds, Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Mr Adam
Hopkins, Kris
Howarth, Sir Gerald
Howell, John
Howlett, Ben
Huddleston, Nigel
Jackson, Mr Stewart
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Mr Bernard
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, Boris
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Kennedy, Seema
Kirby, Simon
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lancaster, Mark
Latham, Pauline
Leadsom, Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward

Leslie, Charlotte
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
Lewis, Brandon
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Lilley, rh Mr Peter
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Lumley, Karen
Mackinlay, Craig
Mackintosh, David
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Mr Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McCartney, Jason
McCartney, Karl
McPartland, Stephen
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalf, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mordaunt, Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mowat, David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Newton, Sarah
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Phillips, Stephen
Philp, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Pincher, Christopher
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, Mr Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Shelbrooke, Alec
Simpson, rh Mr Keith

Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Soubry, rh Anna
Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Iain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
Swire, rh Mr Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tolhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David

Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaizey, Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watkinson, Dame Angela
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Noes:
Jackie Doyle-Price and
Guy Opperman

Question accordingly negatived.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (29 FEBRUARY)

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Monday 29 February:

(1) the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Secretary Philip Hammond relating to the draft European Union Referendum (Date of Referendum etc.) Regulations 2016; the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of the Motion not later than two hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion; and proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption;

(2) paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments) shall apply to any Motion in the name of the Leader of the Opposition; proceedings on the Motion may continue, though opposed, for three hours and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; and (3) Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to any motion to which paragraph (1) or (2) of this order applies.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (ANTICIPATION AND ADJUSTMENTS) BILL

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 2 March, any Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill ordered to be brought in and read the first time may be proceeded with as if its Second Reading stood as an Order of the Day, and Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills) shall apply.—(*George Hollingbery.*)

Katie Road NHS Walk-in Centre

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

7.12 pm

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Tonight I am seeking an opportunity to shed some light on the continuing saga of the Katie Road NHS walk-in centre in my constituency. Its future status has been in doubt ever since its fate was placed in the hands of one of the new clinical commissioning groups. My constituents have had to live with rumours, on-off consultations and continuing threats to the long-term future of an immensely popular and highly valued service that sees about 70,000 patients a year. The origins of the service lie in concerns that the large number of students in the area, as well as vulnerable individuals—often with mental health conditions and in unstable accommodation—were placing a demand on GP services that could not be met by existing provision, which was in turn placing intolerable strains on the local accident and emergency services.

My own fairly extensive consultations with constituents have established that the centre is regularly used by those who cannot easily secure quick appointments with their own GP. That is often a problem for those in work—especially those who work unsocial hours—and for families with elderly relatives or young children who cannot easily gain access to GPs at weekends or in the evenings. The Katie Road centre sees about 300 to 400 patients during an average weekend.

There is now fairly widespread recognition of the value of walk-in centres. The 2014 Monitor review reported rising demand for the service year on year. About 70% of the centres that were surveyed reported that they were seeing an average of 20,000 to 45,000 patients a year, as opposed to anticipated attendances of between 12,000 and 24,000. Yet despite the demand and support for walk-in centres, local commissioners have closed more than 50 since the start of 2010, reduced services at 23 others and reduced overall capacity by about 20%. I am not aware that, other than the Monitor report, there has been any substantial review into the impact of that loss of provision. I wonder whether the Minister is in a position to enlighten me, and whether he might take this opportunity to say what the Government's position is on urgent care generally and walk-in centres in particular. I noticed that the Department of Health consultation "Refreshing the Mandate" says that

"we want to improve people's access to primary care through new forms of provision including rapid walk-in access."

In early 2013, Birmingham CrossCity clinical commissioning group announced plans to consult on the future of the Katie Road walk-in centre. That was apparently based on a report commissioned by the former South Birmingham primary care trust, a report that remains secret to this day. I first asked to see a copy of it in March 2013. In June 2013, the CCG called off its plans for walk-in centres and it was announced that they had been saved, only for the chair of the clinical commissioning group to reveal later that it planned to renew the contract temporarily and that Katie Road had been saved for 12 to 18 months. Later, the CCG announced that it planned a two-stage consultation, with a pre-consultation phase and then a main consultation with the public.

Naturally, I wanted to ensure that my constituents had their say on the matter. When I consulted them, I discovered that more than 72% had experience of using the centre and were firmly opposed to any plans to close it.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): I agree that walk-in centres have the ability to take pressure off overworked A&Es, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that the best way to take pressure not just off A&Es but walk-in centres is to have GP surgeries open seven days a week, so that people can access services overall?

Steve McCabe: I might agree with that, but one of the problems in my area is that GP surgeries have been cut as well, so that is not the answer.

As I said, more than 72% of the people I consulted had experience of using the centre and were firmly opposed to any plans to close it. I also found that 56% of people had used the centre for out-of-hours emergency treatment, and 55% expressed serious concern about any plans to move the service to or near the A&E unit. My findings are consistent with that of the survey conducted on behalf of the NHS central midlands commissioning support unit in 2012, which found that more than two thirds of patients surveyed at eight walk-in centres and urgent care centres across Birmingham and Solihull indicated that they had attended because of an access-related issue—for example, they could not get an appointment with their GP or had to wait a considerable time to be seen.

There were major objections from my constituents to relocating their walk-in centre to the main hospital. They referred, for example, to the distance, waiting times, parking and accessibility. During a visit to Katie Road, I witnessed an ambulance crew bring into the walk-in centre an elderly lady in need of stitches to a leg injury. They did that rather than take her to the A&E unit because of their concerns over the likely delays. The CCG's own figures suggest that an average visit to the walk-in centre costs around £45, as opposed to £75 to £100 for an A&E visit.

I am aware that there are many examples of walk-in centres being co-located with other health or social care services, and that some have a pharmacy on site or are co-located with diagnostic services such as X-ray services, dental facilities or family planning, but I should like to ask the Minister whether there is any evidence that shows an obvious advantage in co-locating an urgent care or walk-in centre alongside an A&E unit, especially evidence that would outweigh such negatives as distance, waiting times, parking and accessibility. In fact, is it not the case that most walk-in centres have a limited ability to refer patients on to secondary care services, as patients needing a referral to secondary care are normally referred by GPs, who are the traditional gatekeepers—a role that has, if anything, been strengthened as a result of the reorganisation of the NHS?

In autumn 2013 the CCG commenced its pre-consultation. The chair of the CCG met with a number of my constituents in February 2014, when he heard clearly their desire to retain Katie Road and their objections to a plan being pushed by the CCG to relocate the walk-in centre to a site at the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Trust site, adjacent to the hospital's A&E unit. In July 2014 I invited the chair of the CCG

and a number of his staff to take part in a second meeting attended by more than 80 constituents—we were limited by the size of the room, or it would have been many more. At that meeting they heard clearly once again that there was total opposition to the closure of the walk-in centre and the plans to relocate to the hospital. That review or consultation eventually fizzled out, with the promise of a bigger and better consultation later in 2014.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The issue of such walk-in centres closing down is difficult for all of us in our constituencies. It is no good Conservative Members saying that we will have a seven-day a week GP service, because what they have done already with regard to the junior doctors dispute shows that they are not capable of doing that. That means that our constituents will continue to suffer. In particular, those at work cannot access services and are therefore put at greater risk through further misdiagnosis or non-diagnosis.

Steve McCabe: My hon. Friend will know very well that there is a problem with GP provision in his part of Birmingham as well as my own, so it is difficult to see how it could be stretched further.

As I said, we were promised a bigger and better consultation for later in 2014, but that was abandoned in light of the impending general election, the date of which had, obviously, been known since the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

No satisfactory explanation for the proposed change has ever been provided, but now, once again, the CCG wants to consult on the future of the walk-in service. This time it apparently wants to consult on a new model of service, the details of which are known only to itself but which has apparently not been clinically tested. It appears that, once again, it involves plans to relocate the walk-in centre to a site adjacent to the A&E unit.

As the Minister will know, sections 75 to 77 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 specifically state that commissioners are required to act in a transparent way when procuring services:

“Transparency is important in ensuring that commissioners are accountable for their decisions. As noted, commissioners also have a duty to involve the public in commissioning decisions.”

It is not clear to me where in that part of the Act there is support for a series of bungled and inadequate on-off reviews and a constant determination to impose one outcome irrespective of the arguments to the contrary. I would welcome the Minister's view on that. I am deeply concerned at the continuing threats to the service, which plays such a vital part in the delivery of healthcare for my constituents. I cannot see how the loss of a provision such as Katie Road is consistent with the Government's ambitions for a seven-day NHS—perhaps the Minister can advise me on that.

Ironically, I have recently discovered that the opening hours of the Katie Road centre are to be extended to help cope with winter pressures. Dr Lumley, who works with the neighbouring CCG, which also serves south Birmingham, is quoted in the press as saying, in response to that announcement, that

‘this is great news for patients in Birmingham and means they can access the Walk in Centre until late, seven days a week.’

[Steve McCabe]

Such a pity her views are not shared by her colleagues in CrossCity CCG, who assumed responsibility for Katie Road in the carve-up following the introduction of the Lansley reforms.

It seems to me that the CCG is clearly out of its depth in handling a public consultation, or certainly one that can command any public confidence. What advice and support, if any, do the Government offer to CCGs on conducting consultations with the public? I am curious to know how much public money—money that could obviously have been spent on patient care—the CCG has spent on its on-off reviews and consultations so far. Is there any limit to how much public money a CCG is entitled to spend on a review or consultation on a single issue? If so, how much is it? Who is ultimately responsible for making a decision on the future of urgent care provision in south Birmingham? Do the Government accept any responsibility for this unsatisfactory state of affairs, and is there anything the Minister can do to help me and my constituents secure the future of this popular and well used health resource in south Birmingham, which is clearly needed and highly valued?

At the very least, I urge the Minister to write to the chair of the CCG following this Adjournment debate, urging him to communicate properly with my constituents and their elected representatives, to stop repeatedly trying to impose plans that have already been rejected and to bring this whole sorry state of affairs to a satisfactory conclusion.

7.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Ben Gummer): I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) for his clear outlining of the case for his constituents and for Katie Road walk-in centre, and I congratulate him on securing this debate. He touches on an interesting issue for the NHS as a whole, one with which clinicians have been grappling in the past few years: what is the nature of urgent and emergency care in a world where demography is changing rapidly, where demands on the service are changing and where there are incredibly different and disparate populations? He rightly points out that he represents a constituency that has a high student population, that has areas with high levels of deprivation and that has a wide mix of ethnic diversity. Other parts of the country have a significantly ageing profile and do not have the ethnic mix that he is able to enjoy in his part of Birmingham; they have a different socio-economic profile.

What is clear for commissioners and for clinicians is that the answer for urgent and emergency care in one area is different from that in another. I know that might be stating the bleedingly obvious, but it was something that was not observed by the NHS before Professor Sir Bruce Keogh initiated his review of urgent and emergency care in 2013. The result of that was a holistic, sensible and coherent plan for how urgent and emergency care should be delivered across the country. The variation in care, from Northumbria down to Cornwall, is extensive at the moment; there are considerable differences. The hon. Gentleman has highlighted the fact that there are differences even within the city of Birmingham. At the very least, we have made progress in the past few years in having a vision of what urgent and emergency care

should look like. The challenge is to try to implement that across the service, which is why, over the past two years, considerable work has been done by clinicians and commissioners to try to understand how the principles of the Keogh review can inform the reshaping of emergency and urgent care in their patches.

As the hon. Gentleman has identified with the issue of one walk-in centre—he can imagine how such local controversies become all the greater when they involve accident and emergency centres and trauma centres—these are matters that are very close to the hearts of constituents, who rely on those services. Those services are there in their moment of need, and they are, in a very real sense, the single greatest embodiment of the NHS and its values. We must treat urgent and emergency care with the utmost care.

The plans that are being worked up across the country are being done carefully with commissioners in co-ordination with NHS England and, ultimately, with Professor Sir Bruce Keogh. Let me give the hon. Gentleman an idea of why that has been so carefully done and the extent of care that has been taken: it was only in the autumn that the route map for the whole country was published. I hope he will therefore understand why his local CCGs have had to revise the timetables by which they have been looking at urgent and emergency care. As he pointed out, they began their own study of this in Birmingham before Professor Sir Bruce Keogh undertook his review. They have had to revise their thinking in the light of that, and I know that they are taking forward their current consultation on the basis of the route maps that have been designed by NHS England with commissioners around the country.

The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about process. I know why he is frustrated, and I completely understand his frustration. I also understand his irritation at the bureaucratise that can fly in his face as a representative of local people. I cannot specifically talk about the consultation of which he speaks because I do not have a detailed knowledge of it. All I can say is that in the NHS there are good and bad consultations. What we have tried to do over the past five years—and I am trying to do this in my current position—is to ensure that we bring the worst consultations up to the best, that we learn from where they have gone wrong and that they go better. I can of course commit to write to the chairman of his CCG, perhaps highlighting the work that has been done around producing very good consultations, reiterating the points that he has made in his speech, and asking for a clarification around each and every point that he has raised, so that he feels satisfied that he has raised his issues in the Chamber and that he can provide answers to his constituents. Clearly, he feels that, at the moment, there is much confusion and not too much clarity.

I spoke to senior commissioners in the South Birmingham CCG today in advance of this debate to ensure that I was availed of the facts of the situation. They assured me that there is a full intention to continue services at Katie Road. The centre's value is understood and well known, which is precisely why there was a temporary extension of the hours till 10 pm to deal with the winter pressures that are felt across the service. The commissioners also made it clear that there has not been a predetermination about the location of a further urgent care centre. It will be in Selly Oak, and it will be

considerably larger than Katie Road so it will be able to accommodate more services and will be of greater use to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. The commissioners have not come to a decision yet about where it should be located. I know that they will want to engage fully with him and with the community in order to ensure that it goes to the right place.

Steve McCabe: When the Minister was given an assurance that Katie Road would continue, he was presumably told that the contract was due to come to an end. Was there any indication that there was an intention to have yet another roll-over contract, or whether there is a timescale attached to the consultation—yet another one?

Ben Gummer: No, I was not assured in that level of detail—I can ask for that information in my letter to the chairman of the CCG—but I think that the intentions were clear, and they seemed entirely honourable. They understood the purpose of the centre, and they clearly saw the disadvantage of those services discontinuing before a new urgent care centre opens. I think that they understand the hon. Gentleman's perfectly reasonable point that there needs to be some sort of continuity of service so that local people know where to go and can feel confident about local service provision.

On the important point about location and co-location, it will be different for different areas. The hon. Gentleman might have local pressures at University Hospitals Birmingham that do not pertain elsewhere in the country. It might be right—we are having exactly the same discussion in my constituency at the moment—to make use of an A&E brand and say, “Right, you have one simple place to go,” or it might be right to locate services on a different site. That will be different for different places. That is why it was decided in 2009, under the previous Labour Government, to give commissioners a greater role in local decisions on urgent and emergency care, because they are the ones who know their patches best, and what I write in Whitehall might not be right for local conditions in Selly Oak, or anywhere else for that matter.

I cannot therefore give the hon. Gentleman an answer on co-location because it will be different in different parts of the country, but what I can tell him is that my letter to the chairman of the CCG will include a particular reference to the fact that he and his constituents wish to be consulted and that there needs to be a clear rationale behind the location so that people feel that it is done not for the ease of NHS-land, but for the betterment of patient service.

The hon. Gentleman asked about consistency with seven-day services. I would like to reassure him that we are building seven-day services on the basis of the urgent and emergency care networks that were outlined by Professor Sir Bruce Keogh in his 2013 review and the consequent work. Contrary to the suggestion of his hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Perry Barr (Mr Mahmood), the seven-day services programme is entirely clinically led. It draws on the work that the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges undertook in 2013 to develop 10 clinical standards. That is the basis of the work we are taking forward. The contract reform that we have undertaken, both for junior doctors and for consultants, is based in part on the recommendations of those 10 clinical standards, so it is routed entirely in the need to respond to the top clinicians' advice on how we achieve consistency of service across seven days of the week.

I would therefore expect the results of any consultation into urgent and emergency care in Birmingham to match precisely the overall work that we are doing to ensure consistency of standards across seven days of the week, good access for patients and a clear and transparent approach to urgent and emergency care, which in parts of the country, as the hon. Gentleman has identified, can at times be both patchy and confusing.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman asked whether there is a threat to walk-in centres. Under this Government he will see continued investment in urgent and emergency care. We will seek to find greater clarity around urgent and emergency care so that there is a clearer brand and more easily recognisable services for local people, so that we eliminate inconsistencies across the service and so that we fulfil the best clinical advice on how to achieve better services in urgent and emergency care by following the recommendations of Professor Sir Bruce Keogh and the work that has been done by local clinicians since. I do not believe therefore that there is a threat to urgent and emergency care services, and I believe they will improve over the next four years.

That is why I am happy to promise the hon. Gentleman that I will continue to answer questions on Katie Road. Should he have any further concerns, I would be delighted if he came to me so that we could talk about them. I will do what I can to allay those concerns and to make representations on his behalf to his clinical commissioning group so that he can get the answers he seeks.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Divisions

ESTIMATES

That this House agrees with the Report of the Liaison Committee of 10 February:

(1) That a day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16: Department of Business, Innovation and Skills, insofar as it relates to the science budget; and Department of Health, insofar as it relates to end of life care.

(2) That a further day not later than 18 March be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for financial year 2015-16: Foreign & Commonwealth Office, insofar as it relates to the Spending Review 2015; and Home Office, insofar as it relates to reform of the police funding formula.

The House divided: Ayes 301, Noes 60.

Division No. 198]

AYES

Adams, Nigel	Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Afriyie, Adam	Collins, Damian
Aldous, Peter	Colville, Oliver
Allan, Lucy	Costa, Alberto
Allen, Heidi	Crabb, rh Stephen
Amess, Sir David	Davies, Byron
Andrew, Stuart	Davies, Chris
Ansell, Caroline	Davies, David T. C.
Argar, Edward	Davies, Glyn
Atkins, Victoria	Davies, Dr James
Bacon, Mr Richard	Davies, Mims
Baker, Mr Steve	Davis, rh Mr David
Baldwin, Harriett	Dinenage, Caroline
Barclay, Stephen	Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Baron, Mr John	Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
Barwell, Gavin	Donelan, Michelle
Bebb, Guto	Dorries, Nadine
Bellingham, Sir Henry	Double, Steve
Beresford, Sir Paul	Dowden, Oliver
Berry, Jake	Doyle-Price, Jackie
Berry, James	Drax, Richard
Bingham, Andrew	Drummond, Mrs Flick
Blackman, Bob	Duddridge, James
Blackwood, Nicola	Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Blunt, Crispin	Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Boles, Nick	Dunne, Mr Philip
Bone, Mr Peter	Elliott, Tom
Borwick, Victoria	Ellis, Michael
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Ellison, Jane
Bradley, Karen	Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Brady, Mr Graham	Elphicke, Charlie
Brazier, Mr Julian	Eustice, George
Bridgen, Andrew	Evans, Graham
Brine, Steve	Evans, Mr Nigel
Brokenshire, rh James	Evennett, rh Mr David
Bruce, Fiona	Fabricant, Michael
Buckland, Robert	Fallon, rh Michael
Burns, Conor	Fernandes, Suella
Burns, rh Sir Simon	Flynn, Paul
Burrowes, Mr David	Foster, Kevin
Cairns, Alun	Fox, rh Dr Liam
Cameron, rh Mr David	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Carmichael, Neil	Frazer, Lucy
Cartlidge, James	Freeman, George
Caulfield, Maria	Fuller, Richard
Chalk, Alex	Fysh, Marcus
Chishti, Rehman	Gale, Sir Roger
Churchill, Jo	Garnier, rh Sir Edward
Clark, rh Greg	Garnier, Mark
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Gauke, Mr David
Cleverly, James	Ghani, Nusrat

Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl	Loughton, Tim
Glen, John	Lumley, Karen
Gove, rh Michael	Mackinlay, Craig
Graham, Richard	Mackintosh, David
Grant, Mrs Helen	Main, Mrs Anne
Grayling, rh Chris	Mak, Mr Alan
Green, Chris	Malthouse, Kit
Green, rh Damian	Mann, Scott
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	Mathias, Dr Tania
Griffiths, Andrew	May, rh Mrs Theresa
Gummer, Ben	Maynard, Paul
Gyimah, Mr Sam	McCartney, Jason
Halfon, rh Robert	McCartney, Karl
Hall, Luke	McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
Hammond, rh Mr Philip	McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
Hammond, Stephen	McPartland, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matthew	Menzies, Mark
Hands, rh Greg	Merriman, Huw
Harper, rh Mr Mark	Metcalfe, Stephen
Harrington, Richard	Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Harris, Rebecca	Milling, Amanda
Hart, Simon	Mills, Nigel
Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan	Milton, rh Anne
Heald, Sir Oliver	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Heaton-Harris, Chris	Mordaunt, Penny
Heaton-Jones, Peter	Morgan, rh Nicky
Henderson, Gordon	Morris, Anne Marie
Hermon, Lady	Morris, David
Hinds, Damian	Morris, James
Hoare, Simon	Morton, Wendy
Hollingbery, George	Mowat, David
Hollinrake, Kevin	Mundell, rh David
Hollobone, Mr Philip	Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Holloway, Mr Adam	Newton, Sarah
Hopkins, Kris	Nuttall, Mr David
Howarth, Sir Gerald	Offord, Dr Matthew
Howell, John	Opperman, Guy
Howlett, Ben	Osborne, rh Mr George
Huddleston, Nigel	Parish, Neil
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Patel, rh Priti
Jackson, Mr Stewart	Paterson, rh Mr Owen
James, Margot	Pawsey, Mark
Javid, rh Sajid	Penning, rh Mike
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil	Penrose, John
Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Percy, Andrew
Jenkyns, Andrea	Perry, Claire
Jenrick, Robert	Phillips, Stephen
Johnson, Boris	Philp, Chris
Johnson, Gareth	Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Johnson, Joseph	Pincher, Christopher
Jones, Mr Marcus	Prentis, Victoria
Kawczynski, Daniel	Prisk, Mr Mark
Kennedy, Seema	Pritchard, Mark
Kinahan, Danny	Pursglove, Tom
Kirby, Simon	Quin, Jeremy
Knight, rh Sir Greg	Quince, Will
Knight, Julian	Raab, Mr Dominic
Kwarteng, Kwasi	Redwood, rh John
Latham, Pauline	Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Leadsom, Andrea	Robertson, Mr Laurence
Lee, Dr Phillip	Robinson, Gavin
Lefroy, Jeremy	Robinson, Mary
Leigh, Sir Edward	Rosindell, Andrew
Leslie, Charlotte	Rudd, rh Amber
Letwin, rh Mr Oliver	Rutley, David
Lewis, Brandon	Scully, Paul
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Shapps, rh Grant
Lidington, rh Mr David	Sharma, Alok
Lilley, rh Mr Peter	Shelbrooke, Alec
Lopresti, Jack	Simpson, David
Lord, Jonathan	Simpson, rh Mr Keith

Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie

Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, rh Mrs
 Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame
 Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig
 Whittingdale, rh Mr
 John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wilson, Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Arkless, Richard
 Bardell, Hannah
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, Iain
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Boswell, Philip
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Cherry, Joanna
 Clegg, rh Mr Nick
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Crawley, Angela
 Day, Martyn
 Docherty-Hughes,
 Martin
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Grady, Patrick
 Gray, Neil
 Hendry, Drew
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Law, Chris

Lucas, Caroline
 Mc Nally, John
 McCaig, Callum
 McDonald, Stuart
 C.
 McGarry, Natalie
 McLaughlin, Anne
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mullin, Roger
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pugh, John
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Saville Roberts, Liz
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Stephens, Chris
 Thewliss, Alison
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Williams, Hywel
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Wilson, Corri
 Wishart, Pete
 Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

ROAD TRAFFIC

That the draft Passenger and Goods Vehicles (Tachographs) (Amendment) Regulations 2016, which were laid before this House on 12 January, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 299, Noes 226.

Division No. 197]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Aldous, Peter
 Allan, Lucy
 Allen, Heidi
 Amess, Sir David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Ansell, Caroline
 Argar, Edward
 Atkins, Victoria
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Baker, Mr Steve
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Baron, Mr John
 Barwell, Gavin
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Sir Henry
 Beresford, Sir Paul
 Berry, Jake
 Berry, James
 Bingham, Andrew
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Borwick, Victoria
 Bottomley, Sir Peter
 Bradley, Karen
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brake, rh Tom
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Steve
 Brokenshire, rh James
 Bruce, Fiona
 Buckland, Robert
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, rh Sir Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Cairns, Alun
 Cameron, rh Mr David
 Carmichael, Neil
 Cartledge, James
 Caulfield, Maria
 Chalk, Alex
 Chishti, Rehman
 Churchill, Jo
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clegg, rh Mr Nick
 Cleverly, James
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Costa, Alberto
 Crabb, rh Stephen
 Davies, Byron
 Davies, Chris
 Davies, David T. C.
 Davies, Glyn
 Davies, Dr James
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh Mr David
 Dinenege, Caroline
 Djanogly, Mr Jonathan

Donelan, Michelle
 Dorries, Nadine
 Double, Steve
 Dowden, Oliver
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Drummond, Mrs Flick
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan, rh Sir Alan
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Elliott, Tom
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Mr Nigel
 Evannett, rh Mr David
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, rh Michael
 Fernandes, Suella
 Foster, Kevin
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Frazer, Lucy
 Freeman, George
 Fuller, Richard
 Fysh, Marcus
 Gale, Sir Roger
 Garnier, rh Sir Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 Ghani, Nusrat
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Graham, Richard
 Grant, Mrs Helen
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Chris
 Green, rh Damian
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Halfon, rh Robert
 Hall, Luke
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, rh Matthew
 Hands, rh Greg
 Harper, rh Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon
 Haselhurst, rh Sir Alan
 Heald, Sir Oliver
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Heaton-Jones, Peter
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hermon, Lady
 Hinds, Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollinrake, Kevin

Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Howarth, Sir Gerald
 Howell, John
 Howlett, Ben
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 James, Margot
 Javid, rh Sajid
 Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Jenkyns, Andrea
 Jenrick, Robert
 Johnson, Boris
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Mr Marcus
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Kennedy, Seema
 Kinahan, Danny
 Kirby, Simon
 Knight, rh Sir Greg
 Knight, Julian
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Latham, Pauline
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Sir Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
 Lidington, rh Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Lumley, Karen
 Mackinlay, Craig
 Mackintosh, David
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Mak, Mr Alan
 Malthouse, Kit
 Mann, Scott
 Mathias, Dr Tania
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 Menzies, Mark
 Merriman, Huw
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, rh Mrs Maria
 Milling, Amanda
 Mills, Nigel
 Milton, rh Anne
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, rh Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Morton, Wendy
 Mowat, David
 Mulholland, Greg
 Mundell, rh David
 Murray, Mrs Sheryll

Newton, Sarah
 Nuttall, Mr David
 Offord, Dr Matthew
 Opperman, Guy
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Pawsey, Mark
 Penning, rh Mike
 Penrose, John
 Percy, Andrew
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Philp, Chris
 Pickles, rh Sir Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Prentis, Victoria
 Prisk, Mr Mark
 Pritchard, Mark
 Pugh, John
 Pursglove, Tom
 Quin, Jeremy
 Quince, Will
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Redwood, rh John
 Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Robinson, Mary
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, rh Amber
 Rutley, David
 Scully, Paul
 Shapps, rh Grant
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simpson, rh Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Chloe
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
 Solloway, Amanda
 Soubry, rh Anna
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Spencer, Mark
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Iain
 Stewart, Rory
 Streeter, Mr Gary
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Graham
 Sturdy, Julian
 Sunak, Rishi
 Swayne, rh Mr Desmond
 Swire, rh Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Thomas, Derek
 Throup, Maggie
 Timpson, Edward
 Tolhurst, Kelly
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tomlinson, Michael
 Tracey, Craig
 Tredinnick, David
 Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
 Truss, rh Elizabeth
 Tugendhat, Tom
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Tyrrie, rh Mr Andrew
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin

Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Warburton, David
 Warman, Matt
 Watkinson, Dame Angela
 Wharton, James
 Whately, Helen
 White, Chris
 Whittaker, Craig

Whittingdale, rh Mr John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Williams, Mr Mark
 Williamson, rh Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Wood, Mike
 Wragg, William
 Wright, rh Jeremy
 Zahawi, Nadhim

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
 Alexander, Heidi
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Anderson, Mr David
 Arkless, Richard
 Austin, Ian
 Bailey, Mr Adrian
 Bardell, Hannah
 Barron, rh Kevin
 Beckett, rh Margaret
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berger, Luciana
 Black, Mhairi
 Blackford, Ian
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
 Blomfield, Paul
 Boswell, Philip
 Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
 Brennan, Kevin
 Brock, Deidre
 Brown, Alan
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bryant, Chris
 Burden, Richard
 Burgon, Richard
 Burnham, rh Andy
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Cameron, Dr Lisa
 Campbell, rh Mr Alan
 Campbell, Mr Ronnie
 Chapman, Jenny
 Cherry, Joanna
 Coffey, Ann
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cowan, Ronnie
 Cox, Jo
 Coyle, Neil
 Crausby, Mr David
 Crawley, Angela
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Stella
 Cruddas, Jon
 Cummins, Judith
 Cunningham, Alex
 Cunningham, Mr Jim
 Dakin, Nic
 David, Wayne
 Day, Martyn
 De Piero, Gloria
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
 Dodds, rh Mr Nigel
 Donaldson, Stuart Blair
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Jim
 Dowd, Peter
 Dromey, Jack
 Durkan, Mark
 Eagle, Ms Angela
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Efford, Clive
 Elliott, Julie
 Ellman, Mrs Louise
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fellows, Marion
 Ferrier, Margaret
 Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fletcher, Colleen
 Flint, rh Caroline
 Flynn, Paul
 Fovargue, Yvonne
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Patricia
 Goodman, Helen
 Grady, Patrick
 Gray, Neil
 Green, Kate
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Greenwood, Margaret
 Griffith, Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Harman, rh Ms Harriet
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayman, Sue
 Healey, rh John
 Hendry, Drew
 Hillier, Meg
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irranca-Davies, Huw
 Jarvis, Dan
 Johnson, Diana
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Helen
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Jones, Susan Elan
 Kane, Mike
 Kaufman, rh Sir Gerald
 Keeley, Barbara
 Kendall, Liz
 Kerevan, George
 Kerr, Calum
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kyle, Peter

Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leslie, Chris
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewis, Mr Ivan
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Lucas, Caroline
 Lucas, Ian C.
 Lynch, Holly
 Mactaggart, rh Fiona
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, Mr Khalid
 Mahmood, Shabana
 Malhotra, Seema
 Mann, John
 Marris, Rob
 Marsden, Mr Gordon
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mc Nally, John
 McCabe, Steve
 McCaig, Callum
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Siobhain
 McDonald, Stuart C.
 McDonnell, Dr Alasdair
 McFadden, rh Mr Pat
 McGarry, Natalie
 McGinn, Conor
 McInnes, Liz

McKinnell, Catherine
 McLaughlin, Anne
 McMahon, Jim
 Meale, Sir Alan
 Mearns, Ian
 Miliband, rh Edward
 Monaghan, Carol
 Monaghan, Dr Paul
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame M.
 Mullin, Roger
 Murray, Ian
 Newlands, Gavin
 Nicolson, John
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Osamor, Kate
 Oswald, Kirsten
 Owen, Albert
 Paterson, Steven
 Pearce, Teresa
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Toby
 Pound, Stephen
 Powell, Lucy
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Rayner, Angela
 Reed, Mr Steve
 Rees, Christina
 Reynolds, Jonathan

Ritchie, Ms Margaret
 Robertson, rh Angus
 Robinson, Gavin
 Rotheram, Steve
 Ryan, rh Joan
 Saville Roberts,
 Liz
 Shah, Naz
 Sharma, Mr Virendra
 Sheerman, Mr Barry
 Sheppard, Tommy
 Sherriff, Paula
 Simpson, David
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, rh Mr Andrew
 Smith, Angela
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Owen
 Stephens, Chris
 Stevens, Jo
 Streeting, Wes
 Stringer, Graham
 Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
 Tami, Mark

Thewliss, Alison
 Thomas-Symonds,
 Nick
 Thompson, Owen
 Thomson, Michelle
 Thornberry, Emily
 Timms, rh Stephen
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Twigg, Derek
 Twigg, Stephen
 Umunna, Mr Chuka
 Vaz, Valerie
 Watson, Mr Tom
 West, Catherine
 Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
 Williams, Hywel
 Wilson, Corri
 Wilson, Sammy
 Winnick, Mr David
 Winterton, rh Dame
 Rosie
 Wishart, Pete
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 24 February 2016

[MR DAVID CRAUSBY *in the Chair*]

Biomass Energy

9.30 am

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered biomass as a source of renewable energy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I am delighted to have secured this important and timely debate. I am also thrilled that, at this early hour, lots of colleagues from across parties and borders have come to participate.

It has been less than a year since the Conservative party secured a clear mandate from the British people to govern. One of the core commitments that we made in the run-up to the general election, which we repeat regularly, is that it is important to keep energy bills as low as possible for consumers and to promote competition in the energy market. Indeed, those same themes featured in the speech given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change to the Institute of Civil Engineers in November. It was referred to as the “reset” speech because it set out the Government’s direction of travel on energy policy over the coming years.

The two themes of affordability and competition are at the core of today’s debate. Like many of us, I am fully committed to ensuring that my constituents have an energy grid that is secure, reliable and affordable. The question, of course, is how we go about achieving that. Last week NERA, an independent economic research consultancy, and Imperial College London published a significant and insightful piece of research that considered the very issues we are discussing. The research was commissioned by Drax, which, as many Members will realise by now—if they do not, they have not been listening very hard for the past six years—operates a power station in my constituency. I grew up looking at the cooling towers. Drax power station generates between 8% and 14% of the UK’s electricity and, perhaps surprisingly, it is the UK’s single largest source of renewable energy thanks to its gradual conversion away from coal to sustainable biomass generation.

The report revealed that around £2 billion-worth of savings could be passed on to the consumer if the Government allowed biomass to compete in future renewable auctions. That £2 billion would equate to an average saving on each and every household bill throughout the land of between £73 and £84. That saving, which I believe any reasonable person—energy expert or otherwise—would argue is significant, stems from the fact that on a whole-system cost basis, biomass is without doubt the cheapest form of renewable energy available to us today. The concept of whole-system cost is important. It has attracted a lot of interest and discussion in recent months and, on that basis, merits further consideration today.

Much of current Government policy is skewed towards assessing the affordability of different technologies based on what is known as the levelised cost, a narrow metric

that only captures the cost of an energy project from construction through its lifetime. However, as the NERA report highlights, a number of globalised costs sit outside the umbrella of levelised costs and are not currently captured by Government policy. I think I can fairly describe them as hidden costs. They are associated with more and more intermittent renewable technologies, such as wind and solar, coming on to the grid, and are ultimately passed on to our energy bills. For example, when the wind stops blowing and the sun stops shining, which it tends to do on these islands, the energy generated by wind and solar drops significantly. That forces the hand of National Grid, the system operator, to pay a back-up generator—usually gas—to switch on and generate power to fill the void. Clearly that action comes with an associated cost.

Because intermittent renewables are unreliable, they require much larger amounts of back-up than traditional coal or nuclear power stations, which have far greater control over how much electricity they generate and when. Again, that comes with an associated cost. The failure to capture those costs when evaluating the price tags of different renewables is doubly disadvantageous. On the one hand, intermittent technologies benefit by looking cheaper on paper than they really are; on the other hand, technologies that are more flexible and reliable and have higher availability are handicapped by not being able to demonstrate the financial benefits and value they bring to the system. That is unquestionably the very definition of a perverse outcome.

If the associated costs, which are great, were added up properly and allocated proportionately to the technologies that generate them, the NERA/Imperial report shows that one renewable technology emerges as considerably more affordable than any other: biomass generation. I should say that I shall focus my comments largely on power generation. I understand that colleagues may wish to discuss the heat side of biomass, which is just as important, but if they will forgive me, I will confine my remarks to the generation side.

The report shows that if a renewable auction was held later this year and the Government allowed biomass to compete with other renewables on a level playing field, it could deliver a strike price that was between £8 and £13 per megawatt-hour cheaper than onshore wind, and £43 per megawatt-hour cheaper than offshore wind. Why is biomass so much cheaper than other technologies when the hidden system costs are taken into consideration? One of the principal reasons is that biomass energy is a flexible source of generation, which can ramp up or down the levels of electricity it produces at short notice in response to the demands of the energy grid. Having that flexibility in place, on the scale that a full power station provides, is hugely important. In fact, the more flexibility we have in the system in the coming decades, the lower will be the costs we incur as more and more intermittent renewables come on to the grid.

The Committee on Climate Change, an independent and well-respected voice on energy issues, stated in its recent report on the future of the UK power sector:

“Flexibility can help to meet the challenges of integrating low-carbon technologies. Flexibility can provide low-carbon sources of system reserve and response to minimise the need for partloaded unabated gas plant, with associated emissions savings. Flexible systems also allow renewables and nuclear output to better match demand by shifting demand...supply...or both”.

[Nigel Adams]

In the UK, only one other technology can provide the same level and scale of flexibility as biomass, and that is gas generation. However, as its usage has demonstrated over recent years, biomass has a far lower carbon footprint than gas on a life-cycle basis. Furthermore, as many colleagues will be aware, because of low commodity prices the market conditions are currently sufficiently challenging that the economics of building new gas-fired power stations from scratch does not stack up. There has been a dearth of new plants coming forward.

That brings me to the second reason why biomass is so much cheaper on a whole-system costs basis. Unlike many of the options touted as the solutions to our energy future—such as new nuclear, new gas, new wind and new solar—biomass generation re-uses the infrastructure we already have in place by converting and upgrading power stations to use compressed wood pellets instead of coal. Some colleagues present are old enough to remember the Central Electricity Generating Board building coal power stations, which are scattered all around the country—or rather, at least some of them are left. I vividly remember Drax B being built; in fact, members of my family were involved in its construction. Using such assets, which the taxpayer has already paid for, negates the need to build expensive new transmission lines or spend money to make existing transmission infrastructure more resilient.

All that is particularly pertinent given the fact that we are going through a volatile period when coal power stations are closing across the country. Eggborough in my constituency announced its intention to consult on closure, and Ferrybridge, just across the border, is going. In recent months, Fiddlers Ferry and Rugeley announced their intention to close or, at best, to operate on a very limited basis. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) is here, as she represents Rugeley and is very concerned about the future of that plant and its workforce.

Such closures are terrible news for the communities in those areas and for the UK's energy security. Since the beginning of this year, 2.5 GW of coal closures have been announced on top of the 4.9 GW announced last year, so a significant amount of power is coming off the grid. Those closures are creating genuine concerns about security of supply, and in recent months have forced National Grid to rely on expensive emergency measures to manage the grid and keep our lights on—the most recent event was in November. I am sure colleagues will be in equal measure surprised and concerned to hear that Drax is the last power station in the UK, and the only station between Yorkshire and Iceland, that can provide a black-start service, which is effectively a kick-start to the grid in the event of a blackout.

If the Government are committed to taking coal off the grid by 2025, as they have indicated, the quickest and most affordable way to do so is to enable more coal power stations to convert to biomass. That is not only the quickest and cheapest way to decarbonise our power sector, but a means of keeping existing stations on the grid, thereby ensuring that the communities that have enjoyed the social and economic benefits from those power stations for many years can continue to do so. There is a clear and compelling case, based on the analysis by NERA and Imperial College, for the Government to

look hard at whole-system costs when considering which technologies to back or to allow to bid. I understand that the Department commissioned Frontier Economics to do work on that topic, which is very welcome, and that the Minister committed to publishing the results of that report in the first half of this year. That is unquestionably a step in the right direction and I thank her for it, but will she assure hon. Members that her Department will utilise the body of research on whole-system costs to inform Government policy?

The Secretary of State said clearly in her reset speech in November that,

“we also want intermittent generators to be responsible for the pressures they add to the system when the wind does not blow or the sun does not shine. Only when different technologies face their full costs can we achieve a more competitive market”—

hear, hear. Does the Minister agree that this issue can be sensibly addressed through the policy options outlined in the NERA-Imperial report? It states that we should introduce either an administrative solution that handicaps renewable technologies in future contracts for difference auctions based on their systems cost, or a market-based solution that allows renewables to bid into the capacity market and CfD auctions, thereby exposing them to market prices that better reflect their true system costs.

Will the Minister allow biomass to compete in upcoming CfD auctions, either on a level playing field—which seems perfectly reasonable—or on the terms I just described? Alternatively, for the sake of simplicity and expediency, will she work with the existing CfD pot structure that she inherited from the coalition? The CfD auctions are designed around three pots: one for established technologies such as onshore wind, one for less-established, higher-risk technologies such as offshore wind, and one for biomass. Why do the Government not simply transfer a portion of the funding allocated to pot 2 to the dedicated biomass pot in this autumn's CfD auction? The Department could do that very simply without any significant regulatory or legislative changes. It would complement, rather than undermine, the Government's strategy for supporting offshore wind by producing the system benefits that I described, which would benefit all generators in the system. That solution would also mean that fewer power stations have to join what one industry analyst recently referred to as

“the Strategic Balancing Reserve dole queue”—

an absurd situation in which renewables are rewarded for forcing coal off the grid, while National Grid has to pay through the nose for an SBR contract to ensure that coal power stations remain available as a contingency option.

As I said earlier, up to £2.2 billion-worth of savings could be passed on to the consumer by allowing just 500 MW of further biomass conversion—effectively one unit. The greater flexibility that biomass provides to the system will make it cheaper to integrate other intermittent renewables such as wind and solar into the grid, if that is the Government's strategy.

David Mowat (Warrington South) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech about biomass and the fact that it is the only dispatchable renewable. Will the Minister address the fact that the Government removed all subsidies from biomass stations unless they are 100% biomass? Fiddlers Ferry on my patch was keen to combine coal and biomass in the same unit, but there

is no subsidy for that. Is there not a risk that the Government are making the perfect the enemy of the good?

Nigel Adams: My hon. Friend makes a very sensible point. Many of the stations that generate from biomass—certainly Drax, two of whose units now generate solely from biomass—have used coal firing as a way of learning about the technology. That is a perfectly sensible thing for a power station to want to do. I, for one, would like to see support in that area, so that is a particularly good point.

Converting stations to biomass is the quickest, most affordable way to get coal off the system and achieve what the Department says it wants to achieve. In less than three years, Drax has become the largest decarbonisation project in Europe; previously, it was called the dirtiest power station in Europe. It generates 12% of our renewable energy. I am delighted that the company has managed to protect the 850 or so jobs that are currently based in the power station, although colleagues may have read a *Telegraph* article this week that appears to imply that half of the station is under threat. I hope the Minister and her Department noticed that, because such threats are not normally hollow.

The company re-skilled its employees in the use of that exciting new renewable fuel in the place of coal, and invested hundreds of millions of pounds in a supply chain that includes new import facilities, four of our ports and 200 new rail wagons, which I had the pleasure of launching at the National Railway Museum. Those rail wagons, which hon. Members will have seen adorning and adding to the beauty of the north and east Yorkshire countryside, were purchased from Britain's last independent rail wagon manufacturer, WH Davis. It really does add value to the UK economy. The Chancellor often refers to the northern powerhouse. The UK biomass industry is unquestionably the power behind the northern powerhouse, and will continue to power it for many years to come.

These issues are at the core of a number of concepts that I hold dear as a Conservative: competition, security and fairness. The clock is ticking, so the Government must take meaningful and decisive action. They have committed to holding three CfD auctions between now and 2020, the first of which is due at the end of the year. For the reasons I outlined, if the Government allow biomass to compete in those auctions on a level playing field with other technologies, they could save taxpayers billions of pounds and make the UK energy grid more secure in the process. To continue with the status quo would be inconsistent with my party's oft-repeated commitment to securing the country's renewable future at the least cost to consumers. I urge the Minister and the Government to think carefully about this issue.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Four Members have indicated that they wish to speak. I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at around 10.30 am, so if Members can keep their contributions to around 10 minutes, I would much appreciate it.

9.50 am

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I thank the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) for bringing forward this debate and for his continued

work on biomass and renewable energy. I hope we can put cross-party pressure on the Government to do the right thing by the electorate of the United Kingdom.

It will be apparent to everyone present today that unabated climate change presents a major challenge to legislators in the UK and across the world. We must address the environmental health of our planet and the decarbonisation of our energy supply as priorities. Tackling the problem will require an unprecedented level of international co-operation. In some instances, our best course of action is to provide a positive example for other nations to follow, and I am proud of what Scotland has been able to achieve so far.

The Scottish Government are on track to meet their 42% emissions reduction target by 2020, and around half of Scotland's current energy consumption is supplied by renewable wind power. We have also outperformed the UK on total emission reductions from a 1990 baseline in every year since 2010, and Sweden is the only European Union state to have outperformed Scotland. Professor Jim Skea, a member of the UK Government's Committee on Climate Change said:

"If you divide where Scotland is now, versus where it was in 1990, it is actually among the world leaders. That is unambiguous."

The Scottish Government aim to have 100% of our electricity consumption generated from renewable sources by 2020. If we are to meet that ambitious target, biomass must play a key role in that transition. I welcome the Scottish Government's strong commitment to this energy source.

Thanks in part to that support, over 2,000 jobs in Scotland are now based in the biomass sector, and Scottish Renewables believes that the industry has "massive potential for growth in the future."

West Coast Woodfuels, a company located in my constituency of Inverclyde, is one such organisation, and it shows the potential for growth in the biomass sector. Founded by farmer Alastair McIntyre, it produces woodchip that is dried in specialised kilns and stored on site. The raw timber for the operation comes primarily from local and sustainable sources. The rise in demand means that the company is now selling its product to a range of public and private sector customers. The example of West Coast Woodfuels shows that biomass is most efficient as a source of energy when the producer and customer are located close to each other. The environmental benefits of biomass are reduced if stocks of wood are hauled great distances across the country to be turned into woodchip, only to be transported on as a source of fuel. A strong local market for biomass fuel, close to producers, minimises carbon emissions and is a healthier option for our environment.

The economic benefits to our local economies should also be self-evident. Biomass plants create jobs in the construction, operation and maintenance of facilities. Employment opportunities are also created in the supply chain, not only through transportation but in growing and harvesting raw materials. The benefits extend beyond the biomass industry and into the wider renewables sector. A report issued by NERA and Imperial College London concluded that biomass

"is a reliable and flexible power source that provides firm capacity. Including biomass as part of the generation mix is likely to lower the costs associated with adding more wind and solar power to the system. This means that it can enable the integration of other intermittent renewable technologies (by providing back up generation),

[Ronnie Cowan]

and help to facilitate the phasing out of old coal-fired power stations, whose closure is putting pressure on security of supply.” If we are to continue enjoying the benefits of the biomass sector, adequate support must be forthcoming from the UK Government.

I share the concerns of those in the renewables sector that the decline in UK Government support not only prevents the industry from meeting its full potential, but damages investor confidence. Had the UK Government maintained their previous levels of support, the viability of many projects would not be in question. The cuts undermine Scotland’s renewables ambition, they are bad for our environment, and they are hurting businesses and consumers in my constituency.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there was widespread disappointment at the Government’s bringing forward of the closure date for the renewable heat incentive? It has caused problems for the poultry sector and major difficulties for many farmers, who will not be able to avail themselves of the scheme.

Ronnie Cowan: The hon. Gentleman has either read my mind or read my speech over my shoulder, because I was about to move on to the renewable heat incentive. I was particularly disappointed by the Chancellor’s announcement that spending on the RHI would be some £690 million less than previously forecast by the Office for Budget Responsibility. The UK Government’s own reports have shown that the RHI has been an important tool in pushing forward the decarbonisation agenda. Data issued by the Department of Energy and Climate Change found that two thirds of users would not have installed renewable heat technology without the RHI. It is therefore difficult to understand why the UK Government feel it necessary to make these changes, which are being imposed against expert industry advice and to the detriment of jobs, investment and the environment.

I regret that we can only scratch the surface of this broad subject in the time available today. I would like to discuss a range of further issues given the opportunity, including how best to incentivise biomass use, address air quality concerns and ensure biomass producers are fairly treated through the tendering and procurement process. Most importantly, I want to see the UK Government abandon their policy of managed decline in support for renewables.

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman has a list of things that the UK Government need to do to enable Scotland to meet its ambitious renewables targets, but, as of this morning, we have a fiscal framework. Is he aware that the Scottish Government intend to put money into such schemes? Presumably they can now do that.

Ronnie Cowan: I have not read the entirety of the fiscal framework at this point in time, but there are some issues that are reserved and will have to be handled through Westminster.

David Mowat: Maybe I am misinformed, but my understanding is that this is a reserved matter, but the Scottish Government will be free to invest in their own choices. If this was one of those choices, they could do so.

Ronnie Cowan: The Scottish Government will now have more powers to raise taxes and spend tax revenue as they feel fit for the benefit of the people of Scotland.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): My understanding of the devolution framework is that when something is within the competence of the UK Government, the Scottish Government are unable to invest in it. There are specific exemptions in the Scotland Bill for topping up benefits, but there is nothing about energy. We are talking in a purely hypothetical way about something that is impossible.

David Mowat *rose*—

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. It is not really in order to intervene on an intervention, unless Mr Cowan allows you to do so. Are you allowing Mr Mowat to intervene, Mr Cowan?

Ronnie Cowan: I was simply slow in getting back to my feet; I have absolutely no issue with the hon. Gentleman intervening. It is a topic of conversation, but when Scotland is independent, we will then take care of our own energy resources and will use them in a way that is most efficient for the people of Scotland. Until that time, there are certain issues that will remain reserved to Westminster and we will have limited power over what we can do about it.

Most importantly, I want the UK Government to abandon their policy of managed decline in support for renewables. Scotland is ambitious and we take the responsibility to tackle climate change seriously. It is time for the UK Government to do likewise.

10 am

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): It is an incredible pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing the debate and on providing such a compelling argument for the benefits of biomass.

I will talk a little about coal-fired power stations and then about biomass conversion. Rugeley, in my constituency—and where I live—has been generating power since the 1960s; Rugeley A opened in 1961, taking coal from the local Lea Hall colliery, and Rugeley B was commissioned in 1970. Iconic power station cooling towers have therefore dominated our skyline for decades. In fact, I grew up looking at cooling towers, as my hon. Friend did, but along the Trent, and today I look out at them in Rugeley.

Rugeley A was decommissioned and demolished in the 1990s, leaving Rugeley B as the last remaining power station in the town; it continues to be coal-fired. Earlier this month, however, its owners, Engie, announced the probable closure of Rugeley B in the summer. That is incredibly disappointing news and a major blow to Rugeley and our community and, in particular, to the 150 employees, the contractors and the wider supply chain. Our immediate focus must be on support for all those affected at such a difficult time.

That news came only a week after the announcement of the scaling back of the coal-fired power station at Fiddlers Ferry in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat).

Furthermore, over the past few months, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty mentioned, about five of the small number of coal-fired power stations in the country have announced that they will close or partially close. The Government have already declared their intention to phase out coal-fired generation by 2025, but the closure or part-closure of those power stations demonstrates the real challenges that we face in the short term, let alone the medium term. The potential closure of Rugeley is a function of deteriorating market conditions in recent years, with a combination of a fall in power prices and an increase in carbon costs.

The Rugeley closure will see 150 employees and at least the same number, if not more, of contractors losing their jobs. There will also be a negative impact on the broader supply chain, not only for the Rugeley area in Staffordshire and the midlands, but going wider to include ports and the freight industry. The closure not only puts jobs at risk, but puts further pressure on energy security—simply keeping the lights on—because Rugeley B alone provides electricity for about 0.5 million homes. Consider that in the context of the other possible power station closures in the country.

I appreciate the desire to move towards renewable energy such as wind and solar, but it does not necessarily offer the same reliability or flexibility as other forms of energy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty said earlier, we are reliant on the wind blowing or the sun shining for those forms of renewable energy, but biomass, as a low-carbon renewable energy source, provides both reliability and flexibility. To date, however, the benefits of biomass unfortunately do not appear to have been fully recognised although, as my hon. Friend outlined, biomass has huge benefits. Biomass, though, is not necessarily playing on a level playing field versus wind and solar, because the whole-system costs are not being considered.

The owners of Rugeley B investigated the conversion from coal to biomass fuel in 2012, but made the decision in 2013 not to pursue the option. Given the closure of coal-fired power stations throughout the country, I believe that there is a real need for the Government to revisit their biomass policy, and quickly. Such power stations provide the infrastructure for potential conversion to biomass, and their workforces have the specialist skills required to operate a power station.

Business rates are incurred up until the point at which a power station is demolished, so there is no incentive to retain the infrastructure—in fact, quite the opposite, because the incentive to demolish quickly is the key issue. Once the power stations are closed and demolished, that's it, because the infrastructure that could otherwise be used to support alternatives such as biomass is gone. I therefore have a question for the Minister. At a time when market conditions seem to be accelerating the closure of coal-fired power stations, what are the Government doing to fully investigate biomass as a realistic alternative to other renewables, and to create policies to encourage and incentivise the conversion of those last remaining coal-fired power stations before they are gone forever?

10.6 am

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I congratulate the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsley (Nigel Adams)—

Nigel Adams: Ainsty.

Albert Owen: Ainsley?

Nigel Adams: Ainsty.

Albert Owen: Will the hon. Gentleman say that again?

Nigel Adams: Ainsty.

Albert Owen: He has it three times on the record—that's important.

Along with the hon. Gentleman, I share a constituency interest in biomass and a general interest in energy. It is important to have the debate at this time, because we need to get a proper energy mix back on the agenda. We need that balanced agenda and I disagreed with the hon. Gentleman's opening remarks when he talked about intermittent wind, because we need wind as part of the mix.

We have had this debate before, but we need to have periods when we have to switch some of our generation off. Although I hope for a long, hot summer with no wind, which many of us want for the tourism industry and everything else, one of the best ways to do things is to have wind as an intermittent back-up system, because it is cheaper to switch wind generation off than it is to switch off gas, biomass or nuclear-powered power stations. We need to start talking, and to build a consensus on a balance of energy sources for the country. We had such a consensus in the 1990s and right through until recently.

I worry about that, and the Minister knows my views, because I genuinely want to achieve the Government's goal of an affordable, secure and low-carbon energy economy. To achieve it we need the broadest suite of energy sources. Biomass has huge potential to be part of that mix, and that is what I will talk about. There has been uncertainty with solar and uncertainty created on onshore wind, which damages not only energy production but the supply chain in the country. We need a forthright debate on the long term, yes, but we still need long-term policies for the renewables sector.

I am by choice pro-nuclear, pro-renewables and pro energy efficiency. I see no contradiction in that, because we need the three of them. One of the reasons why Scotland is reaching its low-carbon renewables target was not mentioned by our colleague from Scotland who spoke before me—I did not catch his constituency either, so he might want to intervene to name it—and that is that nuclear back-up and the extension of nuclear are helping to get emissions down.

Nuclear is an important part of the mix. In my constituency we have had 44 years of safe nuclear generation, although it has now come to an end, with high-quality jobs and a helpful contribution to the country's energy security. With Hitachi and the Horizon project, we are proceeding with a new nuclear build in my constituency. I hope that that, too, will provide decades of quality jobs and of help to the country's energy security.

I am disappointed that carbon capture and storage is off the agenda, because clean coal and gas could also play their part in the transition to a fully low-carbon economy. However, CCS is not on the agenda. What is on the agenda is the opportunity to have co-firing biomass plants for the future and I very much support that.

[Albert Owen]

My constituency has been dubbed the energy island, a concept that I support, because we had early prototypes of onshore wind—they were much smaller than is proposed now. We have also had safe nuclear generation for 40 years, and we have projects in the pipeline for tidal power as well as the biomass project that I will talk about in my remaining time. It is a £1 billion project for not just a biomass station but an eco-park. Under the proposal we will have 299 MW produced from biomass and linked to that will be aquaculture, with a large fish farm and the opportunity to produce fertiliser at the farm for use in food production. It is a very forward-thinking project, so when we talk about building power stations in our areas, we should build eco-parks and link them into district heating systems in the future, so that there is no waste. Such areas really would be low carbon, with heat retained in them, which limits the effects of climate change.

The food part is important. There will also be research and development at the eco-park and it is important that we do the R and D in this country and do not just import that from other countries. We need to work at the cutting edge of new technologies and biomass and eco-parks are one way forward.

The 299 MW plant—a very large plant—will be five 60 MW units in a module form that will be gasified on site. I understand that biomass sourcing is controversial. Orthios is working with DECC, which has already given consent for the project, which is under way—I was there at the launch of the site. In his opening remarks the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty talked about using existing infrastructure. The project is on the site of a former large Anglesey aluminium smelter, so it is an industrial site that is linked to a jetty that can bring in the biomass from abroad, but I am told that it will use locally sourced biomass from the UK as well. The biomass to be brought in will be managed waste from forests and other areas, which is less controversial than just cutting down trees and burning them. Biomass must be managed. I understand that the opponents of biomass feel that it causes deforestation, but there are ways of using waste materials that can be converted into biomass.

I realise that there is a time constraint, and that another hon. Member wants to speak, but there is the jobs aspect, which was touched on. New green energy jobs can be created if we go forward with biomass technology, many of which can be for retrained people as well as for apprentices. As I said, they can be in research and development. In the construction phase of the Orthios project in my constituency there will be 1,200 construction jobs and then 550 permanent jobs.

I was at the launch a couple of weeks ago with apprentices who have already been taken on, and with young people from the schools. We must say to the young people that climate change is real—they get it even if many other generations do not—and there is a future for them in producing green, low-carbon energy. The United Kingdom can be world leaders, and Wales and my island of Anglesey in particular can pioneer many of the technologies.

I commend what the Scottish Government have done in wind because that project was not popular, but I would add that the renewables obligation allows the

Scottish Government to top up renewables funding. They have done that as a way to entice companies in the first place.

Callum McCaig: That was allowed under the previous regime, but the power over the renewables obligation was brought back to Westminster and the scheme has been closed prematurely despite an explicit promise. While that was a sensible way of dealing with things that allowed for different development, unfortunately that opportunity is now closed.

Albert Owen: I was involved in some of the Government talks when the renewables obligation was set up and it did have that flexibility, so it is a shame if that has been taken away, because the devolved Administrations could pioneer their own sources and technologies. They and the UK could work together to make the UK a world leader in technology. I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, but the flexibility was there. I am glad for the correction.

We need to have low-carbon energy going forward and biomass is a huge part of that. I say to the Minister that the auctions are a complicated process. I sat on an Energy Bill Committee in the previous Parliament in which many of us—including the Ministers, who are no longer Ministers in that Department—found them confusing and complicated. We need to simplify them, because if we do not we could lose out on innovative schemes and that worries me. As the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty said, we need a level playing field for biomass, or indeed a special category for it so that we can develop the technology to play a part in the mix going forward. We need a truly consensual approach to our energy policies, with them not determined by five-year electoral cycles. They need to be in the long-term interest and work towards climate change.

I was at the COP 21, where there was a mixed reaction to Britain. Yes, the Secretary of State was trumpeting the fact that we are closing down our coal stations, but there was also real concern about the cuts to our renewables. What I want to see is real investment in low-carbon energy going forward. I repeat that that should be in new nuclear, in renewables and in energy efficiency measures so that, on climate change, the United Kingdom can hold its head up proudly and say, "We are world leaders." I want to see biomass as part of that and I hope that when the Minister responds she will give special consideration to biomass, because the project I have outlined in my constituency and what we have heard from other hon. Members is good for Britain and good for climate change.

10.16 am

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. In contrast to the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), I will focus more on combined heat and power, which he mentioned earlier. I thank him for bringing the debate on this critical issue to the House. I am glad to see it getting the attention that it so richly deserves.

The Scottish National party is highly supportive of the increasing role that biomass heat and combined heat and power schemes are playing in reducing CO₂ emissions. Biomass has played a vital part in putting Scotland on track to meet its 42% emissions reduction

target by 2020 ahead of schedule, which was touched on eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan). Of course, biomass is the oldest source of renewable energy.

Biomass is the only other naturally occurring, energy-containing carbon resource known that is large enough to be used as a substitute for fossil fuels. Unlike fossil fuels, biomass is renewable in the sense that only a short period of time is required to replace what is used as an energy resource. Biomass is also held to be carbon neutral in that the amount of carbon absorbed in growing it is equivalent to the amount produced when burned for energy. The intermittency of solar and wind and the role that biomass can play in our overall energy solution have been well commented on, so I will not take them further than that.

The Scottish Government have shown a strong political commitment to biomass as a renewable energy resource. The UK's largest biomass combined heat and power plant in Markinch, in the kingdom of Fife, received significant funding from the Scottish Government. The plant not only is an asset to Scotland but will help deliver the target of 11% of non-electrical heat demand by renewable sources by 2020, yet the UK Government's decisions continue to undermine the UK's and Scotland's renewables commitments—more on that later.

The Association for Decentralised Energy has provided information on CHP, CfDs and the RHI, which are issues that have been touched on by speakers today. Combined heat and power can use renewable and non-renewable fuels. No matter the fuel, CHP represents the optimal use of that fuel, reducing fuel use by 10% to 30%. Biomass CHP plants are most commonly used in industrial processes where their energy efficiency helps the user to improve competitiveness and reduce carbon emissions. However, biomass CHP is suffering a significant investment hiatus, because of a lack of policy certainty with respect to both the contract for difference and the renewable heat incentive. Only 20 MWe of the potential 440 MWe in biomass CHP projects have reached financial close. Most others are on hold or cancelled, or have been converted to power-only sites.

Under the contract for difference, new-build biomass projects must be CHP, as the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty mentioned. However, the industry currently views biomass CHP as largely uninvestable—if that is a word—under the contract for difference, because the CfD scheme's design is not fit for purpose. The CfD biomass CHP tariff will need to be changed before we can expect the biomass CHP opportunity to be captured. To make the CfD investable for biomass CHP, the Government must allow biomass CHP to receive CfD for its electricity over the full 15 years of the contract, even if its heat customer closes. The Department for Energy and Climate Change has been considering that necessary change for close to two years, and there is now a risk that the regulations that are needed will not be in place before the next CfD allocation round, which is expected late in 2016. We might contrast that with the Hinkley C nuclear strike price of double the current rate, guaranteed for 35 years.

Albert Owen: I am not trying to trip up the hon. Gentleman against his party, but does he welcome the extension of nuclear plants? We have safe generation there which will produce low-carbon energy for up to an extra five years.

Philip Boswell: As the hon. Gentleman well knows, we have two ageing nuclear power stations in Scotland, and while they have played their part, we do not see nuclear as what we require to advance in the long-term future in Scotland. In fact, we do not need it. It is a choice that England has made and that it unfortunately seems to be forcing on us.

Albert Owen: And Wales.

Philip Boswell: And Wales—I concede that point.

The debate pack provided by the House of Commons Library states:

“Following its commitment to increase funding for the RHI to £1.15 billion in 2021, the Government published a series of RHI review documents in February 2016, in advance of an expected review of the scheme in 2017. The Government concluded that ‘the RHI had been wholly positive in its influence on the renewable heat technology market’”.

Many, including myself, would disagree with that statement.

While the industry welcomes the decision to extend funding for the renewable heat incentive up to 2020, reforms are needed to increase certainty within the scheme if it is to be successful in delivering large-scale renewable heat projects. Investors do not know the RHI's value when they plan and then make an investment decision, as happens under other large-scale renewable electricity mechanisms, such as the renewables obligation, which has been much covered in other debates. The Association for Decentralised Energy therefore recommends that DECC should implement a tariff guarantee under the RHI to bring forward lower-cost, large-scale renewable heat such as biomass CHP. With tariff guarantees, the Government would allow a developer to lock in their RHI tariff when the project reached financial close. I agree entirely with the ADE about that.

The House will doubtless note that the only constant with UK Government energy legislation is change—moving the legislative goalposts and destroying investor confidence via uncertainty. I suppose they are at least consistent about moving the goalposts, with more than 18 changes in oil and gas legislation in 15 years, the removal of the renewables obligation removal one year early for onshore wind, withdrawal of the £1 billion fund for carbon capture, solar energy subsidy cuts and the scrapping of large-scale solar energy projects, and plans to privatise the green investment bank just as it is flourishing. Those renewables cuts are made because of the UK Government's focus on the “rash dash for gas”, or fracking, and their prioritisation of nuclear energy, which shows the true direction of their energy policy.

The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty spoke of a black start capability constraint, and that is made all the more pertinent by the closure of Longannet next month. I put the blame for that squarely with the Government, because of their prejudiced transmission charge regime.

The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty and my hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde touched on the reuse of existing energy infrastructure and the SNP believes that the UK Government should be more flexible about legislation, to make a smoother transition to renewable energy from fossil fuel use possible. I maintain that biomass has a key role to play, and I urge increased use of it, especially given DECC's own figures for electricity generated by renewables and as a percentage of gross

[Philip Boswell]

consumption, which show a meagre increase of biofuel as a percentage of overall renewable energy, from around 4.1% in 2009 to 4.7% in 2013. However, in line with the Government's advice, I would introduce a word of caution, because that industry often competes with other types of land use such as food and raw materials production, and of course with the vagaries of crop prices we should also be careful about the availability and price of sufficient sustainably resourced biomass.

Albert Owen: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which is why waste areas are relevant. Many parts of the world have shrub overgrowth. That can be used and the land can return to agricultural use, helping less developed countries.

Philip Boswell: That is certainly an option that any sensible leader would consider when thinking about future policy. I agree that it is vital to retain a sensible balance.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned how critical research and development is to the development of the industry. I understand that the Government are doing something about that. Indeed, the UK Government set out policies to support the use of biomass in energy generation in their UK biomass strategy published in 2012, which noted:

"It is widely recognised that bioenergy has an important role to play if the UK is to meet its low carbon objectives by 2050. Excluding biomass from the energy mix would significantly increase the cost of decarbonising our energy system—an increase estimated by recent analysis at £44 billion. As set out in the 2011 UK Renewable Energy Road map, bioenergy is also an important part of the Government's plans to meet the Renewable Energy Directive objectives in 2020."

Nevertheless, biomass, like all other proven renewable energy sources, is being neglected for the UK Government's preferred options of nuclear and unconventional gas, which of course means we will not meet our climate change targets as set out in the Climate Change Act 2008.

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman and his colleague, the hon. Member for Inverclyde, both made the point that Scotland has outperformed many parts of Europe—everyone except Sweden, I think we heard—with its decarbonisation initiatives, yet we also hear that that is a reserved matter, so such policy is for the UK Government. I am interested to understand how in that case the credit for doing so well is due to the Scottish Government, not the UK Government. I would point out, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) did, that, of all the devolved Administrations and England, Scotland has the highest percentage of electricity generated from nuclear. It is a long road to replace that.

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. That is a long intervention.

Philip Boswell: I concede that the hon. Gentleman is perfectly right—energy is more widely reserved. We in Scotland are keen to play our part in the UK as part of an overall national solution for energy. Our choices may be different, and our choices and powers are constrained. In fact, during the debate on the Energy Bill, the Government rejected our calls for CfD devolution, which is the most popular mechanism we would have for making inroads.

As I mentioned, we will not meet our targets under the Climate Change Act 2008, so I urge the Minister to revise legislation to enable biomass to play its part in achieving our renewable energy targets on time.

10.29 am

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): It is a pleasure to sum up for the SNP in this debate, which has been interesting. It has perhaps been a different debate from the one I anticipated, as the majority of contributions have been on the transfer of existing coal power plants to biomass, but I completely understand why that is. I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing the debate. It is good to get a hearing on this issue.

I met with Drax quite early on in my role as the SNP's energy and climate change spokesperson and very much commend what it has done on shifting away from coal to biomass. There are issues around such large-scale production, which have been touched on, but if it is done right and done well—as I think it broadly is by Drax—it has a large role to play.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned research that suggested that converting just 500 MW of coal to biomass could save £2 billion for consumers, when looking at the whole-system cost. That is quite a remarkable piece of research to suggest such a level of savings.

One theme in the debate has been the need for both a level playing field and a long-term plan for biomass technology. I know the Government are very fond of their long-term economic plan. It is perhaps time they got a long-term energy plan—I note that that has the same acronym, so it could be used interchangeably. The two plans are tied together rather neatly: to have a long-term economic plan, we need a long-term energy plan. As we have heard, we very much require that plan to include biomass if we are to meet our decarbonisation targets.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the hidden costs of intermittent technologies; that is fair. His comment was that that is the "definition of a perverse outcome". My definition of a perverse outcome would be applying the climate change levy to green energy production. I was surprised that that did not feature in his speech, given that when the levy was introduced in the Budget, Drax's share price fell by 25% overnight.

Nigel Adams: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that. If he looks back in *Hansard*, he will discover that I raised that issue at the time—quite vociferously, in fact. It was the first time that I voted against my own party, to my regret, so it was a deeply held view.

Callum McCaig: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I would gladly check *Hansard*, but I have no requirement to do that as I will take him at his word. That is a point well made—touché, as they say.

UK energy production faces significant challenges due to the move away from coal. Significant power stations and traditional behemoths of energy production are coming off the market. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) said that ensuring we get the policy structure right before those power plants close is fundamental. She made a valid point about the incentive for the plants to be demolished. Once the power stations are gone, there is no going back.

The reuse and recycling of the existing transmission line infrastructure is a powerful point. We will get one opportunity to do this, and that opportunity is closing by the day as the power plants close. I would impress upon the Minister that if she and her Government think biomass has a role to play, as it is clear a number of hon. Members do, time is pressing to get the framework right to enable that to happen. I repeat: once the power stations and the transmission lines that take the power from them are down, the cost of establishing biomass on that kind of scale will be astronomical in comparison with what it was.

My hon. Friend the Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) talked about the positive benefit of biomass at a smaller, more localised level than the large-scale power plants on which other Members focused. He mentioned the 2,000 jobs in biomass in Scotland and the potential for more. The link between proximity of supply and production of energy through biomass is also important. While there will be a role to play for biomass in large-scale production, the use of it in a decentralised manner is very much a part of the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) talked about combined heat and power being a real and credible part of the future of biomass technology. In my own constituency, Aberdeen Heat and Power Company Ltd delivers heat, hot water and electricity through biomass to a number of my constituents and others across the city of Aberdeen. Its programme has resulted in a 56% reduction in emissions and, perhaps more startlingly, a reduction in bills of 50%.

Combined heat and power is used well elsewhere in the world, in particular on the continent. It has always struck me as perplexing that we have never utilised it on the same scale, because it is a pretty simple technology. It stops the wastage of electricity because it is converted into heat. If we can get that level of savings—by and large in deprived communities in Aberdeen—that is a win-win situation. I am pleased to see the Scottish Government looking at how combined heat and power can be ramped up as we look to meet our climate change commitments. We have discussed the different ways that the devolved Administrations and the UK Government can work. A lot can be learned from that example, and we would welcome that.

Albert Owen: In my contribution, I mentioned combining food and power. Does the hon. Gentleman have a comment to make on that, as a Front-Bench spokesman for his party? Does he see that as something that could be taken forward in different parts of the UK?

Callum McCaig: I thank the hon. Gentleman—I was coming on to his contribution. He made a number of interesting comments, several of which I agreed with. We will come to the nuclear issue, where there is a degree of disagreement. Combining food and power is an interesting way, particularly when looking at the more decentralised model. Agriculture is clearly a huge industry right across these islands, and there are significant waste products that can be used in different ways. I know there is huge potential for using the by-products of our agricultural production to produce energy through both biomass and biofuels. That requires an awful lot more investigation through research and development.

The conflict of land use in biomass was touched on. If, as the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) suggested, we focus on primarily using waste resources or sub-optimal land—shrub and suchlike—that would allay a number of the fears of those who doubt the viability and compatibility of biomass as a way of achieving carbon reduction. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the requirement for a level playing field, and the fact that we require renewables, nuclear and energy efficiency to do that.

There was some debate about the apparent discrepancy between the SNP's position on nuclear and our welcoming the extension of nuclear power plants in Scotland. On the face of it, that seems sensible, but one has to remember that there is an astronomical bill for decommissioning nuclear. Putting that out as long as possible, sweating those resources and ensuring we get the greatest return on them before we decommission them is sensible. The significant difference between biomass and nuclear, in terms of the benefit, is that the by-product from biomass will not be radioactive for 100,000 years and require billions of pounds to decommission.

The time is now. As with so many of the issues around energy and climate change, if we are to decarbonise, we need a sensible framework. A number of Members have pointed out where there are gaps in terms of biomass. They need to be closed, but the gaps in our energy policy more widely also need to be closed.

10.40 am

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): As hon. Members around the Chamber this morning have made clear, biomass has a substantial role to play in the move towards a low-carbon energy economy. Indeed, not only does it have a substantial role to play, but we should encourage the proper fulfilment of that role over the next period—I will come to that in a moment. We should also be clear about where biomass stands in the move towards a low-carbon economy and the extent to which it can play a role. In that respect, we need to be clear that, given the extent to which reasonable levels of feedstock can be provided to biomass over the next period—and, indeed, over the longer period, up to 2050—it can probably achieve penetration in the UK energy market of perhaps 12% or so.

I take that estimate from the Government's UK bioenergy strategy, which the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) mentioned. We need to be clear that it is not the case that there is no strategy; there is a strategy—at the moment. Whether the present Government consider it to be their strategy now is another question, bearing in mind our discussions on the recent Energy Bill, for example, about to the extent to which things that happened under the last Government really were or were not part of the Government's strategy. Before we end proceedings this morning, I would be interested to know from the Minister whether she feels that her Government wish to continue to pursue that strategy, or whether she is in the process of writing a new bioenergy strategy for the future.

The existing strategy clearly places limits on the extent to which biomass can play a role in the move to a low-carbon economy. As my hon. Friend the Member

[*Dr Alan Whitehead*]

for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) emphasised, that underlines the fact that biomass has to play a role as part of a suite of technologies in order to provide the widest possible mix of energy over the next period.

We also ought to be clear that, as a low-carbon energy technology, biomass has to be just that: sustainable. As my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill both mentioned, sustainability is not just about where we get our biomass feedstock from, but about how we use land for biomass production, and the extent to which biomass production may push out other forms of production, or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn mentioned, the extent to which it takes place on marginal land. In the UK, Drax, for example, is encouraging the planting of short rotation coppicing production, Miscanthus grass and various other things, which can provide a sustainable source of biomass for those undertakings. It is important that biomass is fully sustainable, and of course that comes into play in ensuring that imports of biomass are fully certified across the board, as far as their origin and how they are produced are concerned.

Having said that, biomass certainly can play a clear and substantial role and can perhaps produce 10% to 12% of the UK's energy requirements in future. That also emphasises the point that biomass should not be set against other forms of renewable energy. In that context, I was a little concerned about the suggestion from the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) that biomass should, as it were, be advantaged against other forms of renewable energy, because of its relationship to system integration costs, as far as the network is concerned.

Nigel Adams: I apologise if that is how my remarks came across. What I actually want for biomass generation is a level playing field—for the industry to be able to bid on an equal basis, taking into consideration the full system costs of all technologies. That is all I want: an opportunity for the industry to be able to bid on a level playing field, in a fair way.

Dr Whitehead: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that clarification, but perhaps I can also make a little clarification for him. He mentioned the NERA and Imperial College London report about system integration costs. That is an important report, but he should also know that a similar report from NERA and Imperial College London was produced about three months before the report that he mentioned. It so happened that the client for the other report was the Committee on Climate Change, as opposed to Drax. The questions that were asked in the two reports, which had identical authors at almost identical times, were slightly different and therefore produced fairly different results for overall system integration costs. Essentially, one looked at how biomass would relate to the system as it stands; the other looked at how it might relate to system changes.

One thing I am sure the hon. Gentleman would endorse is the extent to which system changes have to take place to ensure that those changes in the mix are integrated into the system as a whole—so, the periods over which energy is sourced, and what happens with

transmission charges and how they may be levied in future for a particular location.

David Mowat: I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Does he not accept, though, that it is a fact that intermittent forms of energy require back-up and that there is an associated cost that is not reflected in the CfD structure at the moment, which I think is the point that was being made?

Dr Whitehead: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. There are system integration cost differentials between different forms of renewable energy. My point is that, depending on which report people read, those are not the same as they might appear to be between renewables. Indeed, what is undertaken in how the system works as a whole can substantially mitigate the different costs, so that, as we evolve the system, we can be in a much better position to ensure that the suite of different renewables—which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn mentioned, is so important for future low-carbon deployment—can properly be deployed happily alongside one another, as a suite of measures to ensure that we move towards a decarbonised economy.

I recognise that we have limited time this morning, so I want to turn briefly to the point the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty made about the level playing field that is necessary for biomass. It is undoubtedly the case, given the measures that are in place at the moment for the enhancement of renewable energy, that there is not a level playing field. There is an overall problem with that suite of measures because of the levy control framework and the extent to which hardly anybody is likely to get a contract for difference for their project over the next period. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman will be aware that some biomass plants got contracts under the early investment decisions, prior to the new form of CfDs coming into being. However, when it comes to the efficiency of biomass, allying that with CHP schemes to ensure that biomass can get 15-year contracts under the CfD arrangements, even if the heat source is not there for 15 years, is an important change that would need to be made to CfD arrangements for the future.

As for the renewable heat incentive, the fact that there are no guarantees for tariffs between commencement and completion of a project if a biomass plant is trying to go for RHI seems to be an omission for the future that should be rectified as far as their admission to those arrangements—

Mr David Crausby (in the Chair): Order. Dr Whitehead, if we are not careful, we will not hear the Minister, and I really want to hear her.

Dr Whitehead: I appreciate that, Mr Crausby. I will bring my remarks to a close immediately.

My view is that it will be necessary to ensure a level playing field in the future arrangements for low-carbon energy; indeed, whether biomass should be accessible to the capacity market as part of those arrangements might be a consideration the Minister is thinking about. I will be interested to hear from her what arrangements

may be made for CfDs and RHI for that level playing field to ensure that biomass plays the role that all of us here this morning want it to play in the future of renewables.

10.52 am

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Andrea Leadsom): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on securing this debate and in particular for being such a champion of Drax. He and I have had many conversations about it. I am delighted to see my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling) here supporting Rugeley, which is absolutely right. I have enormous sympathy for the people affected by yesterday's incident at Didcot, which was a long-standing and good source of energy for the UK. It was a great tragedy.

Every hon. Member here will know that our priorities are to move to decarbonisation at the lowest cost while ensuring that lights stay on. This debate has shown that there are many ways of achieving that. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen) for pointing out that a balanced energy policy is needed—the shadow Minister also made that point. It cannot be all or nothing.

The installed biomass capacity of all biomass technologies at the end of 2014 was 5.4 GW, which is no small capacity. Of that, biomass combustion was about 3 GW, landfill gas was 1 GW and energy from waste was coming up to 1 GW. That is impressive and the technology certainly plays its part, from potentially low-carbon dispatchable energy to uses in heat and transport biofuel applications and from extracting energy from waste products to injection of low carbon gas into our gas grid.

It has been pointed out that we cannot go ahead without careful consideration of the effects, both positive and negative, that biomass can have on the wider environment. Unlike other renewable technologies, biomass cannot rely on an inexhaustible fuel like the wind, tides or sunshine. The fuels on which biomass is dependent need to be sourced responsibly and sustainably, and in a manner that realises the carbon and greenhouse gas savings that biomass is capable of delivering. Our renewable energy policy seeks to balance those considerations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty asked about CfD auctions. He will know that, in November 2015, the Secretary of State announced that if, and only if, the Government's conditions on cost reductions are met, we will make funding available for three contracts for difference allocation rounds in this Parliament. The first, for less established technologies, is expected to take place by the end of 2016, and the technologies included will be offshore wind, wave, tidal stream, advanced conversion technologies, anaerobic digestion, dedicated biomass with combined heat and power, and geothermal. That is where we are right now. We will set out our further thoughts on that as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend asked whether I agree with the proposals in the NERA report regarding whole-system costs. I am often asked, and I understand why, whether Department of Energy and Climate Change is familiar with the full-life costs of biomass compared with other technologies. I assure him that we are very aware of the costs of balancing the grid from intermittent technologies

that are not incurred from electricity generated from biomass. It is dispatchable, can be base load, is controllable and is very valuable. I confirm that my Department is looking carefully at whole-system costs, but the reports that he and the hon. Member for Southampton, Test (Dr Whitehead) mentioned consist of a subset of technologies and we must look carefully at whole-system costs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat) asked whether subsidies can be available for co-firing. I assure him that subsidies are still available through the renewables obligation. Fiddlers Ferry in his constituency has previously co-fired under the renewables obligation and can take advantage of that scheme until 2027.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase asked how the correct mix should look going forward. I assure her that we recognise there are implications when looking at proposals to end coal generation. It is important to have clear consultation on that, which we will announce shortly. In particular, we will look at how that might impact on coal-fired power stations that are currently co-firing.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde (Ronnie Cowan) raised his proud point that Scotland is doing so well on renewables, but I remind him that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty pointed out, over 20% of the support under the renewables obligation as a whole goes to Scotland with far less of Great Britain's population. Scotland received 24% of RO payments in 2014-15 and will receive significantly more than its per capita share, so it would be fair if the hon. Gentleman credited the UK Government and Great Britain's bill payers with the Scottish Government's achievements in renewable energy.

Philip Boswell: Will the Minister give way?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry, I will not give way.

The hon. Member for Inverclyde asked why the Government are cutting RHI support. The RHI budget to cover renewable heat schemes has been confirmed to March 2021, rising each year to a total of £1.15 billion. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) referred to biomass CHP. We are considering our proposals for that for the forthcoming RHI consultation. We will refine our current policy so that it delivers improved value for money to taxpayers and targets biomass in line with the Government's long-term approach to heat decarbonisation, focusing on large biomass and biomass for process and district heating, and to encourage deployment that is sustainable without subsidy in future.

The hon. Member for Southampton, Test asked about the bioenergy strategy published by the previous Government in 2012. It set out a direction for biomass and recommended supporting sustainably produced biomass to deliver real greenhouse gas savings cost-effectively and taking account the wider impact across the economy. A great deal has happened in the industry since it was written, but those recommendations remain compatible with our current intentions.

Finally, as many hon. Members have pointed out, bioenergy contributes to the UK economy, creates jobs in the fuel supply chain in harvesting, processing and transport, and creates opportunities for foresters, farmers and UK ports and railways. It remains and will continue

[*Andrea Leadsom*]

to remain important, bringing many benefits to the UK in decarbonisation, security of supply and economic benefit. I remain of the view that, when sourced responsibly, biomass can provide a cost-effective, low-carbon and controllable source of renewable energy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered biomass as a source of renewable energy.

Kneller Hall

10.59 am

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposed sale of Kneller Hall, Whitton by the Ministry of Defence.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. This is about the sale of Kneller Hall, but it is about more than that; it is about Whitton, and Whitton's history. The proposed sale of Kneller Hall was announced by the Ministry of Defence in a statement just a few weeks ago. Listed in that statement were about a dozen Ministry of Defence sites. Kneller Hall is the exceptional one in that list, because this is not about a building, but about a community.

It is no ordinary building and no ordinary site. Kneller Hall in effect is Whitton, and Whitton is Kneller Hall, which brings me to my first request of my hon. Friend the Minister. I am grateful that he is here to listen to some of the concerns of residents and, I hope, to agree to my requests and to reconsider the sale of Kneller Hall. My first request is that the Minister will get Ministry of Defence personnel to come to Whitton, preferably to Kneller Hall and preferably with the commandant, Colonel Barry Jenkins, who I notice is in the Public Gallery, because the Ministry of Defence needs to tell the community of Whitton face to face the reasons for the sale of Kneller Hall, and the Ministry of Defence needs to hear Whitton's reasons why it is not a good idea.

It is tragic and extraordinary that in peacetime the Ministry of Defence has managed to create such hostility in a peace-loving community—the community of Whitton. The Ministry of Defence may have estate agents, but it needs historians and psychologists. If the Ministry of Defence had good historians, it would know that Kneller Hall has been in Whitton for nearly 150 years. It would know that Kneller Hall was created because a cousin of Queen Victoria, George, Duke of Cambridge, realised that top-quality musicians, well rehearsed, are essential to inspiring the military. That is our heritage and legacy, which began nearly 150 years ago, in Whitton.

I understand that new military recruits are taken round the museum at Kneller Hall, and in that museum are musical instruments going back to the Crimean war. There is even a musical instrument that was played by a boy soldier at the battle of Waterloo. In the museum, on all the walls, are pictures of all the people who have passed through Kneller Hall—all the top-class musicians—so new recruits know that they are part of an important legacy and an important heritage. Just as every recruit goes through the museum at Kneller Hall to know how much they belong there—they belong for life—every resident of Whitton feels that belonging and that link to Kneller Hall. This is not about a building, but about a community.

The Ministry of Defence notice talks about releasing sites for housing. In London, yes, we need housing, but housing needs to be part of a community. Kneller Hall is the identity of Whitton; it is the heart and soul of Whitton. We cannot rip out the heart and soul of a community and all its identity and replace it with housing that has no identity. That is not what I believe we want as a Government when we say that we want more housing in London. This is a unique site, in a unique

place. Whitton is not a suburb. Whitton is not a dormitory town. Whitton is a unique community, and that uniqueness comes from Kneller Hall.

The Minister may well know, and perhaps some historians in the Ministry of Defence know, that over the years there have been proposals to sell Kneller Hall. My predecessor but one, Toby Jessel, fought the sale of Kneller Hall in the 1980s and in the 1990s. I hope the Minister will join the late Margaret Thatcher and Michael Heseltine and Jeremy Hanley, who realised the importance of Kneller Hall and saved it then.

I would like to quote what Toby Jessel said when he was MP for Twickenham. In the 1990s, in a debate in the House of Commons, he said that there were eight reasons why we should keep Kneller Hall. Those eight reasons are still relevant today. He said that Kneller Hall is a world-famous institution. As the Minister will know from the press, people such as Howard Goodall have been saying how important and internationally famous Kneller Hall is today.

Toby Jessel said that a large sum had been spent on Kneller Hall. My freedom of information requests, answered just last week, have shown that more than £1 million has been spent over the last few years—since I became an MP and just before—on Kneller Hall, so that reason is still relevant today.

Toby said it is the largest of the three schools of music. Importantly, he noted—Toby is a musician himself—that it is half an hour from London, so specialist teachers can travel easily to Kneller Hall. We need that for Kneller Hall's excellence. If the military move away from this school of music, it will not have access to those specialist teachers in the same way. Toby Jessel said in the 1990s that it has a good bandstand, and it is still there today.

Kneller Hall draws large audiences. Again, it is the heart and soul of Whitton. The Proms at Kneller Hall are far better than the Proms at the Albert hall, because it is a community event; it is about the identity of the community. Toby said that Kneller Hall has the capacity to take in the training of the Royal Marines and Royal Air Force bands. That is still possible. And Toby said that it could not be sold for much. Interestingly, I think that this is where the Ministry of Defence estate agents have got it wrong. The Kneller Hall site is metropolitan open land. The Ministry of Defence estate agents did not realise that there are tree preservation orders on most of the trees on the site. We cannot break the heart of a community and replace it with soulless housing. I am sure that that is not the intention of the Minister.

Like Toby Jessel, I have presented a petition to the House of Commons. Even though we have known about the proposed sale for only a few weeks, more than 1,000 people over a weekend signed the petition in Whitton. That demonstrates the feeling in Whitton. Of course, unlike in the 1990s, we now also have online petitions, and a local resident, Nikki Bradshaw, has started one. It has nearly 5,000 signatures already. That is how much Kneller Hall means to people in Whitton and to people who respect the international status of the place.

On the Facebook page—I hope the Ministry of Defence has it—thousands of people are writing comments. I pick a handful of comments on the online petition to show the character of these important points. We need a public meeting because these people need to be heard.

Some have written that Kneller Hall is “part of our community” and a Whitton “institution”. Others say, “Stop selling our heritage.” Typical comments include things like “My grandfather was there as a boy soldier”, “My uncle used to teach there” or, “My daughter trained there.” Some say that there is no other school of music like it in the world and that it is short-sighted to allow the loss of such a revered establishment.

Importantly, somebody—not me—wrote on the Facebook page, “Kneller Hall is part of the big society that Mr Cameron values.” Others commented that, “Selling off the family jewels springs to mind”, and said that we should not destroy what is good about the UK. Nikki, who set up the online petition wrote, “Where was the public and local opinion in all of this?”

I would like the Minister to reconsider the sale of Kneller Hall, and to arrange for a public meeting, which I will host, preferably at Kneller Hall. Now—Queen Elizabeth's 90th year—is not the time to sell Kneller Hall. Neither is it the time to sell Kneller Hall when one of the musicians, Dave Barnes, is in a national television musical competition. I do not want him playing the “Last Post” at the finals of that competition and I do not want Whitton to have its own “Brassed Off” drama. This is not the time.

I am privileged to be speaking to the Minister because he is a courageous man. He has served in the Army—I have seen his medals. However, it is not courageous to leave the retreat from Kneller Hall. He will not get a medal for that, but I will personally pin a medal to his chest if he saves Kneller Hall.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Crausby. I start by reminding the House of my interest as a member of the Army Reserves.

I would like to start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Dr Mathias) for obtaining this debate on the future of Kneller Hall, a Ministry of Defence site in her constituency. Her drive to stand up for the interests of her community is commendable—an example that should be followed by all. I want to acknowledge from the outset that the Department is ever-mindful of the emotive nature of estate rationalisation, and that the concerns and feelings of the local community have been, and will continue to be, considered as part of this decision-making process.

I announced to the House on 18 January 2016 that, as part of the Government's prosperity agenda, the MOD is committed to releasing land to contribute towards 55,000 new housing units this Parliament. Kneller Hall is one of the first 12 sites to be announced for release. Alone, those sites are expected to generate some £500 million in land receipts—a significant and valuable reinvestment for Defence—and approximately 15,400 housing units across the 12 sites. However, our work goes far beyond that important goal. Our footprint strategy is about chairing a path to a more effective, affordable estate that better enables military capability. In that context, it is fair to say that the vast majority of the Defence footprint is currently under review, as the Department gains momentum in the complex planning work necessary to provide the brave men and women of our armed forces a more effective, fit-for-purpose estate.

[Mark Lancaster]

The residents of Twickenham and its surrounding boroughs are not alone in their strength of feeling and, indeed, in their drive to want to retain a local Defence presence. However, the simple fact is that these plans are not directed at individual communities, regiments or bases. This is about ensuring that Government funding is in the right place to ensure the continued defence and security of the United Kingdom.

Dr Mathias: The Minister said that Twickenham is not alone, but does he agree that the petition presented to the Commons and the online petition are unique among the 12 sites mentioned in the January notice?

Mark Lancaster: It is certainly the only petition of which I am aware among the 12 sites. I do, however, imagine that by the end of the process, there will be other petitions on many other sites across the UK because it is absolutely understandable that individual local communities feel strongly about their relationships with Defence. This is an ever-evolving issue so I sense that there will be more petitions to come, which is something I regret, but that is the nature of the job I have to do as I seek to rationalise the Defence estate in the best possible way to deliver Defence outputs.

Kneller Hall is the home of the Corps of Army Music and the Royal Military School of Music, two organisations that are of great significance to the United Kingdom. Despite that sentiment, the facilities in which they are currently homed are ageing, inefficient and not fit for purpose. How can it be that an organisation that contributes so much at home and overseas is expected to train and operate out of an old and failing site? The school and the headquarters have a very small footprint. There are 43 military and 30 civilian staff permanently employed at the site. Regardless, it is unfair that those 73 people have to endure ageing single living accommodation and sub-optimal facilities that do not meet appropriate training standards. The fact is that the site just is not designed for its current use. It is a stately home, not a school, and it is definitely not a military training facility. To bring the site up to standard for its current use would cost at least £30 million.

So what can we do with the site? Do we invest over £30 million of taxpayers' money in an ageing site that houses fewer than 75 staff? Should Defence invest in a site where maintenance costs will continue to rise over the years? Is that really in the best interests of Defence and military capability, and the best use of taxpayers' money? I have looked at this case and concluded that that would not be the right decision for Defence. Disposal would offer better value for money and, crucially, better military capability. Every additional pound we spend here is a pound that cannot be spent on the front line.

Dr Mathias: The Minister says that £30 million is needed because of the decay. Will he tell me—this is important to the community—whether that information has been in the public domain? Have the community and previous Members of Parliament been informed of that? Over how long a period has £30 million been required?

Mark Lancaster: I cannot give an exact answer now but I am happy to come back to my hon. Friend. I believe that the £30 million dates back to 2009, so I would imagine that, in today's prices, it is even greater.

The MOD is reviewing a number of options regarding the future of the capability currently provided at Kneller Hall. For instance, the parent headquarters, the Royal School of Military Engineering, has barracks at both Chatham and Minley with vastly improved technical and domestic accommodation. It also has the necessary vacant space required to house the personnel currently employed at Kneller Hall, irrespective of whether they are military or civilian. The commandant of the Royal Military School of Music has confirmed that either site, with suitable re-provision, would provide far better and greatly improved training facilities for his people.

The Department has considered the prospect of relocating other Army units to the Kneller Hall site. The problem is that there just is not the space and the facilities are not in a good enough condition. Kneller Hall just is not suitable. Both Chatham and Minley are still within reasonable travelling distance of London and the south-west, the main locations of the customers of the British Army's 41 bands. There are generous practice and teaching rooms in place at both sites, since they are modern technical colleges and already host military bands. As well as that, the accommodation is of a more than suitable standard to home the junior soldiers that make up the future of Army music—those who are at the very beginning of their career.

I recognise that our announcements to close sites are unsettling for units, for their families and for our civilian staff. We will do all we can to provide them with the necessary certainty of their future locations as soon as practicable. As an independent site, Kneller Hall requires its own guard force of 18 servicemen and women. It needs its own independent integrated logistical section and its own administrative personnel. If the sites were collocated, these highly skilled service personnel could be employed in more operationally vital posts. Furthermore, the freeing of the site could make way for the provision of up to 192 new homes, which are required to meet the UK's ever-growing housing demand.

I recognise my hon. Friend's concerns on the nature of the community, which is precisely why this is very much a two-stage process. The first stage is establishing that there is not a military use for the site, but the second stage—the future—is for the local community to decide. The MOD will engage with the local community and the local planning authority to decide the best future for the site.

Dr Mathias: Again, I appreciate the Minister's giving way. He talks about 192 homes, but has the Ministry of Defence already been in communication with Richmond borough's planning department? If so, the community is unaware of it.

Mark Lancaster: Yes, I can confirm that the Defence Infrastructure Organisation has been in touch with Richmond's planning department, so that process has started. Again, I make it clear that the disposal of this site is based on military capability need, which alone will generate the disposal of this site. The second process—the potential building of new homes—is a secondary issue; it is all about delivering military capability.

Where do we go from here? Much work is still required to ensure timely and efficient closure of the unit and the relocation of the occupants. There are also a number of third party users of the site that we would wish to give the opportunity to find alternative locations. Important engagement will continue to take place with the local

council and planning authorities. We have negotiated a number of compromises on the site's future use and occupation, including ensuring that the area of metropolitan open land that sits within the unit's boundaries remains untouched, and that the trees on the site continue to be protected and preserved. I confirm that I am happy for specialists from my Department to attend a public meeting on the process for disposing of the site, should my hon. Friend wish to arrange one.

The MOD, as do all Government Departments, follows a set process for disposing of any site. Once declared surplus to defence requirements, a site is placed on a register of surplus public sector land, a database managed by the Cabinet Office, which provides an opportunity for other public bodies to express interest in acquiring sites before they are placed on the open market. As already mentioned, however, the MOD will continue to proceed with the plan for housing, liaising with the local council and planning authorities to ensure the best possible future use for the site. That will present an opportunity for the local community to engage with the MOD on the future use of the site, which will not be disposed of before 2018.

I acknowledge and recognise the emotive nature of closing sites, especially ones such as Kneller Hall that have been at the centre of a community for many years. I am delighted to say that I understand the Army will continue to play proms to the public in the park in the summer. I appreciate wholeheartedly the concerns of my hon. Friend and her constituency, and I assure her that great consideration is given to all military establishments, along with their historical and national significance, but as I have already mentioned, this is not about individual communities, bases, regiments or units; it is about ensuring that the MOD has an updated, efficient and rationalised estate that is fit for purpose and fit for it to operate now and into the future. This is about ensuring that the right resources are in the right place to keep Britain safe.

Question put and agreed to.

11.23 am

Sitting suspended.

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Office: Sheffield

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the closure of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills office in Sheffield.

I suppose I ought to say at the outset that I would like the Government to reconsider the closure of the BIS office in Sheffield. The announcement came on Thursday 28 January of plans to start the process to close the BIS office at St Paul's Place in Sheffield by 2018. It was announced by the permanent secretary for BIS on that day, and it was a complete unknown as far as the workforce were concerned. The closure could result in job losses among the 247 staff in the office. On Tuesday 2 February, the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills said that the decision had been taken to save money for the taxpayer. As was said later, that really smacks of hypocrisy when the Government hope to build a northern powerhouse.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said following the urgent question that was taken in the House on Friday 29 January, the day after:

"It speaks to this Government's London-centric focus and contempt for the north of England that they think a consolidated 'combined central HQ and policy centre' has to be, by rights, in London rather than in Sheffield where the operating costs are cheaper and the perspective on UK investment is much broader."—*[Official Report, 29 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 558.]*

I am sorry to say I was not there on the day and, having read *Hansard*, I deeply regret that, because in all my 30-odd years in this place, I do not think I have seen the word "Interruption" used so much in *Hansard*, particularly against the Government Front Bench—the Minister seemed to be "on one", for want of a better expression. It is a great pity that I missed that day; I know that I can now see it on iPlayer, and I may do so at some stage.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. I recently attended a round-table of the Confederation of British Industry North West on the powerhouse. The people there did not know, or could not name, the Minister who is responsible for the powerhouse. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that says it all?

Kevin Barron: I watched with interest, after the urgent question, the question my hon. Friend asked about individuals in the northern powerhouse and what they felt about this situation, but I will leave that aside at this stage.

We have to look at this against the backdrop of what was reported in the *Financial Times*. It said that 20% of civil service jobs had been lost in the regions since 2010, as opposed to only 9% in London. That is an extraordinary figure and seems to go against the main thread that we have had—or should have had—in Government circles, not for the last five or six years, but for about the last five decades. I remember very well the advanced manufacturing park near Sheffield, which was a glowing example of what Governments can do if they have an intention to do it. When I represented part of it, I was

[Kevin Barron]

lobbied on several occasions when some massive offices were going to be built on the advanced manufacturing park—which is actually in Rotherham, but on the edge of Sheffield—on the basis that thousands of civil service jobs were supposed to be going there. Of course, that never happened, unfortunately.

We can also put this into perspective by considering infrastructure expenditure in the north, which stands at £539 per head, as opposed to £3,386 per head in London. When we are presented with such statistics, it is no wonder that people say that this concept of the northern powerhouse is little more than words.

This move is all about, I believe, accommodating large reductions in headcount and nothing to do with the Department's core function of boosting business. I have been contacted by several constituents regarding the closure. One of them says:

"I've worked in the civil service for"—

I am going to say that this person is now in their third decade in the civil service—

"ten years in London and the rest in Sheffield. For the majority of that time, I have worked in teams that have been split site between Sheffield and London. To my knowledge, there has never been any issues regarding the quality of work or negative impact on policy decisions/policy work due to operating split site teams.

Aside from the obvious impact on me personally with respect to having to find another job, I am concerned about the effect this decision will have on the City of Sheffield and surrounding areas. I am still trying to understand why the Department for Business would take such a step."

This announcement comes alongside the recent announcements by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs about job cuts, and the fact that funding has been withdrawn entirely from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, which is based in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey) and which is part of the BIS 2020 initiative. Words fail me. What should have been happening for decades in this country now seems to be in reverse. These announcements clearly send out completely the wrong type of message to large businesses that might be looking to invest in Yorkshire or other northern cities and towns.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): Is not the answer to the question that my right hon. Friend's constituent put—"Why?"—that this is about crude number-cutting of budgets, jobs and offices? At a time when knowledge of economies outside London and support for the creation of jobs and businesses outside London is needed more than ever, surely this is a short-term decision that will also prove to be counterproductive.

Kevin Barron: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend's analysis. The decision is completely at odds with this concept—it is not much more than a concept—and promise of money of the northern powerhouse. Under the circumstances, these are the worst signals in the world that central Government could send to the north.

Not only will the closure be devastating for South Yorkshire; it will lead to a huge loss of expertise for the Department—for example, the person I have just quoted, who has been in their job for decades. The idea that they can uplift and come down to work in London, even if they could afford to buy a property in London, is a very difficult thing to imagine.

Nick Hillman, who was formerly a special adviser to David Willetts during his time as universities and science Minister, has described this closure as

"a genuine tragedy for good public policymaking."

He says that the Sheffield civil servants

"hold BIS' institutional memory on HE and often know more than the policymakers who are nominally closer to the centre of power."

The staff in Sheffield work closely with external organisations, such as employers and education providers, visiting them to explain policies about funding, deregulation, further and higher education, and Government strategy on rail, as well as listening to their issues so as to better inform policy. Having purely London-based staff will mean additional costs, particularly as a result of pay differentials and a less prompt service for organisations based in the midlands and the north. Gone will be the knowledge and understanding of localities, sectors and industries that can make a difference to effective policy making and allocation of funding.

I have spent more than 30 years in this Parliament now, and for most of that time I have heard many people who believe—people from all parts of the House; Ministers of all political colours, as if they do not recognise it—that north of Watford is a strange land. Bringing more people down from the north to work in London will just bolster that attitude and, I have to say to the Minister, that is fundamentally wrong.

Sheffield staff are also responsible for applying ministerial strategy and policies on the ground. For example, BIS sites such as the Sheffield site ought to be in the vanguard of helping the Government to rebalance the economy and supporting such rebalancing in the sectors that are most prevalent in their respective regions. It seems particularly strange that BIS, with its supposed ambition to create more geographically balanced growth, should take this decision, when other Departments, such as the Department for Education, plan to remain in Sheffield. Can the Minister explain that to us—not just to the Members from Sheffield who are here today, but to other Members from the region as well?

Another constituent drew my attention to the fact that BIS Sheffield has recently advertised for a level 3 apprenticeship in the very office that the Department is planning to close in 18 months. In fact, the closing date for the apprenticeship applications is today—I have the advert with me, and the closing date is 24 February. The post is fixed-term for 18 months from April 2016. There is no mention at all of the office closing in 18 months, so any hope of a permanent job at the end will be non-existent. Indeed, to be honest, who would really want to work in that atmosphere of despondency and anger? I find it hard to understand the mentality or the morality of carrying out such an exercise in the current climate—and, of course, it costs public money as well. Under the circumstances, it seems wrong.

The comments made by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) in response to the urgent question on 29 January stick a little in my throat. She said:

"As I say, in difficult times when we have to make sure that we continue with our long-term economic plan, difficult decisions have to be made, but we take the view that this is the best way to spend public money more efficiently and more effectively."—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 562.]

If that is the case, it is simple. My understanding is that a report was written about the “BIS 2020” initiative. It was about the closure—not just of Sheffield, but potentially of some other regional offices as well—but it has never seen the light of day. I say this to the Minister—and to the Government: I do not blame the Minister. That report was created by public money and we have the right to see the business case for the change. And I will tell you who has the right to see it more than anyone else: the 247 people who have this cloud hanging over them. I urge the Government to publish the facts, so that we can properly review the decision.

2.41 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Howarth. I congratulate and thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) for securing this debate on the closure of the office. The office is in my constituency, but the closure has a far wider impact, and that is reflected by the Members here from across the region. It is not just a blow for Sheffield, but for a region that has been trying to engage positively with the Government on the northern powerhouse. I hope that the Minister will engage positively with us on the concerns that are being expressed.

I have some sympathy with the Minister; the decision seems to have been driven by senior managers—I am delighted to see the permanent secretary here—but is falling apart under scrutiny. Ministers have been put in a difficult position. They have been briefed, and when my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) asked her urgent question, Members were told that the decision has been taken to save money. Meanwhile, staff in the office in Sheffield have been told that there has been no cost-benefit analysis. Under questioning at the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on 10 February, the permanent secretary as much as admitted that there was no business case for the decision. It is not too late, however. The Minister is a thoughtful man, and I hope that he will approach the issue in the same way as he has his Green Paper on higher education—we have discussed it on many occasions—listening to concerns, sharing them with his colleagues and agreeing to an open discussion of the options.

The House of Commons Library’s briefing for the debate described the Sheffield office as one of a number of regional offices and somehow mixed it up with the network of 80 offices. I have raised that issue with the Library, but for the record, we must be clear that the Sheffield office has a head office function that happens to be taking place in Sheffield, and for good reason. I have spoken to a number of the staff in the office, and they are shocked not simply that their jobs are being taken away, but that those jobs are going without a single good argument being advanced in defence of the decision. They are senior policy staff, and they help make Government decisions. They are used to looking at evidence, evaluating it carefully and advising Ministers, and they are shocked that the rules about effective and responsible decision making have not been applied to them.

The staff have many questions, and I will start with four that I would like the Minister to answer. First, why does the 90-day consultation period not include consultation on the rationale to close the Sheffield office? Secondly,

why does it not give those affected the chance to examine the business case and discuss alternatives? Thirdly, why does it not invite alternative proposals for other models that would work well for Government and provide best value for taxpayers? I have some more questions later, but the final one for this cluster is: why does the documentation state that the 90-day consultation closes on 2 May 2016 when it also states that a final decision on the closure of the Sheffield site is planned by the end of March? That is five weeks before the consultation closes.

People in the office and more widely in the region are genuinely bewildered. This Government talk about the northern powerhouse, are supposedly committed to a diverse civil service and regularly talk about value for money, but in the case of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, apparently they want all their policy jobs to be based in the most expensive city in the country because—this may not be the case, and the Minister can clarify things, but it is what staff have been told by senior managers—Ministers cannot be supported by people based elsewhere. Frankly, it just does not add up.

On the business case, I recognise that the Minister is in a difficult position, because the permanent secretary was unable to share any facts on which the decision was based. The first line of the restructuring proposal form, which was sent to all staff on 17 February, makes the case for the decision. It states:

“BIS is required to make significant savings by 2020.”

I have a simple question for the Minister—I hope he can succeed where the permanent secretary failed at the Select Committee: how much money will the proposal to move all policy jobs to London save? If he wishes, he can intervene on me now.

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): I will come back later.

Paul Blomfield: I look forward to the answer. The civil servants whose jobs are on the line as a result of the decision are familiar with the concept of making savings for the public purse. They are engaged in that very pursuit in delivering the Government’s agenda on apprenticeships and further and higher education. They work within strict financial constraints, but were they to make a proposal without any evidence of the budgetary implications, the Minister would agree that they were not doing their jobs properly. Why are the Government, elected on the back of a promise to supposedly balance the books, so reluctant to publish the business case for the decision? I fear from my exchange with the permanent secretary during his appearance before the Select Committee that it is because there is no such document and no such business case. Will the Minister clarify the basis on which the decision was made, if not to save money?

In the documents that have been published, the proposed “combined regional footprint” that will remain—this is mentioned in the restructuring proposal form—

“the FE funding centre (location yet to be decided),”

the HE funding centre and

“possibly a regulation centre in Birmingham”

are all part of the new vision. How much will all those things cost? We do not know. We do not know because the Department does not know, but how on earth can they be less expensive?

[Paul Blomfield]

The Government's own estate strategy, which was published in 2014, points out that the cost of space in Whitehall is expensive. It cites the Ministry of Defence main building at a cost of £35,000 a year a person, compared with the Home Office buildings in Croydon at £3,000 a person. That is less than a tenth of the cost, and Sheffield is less expensive still, and that is before we take account of central London weighting and the extra staffing costs involved. The decision, which has huge consequences for my constituents, the city and the region, has been made on the basis of so little fact and evidence.

There is a wider issue, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley alluded to, about the way that this country is run. There is real value in locating policy making in the regions and nations of Britain. That is why successive Governments have moved Departments out of London. I remember when the Conservatives under Margaret Thatcher moved the Manpower Services Commission to Sheffield in 1981, and such moves continued under Labour. That policy stalled under the coalition and is now thrown into reverse. Before the Minister wheels out the line that more BIS jobs are based outside London, let me remind him that the focus of this debate is on the highly skilled policy jobs that are at the centre of the decision.

Too many decisions in this country are made through the prism of the personal experience of people who live, work and bring their families up in London. The rest of the country is different. We need more people who live their lives, like most of the population, outside London bringing their experience into policy making. The Department for Education carried out its own review of its estate. The review stated:

"We benefit from maintaining sites around the country—we get alternative perspectives on our policy issues, we can draw from a wider recruitment pool, and employing people in sites outside London helps to keep costs down."

If that is important for the DFE, why does it not apply to BIS? The Minister risks his own goals if he loses some of his most experienced staff just as he embarks on an ambitious programme in higher education. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley cited the special adviser of the Minister's predecessor, David Willetts. His special adviser, respected by all parties in Parliament, described the move as

"a genuine tragedy for good public policymaking."

Is the Minister not concerned about the loss of talent? I hope he will come back on that point. What assessment has he made of the loss of jobs on the successful delivery of the policy agenda for higher education, further education and apprenticeships?

There is another issue about creating a diverse civil service. Earlier this month, Cabinet Office Ministers launched the Bridge report to achieve the Government's stated aim of creating,

"a public sector that reflects the diverse nature of the UK".

They launched it with a fanfare, and the head of the civil service, Sir Jeremy Heywood, said:

"The Bridge Group report offers potential nuggets of gold, not just for the civil service but for the UK...The problem is that talent is everywhere but opportunity is not."

One of the plans arising from that report to address inequality in the public sector states that we need

"new terms in place which make it easier for civil servants to live outside London."

How on earth can the Government square that circle? Where is the joined-up thinking?

The Bridge report also found that the number of people in the civil service from poorer backgrounds is shockingly low, with only 4.4% of successful applicants coming from working-class backgrounds. Does the Minister think this move will increase that figure? What equality impact assessment has been made of the decision? It cannot be right that we restrict opportunities to those who can afford to live and work in London, and who have the option to do so without commitments elsewhere. The Government could massively reduce the talent pool from which they recruit with this move, so why are they narrowing their options?

Staff in Sheffield have been told by BIS board members that the reason for the move is because Ministers want them close by. I do not believe that. I think Ministers are more open-minded and more innovative than that. It runs counter to the Government's own estate strategy, published in October 2014, which stated:

"Civil servants should be able to work flexibly across locations at times that are convenient to them and their managers".

It went on:

"Some parts of the civil service and the private sector still have an inflexible, command-and-control model where people are managed more by their presence than by achievement."

The decision seems to confirm that that is how BIS wants to continue to run itself.

The killer blow to the rationale for this decision is at the bottom of page 11 of that document:

"With modern IT, officials no longer necessarily need to be physically present, for example to brief ministers."

I am sure the Minister will concur with that point. Has this decision been taken behind closed doors because somebody had the bright idea that it might be easier for Ministers if they sit on the floor above their policy people rather than pick up the phone, use the video link or plan meetings in advance? No assessment has been made of the expertise and experience lost; of the impact on access to and diversity in the civil service; or of the way in which decisions are made in this country, never mind the cost to the public purse.

Finally, let me reflect on the thoughts of the Department's most senior civil servant, the permanent secretary Martin Donnelly. It is good to see him here. Almost a year ago to the day, he published a blog post on his experience after the Department had undergone huge change back in 2011. The title of the piece is, "Leadership Statement: Talk less, listen more". I have a copy that the Minister might want to share afterwards. Mr Donnelly writes that,

"people felt that the process has been done to them not by them."

He was right. It was a problem then, and it is a problem the Department is on the brink of repeating now. But it is not too late. I urge Mr Donnelly and the Minister to listen to the hugely talented civil servants based in Sheffield. I urge them to listen to the head of the civil service, whose statement, made less than a month ago, I make no apology for repeating:

"Talent is everywhere but opportunity is not."

I hope that the Minister will confirm today that the Government will publish the papers that have informed this decision and I hope he will commit to reviewing it. Is that really too much to ask?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. To accommodate everyone who has indicated that they want to speak, I am imposing a seven-minute time limit on speeches.

2.56 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I apologise to you, to the Chamber and to the Minister because I will have to leave before the end of the debate owing to constituency business.

The decision to close the Business, Innovation and Skills office in Sheffield feels like the latest example of Tory scorn for the north. Yet again, we are faced with major job losses in the north as a direct result of the actions of a Government seemingly unable to look beyond the confines of London and the south. We have 247 staff now facing redundancy, having been informed that their jobs would be moving to London. The Government have described this as a transfer, yet they offer no guarantee that those affected will be allowed to transfer if they so wish, only that they “may be able to”. For those facing such uncertain futures, that is small comfort.

In her letter to me, Baroness Neville-Rolfe acknowledged that the Department is

“very likely to take the opportunity to make some of the significant headcount reductions”

that the budget requires. The Department has said that staff will receive comprehensive support, but we do not yet know what the support will involve. We do know that it will most likely not include any financial support for either travel or relocation costs. In effect, the Government’s commitment to staff amounts to a promise that they might be able to keep their job but, if they do, it will be at their own expense, and very likely a significant expense.

The Government’s statements are contradictory. They continue to talk of a transfer. I found Baroness Neville-Rolfe’s words to me to be very telling. She said she would “take the opportunity” to cut jobs. Do the Government really see a huge job loss in the north as an opportunity? Yet again, they label this as a transfer. To do so is deeply disingenuous. This is a job loss, plain and simple. The irony that the Department responsible for the delivery of the northern powerhouse should choose to divert jobs from one of the great northern cities to London is inescapable and sends entirely the wrong message.

Repeated reviews, most recently the Lyons review in 2004 and the Smith review in 2010, have recommended that the Government should decentralise the civil service, as my colleagues have been saying, both to provide better value for money and to enhance career progression outside of London. Yet the proportion of civil servants based in London has increased from 16% in 2010 to 18% in 2015, a move in entirely the wrong direction. The proposed reduction in BIS staff equates to almost 5% of the total civil servants in the city of Sheffield. This is on top of the previously announced closure of Sheffield’s HMRC building, with the loss of 500 jobs.

The St Paul’s building is currently shared by BIS and the Department for Education, with a number of other Departments basing small numbers of staff in the premises. The closure of the BIS office represents a loss of approximately a third of the current workforce. That will inevitably affect the feasibility of the remaining departmental offices, risking yet more job losses. BIS’s other regional offices face an uncertain future, with the risk of more redundancies in the Department’s northern offices. The Government are choosing increasingly to withdraw from the north while simultaneously offering platitudes of support for the northern economy. That has serious consequences not only for the staff who are directly affected but for the wider community and economy.

Each time a decision such as this one is announced, the Government resort to the same old tune. They talk of efficiency savings and the need to provide better value for money, but let us be clear about what is proposed: the Government are moving jobs from the north to London, one of the most expensive cities in the world. To justify the decision on their own terms, it would be reasonable to expect that a detailed business case had been conducted and all possibilities fully explored before we reached this point.

Mike Kane: My hon. friend is making a very powerful point. Does she agree that this decision lacks vision, guts and gravitas? That is particularly true when it is compared with the decision to move parts of the BBC to Salford, which in terms of transferring jobs from London to the north has been one of the greatest success stories. We remember the problems and the noises off in the press at the time about how bad that decision apparently was, but nobody looks back on it now as a bad decision, just as they do not dismiss the resulting efficiency savings and service improvement. The same can be done with the decision on the BIS office.

Sarah Champion: This decision shows a complete lack of common-sense, along with everything else. The Government have still not released a detailed study. Indeed, as the permanent secretary suggested under questioning from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), such a report may not even exist. It beggars belief that the jobs of 247 dedicated staff should be threatened when no business case whatever has been made. I echo the call made by others today for the Government to publish the evidence that underpinned this decision without further delay.

The north has borne the brunt of the Government’s ideologically driven agenda, as it did the last time the Tories were in power. Time and again, we see the Government taking actions that hit the north disproportionately hard. Most recently, they announced a £300 million transitional fund to help local authorities that are struggling to implement Tory cuts. It speaks volumes that the five least deprived local authority areas will collectively receive £5.3 million, while the five most deprived will receive nothing. Each of the five areas most in need are in the north.

Sheffield City Council’s central Government funding has fallen by almost 50% since 2010. From the ever-deeper cuts to local authority budgets to the abject failure to support the steel industry, the Government have shown disdain for the north. A long line of examples show up the empty rhetoric of the northern powerhouse. The Government are delegating cuts to the north and calling it devolution.

3.3 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on securing the debate.

It is good to see the Minister in his place. This is the second time that a Minister has had to be dragged before Labour MPs to account for the decision on the Sheffield BIS office after the shoddy, shocking way in which the announcement was made. There was no consultation or wider strategy; just the permanent secretary turning up on a Thursday morning and a low-key press release on the Government website later that day. So far, we have heard a good deal of rhetoric from Ministers but not a lot of genuine debate.

I hope that today will change things, that the Minister will reflect on this decision, and that we can have a thoughtful conversation, because the workers at risk of being laid off, who I know will be watching closely today, see a plan that, I am sorry to say, seems to be based on assumptions and tired thinking not fit for a Department that is supposed to be preparing us for a century of innovation and change. They see a decision that, as we have heard, is not backed up by a business case that looks at the decision to close the Sheffield BIS office alone and what the office brings. After all, it differs significantly from local offices throughout the country—something Ministers do not seem to have grasped entirely when they signed off the BIS 2020 plan.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) asked for during the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee hearing, after his request for a comprehensive document was rebuffed, any scrap of paper will do—any shred of evidence or jottings on the back of a fag packet. It is clear that nothing has been forthcoming, because we have received nothing at all. As my hon. Friend asked: how much money will this decision save? It is hard to see it saving a single penny of taxpayers' money, not least because the lease for the office will still be held by the Department for Education, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) said.

This is a serious problem. If the Government are to demonstrate any genuine commitment at all to the northern powerhouse, they will have to move away from the lazy assumptions that underlie the justifications for keeping policy making in London Departments, move away from the belief that London water-cooler conversations matter because they take place in close proximity to Ministers, and move away from the belief that the intangible benefits far outweigh historic knowledge of an area and a different perspective on investment in a northern hub.

The Government have shown wanton disrespect for the workforce at the Sheffield office, giving flimsy justifications. First, they were told that the decision was based on saving money, which, as we have heard, will be next to impossible. Then, it was about policy. At a later meeting, it was because the phones and computers did not work properly—this at the Department responsible for innovation, in the 21st century.

The decision reveals tired thinking from senior Whitehall officials who, when asked what they wanted the Department to look like in 2020, came back with the same old Whitehall answer: a centralised command and control HQ,

based in London, where all employees are within eyesight and earshot and fresh perspective is discouraged. When devolution of power and resources is supposed to top the agenda, the Department cannot seriously take a Kremlinesque approach to policy and decision making.

How can we expect a centralised HQ issuing orders from London to have the same insight and perspective on regional investment as we currently enjoy in Sheffield? That perspective has been built over years of working and living in the community and comes with an historic understanding of what works and why our northern regions are so very different from London. It betrays the Government's thinking. When push comes to shove, they have instinctively retreated into their comfort zone, insulating themselves in a London bubble. It says a lot about where the northern powerhouse comes on their agenda that they would prefer civil servants to be close to Ministers rather than providing a distinct perspective on investment in Sheffield.

The water-cooler conversations at BIS must be pretty good, because this decision is so at odds with the supposed direction of travel across Government. The estates report mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central not only found that the cost of space per individual is in Croydon a tenth of what it is in Whitehall, but that the cost of each individual is about 27% higher in London than in other areas of the country, and that the previous Labour Government saved around £2 billion by moving 20,000 civil servants out of London.

Six years after the Smith report said that ministerial behaviour was crucial in overcoming what it termed the "London magnet" and relocating Whitehall, we now have a BIS Secretary doing the exact opposite. The report, which was published just before Labour left power, had at its heart a direction of travel that would move civil servants out of Whitehall to bring the Government closer to the people and stimulate economic vibrancy.

Senior officials categorically admitted to Sheffield employees that they did not even think about the effect on the local economy when they were making their decision, an oversight that flies in the face of years of Government policy, in which the move to cities and regions outside London was supposed to be a standard-bearer for businesses to follow. If the Minister thinks that the author of that report, Ian Smith, was not talking about types of policy roles such as those in Sheffield when he spoke about "ending the London magnet", he is wrong. In fact, Mr Smith argued that "power and career opportunities will only truly move out of London when significant parts of the core policy departments are moved."

Senior BIS officials must have great hopes for the benefits of these water-cooler conversations if they are to override the clear direction of travel of Government; if they outweigh the huge costs, not only per individual employee but of the loss of historic knowledge and perspective in Sheffield; and if they outweigh the terrible message that this sends about concentrating power in London to businesses hoping to locate to a region that BIS is supposed to be helping to grow.

I imagine that even the Minister agrees that the business justification for the Sheffield closure is flimsy, so I want now to turn to why it is so important that we do not lose these jobs in Sheffield. In the near six weeks

since the decision was announced there has been no acceptance of the unique position of this northern policy centre. The Sheffield BIS office is unique. It is part of the headquarters—the only office outside London carrying out the high-level policy functions that civil servants in Whitehall also carry-out, such as analysis of evidence, project management and stakeholder engagement.

In trying to justify the decision, the BIS Secretary was adamant that his plan will continue the existing arrangement where more of his civil servants will be outside of London than inside. I am sorry to say that he either does not get it or is being disingenuous. The description of his Department in an internal advert tells the truth. It says:

“the vast majority of the 2,300 directly employed staff at the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills are based in London”.

That was written before the Sheffield closure was announced. The vast majority—96.7%, as I discovered in a recent parliamentary question—of the Department’s senior civil servants are based in London, as are almost all of the core BIS office staff. If you think I am leaping to—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I call Deirdre Brock.

3.10 pm

Deirdre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. Please excuse my voice. I hope hon. Members can hear what I am saying.

I have to admit that I was surprised when it was revealed at the end of last month that Sheffield is too far north to be part of the northern powerhouse. It struck me that *Private Eye* might know something about it being grim up north London—about the hardship, the economic disadvantage that sometimes seem overwhelming and the deprivation, compared with the easy street life in Yorkshire. What Government could stand idly by and see such inequality last? There was apparently no choice but to move jobs to compensate, so the northern powerhouse is powering south, like so much else in the UK, and being sucked into the black hole that is London and its surrounds.

This decision, we are told, is part of a move to streamline services, centralise staff at BIS and ensure that Ministers have easy access to the knowledge and skills of staff. Is there some difficulty with the internet reaching Sheffield, I wonder? Ministers cannot be uniquely unable to use email and other electronic communication. I bet there are enough people already in London who would be willing to give them the benefit of their personal wisdom.

If this is about cost-cutting, I really cannot understand why staff are being moved somewhere where they have to be paid the London weighting and where office space is ridiculously overpriced. Surely the sensible thing to do would be to close the expensive offices in London and centralise the staff in Sheffield, Doncaster, Leeds, York or indeed anywhere outside the south-east of England—especially, for goodness’ sake, when they are working on the northern powerhouse. That might make sense.

While we are on the subject of north and south, I hope I will be excused a little detour to point out that the northern powerhouse is not very northern. It is

quite a bit south of my constituency, a heck of a distance south of Caithness and Sutherland, and nowhere near Shetland. In fact, Sheffield is three times further away from Inverness than it is from London. It is 140 miles to the capital of the south-east and 409 miles to the capital of the highlands—and that is if there are no diversions. We will keep in mind that it is the northern England powerhouse and forgive the oversight.

The suction that continues to take jobs south needs to be addressed urgently. About one fifth of all civil servants are based in London, according to the Library’s “Civil Service statistics” briefing paper, and another 10% are in the south-east of England. Even Scotland, which runs a whole lot of parallel systems to the UK civil service, has only 10% of the overall headcount. Scotland, of course, is very efficient, but it is clear that there is no great spread of civil service employment. Despite the rhetoric about moving civil service jobs out of London from the Government and, to be fair, their predecessors, the jobs have stayed in London—even those that should be elsewhere—and some are actually moving back to London.

The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills might be too costly to run, too complicated, inefficient and possibly even unfit for purpose, but centralising it in London cannot be the answer. If the Mayor of London is correct and London is a thriving, innovative city, bursting at the seams with businesses hungry for skilful people to work in them, surely it would simply be better for BIS to get out of the way and let them get on with it. If he is wrong and London is struggling to attract businesses, Government Departments should get out of the way to reduce pressure on office rental prices. Either way, Sheffield is surely a better call than London for a Government office.

Of course, this is what the Mayor of London actually thinks:

“the success of this city cannot be taken for granted: the jam from London must not be spread too thinly over the dry Ryvita of the regions.”

That kind of whiff-whaff helps no one. The truth is that sucking public spending into London while the rest of the UK bites down hard on austerity is damaging for every community on these islands. Superheating the London economy does not help ordinary Londoners, who are being pushed out of their own city by living costs and who see their communities destroyed to provide for affluent incomers. Pulling civil service jobs into the south-east of England does not help young professionals who are trying to get ahead and make something of their lives. There is no policy imperative or cost consideration that requires them to be sent to London, and no public good that would be fulfilled. There is no real reason at all for their being in London.

There is time and space for the decision to be reconsidered and for those staff to be located somewhere far more suited to the job they will be doing, as many Members said. Ministers have a chance to do something sensible for a change. There is time to change tack and to do something useful. Instead of running Sheffield down, build it up. Increase the staff there, give the office a boost, give Sheffield a boost with it and give London a break.

3.15 pm

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to voice my dismay at this decision. I thank the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) for securing this debate.

As the Minister knows very well, I am the last person to object automatically to decisions relating to savings in public spending. In fact, I spent half a decade defending decisions for which many hon. Members developed a political cottage industry of blaming me personally—*[Interruption.]* They nod as sanctimoniously now as they condemned me then. That's history, as we say, but that gives me a certain credibility when I claim that I look at this decision with a degree of objectivity. The political subjectivity, of course, comes from the fact that a number of my constituents in south-west Sheffield have been directly affected by it.

All of this stems from the BIS departmental settlement with the Treasury in the spending review in late November 2015. That is the origin of the decision. I want to dwell on why the decision was made in the way that it was, why the Treasury delivered cuts to BIS on such a scale, and why they cascaded down to have such a disastrous effect on Sheffield and the many dozens of BIS employees in the Sheffield office.

I thought to myself, "Perhaps it is because the new Government decided to protect more non-BIS Departments in Whitehall." In other words, perhaps the knock-on effect—the budgetary pressure—on BIS is more remorseless than it was during the five years in which I was Deputy Prime Minister. During that time, we fought to defend a number of BIS programmes—notwithstanding a number of very controversial BIS financial savings. Actually, on closer scrutiny, I found that, far from there being additional protections, some of the protections have been relaxed. For instance, under the coalition Government, and at my personal insistence, schools spending was protected in real terms. It is now not protected in real terms under this Government. There is no wider Whitehall reason why the knock-on effect on the BIS budget should be so much greater than it was in the past.

Then I thought to myself, "Perhaps, to be very fair, this difficult decision can be justified if savings are made"—although I very much tend to agree with what was said earlier. I find it difficult to see any significant material savings from this decision, but let us give the Government the benefit of the doubt. If there are savings, perhaps they are being channelled elsewhere to protect some of the other important BIS initiatives and projects. But no—I discovered that it is part of a much wider cull. In the wider context of the other things that have been scrapped—the Business Growth Service, the Manufacturing Advice Service and the growth accelerator programme—it is more, rather than less, inexplicable. In other words, the savings in that area of the BIS budget are not being recycled to protect other areas.

I looked at the figures, which are as ever—now that I no longer have the excellent help of legions of civil servants—quite difficult to get hold of. The figures that I was able to get hold of from the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the House of Commons Library show something very revealing indeed. It is this. Under the Government of 2010 to 2015, the reductions in the BIS budget, when compared with other Whitehall Departments, put it about mid-table. Some Departments had more

generous settlements and roughly the same number had more reductions. The reduction, which was very significant and led, for instance, to some of those agonising decisions on higher education spending, was just over 18%, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies. In cash terms it was well below a £4 billion saving.

In the latest league table showing where, in the Whitehall jungle, money has been saved in the greatest amounts following the Chancellor's announcement in late November, BIS leaps from mid-table to the position of having the second-largest cut. The cut of 18% under the previous Government has shot up to 26%, well over £4 billion. My central assertion is that that is a choice—not an inescapable guillotine. Perhaps I may say gently but firmly to the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who has done a great job of highlighting the injustice of the decision, that he was very unfair to point the finger at the permanent secretary. The decision was a political choice by the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, who was keen to be top of the class in the Chancellor's Whitehall fan club by delivering the earliest and biggest savings—in my view, excessive savings—to the Treasury when, as I found out over five years, Whitehall Departments are asked, as in a game of pass-the-parcel, to make savings.

That is why I ask the Minister to confirm that the genesis of what is happening was a political decision—not by him but by the Secretary of State—to do more than his duty to the Chancellor, and to deliver such big cuts from BIS that it shot from the middle to second from top of the Whitehall table. The decision was unnecessary and did great damage to a number of other important BIS programmes. It is now doing considerable damage to the livelihoods, families and fortunes of hundreds of people in Sheffield and South Yorkshire.

3.21 pm

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on obtaining the debate, and my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), who did an excellent and thorough job of taking on the paucity of the Government's thinking on and explanation of the decision, and their business case. In passing I would point out to the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) that the key point my hon. Friend was making was that we have not had an explanation showing any savings. We do not know that that is what has driven the decision, and it would be helpful if the Minister would explain. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) for obtaining an urgent question straight after the announcement. That was excellent, although from what I understand we do not seem to have made much progress since then.

The decision is about real people, who have lost their jobs. Darren Shepherd and his colleague Alison came to my surgery on Saturday because they are going to lose their jobs, and they are worried. They are frightened for their families' future. They said to me, "Why is this happening, Mr Betts? Can you tell us why?" I said, "Well, I'm sorry, I can't, because nobody has told me why." That is not an adequate position to put people in when they work hard for the Government and the country, doing a variety of jobs. They do not know why and no

one can explain to them. That is the fundamental question that we are asking today. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central said, it is of benefit to the civil service to have a wider pool from which to draw talent—and it is beneficial to the Government, the people doing the jobs, and the city of Sheffield. The Government will have to work hard to convince us on any of those counts that it was the correct decision to take those jobs from Sheffield and move them to London.

I do not want to say more about the particulars of the staff and their situation, or about the diminishing of the wider pool of talent, although I look forward to the Minister's reply on those points. I want to make a few points about the Government's commitment to devolution. I am the Chair of the Communities and Local Government Committee, which has just produced a report on devolution. We unanimously said:

"We strongly support the principle of devolution. We welcome the fact that, at the start of this new Parliament, it occupies such a prominent position on the Government's agenda."

I agree with that. It is not a party political issue but a commitment to devolution. I welcome the Government's move in that direction. We also said:

"The Devolution Bill is just one part of enabling devolution. There also needs to be an enthusiasm for it across all Government Departments and a commitment to it as the 'default position'"

and that we

"would like to see a culture of devolution embedded in all Government Departments",

an annual report about what Departments do, and an opportunity for local authorities to report back on the Government's commitment to devolution and rate their experience of different Departments. I do not think BIS will get many stars from Sheffield City Council in the devolution report.

If we are to have devolution in what is the most centralised country in western Europe, it cannot be left to the Department for Communities and Local Government to do very good deals with councils including those in the Sheffield city region. The whole of Government must be signed up for it. Therefore, what we are talking about is not just a matter of substance in relation to BIS and its operation, and people's jobs, important though those are—and I will fight hard for my constituents involved in the process—it is also symbolic of the whole Government and their attitude towards devolution. Is devolution a matter of a few deals with local government, or is it a matter of Government policy to which the whole Government, including BIS, is signed up? If it is about a balance and a few pounds of cost difference here or there, or the slightly greater inconvenience for Ministers of getting on the phone or using a video link, the balance must come down in favour of the jobs in Sheffield, as a fundamental indication that the Government are committed to devolution, to pushing powers out to the regions, and at least to keeping the jobs that already exist there.

The term "northern powerhouse" is bandied around. It started with the Chancellor, but many Ministers and MPs now use it. The fundamental question is whether it is just a catchphrase or real policy—empty words or substance. I look forward to the Minister's convincing me in due course.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the Front-Bench speakers, I ask them to bear in mind that I hope there will be time at the end for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) to conclude the debate.

3.27 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful to be speaking under your chairmanship today, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on making the debate possible, and commend him for defending his constituents' right to be heard on a matter that I know is important for the great steel city's community. I do not know whether the Minister or even the permanent secretary recognise this thing called an iPad. FaceTime works. I use it every day in my constituency work, and I am sure that senior civil servants and Ministers could do the same.

I am disappointed that the Secretary of State is not here. I read the urgent statement that was demanded by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh)—and I congratulate her on that—and thought that if it was not so serious it would be a good laugh. It was extraordinary, and I commend the hon. Lady for making sure the statement happened.

I have a long family connection to Sheffield, and over many decades I have seen the rise and fall of British Government policy in the city, as Governments have sought to deal with the aftermath of deindustrialisation while maintaining the quintessentially British Government policy that I would title "South, south, south." Not long ago in the Chamber the Government extolled the virtues of devolution and decentralisation to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but they fail to recognise, or perchance they ignore, the elephant in their English garden—the culture of London centralisation. Yet in "UK Cities Monitor 2008" the north's cities, including Sheffield, were among the top 10 for locating a business, and in third and fourth places for office location. The same report placed Sheffield third for "greenest reputation" and second for availability of financial incentives. I might move there myself. What is not to like? London, the capital of oligarchs and Russian tycoons, offers nothing but the London weighting, which could not buy someone a rabbit hutch, and the prospect of a mute commute more akin to "1984". There is the opportunity to base a civil service Department in one of the UK's friendliest cities and to obtain all the social and economic benefits that that would bring to the entire islands.

I have no doubt about the personal commitment of the Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), to her political ideology or, for that matter, about her knowledge of Sheffield itself given her local connections—it is a pity she is not here today—but I do question the political ideology that is driving this process. While cities such as Sheffield offer new, innovative approaches to growth outside the hothouse of London, offering civil servants the opportunity to move to London or, even worse, to commute from Sheffield is both unproductive in the long term and a socially and economically bankrupt approach. If a civil servant decides to up sticks, either as a single person or with a spouse, partner or family, the policy will generate a burden on London's already overcrowded public services as well as shrinking the affordable housing market.

[*Martin Docherty-Hughes*]

Having read the response to the urgent question on 29 January, I am mindful of the point made by the hon. Member for Blackpool South (Mr Marsden), which I will quickly quote:

“It is also a huge worry...to the 12 other BIS regional offices, six of which are in the north,”—

I take that to mean the north of England—

“that they are at risk from this so-called restructuring.”—[*Official Report*, 29 January 2016; Vol. 605, c. 559-60.]

I call that restructuring policy the London dividend. Like the hon. Member for Blackpool South, I call upon the Minister to set out unambiguously and openly the Government’s approach to that restructuring. Will the Minister here today commit to a restructuring programme that does not drive civil service jobs from the great cultural counties of northern England to the bursting metropolis of London? If that is the policy, then, like those that were once thrown at Scotland, it will undermine community cohesion, erode civic pride and limit both opportunity and resources for cities such as Sheffield. Such cities continue to be undermined by the reality that, according to the Institute for Government, the proportion of civil service jobs in London increased from 16% in 2010 to 18% by March 2015, when there were already 80,000 such jobs in the capital.

It is critical that the Government use their powers to bring about the inclusive growth that the Scottish Government, even with its limited economic powers, have achieved. Scotland has developed a more egalitarian model, which was praised by Professor Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel prize-winning economist, when he said:

“Tackling inequality is the foremost challenge that many governments face. Scotland’s Economic Strategy leads the way in identifying the challenges and provides a strong vision for change.”

Data from 2012-13 show that income inequality is lower in Scotland, and the gender gap in employment in Scotland has also narrowed, but this will not help the northern powerhouse, or even the city of Sheffield, to deal with so many of those matters. The British Government’s approach to growth, as seen in this debate, is short-sighted, limited and exclusionary. It fails to see the tangible assets of its great historic northern counties or the communities who choose to live there.

In finishing, I commend those communities, who, through it all, are resolute and determined to be heard in this place. I would encourage their elected representatives, who I also commend today, not to look south to London for policy answers. I say to them: I challenge you, in meeting the needs of your communities, to turn and look even further north, and consider that inclusive model which I would consider could assist you in seeing off this Government’s ideological drive to limit your cities’ and counties’ ability to be that northern powerhouse; and I challenge you to ensure that the civil service, with all due respect, is representative of the communities that it seeks to serve.

3.34 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on securing this important debate and pay tribute to all my hon. Friends from across the

region, who have worked so hard on their constituents’ behalf to hold the Government to account for their perverse decision.

The announcement by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on 28 January 2016 to close its largest office outside London and transfer staff to London was understandably greeted with shock. My hon. Friends have highlighted the effect it has had on people and their jobs. The announcement came out of the blue. It is confused and short-sighted at best and destructive at worst. Put simply, it makes no sense, economically or otherwise, and the Opposition are calling for the Government to review it. It is bad news for the people of Sheffield and for the civil service, because of the loss of experienced staff and their valuable institutional knowledge. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield), it is also bad for the diversity of the civil service. Indeed, Sir Jeremy Heywood’s comment is germane here:

“talent is everywhere but opportunity is not”.

The move is also bad for the economy of the region. It will divert money from the local economy, further damaging jobs and incomes in Yorkshire. What does that tell us about the Chancellor’s rhetoric about the need to create a northern powerhouse and the importance of regional growth to rebalance the economy? It tells us that it is just rhetoric. This is really about the greater centralisation of power in London, which will create an even bigger gulf between the regions. As a proud northerner, born and bred, I can tell the Minister that that gulf exists. I feel no particular affinity towards London, but I do towards Sheffield, Rotherham and Edinburgh—the cities of the north—because they are where common-sense decisions are often made. If the Government are serious about the northern economy, they should stop moving civil service jobs to London and start providing proper support instead of empty promises. London is overheating and house prices are becoming increasingly unaffordable to ordinary people. The north needs jobs and has the talent to fill them.

The BIS permanent secretary said that the plan to create a combined central headquarters and policy centre in London is about modernising how the Department works, making it more flexible and reducing operating costs. He also claimed that the closure was part of a programme to reduce the Department’s operating costs and staff size by 2020. He said:

“Our operating model needs to be designed in a way that works for this smaller workforce with more streamlined structures.”

I will not even mention the quote about the telephone system and computers not working in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills; I think that was effectively debunked by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh).

The Minister for Small Business, Industry and Enterprise, the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), agreed with the permanent secretary, saying that the closure of the Sheffield office is part of the plan to deliver efficiency savings and contribute to the Government’s deficit reduction target—another blow for the north. However, there appears to be no evidence for any cost saving, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central. How can transferring the work of the office to London, a significantly more expensive location than Sheffield, lead to a reduction in operating costs?

I want to pay tribute at this point to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central, in whose constituency the office is located and who has been at the forefront of the campaign to find any convincing rationale for the move. As he pointed out, nothing approaching a business case been made for the move. The permanent secretary admitted that when he was questioned by the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. On being probed about whether there had been any cost-benefit analysis of the move from Sheffield, he replied:

“We did not do disaggregated business cases for each of the 80 offices we now have.”

He went on to say that there was not even a copy of the board paper that initially proposed the move.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Is it not also shocking that the trade unions were not advised prior to the announcement? What does that say about the Government’s approach to industrial relations? What does it say to the people of Sheffield, who are also seeing other proposed office closures, such as at HMRC?

Yvonne Fovargue: It is symptomatic of the Government’s approach to trade union relations that they feel that the unions are so irrelevant they can be ignored and their power reduced. Many other offices throughout the country are indeed closing, such as the HMRC offices in Merseyside, with a loss of jobs and talent.

In addition, the permanent secretary said:

“I don’t think I can point you to one specific document which covers specifically the Sheffield issue”.

So, 249 people losing their jobs was not covered even by one specific document. That is appalling. Those are weasel words: there is no business case for Sheffield to be closed. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central has tabled written questions to the Secretary of State and written to the Prime Minister asking for the business case to be published. It is still not in the public domain.

I suspect that the real reason for the move is not to save money, but simply a desire to have officials closer to Ministers in London. The phrase used by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, “water-cooler conversations”, is appropriate here—as she said, they must be pretty good conversations to cost that amount of money. The right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) believes this is a political decision that has come the top; other people believe it is a decision of the civil servants. We have no documents; we do not know.

The civil service has become increasingly centralised since 2010. As we have heard, the proportion of civil service jobs based in London has increased from 16% in 2010 to 18% in 2015, when 80,000 civil servants were based in the capital. The decision to close the Sheffield office is completely unacceptable. It has not been properly thought through and it has not been explained to the people most affected—those losing their jobs—or the people who represent them, their Members of Parliament. The decision seems to be based purely on a whim, and I certainly cannot believe that it will save money. In my view, the Government have to come clean on why they are moving these 247 jobs. It is complete nonsense to move jobs to London, where salaries and office rents

are higher. Nobody can see how it makes any sense at all. Public money paid for the 2020 report and we have a right to see it.

Too many decisions are made by people living, working and bringing up children in London, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley. Too many decisions are made by people who have never been outside the capital and they do not draw on the varied experiences of other people from around the regions, who have a totally different experience of life. Policy needs to be developed by people with differing experiences, and the majority of people do not live in London. Will the Minister commit today to reviewing the decision in the light of what he has heard, or will the Government forge ahead and close the Sheffield office, delivering yet another blow to one of the great cities in the north?

3.43 pm

The Minister for Universities and Science (Joseph Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Howarth.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) on securing this important debate, the second on the subject in recent weeks. I commend all right hon. and hon. Members for being present in strength and for speaking on behalf of their constituents.

As right hon. and hon. Members are aware, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills is committed to delivering efficiency savings and to contributing to the Government’s overall deficit reduction target to clear the deficit by 2019-20. To achieve that, we developed the “BIS 2020” programme to modernise how the Department works.

Paul Blomfield: I apologise if I am intervening prematurely—the Minister might be about to tell us this—but will he explain for the first time how much money will be saved by moving 247 jobs from Sheffield to London? It is a simple question.

Joseph Johnson: I will come to savings shortly, so if the hon. Gentleman bears with me for a few seconds, I will get to his question.

The BIS programme will reduce operating costs by 30% to 40% and deliver a simpler, smaller Department that is more flexible in delivery and more responsive to stakeholders. As part of those plans, as right hon. and hon. Members know, the Department has announced its intention to close the BIS office at St Paul’s Place in Sheffield by January 2018. Such decisions are never taken lightly, and providing the right support for and communications with staff has been a priority for the permanent secretary and the entire senior team of the Department. All staff and departmental trade unions were informed of the decision on 28 January and the statutory 90-day consultation process began shortly afterwards. All staff affected by the decision have been fully briefed.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who is no longer in her place, asked what support had been made available to affected staff. I will give the House some detail on that important matter. We are providing comprehensive support to all those facing a potential change or loss of job, including: professional, external careers advice; professional outplacement support;

[Joseph Johnson]

a jobs fair in partnership with the Department for Work and Pensions; time out of the office for job-search activities; and financial advice workshops. In addition, we are exploring all routes to avoid compulsory redundancies, including voluntary exit schemes. There will be no compulsory redundancies before May 2017 as a result of the proposed closure of the Sheffield site.

Many staff will be listening to the debate or watching it on television. The BIS senior leadership wants to ensure that the package of support is comprehensive. If there are things that the Department could be doing, or ways in which we could enhance the support I have outlined, we want to know about it. We want the staff affected to let us know what more the Department can do to support them at this time. We have set up a dedicated email address for them to use, and they have already used the system to make valuable suggestions about ways in which we can enhance the support available. We have been asked by the staff to ensure that updates are regular and frequent. We will be ensuring that that happens. We have already established a dedicated section on the Department's intranet which includes a comprehensive overview of all "BIS 2020"-related matters. We have set out exactly when our Department's senior leadership team will be in Sheffield, so that affected staff may discuss their concerns directly.

Chris Stephens: The Minister has talked about consultation with staff. Will he tell us, first, how many meetings there have been with the trade unions affected? Secondly, will he outline how a responsive Department can be responsive when it closes offices, leading to a lack of local knowledge and no understanding of local areas?

Joseph Johnson: I will happily touch on part of that question. We are now in the 90-day consultation period. The consultation is on a range of issues, including the future of the staff in Sheffield, so—in response to an earlier question from Opposition Members—the future of staff in the city is only one of the issues being consulted upon. Legally, we may confirm the decision on closure before the end of the consultation, but I am happy to confirm that we will wait until the end of the full 90-day period before making a final decision. In response to the hon. Gentleman's specific question, we have had regular meetings with trade union officials.

To continue, the Department needed to be restructured in line with its new business model under the "BIS 2020" framework. In answer to the question from the hon. Member for Sheffield Central, that will deliver savings of £350 million by 2020, of which approximately £100 million will fall in the administration budgets.

Paul Blomfield: With the greatest respect, the Minister did not answer my question. I presume that the matter has been looked at in considerable detail, because I am sure that no such decision would be made in any less responsible way. My question was: how much money is saved specifically by moving 247 policy jobs from Sheffield to London?

Joseph Johnson: I would fall back on the response that the permanent secretary gave to the Select Committee on that point: it is difficult to disaggregate a specific item in an overall programme change. The overall "BIS 2020"

programme is an holistic system change of working for the Department that will deliver savings of 30% to 40%, worth £350 million overall.

Mr Betts: May I ask the question a different way around? If the Department pursued its restructuring and the "BIS 2020" programme, but left the jobs in Sheffield, how much more would that cost the Department?

Joseph Johnson: Again, I am unable to provide a disaggregated breakdown of that figure because we are talking about a system change. We must bear in mind that the Department's current locations are legacy locations, which are the result of legacy decisions and ad hoc organisational changes over a long period of time. We are moving to a more system-based way of looking at all the various ways in which the Department works. In future, our structures need to be, and will be, designed in a more streamlined and efficient way.

To support that effort, we will be bringing down the number of locations from which we operate from about 80 to approximately seven centres of excellence, supported by a regional footprint for work at a local level. Each centre will focus on a key business activity and bring together expertise and help to build up capability. That does not mean a London-centric Department, as has been suggested by Members. Even with the movement of policy roles to London, our overall London footprint will decrease by 2020. We have, and will continue to have, many more people based outside than inside London.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way; he is being generous. The point we were making was exactly that the Sheffield BIS office is not like other local and regional offices throughout the country; they are the only headquarters outside London where policy decision making is done. Does he not accept that this closure is a serious blow to the Government's northern powerhouse and to devolution, which exposes that all as empty rhetoric?

Joseph Johnson: Clearly I disagree with that. We will not be losing the capabilities. We will be moving a number of the jobs, and some jobs will become available in London, so the policy expertise that resides in Sheffield at present will not be lost.

The hon. Member for Sheffield Central asked about equality. BIS is recognised across Whitehall as a leader in its support and determination to embed diversity across the Department's workforce, and that will continue to be the case in the years ahead, notwithstanding these changes. The Department employs about 18,000 staff outside of London and just over 2,000 are based in the No. 1 Victoria Street headquarters in London.

Paul Blomfield: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Joseph Johnson: I will make a bit of progress, if I may.

We are certain that that footprint, and our BIS local capability in particular, will ensure that BIS will maintain a nationwide perspective on policy issues. The hon. Gentleman who just tried to intervene—I am responding to his earlier intervention—was concerned about our ability to maintain policy capability in the light of the expertise that resides in Sheffield. As I said, there will be opportunities for people from Sheffield to move to

London and other places, and we are confident that we will be able to maintain the high quality of work in the higher education and other policy directorates.

As the Minister for Universities and Science, since last May I have been working closely with higher education officials in Sheffield, and I am very happy with the work that they have done. They have consistently provided excellent support, and I want to thank them very much for their work. I reiterate that the Department's decision was not taken lightly, but I am confident that our higher education policy making capability will remain as strong as ever.

In response to the points made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) on the northern powerhouse, the Government are completely committed to Sheffield and its surrounding area as part of the northern powerhouse. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, along with the Department for Communities and Local Government, has been working closely with the local council and the local enterprise partnership to produce an enhanced, landmark devolution deal, which will see a Sheffield city region mayor elected for the first time next year by voters across South Yorkshire. The mayor will have transport budgets, franchised bus services and strategic planning, plus additional devolved powers for the area's combined authority. The mayor will also get control of an investment fund worth £30 million a year for 30 years.

Mr Clegg: I have a really friendly suggestion for how the Minister can honour the stirring rhetoric about the Government's commitment to the northern powerhouse and to the long-term vibrancy of the Sheffield economy in particular. Will he undertake to all of us here now that he will personally make representations to the Secretary of State for Transport, the Chancellor and, if necessary, the Prime Minister to locate the high-speed railway station due to be located in South Yorkshire in—

Kevin Barron: Meadowhall.

Mr Clegg—no, not in Meadowhall, but in Sheffield city centre? The northern powerhouse is built around the vibrancy of city centres. Ignore the cacophony of different voices from the Labour party in South Yorkshire and locate the station there and, not all, but quite a lot will be forgiven.

Joseph Johnson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising an important point about the new transport connections that will improve the competitiveness of businesses in the north of England and the northern powerhouse area. That highlights the important point that, first of all, the northern powerhouse is about stimulating private sector growth, jobs and economic activity. It is not about preserving an aspect exactly the way things are across the whole of the state and the public sector—that is not what the northern powerhouse is about as an idea. It is about building better transport links, for instance through the creation of the Transport for the North body, and investing in things such as our science base, which we are now able to do thanks to the great science settlement we got in the spending review, which will help great institutions such as the Sir Henry Royce Institute, the Institute for Ageing in Newcastle and the National Graphene Institute in Manchester, which have all been able to come into existence in the north and help to drive productivity up in the area.

Mr Betts: The northern powerhouse is about private investment, and that is important, but so is the symbol that the Government give about their commitment. We cannot get precise figures about the savings for the Department in moving these staff, but does the Minister agree that his permanent secretary could scope out an alternative model of how the Government would operate—with all the changes and the policy streams, but with staff remaining in Sheffield—to see what the difference is, and would he publish that, so that we can have an open and transparent consultation?

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. There is great strength of feeling here. I hope the Minister will leave time for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron).

Joseph Johnson: Thank you, Mr Howarth. I want lastly to address this false picture—[HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question!"]—that is being presented of jobs being sucked into the economy in the south. The north of England is one of the fastest-growing regions of the country in terms of jobs growth and employment. The north-east and north-west are seeing very strong employment growth. We are confident that our long-term economic plan will continue to deliver jobs and opportunities for all the people in the area.

This has obviously been a very difficult decision for the Department. We are listening closely to staff to see how we can improve the support available to them and we will be listening closely to them in the weeks and months ahead. I will leave time for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley to conclude.

3.57 pm

Kevin Barron: First of all, may I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate? It has been fascinating. I will quickly nip through one or two things that have been said. I did not know about the problems we have with phones in Sheffield—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) said that the workforce had been told that. I thank the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) again: we do have the internet in Sheffield and South Yorkshire, and it does tend to work. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, modern IT is a way to brief Ministers as well. Let me relate a little to that: iPads do work, as well as the Scottish National party. I did an interview live on Radio Sheffield at twenty past eight this morning, sat in my lounge, in a house in West Yorkshire, using a landline. I said to the interviewer at the time, "Twenty years ago I would have had to have got on the bus, gone into the studio and sat in Millbank to have the interview," because they could not have coped with what are now everyday things. The idea that we are concerned about phone lines and everything else is just a little too much.

I was interested by the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg). This is a political decision in the end and we have to accept that. I was here yesterday afternoon when we were talking about pharmacies. The Government decided to cut £170 million from pharmacies as part of the national health service's £22 billion of efficiency savings, and today they tell us that they will put £10 billion back. If someone took £22 from me and gave me £10 back, I would think I had lost and I would not be happy with that.

[Kevin Barron]

I recognise that we do not have much time, but may I say this to the Minister? He says that the decision has not been taken lightly, but from the interaction we have had here, I can say that it has been taken without much knowledge of what the Department wants to do, and if I were a member of the workforce, I would not be very happy to have that fait accompli put in front of me. I still think there is time to reconsider the decision and I hope that the Government will do so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the closure of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills office in Sheffield.

Disabilities, Poverty and Inequalities

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

4 pm

Natalie McGarry (Glasgow East) (Ind): I beg to move,

That this House has considered disabilities, poverty and inequalities.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and an honour to have secured this debate, which is on an issue that is vital to people in all parts of the country. I also thank my colleagues for coming along to consider the association between disabilities and poverty, as well as organisations such as Inclusion Scotland and Disability Rights UK, which have been so kind in assisting me in my preparation for this debate. It is my real hope that this debate will contribute to putting this issue more firmly on the Government's agenda and that the Minister will commit today to doing more to address it.

Ours is a disabling society. Some are born impaired. Some acquire impairments, some of which are visible and others invisible. All of us at some time will feel the invisible agency of a society that is organised for the convenience of able bodies. It is a society that adds to disabilities. Poverty and inequality affect a hugely diverse range of people in every constituency represented in this Parliament, but those living with disabilities especially and disproportionately face economic hardship, which for too long successive Governments have failed to tackle effectively.

While headline poverty rates suggest that disabled people are around 10% more likely to be in poverty than the population at large, it is generally thought that those figures significantly underestimate the scale of the problem. As is so often the case, the statistics fail to take into account the acutely increased costs and pressures that disabled people can face. Indeed, we know that the link between inequality and disability is reciprocal.

On the one hand, the high costs associated with living with a disability can push disabled people and their families into poverty, as many struggle with the greater costs of care, accommodation and transport. Recent research from the disability charity Scope has shown that disabled people spend an average of £550 per month on disability-related expenses—things such as taxis, increased heating and electricity consumption and the cost of maintaining equipment. As a result, those with disabilities are twice as likely to have unsecured debt totalling over half of their income, and they have on average £108,000 fewer savings and assets than non-disabled people.

On the other hand, the health and social inequalities that are so acutely felt in more deprived areas can contribute to a higher rate of disability in the most disadvantaged communities of the country. We need to recognise that being born into and growing up in poverty can have profound impacts on a child's health, wellbeing and fitness at birth and in later life.

Statistics from the Department for Work and Pensions demonstrate the extent of the disparities between more and less advantaged communities in the UK. It may be an imperfect measure of the total incidence of disability, but the DWP's own figures on personal independence

payments show that people in more affluent areas are less likely to require disability-related support. In the Prime Minister's constituency of Witney, 405 people received PIP in October 2015. In Chingford and Woodford Green, represented by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, 495 claimants were paid PIP, while 680 constituents of the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People received that support. Take as a contrast my constituency of Glasgow East, where in October 2015 1,806 people received personal independence payments. It is astonishing that my constituents are a staggering four and a half times more likely than the Prime Minister's to be in receipt of crucial disability-related support.

Too often at my surgeries and around my constituency, I meet people whose experience of poverty has contributed to or exacerbated their disability and whose financial security is threatened every month by disability-related costs. Despite plenty of evidence that this is a deep-rooted structural issue, we have so far failed to assert the sharp focus that is so desperately required to build sustained progress for disabled people and remove the links between disability and poverty. Our collective failure to do so is harming families across the country.

Today in the UK, a third of people in poverty live in a household with at least one disabled person. One in three children in Scotland who live with a disabled adult live in poverty, compared with one in five children living in poverty who do not live with a disabled adult. Disabled people can face increased cost pressures, and families with a disabled member face disproportionately a serious social gradient.

Research for the organisation Parenting across Scotland has found that families living with disability find it even more difficult to make ends meet, with 54% of parents in Scotland with a disability finding it more difficult to pay the bills than a year ago, compared with 29% of non-disabled parents. Some 25% of disabled parents in Scotland report problems getting affordable credit, compared with 8% of non-disabled parents. Meanwhile, 26% of disabled parents were being paid less than the real living wage, compared with 10% of non-disabled parents. It is clear that families living with disability are disproportionately and unacceptably bearing the brunt of the economic inequality that increasingly defines our society.

Wealthy families in Britain are a third less likely to have a disabled child—a statistic that reveals an alarming social gradient, because those families are pushed further into poverty by the pressures of caring for those children. People with disabilities and impairments are some of the poorest and most marginalised in the country. Academics at the University of Warwick's School of Health and Social Studies published a paper in *BMC Pediatrics* showing that families bringing up a disabled child are at least £50 a week worse off than those without.

A family bringing up a child with a disability will face 18% higher costs in their family budget. That is because, for example, a disabled baby needs more nappies. A family's ability to work and find affordable childcare is a real burden. Households with disabled children will depend more on social security benefits and face the additional financial costs associated with caring for a disabled child. Fuel costs for specially adapted cars are often higher than average, and the fact that those with the most severe disabilities have to attend hospitals and clinics weekly or even daily for therapies and treatments can have an enormous impact on family budgets.

Extra energy costs are also incurred because homes often have to be kept warmer in order to protect people with disabilities from colds and bugs, to which they are especially vulnerable. Disabled children living in poverty are often housebound due to the nature of their condition, and for those with the most severe disabilities, a warm home can truly mean the difference between life and death.

If we are ever to break the poverty-disability link, we need a long-term plan to tackle deprivation, lift communities out of poverty and ensure a decent standard of living for every single person in our country. While the UK Government's policies are sadly taking us in the wrong direction in that respect, I know there are Members on all sides of the House who agree we need to do more to ensure a better quality of life for disabled people across the UK.

Of course, this issue affects a great many people not only in this country but in every corner of the world, and there is an important international dimension to the debate. Globally, one in seven people have a disability, and 80% of disabled people around the world live in poverty. In the developing world, we see the same reciprocal relationship between poverty and disability, only with even more striking effects. In a great many countries, people living in poverty simply do not have adequate access to the healthcare, clean water and sanitation that we in the UK take for granted. As a result, they are even more vulnerable to malnutrition and disease. They are also more likely to live and work in dangerous or disaster-prone areas, all of which means that poor people in the developing world are more likely to acquire an impairment that leads to disability.

Disabled people in the developing world, as is the case here, can also too often find themselves excluded from healthcare, education, employment and opportunities to participate in their communities, meaning that those living with disabilities often constitute the poorest people in the poorest countries on earth. The Government's international development agenda has recognised the specific need to assist disabled people, but non-governmental organisations and charities, such as CBM UK, are telling us that more needs to be done by the Department for International Development.

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): Thank you, Sir Roger, for chairing this debate. Does the hon. Lady agree that, in the light of the sustainable development goals, which are accepted and have been adopted by 170 nations in the world—Britain is a signatory—the Minister should agree to provide support to those families and particularly disabled people so that they can have a better standard of living?

Natalie McGarry: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for succinctly making that point, and I completely agree with him.

As we know, people with disabilities are most at risk in conflict situations, meaning that our diplomatic and humanitarian response is vital in supporting disabled people. One in five refugees in Jordan and Lebanon is affected by physical, sensory or intellectual impairment—a chilling illustration of the cost of the warfare raging in Syria today.

Internationally, the UK must champion diplomatic solutions that will help to end conflict, alleviate poverty and support disabled people in some of the most desperate

[Natalie McGarry]

places on earth. At the world humanitarian summit in May in Istanbul, DFID's representatives must highlight the importance of the inclusion of disabled people as a core element of an effective humanitarian response.

However, there is so much more to do here in the UK to break the poverty-disability link as well, and although the lives of disabled people in conflict zones and the developing world can only be transformed through international co-operation on development and humanitarian assistance, here in the UK, we in this place have the primary responsibility to improve the lives of people living with disabilities. As a starting point at least, we need to make sure that people and families living with disability have the financial support that they need to get by without the fear of a life lived in poverty. We have a serious responsibility to invest more in a system of social protection that meets disabled people's needs and tackles the pernicious inequalities that they face.

Of course, that is not in keeping with the current direction of political travel in this place. It is hard to escape the fact that the UK Government's austerity agenda is immeasurably harming the finances of disabled people in the UK, pushing many more into poverty and making difficult lives even harder. The introduction of universal credit is hitting families with disability particularly hard, as those previously claiming the middle or higher rate of the care component of disability living allowance will no longer receive the severe disability premium.

In Scotland, 80% of households hit by the bedroom tax include at least one disabled person. Changes to incapacity benefit have cost householders on average £3,480 a year and changes to disability living allowance have cost people £3,000 a year. In England, according to estimates from the Centre for Welfare Reform, cuts to welfare, social care and other services mean that disabled people are facing an average cumulative cut of £4,600 a year.

It is simply not acceptable that disabled people are being treated as fair game for the Government's austerity agenda and yet, further cuts to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group went through Parliament yesterday. That will further disincentivise work for people with disabilities and push thousands more people with long-term illnesses and disabilities into financial hardship.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): One of my constituents who experiences disability is unable to read some of the information that is required to make her personal independence payment application and, as a result, relies on the citizens advice bureau to support her. Does the Minister accept that some people require additional support to make their applications, and acknowledge that, rather than penalising people such as my constituent, they need assistance to live independently and make their way in the world?

Natalie McGarry: I thank my hon. Friend for making that hugely important point. In my constituency, I have also seen the lack of access to readable documents and support, particularly for people with mental health issues as well as literacy issues, and that has caused them adverse harm.

Employment and support allowance was envisaged as a way of supporting people with limited capacity for work as a result of sickness and disability. It sought to recognise the barriers that disabled people face in seeking work—the disabling attitudes, the disabling environments and the additional costs that disabled people bear, day to day, just leading their lives. ESA extended a small measure of recognition for the inequality that our society generates, and now even that small gesture is to be torn away.

Paul Farmer, the chief executive of Mind, is reported as saying:

“People being supported by ESA receive a higher rate than those on JSA because they face additional barriers as a result of their illness or disability, and typically take longer to move into work. Almost 60 per cent of people on JSA move off the benefit within 6 months, while almost 60 per cent of people in the WRAG need this support for at least two years.”

What assessment have the Government made of the impact of this measure on disabled people?

According to a survey conducted by the Disability Benefits Consortium, almost a third of people on ESA who were surveyed said that they cannot afford to eat on the levels of ESA that they receive now. Inclusion Scotland has said that the proposals are

“a direct attack on the living standards of disabled people, their families, carers and children and will result in hundreds of thousands more being plunged into poverty and destitution”.

I hope that today the Minister can justify the Government's approach to supporting disabled people and explain how cuts to social protection funding will take disabled people out of poverty. Unfortunately, I fear that the newest cuts will continue to do what this Government's austerity project has already done and cause additional financial difficulties for people living with disabilities.

Poverty and disability should not have to be so closely intertwined, and with a concerted effort to reform our social security system and ensure that disabled people have an adequate income and decent, appropriate employment opportunities, we can address the severe inequalities that disabled people experience.

We know that poverty and disability can be mutually reinforcing and that disabled people have too often been let down by decisions made in this place, which in recent years has tended to make their situation worse. However, this Government's record has too often been to deny or explain away the statistics when confronted with them, and to deny the impact that their policies are having on real people in real communities across the UK. I somewhat suspect—though I hope not—that that will continue today. I very much hope that the Minister takes this opportunity to prove me wrong.

4.17 pm

The Minister for Employment (Priti Patel): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Roger. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Glasgow East (Natalie McGarry) and congratulating her not only on securing this debate, but on her incredibly thoughtful and instructive contribution. She highlighted a number of issues, and I think it is probably fair to say that we completely agree on 95% of those, such as her assessment of the barriers that people with disabilities face; the recognition that their circumstances are difficult, and therefore that we have, quite rightly, social security

protections in place for them; and that there is always more that we can do. There was also her reflection on past Governments' approaches and the failures of systems to provide the right kind of support—adequate support—for people who have been stuck in poverty and have faced barriers and inequalities. The real difficulties, hardships and challenges associated with disabilities were also absolutely recognised by her, and I pay tribute to her on that basis.

I also want to comment on the hon. Lady's reflection on disability, inequality and poverty at an international level. She was right in this debate to highlight the significance of the challenges that communities and individuals face around the world. For many millions of people internationally—we should put this in some kind of context—particularly in the underdeveloped world and in developing economies and countries, the barriers that they face are enormous for a wide range of reasons. It is not just about access to healthcare or support; it is the fact that the development of their economies and their societies is taking a very different trajectory from ours and they do not have the type of provisions we have in place for people who are experiencing poverty, disabilities or barriers.

If I may speak in the UK context and bring this back to home, the Department for Work and Pensions and the present Government have consistently focused—as, to be fair, did the previous Government—on the fact that when it comes to tackling poverty and inequality, the aim of our welfare reforms has been to secure employment opportunities, putting into practice the principle that work is the best route out of poverty. Evidence shows that nearly three quarters of workless families who have found full employment have escaped poverty.

Specifically—I will come to some of the points that the hon. Member for Glasgow East raised—we are very much focused, in the policy changes that we are making, on helping people with health conditions and disabilities to overcome some of the clear and stark barriers that they have faced in obtaining employment, so that they can rightly benefit from having access to employment opportunities and being in work. At the same time, we are also focused on protecting people through social security. For those who are vulnerable in society, particularly disabled people—it is worth highlighting that spending on the main disability benefits went up by over £2 billion in real terms over the course of the previous Parliament—it is right that we have the right kind of financial protection in place.

Universal credit was mentioned. We have brought in new exemptions for households entitled to carer's allowance and the UC carer element, as well as for households receiving guardian allowance, which will be brought forward at the end of the year.

This is a much wider debate on how Government policy can help to transform people's lives by tackling the root causes of poverty, supporting people into work and helping them progress. It is not just about yo-yoing or cycling in and out of the benefits system. I refer specifically to universal credit, which will support people, whatever their circumstances, to put the right frameworks in place to help them into work. At the same time, our focus has been on supporting more disabled people into work. We have made good progress, and 3.2 million disabled people are currently in employment. That is an increase of more than 150,000 over the past year.

My colleague, the Under-Secretary of State for Disabled People, is focusing on a huge agenda for employment, to halve the employment disability gap and—there was a debate in the House yesterday on our wider welfare reforms—by means of the Disability Confident campaign, to bring together more employers to work with us to create employment opportunities for people with disabilities, to challenge attitudes to disabilities, to help remove potential employment barriers and, importantly, to ensure that people who have barriers and disabilities have the opportunity to fulfil their potential.

It is important to highlight that many parliamentary colleagues across all parties are doing a great deal of work in their constituencies to promote and support the concept of Disability Confident and working with employers in their constituencies. I am happy to work with the hon. Lady and her colleagues to look at some practical things we can do, not just in her constituency, but in others throughout Scotland. We are working with employers to do a lot more to bridge the employment disability gap. At the same time, a lot of good work is taking place in our jobcentres to change attitudes and to work with employers and bring more together.

Natalie McGarry: I thank the Minister for the tone of her response so far. I congratulate the Government on their target of halving the disability employment gap, but in the Department for Work and Pensions the number of advisers for disabled people is disproportionately low, which is a real barrier to helping people into work.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady touched on the employment and support allowance, which was also part of the debate in the House yesterday. Some clear reforms are taking place and we are committed to publishing a White Paper in the spring which will focus on how we can provide the right kind of support and not just financial support. We are great believers in practical support. We are making sure that advisers and the right kind of support are in place to help people with barriers and disabilities and to give them the right guidance and the support that they need. At the same time, we are investing a lot more.

In our summer Budget there was provision of at least £115 million for a joint work and health unit to improve the work and health outcomes for people with health conditions and disabilities. The unit has started work. We are also working with disability charities to look at the right way—we will have pilots around the country—to provide practical support and schemes to support people with barriers and health conditions. Mental health is a classic example. The Government are committed to a lot of funding for mental health provision. In particular, we are seeking through this unit to join up the provision and to make sure the signposting and the right sort of provision can take place.

Angela Crawley: Last week, I met employees at the jobcentre in my local area who spoke extensively about their work to support people back into employment. They raised the point that a large percentage of those who present at the jobcentre suffer from mental ill health. Does the Minister accept that these people require a longer period of support to sustain long-term employment? That may cost the Government more in the long run, but will benefit their lives.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to highlight that. We know that the challenges and barriers facing people with mental health problems are enormous. One purpose of universal credit is to support them while they try out work and undertake employment that may stretch them in the long run, and support them in work as well. At the same time, we must do more to work with employers. The Government do not have all the answers. Employers and their organisers have great health and occupational health support, and we must look at how we can leverage that to support individuals in employment.

If nothing else, this debate has highlighted that, yes, more needs to be done and we cannot stand still. Through our White Paper and the joint work between DWP and the Department of Health, the Government are looking at how to bring resources together in the right sort of structured way to ensure that we can deliver the services that in the long run can transform lives. These people are furthest away from the labour market. Their lives have been challenging for many reasons and they need the right sort of support to provide them with motivation and encouragement to get out of the cycle of inequality, deprivation, poverty and the combined factors that have stopped them from working in the past.

I am conscious of the time, Sir Roger, so in conclusion I want to emphasise that through the reforms and our current work—a White Paper will be published—the Government are committed to enabling not just disabled people, but those with health conditions and barriers, to fulfil their full potential while protecting the most vulnerable. I look forward to working with the hon. Member for Glasgow East and some of her colleagues when the White Paper is published and hearing their views on how we can do more to support people with these conditions back into work.

Question put and agreed to.

Crohn's and Colitis Treatment: England

4.29 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the treatment of people with Crohn's and colitis in England.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am aware that there are different treatments in Scotland and Wales, but I want to focus on Crohn's disease and colitis in England.

I am pleased to be leading this very important debate on Crohn's and colitis, which affect more than 250,000 people in England and 300,000 in the UK. I have been working with the charity Crohn's and Colitis UK, some of whose members are here today. They would be delighted to meet any hon. Members participating in the debate because they would like to get some publicity for that particularly wonderful charity, which is based in my constituency in St Albans. It does a tremendous amount of work for those who live with these challenging conditions.

I am also pleased to say that I have been reading the feedback from the digital debate on Facebook. That is a new concept, and I am very pleased that the House is offering it. I wish to express my thanks to Crohn's and Colitis UK and the Westminster Hall digital debate team for arranging the online forum. We received 1,068 comments on the forum, and the posts were shared 258 times and liked 734 times, so it has been highly informative to this debate.

Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis are the two main forms of inflammatory bowel disease. Both are chronic lifelong conditions that cause inflammation of the digestive system. Ulcerative colitis affects only the large intestine, whereas Crohn's disease affects the whole digestive system. According to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, it is estimated that in the UK 115,000 people have Crohn's disease and 146,000 have ulcerative colitis. That is an estimated 460 people per constituency. I keep using the word "estimated" because there is no national database. At my last meeting with the charity, it stressed that it would very much like there to be a national database and better record keeping on those people who are presenting with the disease.

The most common symptoms of inflammatory bowel disease include diarrhoea, cramping pains in the abdomen, tiredness and fatigue, and loss of appetite and loss of weight. The exact causes of Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis are unclear, but there is evidence that IBD can cluster in families, and having an affected family member is a risk factor. IBD is a lifelong condition, but people can get it at any age. It most commonly first presents in the teenage years and early twenties—the mean age of diagnosis is 29.5 years. About 18,000 new cases of IBD are diagnosed each year, and that number is increasing. This is not a trivial complaint. IBD can be painful, disrupt normal activities and reduce quality of life, particularly during periods of active disease. These conditions can affect the individual's ability to work, learn, socialise and form and maintain relationships.

We British are famous for our lavatorial sense of humour, and just saying the word "bottom" or "bum" is usually enough to bring on a fit of the giggles, so it is no surprise that we, the British public, are not good at discussing bowel problems or even seeking help for

them—no wonder IBD has been described as a hidden disease. That reluctance can lead to sufferers feeling isolated and stigmatised.

According to Crohn's and Colitis UK, the causes of IBD are a combination of factors. Those include the genes that a person has inherited, together with an abnormal reaction of the immune system to certain bacteria in the intestines, probably triggered by something in the environment. Viruses, bacteria, diet, smoking and stress have all been suggested as environmental triggers, but there is no definitive evidence that any one of those is the cause of IBD. That is why, as I know the charity would also say, we need more research and more evidence. We need IBD to have a higher profile, as it affects so many of our constituents.

There is currently no cure for Crohn's or colitis. The main aim of treating IBDs is either to heal the inflammation and so reduce symptoms during a flare-up or to prevent flare-ups from happening. NICE has recommended a number of different medicines for IBD, which can be taken in different ways by patients, but if individuals do not respond to medication, surgery is considered as an option—20% of people with ulcerative colitis and about 60% to 70% of people with Crohn's disease go on to have surgery. A large number of our constituents will be forced to have surgery as a result of the disease. The lifetime medical costs for IBD are comparable to those for other major diseases such as diabetes and cancer. It is estimated to cost £900 million per annum, UK-wide. Crohn's and Colitis UK currently funds about £500,000-worth of research every year into the causes of, and treatments and care for, people with IBD. Although that sounds like a large amount of money, in terms of the number of sufferers it is not a large amount.

There is a new research study under way from the National Institute for Health Research, called the IBD BioResource. The aim is to accelerate research into Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis and build on recent major advances in the understanding of the genetic basis of these conditions. The IBD BioResource is being launched for roll-out nationwide through 2016. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister how much support the Government are giving to the IBD BioResource study.

Crohn's and Colitis UK says that there is a low level of awareness of IBD among the public, policy makers and even clinicians. It says:

“Public awareness of IBD is lower than for Parkinson's and MS”—

multiple sclerosis—

“respectively, despite more people being affected by IBD than both diseases combined.”

Most of us will be very familiar with those two diseases.

At this point, I want to include some of the comments from the digital debate on Facebook. One contributor said:

“I've had Crohn's for 18 years. For me it's pain, fatigue and always having to explain to people what's wrong with me and why I can't come to work or do things.”

Another referred to:

“The Stigma of having a bowel disease. People not believing you and belittling how you feel because they can't see it.”

Another said that we need:

“To raise more awareness of the illness! Make people more aware of what we go through on a day to day basis!”

Another talked about:

“Having to try, and try, and TRY to make people realise that it's a disability and that just because you 'don't look ill' (in a wheelchair) you still have issues that they will never understand.”

Many made the point that the illness controls and disrupts their lives to such an extent that they are in fact disabled by it. It is a hidden disability, and many call for it to be recognised as a disability. Therefore my question for the Minister is this: what are the Government doing to increase awareness of inflammatory bowel disease, and what are they doing to measure accurately the number of people living with IBD in England?

The charity tells me that early diagnosis of Crohn's and colitis can prevent emergency hospital admissions, which have a cost to the NHS, and can help to avoid clinical complications. Unfortunately, in a substantial number of cases, that is simply not happening. Studies have shown that 35% of people with Crohn's and 16% of people with colitis had three or more emergency admissions before they received their diagnosis.

In the digital debate on Facebook, a sufferer said:

“I was treated for 6 months by my GP for food poisoning and/or anorexia before eventually ending up hospitalised as an emergency. The hospital did biopsies that day and confirmed Crohn's. My Crohn's turned out to be particularly aggressive and unresponsive to treatment and numerous surgeries.”

Another said:

“GPs need to be more up to date with IBD and stop saying it's just a virus or IBS”—

irritable bowel syndrome. They continued:

“It took quite a few years of pain and complaining before I was diagnosed with Ulcerative Colitis.”

There is clear guidance from NICE on referral. The NICE quality standard for IBD states that people who have been experiencing abdominal pain or discomfort, bloating or a change in bowel habits, such as diarrhoea, with or without rectal bleeding, for at least six weeks should be suspected of having IBD. However, the feedback is clear that for many that is currently not happening and the guidance is not being followed.

NICE recommended faecal calprotectin testing as an option to help doctors to distinguish between inflammatory bowel diseases, such as Crohn's and colitis, and non-inflammatory bowel diseases, such as IBS. That testing should enable quicker identification of suspected IBD and referral to a specialist, and reduce the number of unnecessary endoscopies carried out. Therefore more effective use of faecal calprotectin testing in primary care should enable quicker and more economical diagnosis of IBD patients, ensuring better and more efficient care in England.

What steps will the Minister take to improve the identification of suspected IBD? What are the Government doing to increase awareness of IBD in general practice among GPs? What steps will she take to improve the rate of referral of people with suspected IBD from primary care to the experts in secondary care? Will the Department undertake an evaluation of the uptake of faecal calprotectin testing by clinical commissioning groups, which NICE recommends, and the time taken by labs to process the results?

The IBD standards have been widely recognised throughout the IBD community, and later rounds of the IBD audit have benchmarked IBD services directly against them, but there is still a lot to do. Some 14% of services are still unable to provide people with Crohn's or colitis

[Mrs Anne Main]

with access to an IBD specialist nurse. Many of us would think of having access to a Parkinson's specialist nurse, but IBD specialist nurses are few and far between, and many that have them struggle to maintain that vital service. Nearly one in four—23%—of all services have no access to specialist nutritional support despite the high level of malnutrition experienced by people suffering with IBD. Only 12% of services have a clear process to enable people with IBD to see a psychologist or a counsellor with a particular knowledge of IBD, and IBD has been described on many occasions as being a traumatising disease that leaves many people feeling isolated and unable to discuss with anyone—sometimes even their closest partners and friends—the reasons why they are often ill.

Sufferers complained online of a postcode lottery with IBD nurses. The lack of nurses was cited by many, who also said that GPs needed more training to identify people with Crohn's and to assist in providing faster referrals or appointments when treatments need adjusting. Some sufferers found that their GP even seemed reluctant to make those referrals. Many sufferers said that employers need to have a greater awareness of the impact of IBD on their employees, especially given that flare-ups can occur at any time.

What is the Department doing to ensure the implementation of the IBD standards in England, and can the Minister give assurances to those living with IBD that they will not be forgotten on a strategic level by the NHS? What action is the Department taking to ensure that the NICE quality standard for IBD disease is being implemented across England? For those living with IBD, debilitating symptoms such as diarrhoea can occur instantly and unpredictably. Crohn's and Colitis UK has been championing quick access to suitable toilet facilities. I hope the Minister will encourage all local authorities to evaluate the public toilet provision in their locality.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab): Increasing access to toilets away from home is of benefit to all groups in society but it is especially crucial for those living with Crohn's and ulcerative colitis, who have concerns about not reaching a toilet in time. Does the hon. Lady believe that other nations in the UK can learn from Welsh Labour's Public Health (Wales) Bill, which treats access to toilets as a public health issue?

Mrs Main: It certainly is a public health issue. In the first Parliament I was in, from 2005 to 2010, I was on the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government and we looked into the issue of toilet access. I do not think that much has improved since then and that was under a Labour Government. I am sorry to say that we have not made a lot of progress. At the time, ordinary businesses were showing and displaying signs reading, "We welcome people using our public facilities." The evidence that came out of that Communities and Local Government Committee report was that toilet provision was not just needed for people with things such as Crohn's and colitis—there was a vast spectrum of other conditions for which people would welcome toilet provision, but that is for another debate.

It is very obvious that more focus on the cure and cause of IBD is urgently needed. I hope the Minister will give sufferers of this debilitating disease a cause for

hope and a better future. I look forward to her answers—I hope she can give them today—to a large number of the questions that I have raised on behalf of those who have responded to the online debate and on behalf of the charity Crohn's and Colitis UK, which is doing such a lot of good work. Look for the purple badge.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I think four Members wish to speak. I will not put a formal time limit on speeches but request that Members confine their remarks to about six minutes. If we are sensible, everybody should get a chance to speak.

4.44 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this debate. It is most welcome, especially to those people who are suffering and feel that they have a forgotten illness. It is important to discuss this immune system-related condition and to remind those in the Government that IBD is not IBS. I previously submitted a written question to the Minister about some of the data on Crohn's and colitis gastroenterology appointments and asked whether they were being cancelled or postponed by the provider. No data are collected on that and it seems that quite a lot of data are not collected on the illness. I welcome the hon. Lady's comments on centralising data on sufferers. As a sufferer myself, I think it would be a particularly good idea.

The appointments issue was recognised by my local trust. First appointments after a referral by a GP were timely but subsequent appointments to consultants were frequently being rescheduled at short notice and people would not be able to see their consultant for a further six months. For IBD sufferers, the gaps between assessments and, for consultants, the gaps between monitoring, are increasingly problematic. Consultants cannot get the data they need to monitor sufferers properly.

Specialist IBD nurses are absolutely essential as a resource for between-appointment reassurance and advice for sufferers. The nurses cover not only IBD. Those at my local hospital, including Kay Foster, who has been particularly helpful to me, cover IBS and a whole range of bowel conditions. Her caseload is enormous but if someone rings her, she will always call back. If that service were available more widely, it would be greatly appreciated.

Funnily enough, I had an email from a constituent, who said that she has recently come out of hospital after being admitted with suspected inflammatory bowel disease after having a camera investigation. She was discharged from hospital after becoming very ill and having to be put on a drip because she dehydrated and collapsed. She is now on a waiting list of about six weeks for a CT scan. At the moment, she is constantly having flare-ups as soon as she eats anything. She is losing a lot of weight and is not digesting anything. Her big concern is that she is malnourished, dehydrated, weak, exhausted, in pain and constantly having to use the toilet.

4.46 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.57 pm

On resuming—

Melanie Onn: My constituent is suffering with daily anxiety attacks. She has three young children, and she feels as if she cannot be a proper parent because she is so poorly. She has already signed off sick and is unable to work. She asked me to intervene to try to move her appointment forward. Of course, I recognise that numerous people will, unfortunately, be in that situation.

In my previous role as an organiser for Unison, I met a carer for older people in a nursing home. She had two young children, too, and she was struck down by the illness particularly severely. Within a short period of time, she was taken down the route of capability by her employer. Fortunately, we were able to intervene because, as a long-term condition, it falls under the Equality Act 2010. We were able to assist, but all employers should be aware and make reasonable adjustments, as they are required, including to work patterns, which can assist in supporting people.

At the moment, treatment seems to be limited to preventive measures, but that is very much about people's physical health. It is also about mental health, because stress can form part of the illness. Continued use of steroids is not a healthy way to live and can have negative long-term effects. Many people are desperate to get control of this disease, and investment in research to try to combat the illness cannot come soon enough.

4.58 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing this important debate. Helping to increase the understanding and awareness of Crohn's and colitis is of huge importance to the 300,000 people across the UK who suffer from one of those complex, lifelong and potentially life-threatening diseases. It is thought that as many as 26,000 people in Scotland have Crohn's or colitis, a higher incidence rate than anywhere else in the UK.

Living with IBD can have a huge impact on every aspect of a person's life. It has serious physical and mental health implications, as I found out when I met local representatives of Crohn's and Colitis UK soon after I was elected. I was surprised to find out that there were hundreds of people living in my constituency of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock who suffer from these hidden, often misunderstood and dreadful conditions. It is vital that we try and reach out to these people, who may feel isolated or be coping badly with their health.

Living with IBD can be a daily struggle. Some symptoms of the disease can be embarrassing, which can lead to people suffering, without receiving adequate support, or feeling isolated. As we have heard, among the most distressing symptoms of IBD are diarrhoea and a constant urge to have a bowel movement. This means that people with IBD need constant access to a toilet, due to the frequency and urgency of their bowel movements. That is why the availability of clean public toilets is so crucial for those with IBD.

Understandably, these symptoms are often accompanied by a continuous anxiety about the sudden need to go to the toilet but having little time to find one. Who here can imagine the nightmare of being constantly under threat of being incontinent in public? For many individuals,

that anxiety can have a devastating impact on their ability to engage in activities outside the home, such as working, shopping or socialising.

I am trying to help my constituents by working with the local Crohn's and Colitis UK group on a scheme that encourages shops, restaurants and other businesses to have an open-door policy for people with Crohn's or colitis who carry the "Can't Wait" card. Something as simple as a sticker in a premise's windows will allow people with these conditions to know that they can use a toilet that in other circumstances may not be open to the public. We also need to challenge the public's attitude about disability, which is probably down to the logos that are used, and show that those with disabilities are not always in wheelchairs.

One of the things that people in my constituency who have IBD do not have to worry about is paying for their prescriptions. One of the main reasons the Scottish Government scrapped prescription charges was the benefit to people with life-long conditions such as IBD. Research shows that as a result of an unfair, outdated and arbitrary system of exemptions, many people with long-term conditions in England are severely compromising their health because they are unable to afford prescription charges. Since such charging was scrapped in Scotland, those with conditions such as IBD who need medication on an ongoing basis throughout their lives to keep them well no longer have to face making an impossible decision between paying for essential medication or feeding their family, or paying their rent or heating their home. Effectively taxing someone for having IBD or any other long-term condition is unfair and fundamentally against the founding principles of the NHS. I am proud that in Scotland we took the decision to improve access to prescriptions for all.

Although much needs to be done to improve the treatment of people with Crohn's and colitis, I ask the Government to recognise the benefits of scrapping prescription charges for people with long-term conditions, and I ask all Members of the House to work with their local Crohn's and Colitis UK group to help to foster the kind of environment where people suffering from these incurable and relapsing chronic conditions can feel confident to leave their homes and take part in the everyday activities that most of us take for granted.

5.3 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Roger.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on her outstanding speech and on bringing this important topic to the fore. I am delighted that we have had so many contributors today. I remember that when I held a debate in 2012 on employment opportunities for those with Crohn's and colitis, I was the only speaker who was responded to by the Minister. I am glad that this issue has moved up the agenda somewhat since then.

Those with Crohn's and colitis are often mixed up with those with irritable bowel syndrome—in fact, I admit that when I first heard of Crohn's and colitis, I thought they were the same thing. I did not realise how debilitating and disabling they were, and how many people suffered in silence, and I really believed that it was time to shine a light on those things.

[Chris Evans]

A recent Crohn's and Colitis UK survey of pre-employed young people with inflammatory bowel disease showed that the prospect of gaining their first job was regarded as a daunting challenge. Employability emerged as their overriding concern, and when they found themselves in work, they found that they were often too embarrassed or scared to tell their employers about their needs. When I secured that debate—four years ago, nearly—I said that all we were calling for from employers was some understanding and some respect. However, with the welfare reform changes that lay ahead, I was deeply concerned that that was not going to be the case. That is why I am disappointed that the report found that 69% of the young people interviewed felt that their IBD had prevented them not only from reaching their full educational potential, but from having any chance of employment, with over half ruling out some sort of career option.

Back in January 2014, I took on an intern for three months who has Crohn's disease. She completed her internship and I was very impressed by her work. There was an opening in my office and I offered her a job as my parliamentary research assistant, and she has been with me ever since—although I will say that in some parts of this speech she has written “irritable bowel disease” rather than “inflammatory bowel disease”, even though she herself suffers from the condition, but I will forgive her that. I was keen to take part in the internship programme, as I valued the idea of giving a younger member of the public an incredible career experience, while also teaching politicians such as myself about inflammatory bowel disease—she has written “irritable bowel disease” again, Sir Roger.

In January 2015, I hosted the parliamentary launch of the Work Foundation's report on IBD and employment, alongside Crohn's and Colitis UK—I am delighted they are here today, as the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned. In the UK, at least 300,000 people, or one in 210 people, have Crohn's disease or ulcerative colitis, which are both known as inflammatory bowel disease. That equates to roughly around 460 people in each parliamentary constituency across the UK. These are incurable and relapsing chronic long-term conditions. The symptoms can be present at any age, but most commonly in the teens and twenties.

People with IBD are high users of health services, with 50% of patients with Crohn's disease requiring surgery during their lifetime. I know this first hand, as my parliamentary researcher, who has Crohn's disease, as I have mentioned, has had four operations in the two years she has been working in my office. In saying that, I pay tribute to Laura for her bravery, because, for something as private and embarrassing as some of the symptoms she has suffered from, she has not been afraid to bring that to the fore. We need more people like her, not only in politics but throughout working life.

Medical treatment will often include corticosteroids and immunosuppressants, including the biological therapies that are the latest treatments offered for inflammatory bowel disease. These conditions can have a devastating and life-stopping impact on a person's life, due to the unpredictable nature of flare-ups, together with sleep deprivation, pain and fatigue, and they can severely affect an individual's self-esteem.

There appears to be a low level of awareness of inflammatory bowel disease among the public, policy makers and clinicians. Public awareness of IBD is lower than it is for Parkinson's and multiple sclerosis, as the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned, despite more people being affected by IBD than by both these conditions combined. The lack of public awareness is exacerbated by the stigma attached to the symptoms of IBD and the fact that it is a hidden illness.

Four years ago, I called for some understanding from employers. With debates such as this and events we have had in Parliament, I hope that understanding can come to the fore. If there is a message that should emerge from today's debate from sufferers of IBD such as my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and my parliamentary researcher, it is that there is no point in hiding IBD away. If someone is suffering, they should ask their employer for help. Most people I meet—I was a trade union official—are understanding. I have tried to be an understanding employer myself. Once people overcome that barrier, they will find that they can have a working life that is fruitful and that can lead to some great opportunities.

I had wanted to say more, Sir Roger, but I understand that there is a time limit. However, I will say this to anybody who suffers from Crohn's or colitis: please do not hide away. If you are suffering, then speak to your employer. Speak to your teacher. Tell them what you are suffering from and they will be understanding. I genuinely believe that Crohn's and colitis is as much of a problem for this country as dementia, whereas it is not mentioned because it is embarrassing—it is not something that we talk about. Crohn's should be pushed up the political agenda, and I hope that with today's debate we will do that.

5.9 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for securing this debate, because, as we have heard in some of the contributions, there is a lack of awareness of the difference between irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease. Having been a doctor myself for more than 30 years, and a general surgeon for 20 of those before specialising purely in breast cancer, I know well what the outcome can be for people with IBD.

As the hon. Lady said, the rate of surgery is such that between 50% and 70% of Crohn's patients and almost a third of those with ulcerative colitis will end up having an operation. The conditions are not trivial or embarrassing; they are life-threatening. It is therefore absolutely important that we try to get the research funding so that we can understand the cause, because that then gives us a chance of finding the cure. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson) mentioned, for some reason Scotland has a very high incidence of such conditions. Is that genetic, or is it environmental? Looking at what is going on in different parts of the UK may help us get a handle on what is going on. Those are the things that we need to look for in the long term.

Normally when we are in the Chamber talking about a disease, we are talking about access to medicines in the major sense of not being allowed a new drug that

would make a difference. Unusually, that is not the case here. The anti-tumour necrosis factor drugs can make a huge difference and have been passed by all the nations of the UK, but there is an issue with patients getting all the medicines that they require. If patients are on biologics, they will not pay prescription charges, but most of them are on a panoply of drugs, and for those they do have to pay. England needs to consider that Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have got rid of prescription charges. That move was led by Wales in 2007.

Plenty of research shows that, in general, less than 10% of the population pays for prescriptions, with half as pre-payment and half as pay-as-you-go. However, whenever surveys are done of people with chronic diseases, we find that some 75% to 85% are paying. That is because many of those diseases do not hit people once they have conveniently retired and qualify for free prescriptions. We have talked about how Crohn's may hit people in their teens and how ulcerative colitis may hit people in their 20s and 30s, and they will have those conditions for life. They will be on different medications: methotrexate, steroids, enemas—the whole works—and they will be paying £8 an item. We talk about pre-payment, but many of these people will be in poorer jobs, because there will be times when they are not so well and when they are in and out of work as they have a waxing and waning condition. Because of that, they have to try to work out whether it will benefit them to pay £100-odd to have a pre-payment certificate. Perhaps they have a good year, perhaps they do not.

What has been shown in all the research is that approximately 35% of people report having not picked up a prescription because of charges, and approximately 30% have done that repeatedly. With all conditions we know that if someone is not taking their medication, they will get worse, but that is particularly the case with Crohn's and colitis, which have such complications as strictures and toxic megacolon.

Working in breast cancer, we talk about “the big C”, but when I was doing general and emergency surgery I used to think of Crohn's as “the wee C”, because it affects virtually all of someone's life. It is debilitating and will affect everything that they do. These people are in and out of hospital, developing strictures, perforations and ischemic bowels and undergoing ileostomies, reversals and so on. It goes on and on. The hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) mentioned his member of staff, and I suggest he proofreads his speeches. She may write them, but it is his job to check them. People with Crohn's often end up in hospital having expensive and incredibly difficult surgery. To go back into the abdomen of someone who has Crohn's is a surgical nightmare. I have been there with the sweat pouring off me, trying to do those operations. Using the anti-TNF drugs earlier and ensuring that patients take all the medication required will make a difference in reducing surgery and, in the end, that is more cost-effective.

The other thing is access to care and trying to make it easier for people to get on with normal life. Along with Crohn's and Colitis UK, the Scottish Government funded a two-year pilot that was looking at allowing patients to be much more linked to the clinician using e-health technology. That was carried out in the highlands to look at people living in rural areas, and in Greater Glasgow and Clyde to look at people living in a large city. The pilot developed information and support for

patients and redesigned the services around the patients. Using the technology, the patient has an app that gives them information. They can have a two-way conversation with a clinician and they can register their symptoms. The clinician has a dashboard on their patients, and they can see whether someone is getting worse. That allows them to say, “Increase that”, or “Decrease this.” It means that patients do not always have to go and sit in the hospital if they are trying to hold down a job. If someone lives in the highlands and has to travel four hours to get to Inverness, that is a major pain when they are trying to maintain a normal life.

A new strategy is being launched in Scotland in June, and its aim is to meet the UK national Crohn's and colitis standards. It will be the first comprehensive integrated strategy in the United Kingdom. It will create a patient portal where people can access their clinic letters and blood results so that they learn that they can manage their own disease. When we talk about the five year forward vision, or the 2020 vision in Scotland, the aim is to enable and empower patients to manage their chronic diseases as far as possible.

The last thing that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Islwyn was changing attitudes in society. Not everyone with a condition is on crutches or in a wheelchair, and we need to get past the embarrassment of talking about bottoms or going to the toilet. We need to realise that these are serious conditions that are debilitating. We simply need to make access to toilets available for everyone, whether they are elderly, incontinent or have inflammatory bowel disease. It is about trying to get past that access just being for certain people because it is important for a lot of people.

5.16 pm

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I, too, commend the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) not only on securing the debate and the eloquent way in which she opened it, but on the work she is doing to help raise awareness of Crohn's and colitis. Although the debate is about the situation in England, we have had a valuable set of contributions from Members from Wales and Scotland. While it is right that the public health Minister is responsible for this policy area in England, there is a lot of experience and research that we should be sharing. We should also be sharing a lot more understanding of what each part of the NHS in each respective part of the United Kingdom is achieving in the work to try to tackle some of the issues.

I put on record my thanks to Crohn's and Colitis UK for all its hard work in briefing Members of Parliament for this debate, and for all the work it has done since its inception in 1979. I will let you into a secret, Sir Roger. I am fairly new to the shadow public health role, although I have been on the shadow Health team for some time now. I must confess to not being entirely abreast of the issues facing IBD sufferers before looking at them for this debate. Frankly, what I found stunned me. More than 300,000 people in the UK suffer from Crohn's or ulcerative colitis, and that equates to some 460 people in my constituency alone.

While that is a lot of people, IBD is not as prevalent as some of the more common long-term conditions. That means that research funding, as we have heard over the course of this debate, is thin on the ground,

[*Andrew Gwynne*]

and there is not the same level of awareness in the general public at large. Put simply, it is not a glamorous cause. There are few outward signs of having the condition, but the effect on lifestyle is massive for the people concerned. Many of the problems that we discuss regularly in terms of cancer are just as pronounced when it comes to IBD, and not only include pain, fatigue, sleep deprivation and disruption to life in general, but also relate to awareness, diagnosis and psychological impact, and I want to touch on those things.

First, I want to address the problems of diagnosis. GPs need to be more aware of IBD. Every medical practitioner knows of instances of general abdominal pain and irregular bowel function being written off as IBS. As I have already said, I was not fully aware of the problem of misdiagnosis until I heard from Crohn's and Colitis UK, so the matter does come down to awareness both among the general public and, importantly, among the medical community. Because the most pronounced symptoms of IBD are often the most embarrassing to discuss, the issue often gets swept under the carpet, even in the GP's surgery.

Studies have shown that 35% of people with Crohn's had three or more emergency admissions before they received a diagnosis. Frankly, that just is not good enough. I accept that some delays to diagnosis are inevitable, considering the nature of the disease, and clinical judgment should receive an appropriate degree of latitude, but we can and we must do much more.

There are some welcome signs. In 2013, NICE recommended faecal calprotectin testing as one option for doctors to help distinguish between IBS and IBD, which is welcome. There can be more effective use of that at primary care level, which would save not only money but would ensure better and more efficient care for patients: an undeniable win-win situation for all involved. How will the public health Minister improve the efficiency of the identification of suspected IBD? We also need to reduce the unnecessary use of endoscopies where less intrusive tests would do just fine.

I want to spend some time talking about the psychological impact, which Members have touched on today. Last year, the Opposition established the post of shadow Mental Health Minister, a job in which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) is making a significant impact. Mental health is of paramount importance to the Labour party, and it is often the unseen damage that is most destructive. IBD symptoms, diagnostics and treatment can have a disastrous impact on a sufferer's mental health. The uncertainty and sense of lost potential must be absolutely awful, and I cannot help but imagine how I would feel were one of my children told that they had IBD.

An audit in 2014 found that only 12% of services have a clear process to enable people suffering from IBD to see a psychologist or professional with knowledge of IBD. That figure may have improved—we might see that when the next audit is carried out—but however we look at it, it is not good enough. About 41% of IBD sufferers experience high levels of anxiety, and so of course we must do more because many people living with IBD feel that simply having easier access to psychiatric services at critical points would help immensely. With the Government's laudable commitment to ensuring parity

of esteem, which we are fully behind, what is the Minister's Department doing to make sure that people with IBD across England have the appropriate level of access to tailored psychological support with professionals who are familiar with the very specific issues they face?

I am pleased that hon. Members have mentioned the access to toilets strategy formed by my Labour colleagues in Wales. Obviously, an episode of incontinence in public is extremely embarrassing, and with incredibly poor access to public toilets being endemic across England, a person with IBD can feel anxious even being in an unfamiliar place. Many people with IBD have seen a devastating impact on their capacity to lead normal lives when they are away from home. I am therefore pleased that the Welsh Government have led by treating access to public toilets as a public health issue.

The Welsh Assembly is now considering the Public Health (Wales) Bill, which is close to the final stages of the legislative process. Some fairly simple steps can have a big impact on the ability of Crohn's and colitis sufferers to lead normal lives when out and about. Councils, for example, could make better use of the toilets that are already in the community, whether in public buildings or private businesses. The Bill will place a duty on every council to publish a local toilet strategy. The Welsh Government are leading the way, and I hope the UK Government will follow suit. I appreciate that it might require intervention by the Minister's colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government to halt some of the public toilet closures that we have seen in recent years, but will the Minister offer to discuss this not only with her colleagues in DCLG, but with my Welsh Labour colleague, Mark Drakeford? I think there is plenty of potential here.

My thanks go to all hon. Members for their contributions this afternoon. Some incredibly astute points have been made, and I hope the Minister goes away better informed, as I know I will, as a result of this debate. We owe it to those 300,000 people in the UK suffering from Crohn's disease or colitis to come up with some better ideas in the coming months and years. This debate has given us a good starting point, such as the need for better public toilet access, and the need for more widespread use of less invasive diagnostic techniques. About 18,000 new cases of IBD are diagnosed every year, so this is not some fringe problem, but an issue facing people in every single community across the country. I look forward to hearing the public health Minister's response.

5.26 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. We have had a good debate with many first-class contributions. I hope it demonstrates to those watching and those who participated in such great numbers in the Facebook debate that Parliament is taking this issue seriously as we have filled the time available to us with various contributions. I hope to be able to respond to most of the points made. If not, as ever, I will try to respond post debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate. It is always interesting for a Member of Parliament with a great charity in the constituency; the MP ends up becoming quite expert,

and my hon. Friend has done an excellent charity proud this afternoon in raising the issues. Crohn's and Colitis UK is the national charity campaigning on these issues. I pay tribute to its work as it campaigns tirelessly to raise the profile of Crohn's and colitis and to provide support and advice to all those affected. My hon. Friend is a keen supporter of its work.

I will not spend time describing the diseases themselves or the number of people affected, because others have eloquently done so. Instead I will talk about some of the ways in which we are responding. A great many of our fellow citizens are affected, so it is right that we have this debate today.

Some hon. Members raised the issue of GPs, diagnosis and training. Digestive health features both as part of the undergraduate medical curriculum and GP specialty training. For GPs the required competencies include understanding the epidemiology of digestive problems as they present in primary care; how to interpret common symptoms in general practice; and how to demonstrate a systematic approach to investigating digestive symptoms such as IBD. IBD also features in the content guide for the Royal College of General Practitioners applied knowledge test, a key part of the assessment of trainee GPs, which must be passed in order to qualify.

As others have said, diagnosing the symptoms of IBD can be challenging for a GP. Even though the numbers are quite large, as we have heard, if we divide the numbers by GP practice across the country, it might be the case that some GPs are not seeing people very often. The variety of symptoms and the range of their severity differ from patient to patient. Problems may also arise owing to the fact that the symptoms of IBD, such as abdominal pain and weight loss, are shared with other more common, less serious conditions, such as IBS, which is estimated to affect 12 million people in the UK, as opposed to IBD, which affects around 300,000. However, as others have said, a misdiagnosis or a delayed diagnosis can lead to a range of further complications for IBD sufferers, so it is important that clinicians have the tools and resources to help them to identify symptoms when a patient presents.

In addition to their clinical training and experience, a number of tools and resources are now available to clinicians to help them to diagnose and manage IBD. The "Map of Medicine" is an excellent free online evidence-based guide and clinical decision support tool, which is available to GPs and other healthcare professionals working in the NHS. It has published diagnosis and treatment maps for patients with IBD. The map supports GPs on issues such as differential diagnosis and helps them to identify "red flag" IBD symptoms and provide advice on appropriate diagnostics and referrals. NICE has produced a clinical guideline specifically to support clinicians in using faecal calprotectin testing to help doctors to distinguish between IBD and less serious conditions as it highlights inflammation specifically.

NICE's role in setting standards in the diagnosis and management of a range of diseases is well known, and IBD is no exception in that regard. NICE published best-practice clinical guidelines on the management of Crohn's and colitis in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Once diagnosed, a number of treatment options are available for patients. The Scottish National party spokesperson, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford),

outlined some of the related challenges and some of the treatments in which she has participated. When treating IBD, the aim is either to heal the inflammation and so reduce the symptoms during a flare-up, which is known as inducing remission, or to prevent flare-ups from happening in future, which is known as maintaining remission.

The routine monitoring and follow-up of patients is a key feature of the guidance on the management of Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. It ensures that patients can access specialist care when flare-ups or relapses occur. Protocols for monitoring should be agreed locally. Various drugs are recommended by NICE and funded by the NHS, and they can help with both of those aims. Although there is currently no cure for IBD, we know that some treatments can ease symptoms and improve quality of life—we heard Members talk about a particular member of staff and bring quality-of-life issues to the fore in their speeches. Management options include drug therapy, dietary and lifestyle advice and, in severe or chronic active disease, surgery.

I turn briefly to prescriptions. In addition to medical exemption, there are extensive exemption arrangements in England, based on age and income, via various means-tested benefits. For people who need multiple prescriptions and have to pay NHS prescription charges, such as those with long-term conditions, prescription prepayment certificates are also available, and it is worth highlighting that. I take the point about the challenge of prescriptions, but not everyone is aware of PPCs. This is the fifth year that the cost of an annual certificate has been frozen, and the third year that the cost of a three-month certificate has been frozen. Next year, both certificates will remain at £104 and £29.10 respectively. There is no limit to the number of items that can be obtained through a PPC. The annual certificate benefits anyone needing more than 12 items a year and the three-month certificate benefits anyone needing more than three items in that three-month period.

The IBD quality standard was mentioned. In general, quality standards are important in order to set out to patients, the public, commissioners and providers what a high-quality service should look like. NICE issues them, and they enable services to benchmark themselves against one another. The quality standard for IBD was published in February 2015 and contained priority statements covering important areas such as specialist assessment, drug monitoring and surgery, all of which is designed to drive improvements in IBD care. Although providers and commissioners must have regard to the quality standards in planning and delivering services, the standards themselves do not provide a comprehensive service specification and are not mandatory.

The six inflammatory bowel disease standards were published in 2013 by the IBD Standards Group, an independent organisation made up of a number of professional clinical organisations and the charity itself. The standards were designed to support clinicians and commissioning organisations in the development of local IBD services. If appropriate, they may be considered alongside sources of guidance such as the NICE guidelines.

A number of important issues have been raised in the debate that are very much matters for NHS England to look into. I am sure it will be really interested to hear about the challenges that have been raised in the debate, as well as about the Scottish strategy. As the shadow

[Jane Ellison]

Minister said, the consideration of best practice throughout the United Kingdom is often common, as are many research outcomes, not only throughout the United Kingdom but internationally.

Some Members mentioned the importance of nurse specialists. It was lovely to hear the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) pay tribute to the specialists with whom she has dealt and the standard of care and support she has experienced. Obviously the recruitment of staff is ultimately a local matter but, again, the NICE guidance states that local services should ensure that patients with Crohn's or ulcerative colitis have support from an IBD multidisciplinary team, which should comprise a range of experts, including dieticians, who were mentioned, and clinical nurse specialists with particular expertise and specialist interest. That MDT care is a key feature of the quality standard, which sets out what great-quality care looks like.

The shadow Minister mentioned mental health support. It is worth noting for the record that we invested more than £400 million over the previous spending review period in improving access to psychological therapies—the IAPT programme—to ensure access to talking therapies for those who need them. That includes people with long-term conditions who are suffering from anxiety and depression. Recent positive announcements include the Prime Minister announcing £1 billion to start a revolution in mental health, which is a shared interest right across the House. No one has done enough on mental health in the past, and the matter is now much more front and centre in our thoughts. As part of that announcement, £247 million has been allocated to ensure that every emergency department has mental health support. That money reaffirms the Government's commitment to parity of esteem between mental and physical health.

Several Members quite rightly asked about toilets. As others have said, it is essentially a matter for my colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government, but I will of course draw their attention to this debate. Local authorities in England are forecast to spend just over £60 million on such services in 2015-16. It is also worth noting that more than 400 local authorities and thousands of businesses have joined the national RADAR key scheme, meaning that some 9,000 toilets in shopping centres, pubs, cafés, department stores, bus and train stations and many other locations are now listed as being accessible through the scheme. I am sure that we have all seen them in our local areas. Official RADAR keys cost about £5 and can be bought from participating local authorities or Disability Rights UK shops. While noting that initiative, we must recognise that there is always more to do in that regard.

Members quite rightly drew the House's attention to research and the need to know more. Dealing with a disease that currently has no cure is a big challenge, and research is key. The Department of Health currently spends more than £1 billion a year on research. As for IBD, the Department's National Institute for Health Research awarded a £1.5 million research professorship for five years from 2013 to 2018 at the University of Oxford to examine the use of molecular techniques to re-stratify Crohn's disease, aiming to get into the detail of identifying patients amenable to new treatment approaches and to develop new therapies. The NIHR is also investing just under £1 million in a study comparing the accuracy of MRI imaging and small bowel ultrasound in assessing the extent and activity of newly diagnosed and relapsed Crohn's disease. The final report from the study is expected to be published in September 2017, and I am sure that there will be interest in that among Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans also mentioned the IBD BioResource. It is a really exciting project that brings together the Medical Research Council and the NIHR, supporting groundbreaking studies looking at the genetics of and new treatments for IBD that have the potential to make a real difference to patients' lives. It will undertake a major new genetic analysis based on genome sequencing, and it will keep a database of 25,000 patients with IBD.

I have tried to cover most of the points raised in the debate. I hope that I have given hon. Members a sense of the Government's ambition to make progress on research. I again pay tribute to the charity for contributing to the research. Partnerships between Government bodies, medical research bodies and specialist charities are an important part of making progress, not least because recruiting people to studies is important, and we cannot do that without the work of the charities.

I will write to Professor Sir Bruce Keogh, the medical director of NHS England, to outline the concerns that hon. Members raised today and to ensure that he is aware of Parliament's interest in this issue and of the challenge to the NHS that has been outlined today. I urge Crohn's and Colitis UK, as I do all relevant stakeholders, to continue to engage with NHS England to build valuable long-term relationships. I will write to the Royal College of General Practitioners, as a number of the issues that were raised relate to it. I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans for securing today's debate and for making such a meaningful contribution to raising awareness of this very important issue.

5.41 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Wednesday 24 February 2016

TREASURY

UK's Counter-terrorist Asset Freezing Regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Harriett Baldwin): Under the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 (TAFE 2010), the Treasury is required to report to Parliament, quarterly, on its operation of the UK's asset freezing regime mandated by UN Security Council Resolution 1373.

This is the 17th report under the Act and it covers the period from 1 October 2015 to 31 December 2015¹. This report also covers the UK implementation of the UN Al-Qaida asset freezing regime and the operation of the EU asset freezing regime in the UK under EU regulation (EC) 2580/2001 which implements UNSCR 1373 against external terrorist threats to the EU. Under the UN Al-Qaida asset freezing regime, the UN has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under the Al-Qaida (Asset-Freezing) Regulations 2011. Under EU regulation 2580/2001, the EU has responsibility for designations and the Treasury has responsibility for licensing and compliance with the regime in the UK under part 1 of TAFE 2010.

Annexes A and B to this statement provide a breakdown, by name, of all those designated by the UK and the EU in pursuance of UN Security Council resolution 1373. The two individuals subject to designations, which have been notified on a restricted and confidential basis, under sections 3 and 10 of TAFE 2010 are denoted by A and B.

The following table sets out the key asset-freezing activity in the UK during the quarter ending 31 December 2015:

	TAFE 2010	EU Reg (EC) 2580/2001	Al-Qaida regime UNSCR1989
Assets frozen (as at 30/12/2015)	£15,000	£11,000 ²	£60,000 ³
Number of accounts frozen in UK (at 31/12/2015)	36	10	33
New accounts frozen (during Q4 2015)	2	0	14
Accounts unfrozen (during Q4 2015)	10	0	0
Total number of designations (including restricted designations at 31/12/2015)	25	0	322
(i) New designations (during Q4 2015, including confidential designations)	0	0	25
(ii) Number of designations that were confidential (during Q4 2015)	0	N/A	N/A

	TAFE 2010	EU Reg (EC) 2580/2001	Al-Qaida regime UNSCR1989
(iii) Delistings (during Q4 2015)	5	0	7
(iv) Individuals in custody in UK (at 31/12/2015)	2	0	0
(v) Individuals in UK, not in custody (at 31/12/2015)	1	0	2
(vi) Individuals overseas (at 31/12/2015)	15	10	239
(vii) Groups	7	23	74
Individuals by nationality	4	N/A	N/A
(i) UK Nationals ⁴	14		
(ii) Non UK Nationals			
Renewal of designation (during Q4 2015)	5	N/A	N/A
General Licences		(i) 0	
(i) Issued in Q4		(ii) 0	
(ii) Amended		(iii) 0	
(iii) Revoked			
Specific Licences			
(i) Issued in Q4	3	0	2
(ii) Amended	3	0	0
(iii) Expired	0	0	0
(iv) Revoked/	0	0	0
Redundant	0	0	0
(v) Refused			

Legal Proceedings

Moazzem BEGG, who was previously designated under TAFE 2010, lodged an appeal on 3 November 2014, challenging the Treasury's decision to revoke rather than quash his designation. These proceedings were ongoing during the reporting period.

One individual, C, designated under TAFE 2010 lodged an appeal against their designation on 21 May 2015. These proceedings were ongoing during the reporting period. They lodged their witness statement on 11 September 2015. Additional evidence was filed on 9 November and the special advocate filed a series of questions for HMT in December. HMT responded to these points of disclosure on 15 January.

There were no criminal proceedings in respect of breaches of asset freezes made under TAFE 2010, during the reporting period.

Annex A—Designated persons under TAFE 2010 by name⁵

Individuals

1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI
2. Imad Khalil AL-ALAMI
3. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER
4. Ibrahim Salih AL-YACOB
5. Manssor ARBABSIAR
6. Usama HAMDAN
7. Nur Idris HASSAN NUR
8. Nabeel HUSSAIN
9. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN
10. Mohammed KHALED
11. Parviz KHAN
12. Musa Abu MARZOUK

13. Khalid MISHAAL
14. Khalid Shaikh MOHAMMED
15. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI
16. Ali Gholam SHAKURI
17. Qasem SOLEIMANI
18. A (restricted designation)

Entities

1. Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA)
2. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)
3. Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)
4. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
5. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)
6. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)
7. Sendero Luminoso (SL)

Annex B: Persons designated by the EU under Council Regulation (EC)2580/2001⁶

Persons

1. Hamed ABDOLLAHI*
2. Abdelkarim Hussein AL-NASSER*
3. Ibrahim Salih AL YACOUB*
4. Manssor ARBABSAR*
5. Mohammed BOUYERI
6. Hasan IZZ-AL-DIN*
7. Khalid Shaikh MOHAMMED*
8. Abdul Reza SHAHLAI*
9. Ali Gholam SHAKURI*
10. Qasem SOLEIMANI*

Groups and Entities

1. Abu Nidal Organisation (ANO)
2. Al-Aqsa E.V.
3. Al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade
4. Babbar Khalsa
5. Communist Party of the Philippines, including New People's Army (NPA), Philippines
6. Devrimci Halk Kurtulu Partisi-Cephesi—DHKP/C (Revolutionary People's Liberation Army/Front/Party)
7. Ejército de Liberación Nacional (National Liberation Army)*
8. Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC)*
9. Gama'a al-Islamiyya (a.k.a. Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya) (Islamic Group—IG)
10. Hamas, including Hamas-Izz al-Din al-Qassem
11. Hizballah Military Wing, including external security organisation
12. Hizbul Mujahideen (HM)
13. Hofstadgroep
14. International Sikh Youth Federation (ISYF)
15. Islami Büyük Dogu Akincilar Cephesi (IBDA-C) (Great Islamic Eastern Warriors Front)
16. Khalistan Zindabad Force (KZF)
17. Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) (a.k.a. KONGRA-GEL)
18. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)
19. Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
20. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command (PFLP-GC)*
21. Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—(PFLP)*
22. Sendero Luminoso (SL) (Shining Path)*
23. Teyrbazen Azadiya Kurdistan (TAK)

¹ These figures are correct as at 30 September 2015.

² This does not duplicate funds frozen under TAFAs.

³ This figure reflects the most up-to-date account balances available and includes approximately \$64,000 of funds frozen in the UK. This has been converted using exchange rates as of 31/12/2015. Additionally the figures reflect an updating of balances of accounts for certain individuals during the quarter, depleted through licensed activity.

⁴ Based on information held by the Treasury, some of these individuals hold dual nationality.

⁵ For full listing details please refer to: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/current-list-of-designated-persons-terrorism-and-terrorist-financing>

⁶ For full listing details please refer to www.gov.uk

* EU listing rests on UK designation under TAFAs

[HCWS548]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I represented the UK at the Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 15 February in Brussels.

The chair of the Council, the Netherlands Minister for Agriculture, presented the work programme for the duration of the Dutch presidency. It focused on the key areas of food security, the future of the common agriculture policy, plant breeders' rights and patent rights, antimicrobial resistance, market situations, and sustainable fisheries.

Commissioner Vella introduced the first agenda item on the Commission's proposal to amend rules for the control and management of EU fishing vessels operating outside of EU waters. All member states, including the UK, supported the general aims of the proposals. However, we and a number of others had concerns about increased administrative burdens and coherence of EU rules with relevant regional fisheries management organisations. Concerns were also raised about the overlap of member state and Commission responsibility for issuing authorisations, on the grounds of subsidiarity. The presidency noted it hopes to agree a Council general approach in May or June 2016.

The second agenda item was on establishing an animal welfare platform—a paper which was put forward by Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands. The Council broadly supported this, which would allow experts to further exchange best practice and harmonise data and animal welfare across all member states. France stressed the need to include animal welfare standards in future international trade negotiations.

Before lunch, a brief overview was given by the presidency on the antimicrobial resistance conference which took place in Amsterdam on 9 and 10 February. The UK, Denmark and Slovenia supported making this issue a priority.

After lunch, Commissioner Hogan updated the Council on EU trade and ongoing negotiations. He highlighted that EU exports were 6% higher than the previous year and that he was continuing to support sectors by increasing

export promotions funding, diversifying and increasing EU trade partners and capitalising on opportunities in emerging economies. The Commissioner set out his ambitions to diversify and increase EU trade with a number of countries including China, Japan and the USA and he updated the Council on his recent visits to Colombia and Mexico. He also highlighted the recent success at the World Trade Organisation conference in Nairobi.

I supported the Commissioner in calling for ambitious trade and pushed further consideration of animal welfare in free trade agreements. This was echoed by a number of other member states.

Lastly, Commissioner Hogan summarised the conference on agricultural research held in Brussels on 26-28 January 2016. Many member states intervened welcoming the development and direction of the strategy.

The following were AOB items on the agenda:

Poland tabled a non-paper detailing their concerns on the extension of the restricted area for African swine fever, and called for additional support to the Ukraine to manage the spread of the disease. This was supported by nine other member states.

Poland and Spain led the discussion on agricultural markets highlighting the challenges in the pigmeat, dairy, fruit and vegetable sectors. This led in to a closed ministerial lunch discussion.

[HCWS545]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Pre-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): A meeting of the Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) Council will be held on 25 February, which I will attend on behalf of the UK.

The Council will begin with a discussion of the proposed draft regulation regarding the reinforcement of checks against relevant databases at external borders, including a policy debate and agreement to a general approach. Where systematic checks against databases would cause a disproportionate delay at the border, there is an option in the proposal to instead make checks on a targeted basis at land and sea borders only. Some member states would like air borders to be included in this option. While the UK does not participate in the border control elements of Schengen, we have a strong interest in improving the security of the EU's external border, and I will stress the need for the measure to cover systematic checks at airports and push for Schengen and non-Schengen states to be able to exchange immigration information.

This will be followed by a debate on the proposed draft regulation on the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Given the UK's position in relation to Schengen, we will not participate in this measure, but I will again stress the need to improve the management of the external border.

Finally, there will be a substantive discussion on migration, where EU member states will evaluate the current situation as regards the implementation of measures taken by the EU to address the migration crisis. The discussion

will also consider what future action the EU should take. This discussion is likely to be informed by the Commission communication on the state of play on the implementation of the European agenda on migration—published 10 February. I will intervene to reinforce key messages on securing the external EU border, effective implementation of “hotspots” in Greece and Italy, and minimising pull factors: if the EU is to avoid a repeat of last year, we must take decisive action now.

[HCWS546]

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Electoral Registers

Mr Gary Streeter (*Representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission*): The Electoral Commission has today published a report on its analysis of the December 2015 electoral registers in Great Britain and its assessment of the individual electoral registration (IER) activities carried out by electoral registration officers (EROs) during the annual canvass.

EROs were required by law to publish their revised register by 1 December 2015 except in cases where there was a by-election in their area during the period of the canvass (1 July to 1 December 2015), in which case the publication of the register could have been postponed until up to 1 February 2016.

The size of the parliamentary electorate in Great Britain on 1 December 2015 was 43,478,635. This represents a decrease of approximately 1% since December 2014/March 2015, and of 3% since February/March 2014, when the last revised registers compiled under the old system were published.

It is important to note that the 1 December publication date represents a snapshot of the registers at that time, and that 1.3 million applications to register have been made since this date following significant registration activity across the UK in advance of the elections in May 2016. The Electoral Commission will also run a national public awareness campaign, supported by a range of partners.

In June 2015, the Commission reported that 1.9 million entries on the May 2015 electoral registers had been retained from the previous household registers. Following a significant amount of work by EROs and their staff since then, including a comprehensive household canvass, the number removed from the registers at the end of the transition period was reduced to approximately 770,000, though the Commission notes that this does not include data from the London borough of Hackney as they were unable to provide an accurate figure. This represented 1.7% of the electorate overall, although this varies considerably by local authority. The Commission's report analyses this in more detail.

It is not possible to estimate the total number of eligible electors, still resident at the same address, who were removed from the registers. However, it is likely that some of the entries that were removed related to electors who were eligible to remain registered to vote. Although there was no legal requirement for EROs to write to those removed from the revised register, the Commission's guidance to EROs has previously

recommended that EROs do so, given the important elections taking place across Great Britain in May 2016. The Commission notes that a small number of EROs may have left unconfirmed electors on their registers when published on 1 December and that these are being looked into further by the Commission and the Cabinet Office.

The Commission reports that there remains an issue with the number of registered attainers in particular. There were 276,185 attainers on the December 2015 parliamentary registers, which represents a fall of 40% in the number of registered attainers since February/March 2014. This decline would indicate that the requirement for attainers to register individually under IER, rather than be registered by a parent or guardian, is having a negative impact on the number registered.

The Commission sets out a number of options for reversing this decline in the report.

The Commission's view is that considerable challenges remain that will continue to have a significant impact on the accuracy and completeness of electoral registers in the future. The report published today outlines the most significant of these and highlights the opportunities the Commission thinks can be taken to ensure they are appropriately addressed in the future. These include measures to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of EROs' activities and to modernise the registration process in support of the vision recently set out by the Government.

The Commission notes that it has encountered several issues in obtaining accurate register data and key headline statistics from Cabinet Office and electoral management software (EMS) suppliers.

The Commission specifically identified errors in the headline electorate figures for 1 December 2015 that were reported to Cabinet Office by customers of two of the software suppliers. As a result, when quoting national electorate figures, the Commission has used the electorate statistics collected by the national statistical agencies as part of their official electoral statistics collection.

For the other data presented in this report the Commission has used the data supplied to Cabinet Office and confirmed the figures with the relevant EROs.

The Commission is confident that the national-level aggregated data provide an accurate picture of the overall state of the December 2015 registers in Great Britain.

However, given the late receipt of much of the data requested, the remaining problems with some data and concerns raised by some EROs, there are significant limitations on the analysis of specific data and at a local authority level in general.

The transition to IER is now complete, but being able to collect accurate and useful registration data from EROs will be an ongoing requirement for the Commission, and it is also important for each individual ERO to be able to call on this data to assess their own activities. The Commission intends to continue working closely with Cabinet Office and the EMS suppliers in the future in order to help improve the data produced by their systems.

Overall, the transition to IER in Great Britain has been managed well by EROs. Assessments against performance standard 2, which requires that EROs deliver their strategies and use available data to monitor progress and make amendments to their plans where necessary to ensure they remain appropriate, have been impacted by the late receipt of data and, therefore, the process has not yet concluded. However, the Commission has reached an assessment that one ERO, for the London borough of Hackney, did not meet performance standard 2. The final set of performance assessments will be made available in the summer.

At the same time, the Commission will release its final report on the transition to IER when it publishes a full accuracy and completeness of the December 2015 registers. The findings from the study will be assessed against comparable data on the last revised registers compiled under household registration in February/March 2014, when the Commission estimated the Great Britain registers to be 87% accurate and 85% complete.

Copies of the Commission's report have been placed in the Library and it is also available on the Commission's website: www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

[HCWS547]

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