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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 12 March 2015

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Dairy Farmers

1. **Daniel Kawczynski** (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps she is taking to assist dairy farmers.

[908017]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The dairy industry is a vital part of food and farming and of our national life. With farmers struggling with low prices, we are doing all we can to help with cash flow. We are working with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs to help farmers delay their tax payments; we are urging banks to treat dairy farmers sympathetically; and we have prioritised dairy farmers for payments from the Rural Payments Agency.

Daniel Kawczynski: I am grateful for that answer. My right hon. Friend will know that Shropshire has some of the most productive and best dairy farms in the whole country, and I very much hope to invite her to visit Shropshire after the election, when she will continue to be a great Secretary of State. Will she explain what additional help she is giving to dairy farmers to ensure that more milk is used in our schools and hospitals, and exported?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree with my hon. Friend about how productive dairy farmers in Shropshire are. We want to see more dairy products sold here in Britain and overseas. That is why we launched the Bonfield plan, which will open up £400 million-worth of business across the public sector. I strongly encourage schools, hospitals and caterers to use the balanced scorecard, so that they can buy from great producers in Shropshire.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): May I applaud the work the Secretary of State and her Department have done on exporting dairy and other products? What urgent action can she take to rebalance the relationship in the supply chain between the very small dairy producer and the often very large processor in this business?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Since 2009, we have seen a 50% increase in dairy exports. There is still more to do, however, which is why we have appointed our first ever agriculture and food counsellor at the Beijing embassy—China will be the world's largest importer of food and drink by 2018. There is, of course, more work to do, and we have given the Groceries Code Adjudicator further powers, including the power to impose fines of 1% of turnover.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): A key plank of the Government's assistance to dairy farmers is the LEADER programme. After the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs failed to answer pleas for advice on the Isle of Wight's application, will my right hon. Friend agree to an urgent meeting, so we can discuss this matter with Ministers?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and he is right about the vital support the LEADER programme brings. DEFRA Ministers are already looking at this issue, and I would be delighted to discuss it with him.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): With milk at 20p a litre, farmers across Wiltshire are suffering most dreadfully, and many of them are going out of business, but they accept that it is a question of worldwide supply. They ask me questions, however, about whether the Irish quota is larger than it need be, and about whether milk products, particularly cheese, are being re-imported from Ireland—possibly illegally across a porous border—and depressing British prices.

Elizabeth Truss: Currently, 50% of the dairy products consumed in Britain are imported. I want to see more British products produced and sold in this country. That is why I am pushing the European Commission for compulsory country-of-origin labelling to make sure that British consumers can go into supermarkets and find out which products are from Britain.

Inshore Fishing Fleet (Discard Ban)

2. **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of a discard ban on the inshore fishing fleet. [908018]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We recently launched a consultation on the implementation of the discard ban, which will help us to make that assessment. The consultation is being used to identify how to phase in the ban, how to allocate increases in quotas, where to introduce exemptions and how to manage the under-10 metre quota pool. The discard ban can provide significant benefits for all sectors of the fleet.

Damian Collins: Trawlermen in Folkestone, Hythe and Dungeness have raised with me their concerns about the lack of quota for the inshore fishing fleet and the potentially devastating impact of the discard ban. Will the Minister urgently consider making more quota available for the inshore fishing fleet and granting an exemption from the discard ban?

George Eustice: While the common fisheries policy does not allow the exemption of a whole fleet, there are other exemptions—for instance, exemptions for species that survive after being discarded, and if handling discards is disproportionately costly. On quota, we are in the process of permanently realigning some of it from producer organisations to the inshore fleet. In addition, as part of this consultation, we are considering giving the inshore fleet a greater share of the quota uplift that forms part of the CFP.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Given the collapse of our bass stocks, and the fact that the latest figures show a worrying 30% increase in the number of commercial landings of bass, will the Minister please finally take meaningful action to save our bass? Will he, for instance, provide for an immediate increase in the minimum landing size, which is something that I signed off 10 years ago when I was the fisheries Minister?

George Eustice: I know that the right hon. Gentleman has been pursuing this issue. As he will know, at the December Council we argued strongly for measures to be taken on bass. We pressed the European Commission to take emergency measures to ban pair trawling, which was done in the new year. We are currently discussing with other member states and the Commission the possibility of a bag limit for anglers, and also catch limits for the remainder of the commercial fleet. I can also tell the right hon. Gentleman that we are considering raising the minimum landing size nationally.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): May I urge my hon. Friend to review the application of the rules relating to the ban on the return of fish that might survive, particularly hand-lined mackerel? I have some experience of this, and I know that the vast majority survive. It is absurd for fishermen to be told that they cannot return those fish.

George Eustice: Mackerel were included in the pelagic discard ban that was considered last year, but we are giving serious consideration to the survivability rates of white fish, particularly flatfish such as sole and plaice. I shall be happy to look into the specific issue of mackerel hand-lining in Cornwall, and to keep it under constant review. We did manage to secure an exemption for the Cornish sardine industry, which was a big success.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): There is still a huge amount of uncertainty about how the ban can be made workable in the context of mixed fisheries in the North sea. What are Ministers doing to ensure that so-called choke species do not end up choking off the livelihoods of not just the fishermen in the white fish fleet, but the onshore processors?

George Eustice: I know that people are concerned about the challenges involved in the implementation of a discard ban. That is why we have had to start thinking about it at an early stage, and why we have issued the consultation in the way that we have. As for choke species such as hake, which is often cited in Scotland, we will be phasing in the ban over five years, and we will start with the species that define the fishery, so the ban on some of those species would not apply until a date closer to 2020.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I believe that the discard ban is absolutely right, although it will obviously take some time to get its implementation right. What will be done about fish that are landed and may or may not be fit for human consumption, but could be used as fish food, or even for farming purposes?

George Eustice: We are discussing that with processors and port authorities, but we believe that we have enough processing capacity to create fishmeal, although there may be problems with transport from the ports to the locations where the fishmeal is processed. We want to change fishing behaviour, and to reduce the amount of unwanted fish that is landed by means of more selective gears and changes in fishing patterns.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am sure that the Minister is aware of the regional discrepancy in net configurations. The Northern Ireland requirement is 300 mm, while the requirement in the Republic of Ireland is 80 mm, and there are different requirements in Scotland, Wales and England. Has the Minister discussed with regional authorities and the Government of the Republic the introduction of more uniformity in net configuration, in the context of the discard ban?

George Eustice: I shall be happy to look into that. As the hon. Gentleman knows, the nephrops industry is particularly important in Northern Ireland, and we managed, against the odds, to secure an increase in the total allowable catch at the December Council. That will be good for the Northern Ireland fleet. Different countries take different approaches when it comes to technical measures; that is an important aspect of the devolved entity that we want the common fisheries policy to become.

Bees and Pollinators

3. **Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the role the public can play in supporting bees and pollinators. [908020]

6. **Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the role the public can play in supporting bees and pollinators [908023]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): In November we published the national pollinator strategy, a 10-year plan to help pollinators to thrive, which involves farmers, major landowners and the public. People can help in their gardens, schools or local parks by leaving areas wild for pollinators, or ensuring that food sources are available throughout the year.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Secretary of State update me on how the 2013 United Kingdom national action plan for sustainable use of pesticides is being reviewed, so that the use of pesticides by local authorities in particular can be reduced?

Elizabeth Truss: We will update the action plan by 2017 in line with European Union requirements. Many local authorities are involved in our national pollinator strategy: Bristol, Wyre Forest and Peterborough are all taking measures to plant pollinator-friendly wild flowers.

Jeremy Lefroy: Last month, at the Stafford green arts festival, “There is no planet B”, I was presented with a book that contained a number of concerns raised by my constituents, including the threat to bees and pollinators. What news can I give them of the work being done across the country to protect and preserve pollinators, which are so essential for food production?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: pollinators are vital for our £100 billion food and farming industry, and are estimated to be worth £430 million to our economy in services alone. That is why we launched the national pollinator strategy, which will include a wild pollinator and wildlife element in the new countryside stewardship scheme. That means that farmers will have a strong incentive to help pollinators on their land.

Mrs Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I am pleased to see that Network Rail has joined the Government’s strategy on pollinators, but is my right hon. Friend aware that its practice of removing all vegetation along the railway embankments destroys the habitats of bees and pollinators, and no assurances have been given to my constituents in Hampton-in-Arden that there will be an offset for this biodiversity loss?

Elizabeth Truss: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that point. It is good news that Network Rail, the Highways Agency and other major organisations, including the National Trust, have signed up to the pollinator strategy, and I am certainly very happy to take up that specific point with Network Rail, because major landowners can do so much to make sure that areas are available for pollinators to thrive.

Rural Payments Agency

4. **Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con):** What assessment she has made of trends in the performance of the Rural Payments Agency since 2010. [908021]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Under this Government, the Rural Payments Agency has dealt with the historical issues of late payments to farmers, which were a feature under the last Government. This year it released payments to 97.4% of claimants within the first month, and 2013-14 was the agency’s most successful year to date, with more customers being paid on the first day than ever before, and with high customer satisfaction scores.

Bill Wiggin: I must declare my interest in farming. Will the basic payments system be ready by 15 May? Why are farmers expected to draw ineligible features, instead of satellite mapping being used? What sort of support is there if they make any errors in the process, so that they are not being set up to fail?

Mr Speaker: There were three questions there, but at least each was brief.

George Eustice: On the first point, I can report that over 75% of farmers are now registered on the system. Some of them are experiencing issues with the slowness of the mapping system, and we are working to address

that. On my hon. Friend’s question about why they have to map, they have always had to map ineligible features—that is a requirement of the EU regulations—but they are entered on to the final application by digitisers, who check that the area is mapped correctly.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Stephen Wyrill, national chairman of the Tenant Farmers Association, says that the Department’s online system for farmers to claim under the basic payment scheme is “heading for carnage”, and Guy Smith, vice-president of the National Farmers Union, says that its concern will turn to “justified alarm” if full mapping functionality is not operating by this weekend as promised. Many farmers depend for their survival on this payment. Can the Minister give an undertaking that all farmers will be able to make their claim online by 15 May?

George Eustice: We have been working closely with the farming industry on this. Under this system, this was always going to be an iterative process. We wanted to put the system in place in stages and instalments. We have 75% of farmers on already, we are addressing the issue of the speed of the system, and we are looking at ways of expediting things for certain land types, so that they can bypass parts of the land eligibility criteria. I should also point out that we have a network of 50 digital support centres to help those farmers who require help.

Maria Eagle: With 25% of farmers not yet registered and the deadline fast approaching, *Farmers Weekly* is reporting that only 236 farmers have gone for help to the 50 support centres, which is fewer than five per centre. Those who have registered—96% of them did so by phone, not online—are reporting that the online system has constant error messages and general slowness, that field information is not appearing, and that the mapping function does not work. Is the Minister planning a paper-based plan B, in case his online system collapses or is not fit for purpose?

George Eustice: Our plan is to make the system work and to ensure that those farmers who need help can go into digital support centres. We anticipate that those centres will be busier in April, but we have ensured that they have sufficient capacity to upscale and to help farmers. It is important to recognise that about half of all farmers have only permanent pasture, and the requirement for them to map their details is lesser than it is for arable farmers. We are looking at ways of expediting this process.

Mr David Heath (Somerton and Frome) (LD): This Government should be hugely proud of the massive improvement in the Rural Payments Agency, compared with the chaos of a few years ago. We should also give thanks to its chief executive, Mark Grimshaw, for his work on making that happen. It is a fact that the IT systems will be critical in future. They will have to work, but we also need to enable farmers to use IT out in rural areas of the country that often have no access. The Minister will of course do everything he can to make the system work, but will he also redouble his efforts to persuade other Government Departments that rural broadband is absolutely critical to this important industry?

George Eustice: Yes. We recognise the importance of rural broadband, which is why Broadband Delivery UK has invested hundreds of millions of pounds to bring broadband to rural areas. I know that my hon. Friend was involved in commissioning the Cap D system—the common agricultural policy delivery system—and he will recognise that we have ensured that it can operate at quite low speeds of around 2 megabits per second. That will ensure that most farmers are able to use it, but we have established the network of digital support centres for those who are not.

Key Performance Indicators

5. **Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that her Department's environmental key performance indicators are met. [908022]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Rogerson): The core Department has reduced the size of its core estate to three properties and implemented measures such as LED lighting and improved insulation to reduce energy use. Carbon emissions, the quantity of waste we generate and the amount of water we use have reduced by 39%, 30% and 2% respectively. In the coming year, we are looking to use energy performance contracts to make our buildings more efficient and potentially to introduce renewable generation.

Chi Onwurah: The environment is clearly a key part of preventing and combating climate change, and that was one of the performance indicators. However, the Secretary of State has reduced from 38 to six the number of people working on climate change, and the Committee on Climate Change gave her Department a mere three out of 10. Does the Minister agree that in so trivialising climate change, the Secretary of State is putting at risk our long-term economic and environmental future?

Dan Rogerson: Mr Speaker, you will not be surprised to hear that I do not agree with the hon. Lady's contention. I have a meeting this afternoon with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change on the important work that we are doing on mitigation and adaptation. That remains a priority for this Government, which is why we are delivering on making a difference on this important range of issues.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): Could one of the Department's environmental key performance indicators be the simplification of uplands entry-level stewardship agreements? I have several hill farmers who are struggling with unhelpful interpretations of those agreements by Natural England, and they need to be clarified and simplified.

Dan Rogerson: It is absolutely right that we should do all we can to ensure that these important new schemes are brought in properly, and that the existing schemes are functioning correctly. If my hon. Friend has particular concerns about the schemes, I would be happy to receive a letter from him that I can share with my colleague who deals primarily with these matters.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Select Committee on Environmental Audit has used a traffic-light system to assess the Government's performance over the past five years. On air pollution, it has given the Government a red light; on biodiversity and wildlife, it has given the Government a red light; and on climate change adaptation, flooding and coastal protection, it has also given the Government a red light. This Government were supposed to be the greenest Government ever, so why are they ending their time in office without being awarded a single green light?

Dan Rogerson: During my time in office, I have been happy to give evidence repeatedly to the Environmental Audit Committee, though I might disagree with some of its conclusions. I am happy to say that this Government are making improvements on air quality. There are issues with nitrogen dioxide, but they are being addressed at European level. We are improving our status in the important area of biodiversity in this country. We are improving our water quality. Across a whole range of areas, this Government are taking action to improve the quality of our environment and to establish, through the processes of the Natural Capital Committee, the importance of our natural capital now and in the future.

Flood Defences

7. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): How many flood defence schemes are planned to be built under the Government's flood defence programme. [908025]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): Our six-year flood defence programme, announced in December, includes more than 1,400 projects across the country. This £2.3 billion investment is a real-terms increase in capital spending and will mean that 300,000 homes are better protected.

Martin Vickers: I thank my right hon. Friend for that. She will be aware of local authorities' proposals to strengthen defences around the Humber estuary, and the autumn statement allocated £80 million for initial expenditure. Will she update us on when her officials will have made a full assessment of the proposals and when she will be able to make an announcement?

Elizabeth Truss: I was delighted that in December we could announce £80 million for schemes on the Humber estuary, which will improve protection for more than 50,000 households. We are examining the ambitious proposals put forward by my hon. Friend, his colleagues and local authorities in the area, and we will publish the results in July.

12. [908032] **Sir Hugh Bayley** (York Central) (Lab): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for publishing the flood protection investment figures as official statistics, for which I asked in the House more than a year ago. They show, as I claimed, that over the past three years the Government have cut the amount spent on flood protection by £350 million, compared with the amount they inherited. The really interesting thing is that although the figures show the amount rising this year to £469 million, they show it falling immediately

after the election to £370 million. Is that because the Government believe flood risks will fall by 20% next year—or is it just pre-election cynicism?

Elizabeth Truss: Let us be clear: the amount we are spending in our six-year programme—£2.3 billion—is a real-terms increase on the capital expenditure this Parliament, which again is a real-terms increase from that in the previous Parliament. The result of that is we will end up reducing flood risk, including the impact of climate change, by 5%.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that it is not just the sea we need to protect against, but flooding from excessive rain. What action is she taking to encourage the Environment Agency to ensure that drainage ditches are regularly dredged?

Elizabeth Truss: First, we are putting additional funding into maintenance—an additional £35 million this year and next year for those types of activity. We are also running pilot projects so that local landowners and farmers can be involved in that work, as well as the Environment Agency. In addition, local environment agencies are spending more time now on issues such as dredging to make sure that that work happens.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The residents of Morpeth in my constituency are delighted with the actions of the Environment Agency and the near-completion of the flood alleviation scheme, but they are really concerned about flood risk insurance. What stage are we at in the discussions and negotiations on Flood Re and other affordable insurance schemes?

Elizabeth Truss: We are on track for Flood Re to be established this summer—we are currently working on that. In the interim, we have the 2008 statement of principles, which will make sure that people in those areas do have flood insurance.

Mr Speaker: I call Kerry McCarthy. She is not here.

Bovine Tuberculosis

9. **Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the lessons that can be learned from the experiences of other countries in dealing with bovine tuberculosis. [908027]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): The success of the bovine TB eradication policies pursued in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the Republic of Ireland demonstrates the need to bear down on the disease effectively in both cattle and wildlife.

Fiona Bruce: I thank the Minister for his answer. Does he agree that lessons from Ireland, in particular, show that where there is TB in wildlife it must be tackled through culling as part of any comprehensive strategy to tackle TB? If that had happened years ago when TB was known to be moving towards Cheshire at the rate of 1 mile a year, Cheshire's farmers would not be suffering the difficulties they are today. Does he also agree that this should not be such a political issue? It is about supporting our farmers and eradicating TB.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point: it is not possible to eradicate this disease without tackling the reservoir of the disease in the wildlife population. She rightly says that the previous Government put their head in the sands and did nothing. This is a slow-moving, difficult disease and it has to be hit hard and early, which the previous Government failed to do. At a recent NFU conference Labour confirmed again that, irrespective of the evidence and the advice of the chief veterinary officer, it would abandon the culls.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): Despite the Government's protestations, the previous Labour Government killed more badgers than any other Government. [Laughter.] Yes. The £50 million trial over 10 years concluded that such action gave no meaningful contribution to the eradication of tuberculosis. The Government's badger culls have not just been a disaster for wildlife, but come at a huge financial cost. In the first year of the culls, the Government spent £9.8 million. With Ministers proposing to extend the badger culls, possibly to 10 areas and after that to 40 areas, how much more can taxpayers expect to fork out for these ineffective and inhumane badger culls?

George Eustice: The random badger cull trials that were carried out demonstrated incontrovertibly that, over time, the cull did lead to a significant reduction in the disease, which is why the experts in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs recommend a cull as part of the strategy. It is absolutely wrong for Labour to say that it will ignore the evidence and the advice of the chief veterinary officer. On the costs in the first year, the cull clearly had elements of analysis, post mortem, research and policing that will not be present when we roll it out more widely. We are committed to having a badger cull as part of our 25-year strategy.

Natura 2000

10. **Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con):** If she will take steps to increase the number of Natura 2000 sites in England. [908029]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Rogerson): A review of the network of special protection areas classified under the wild birds directive is currently under way and will inform decisions on the need to classify further sites. The network of special areas of conservation designated under the habitats directive is essentially complete, but is continually under review to ensure that it remains sufficient. Further work has been undertaken to identify additional SACs for harbour porpoise and is expected to deliver later this year.

Mrs Gillan: I thank the Minister for his answer. In that review, will he consider extending the status of Natura 2000 to the area of outstanding natural beauty in the Chilterns, particularly as it has precious ancient woodland, really fragile chalk streams and the majestic sight of the successfully re-introduced Red Kites soaring over our Chiltern hills? Surely we should be a candidate for Natura 2000 designation?

Dan Rogerson: I can reassure my right hon. Friend that the work of the AONBs is very much recognised by Government. On considering further protections, we must look at the evidence on those particular species

and take any decision very carefully. Natural England is considering designating more ancient woodland as sites of special scientific interest, which will increase the protection afforded to the best ancient woodlands above and beyond that which is already accorded to ancient woodlands through the national planning policy framework.

Hunting Act 2004

11. **Paul Flynn** (Newport West) (Lab): What her policy is on repeal of the Hunting Act 2004. [908031]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): My support for fox hunting is well known. The Hunting Act was a mistake, and I strongly support repeal. Acknowledging the strong views on both sides of this debate, I am pleased that the Prime Minister has said that a Conservative Government will give Parliament the opportunity to repeal the Hunting Act on a free vote with a Government Bill in Government time.

Paul Flynn: Despite Tory hysteria, the Hunting Act did not reduce the pageantry of hunting or result in the mass slaughter of horses or hounds. What it did do was reduce greatly the sadistic torment of the chase and the kill. Is the nasty party really going to campaign in the election to bring cruelty back into hunting?

Elizabeth Truss: I am not prepared to listen to the advice of a party that has a shadow farming Minister who will not listen to the chief veterinary officer and who has said publicly that he will not follow his advice on animal welfare issues.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating members of the Holcombe hunt, whose hounds have their kennels in my constituency, on maintaining their activities within the law since the hunting ban was introduced and preserving this most traditional of rural pursuits?

Elizabeth Truss: I completely agree that hunting is important for rural communities. It is traditional and part of the fabric of our countryside.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Why will the Secretary of State not recognise the huge opposition to the idea of repealing the Hunting Act? Instead of proposing yet more cruelty to animals, why will she not look at extending the Act to grouse shooting and hare coursing, which also are cruel and hugely opposed in this country?

Elizabeth Truss: Our approach is that we will introduce a Government Bill in Government time to repeal the Hunting Act on a free vote.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): If that is indeed our approach, can the Secretary of State tell us why there has not been a free vote in this Parliament, as set out in the coalition agreement?

Elizabeth Truss: I want to see repeal of the Act, and I am pleased to say that the Prime Minister has said that a Conservative Government will give the opportunity for that.

Topical Questions

T1. [908007] **Maria Miller** (Basingstoke) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The Government are delivering on their priorities of growing the economy and improving the environment. Since 2010, we have cut farm inspections by 34,000 a year. We have helped create 150,000 acres of priority habitats. We have planted more than 11 million trees. We have cleaned up more than 10,000 miles of river. We have reformed the common fisheries policy, invested £3.2 billion in our flood defences, providing protection to an additional 230,000 homes, and put in place a strategy to eradicate bovine TB. This is a record we can be proud of.

Maria Miller: Will the Secretary of State join me in applauding the work of the Forestry Commission to secure a criminal conviction against those who illegally felled more than 500 trees in Basingstoke in a failed attempt to establish a Traveller site? Will she look at ways to encourage the courts to use the fining powers that are available to them to help stop this sort of appalling environmental vandalism?

Elizabeth Truss: I welcome the fact that the Forestry Commission's enforcement action has been successful, and I applaud its exercise of these important powers. We take protection of our woodlands seriously, and no doubt the Commission will pursue the restocking requirements vigorously. It is for the courts to determine sentences, but I fully expect the restocking burden to act as a key deterrent.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): If the Government's record in tackling lethal air pollution is as good as the Under-Secretary, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Dan Rogerson), claimed earlier, why is Britain facing unprecedented fines and legal action in the European courts for failing on every single air quality measure?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dan Rogerson): I am happy that the right hon. Gentleman is focusing attention on this. As he will no doubt be aware, one of the key factors is transport fuels, especially diesel, and the failure of vehicles to meet in real-world conditions what was shown by testing when they were approved for use. We must make improvements at the European level on vehicles standards and testing. We also make funds available to local authorities to help them take measures locally to deal with air quality. It is a crucial issue.

T3. [908010] **Robert Jenrick** (Newark) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that her Department is on course to have cut red tape for farmers by cutting guidance by 80% and by reducing the number of farm inspections by 34,000 during this Parliament? When she is returned after 7 May, will she ensure that cutting red tape includes making it easier and cheaper for my Nottinghamshire farmers and riparian owners to maintain the streams and rivers that protect the countryside?

Elizabeth Truss: I agree with my hon. Friend. We have seen a reduction of 34,000 farm inspections per year and an 80% reduction in red tape from DEFRA. That is vital for our £100 billion food and farming industry. A future Conservative Government would continue to bear down on red tape. We are considering pilots for land owners and farmers to manage water courses themselves, to get rid of a lot of bureaucracy.

T5. [908013] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): I hope that the Minister's office passed on notice of my question; I appreciate that it is quite obscure. Musicians face anxiety when they travel to the United States because if their instruments contain even small amounts of ivory they fall foul of the convention on international trade in endangered species regulations. Will the Minister assure me that CITES certificates will be recognised by the US authorities and, in the longer term, may we perhaps look at an exemption for vintage instruments? I think that mother of pearl as well as ivory is an issue.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We are aware of these concerns and certainly want the US Government to recognise CITES musical instrument certificates, to ease the task of musicians travelling to the US with instruments that contain small amounts of legal ivory. Ultimately, these are matters for the US Government to determine. However, we intend to approach the European Commission and other EU member states to propose a joint approach to ask the US to clarify its position, with the aim of providing the reassurances the hon. Lady seeks.

T4. [908012] **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): So much done, so much still to do. Will my right hon. Friend commit to giving statutory status as consultees to water companies for fracking, major developments and houses and roads? In the time available, what will she look back on and see as her Department's major achievement over the past five years?

Elizabeth Truss: I certainly commit to my hon. Friend that we will ensure that there are proper environmental protections for water, as part of the Environment Agency's work on protection for fracking areas. On the Department's achievements, we have put food and farming at the heart of the long-term economic plan. We have seen food exports rise to £19 billion. That is vital for the one in eight people in this country who work in food and farming.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I ask the Secretary of State not to be too complacent about our streams and rivers in this country? Has she seen recent research? I have registered interests as the initiator of Greenstreams, which cleans up the rivers in my part of the world, and in environmental waste. Does she know that the old landfills are leaching tonnes of ammonia into our rivers every year? If we do not do something about it, the 27.5 tonnes of ammonia that go into one Oxford river every year will continue to do so, and that will happen all over the country.

Elizabeth Truss: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Since 2010, phosphates and sulphides in water have reduced. That is positive progress, but of course he is absolutely right: there is more to do. That is why we have just launched the water element of the countryside stewardship programme, which provides incentives to do just that.

T6. [908015] **Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): With so many large infrastructure projects in the pipeline, what input has the Secretary of State had in looking at the cumulative environmental impact of projects such as High Speed 2 and airport expansion? How many meetings has she had with the Department for Transport and HS2 Ltd, and how regular are those meetings?

Dan Rogerson: Ministers, including my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, have regular meetings throughout the year with Ministers from other Departments, and of course, at official level, we engage very strongly across Departments on such issues. Planning guidance on the need to protect our environment is absolutely clear.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the current price war in the supermarkets with regard to the price of a loaf of bread. Sainsbury's is selling Hovis at 75p a loaf. What can Ministers do to ensure that that does not adversely impact people working in the baking industry?

George Eustice: The supermarket adjudicator requires retailers to stick to the terms of contracts, not retrospectively to hit suppliers or unreasonably request them to take part in promotions. Through the groceries code and the adjudicator, we have measures in place to deal with the problems that the hon. Gentleman cites.

T7. [908016] **Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Shoreham in my constituency has a flourishing houseboat community, which adds to the colour of our town. Alas, it also adds to the colour of the water flowing into Shoreham harbour until high tide washes it away, as few boats have sewage tanks or are linked to drainage on the shore. Do the Government have any plans to tighten up on pollution from boats used as homes?

Dan Rogerson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight potential risks from sewage pollution in water. If the Environment Agency can demonstrate a problem, it can issue a notice within 3 nautical miles of an area of operation. Since 1994, all new recreational craft should be fitted with holding tanks that allow managed discharge. Larger vessels are covered by maritime conventions. If there are specific issues in his area and he would like to write to me about them, I will get him a more detailed answer from the agency.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): We heard earlier of the broadband and other problems of those trying to access rural payments. I know personally the dire experience of broadband services across much of Northumberland, so three years after Labour's universal broadband commitment would have come into force, will the Secretary of State admit that this Government

have sacrificed the rural economy in order to subsidise a monopoly roll-out by BT of superfast broadband mainly in urban and semi-urban areas?

Elizabeth Truss: During this Parliament, we have seen superfast broadband coverage rise from 43% to 80%, and we are seeing connectivity improving in rural areas and the gap between rural and urban areas close in terms of productivity and earnings, as well as better road connections, such as the dualling of the A11.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's help for dairy farming through exports, public procurement and general support, but what talks has she had with the banks? I think milk prices will improve, but the banks need to support farmers in the meantime.

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. There will be short-term cash-flow pressures on farmers who are currently receiving low prices and in some cases have quite high costs. I have had a meeting already with the banks to discuss this and to encourage them to show forbearance. As the Secretary of State said earlier, we have also been encouraging HMRC to show forbearance to those farmers facing difficulties, and I will continue to monitor the issue closely.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): May I urge the Government to reconsider their policy? Although they offer support for bovine TB badger vaccination projects in edge areas, they do not provide that same support in so-called hot-spot areas. I have been working with the Zoological Society of London on a project which has just been very successfully rolled out for its first pilot this year in Penwith. I urge the Government to look at that seriously, because projects in hot spots could make a telling and important contribution to bearing down on bovine TB.

George Eustice: I have met the hon. Gentleman to discuss this issue. He is aware that we have made an offer at DEFRA to give some support to that project in his constituency, notably to provide it with free vaccines and some equipment. However, the edge area vaccination scheme is in the edge area for a very good reason: the vaccine does not cure badgers that already have the disease. There is logic to using the vaccine in the edge area, to create a buffer to prevent the spread of the disease, but less so in the high-risk areas.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Banbury, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

House of Bishops

1. **Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** What steps the Church Commissioners plan to take in response to the House of Bishops' pastoral letter on the 2015 general election. [908037]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Canon Sir Tony Baldry): A copy of the House of Bishops' pastoral letter has been sent to every Member of Parliament. The letter makes it clear that it is not a shopping list of policies that the bishops would like to see, and that if

anyone claims that the pastoral letter is saying, "Vote for this party or that party", they have misunderstood it, but that there is a need to focus on the common good and the participation of more people in developing a political vision.

Mr Nuttall: As this is the last Church Commissioners questions before Dissolution when my right hon. Friend leaves this House, may I place on record my thanks for all his work as the Second Church Estates Commissioner?

Is my right hon. Friend concerned that this letter, which is actually a 52-page booklet, may have been misrepresented in some quarters by some commentators, who have cherry-picked certain phrases and passages rather than looking at the document as a whole?

Sir Tony Baldry: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I hope every parliamentary colleague will read the bishops' pastoral letter. I do not expect everyone to agree with everything in it, but it is a thoughtful and thought-provoking document which makes it clear that the bishops believe that

"the great majority of politicians and candidates enter politics with a passion to improve the lives of their fellow men and women."

Only yesterday the Archbishop of Canterbury made this observation:

"It's just the reality; decisions have to be made and it is often unbelievably difficult. Politicians know that quite often they are doing the best they can and the more I see of them the more I reckon that it's very rare to find one who isn't doing the best they can but often in incredibly difficult situations."

St George's Cathedral (Jerusalem)

2. **Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** If the Church Commissioners will take steps to support St George's cathedral in Jerusalem. [908038]

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: Like any Anglican cathedral overseas, St George's cathedral in Jerusalem is financially independent of the Church Commissioners. However, I would hope that everyone possible would support the work of the friends of St George's cathedral in Jerusalem, a UK registered charity that has the Archbishop of Canterbury as patron.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer and join my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Nuttall) in paying tribute to the work that he has done as the Second Church Estates Commissioner.

On a visit with the International Development Committee last year in the area, I had the privilege of being invited by my constituent, Mrs Hifsa Iqbal, to an interfaith conference hosted by St George's cathedral in Jerusalem. May I encourage the Church Commissioners to look at the very important work that St George's is doing in the middle east and see what support they can give?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: My hon. Friend makes a good point and I entirely agree with him. St George's cathedral in Jerusalem seeks to support everyone in need irrespective of their faith, but its support for Palestinian Christians is particularly important as they often feel themselves to be twice a minority. It is a sad fact that the number of Christians in the Holy Land has

dwindled significantly in recent years, so I hope that we will all do what we can to support the work of St George's cathedral in Jerusalem, and the schools and hospitals that it runs for everyone in the west bank and in Gaza.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): That is indeed a sad fact. I was fortunate to be able to join worshippers for evensong at St George's cathedral in Jerusalem and I still remember the prayer that evening, that we should pray not just for the Israelis or for the Palestinians, but for ourselves—that we should not separate them in our prayers. Does that not illustrate the vital contribution that St George's can make to both civic and spiritual life in Jerusalem?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. I commend to every colleague psalm 122, which includes the words:

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.”

Christianity (Rural Areas)

3. **Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): What steps the Church of England plans to take to maintain and support a Christian presence in every rural community. [908039]

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: The Church of England is committed to being a Christian presence in every community. The recently published “Growing the Rural Church” report identifies a number of recommendations to help rural multi-church groups to flourish.

Martin Vickers: As well as being places of worship, especially in rural areas, churches are community hubs, and with priests being spread over so many parishes now, there are increasing problems. Will my right hon. Friend do everything he possibly can to ensure that the Church provides as many clergy as possible for our rural parishes?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: Yes, indeed. We certainly seek to recruit more stipendiary and self-supporting clergy. My hon. Friend makes an important point. The vibrancy of churches is important to rural life. There are 635 churches in the diocese of Lincoln. They all play an important part in the vibrancy and vitality of the countryside of Lincolnshire.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the Church Commissioners dig deep into their resources to ensure that the jewels of the rural crown of the multiple parish churches in a constituency such as Thirsk and Malton will be preserved and kept in the best possible state of maintenance?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: One of the tasks I will take on when I leave the House is to chair a statutory body, the Church Buildings Council, which is responsible for the maintenance, repair and restoration of all 16,000 parish churches throughout England. I want to make sure that they are always seen as a blessing, not as a burden. We must acknowledge that the majority of English churches are in rural areas, which cover only a sixth of the population, so we have some challenges, but they play an important part in the lives of every village community.

Citizenship

4. **Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): If the Church Commissioners will discuss with Church of England bishops initiatives involving other faith leaders on instilling citizenship values throughout the population. [908040]

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: Bishops throughout England work closely with other faith leaders in their diocese to uphold citizenship values throughout their communities.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Gentleman has always been more of a blessing than a burden in these sessions, and today especially so.

On a serious note, citizenship is taught patchily in schools in our country. We have a wonderful interfaith group in Huddersfield which leads this positive move to share faith and interests. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that if the hard work is done in such organisations all the time, when crises arrive it will stand us in good stead?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: I entirely agree. Indeed, I am glad that during this Parliament the Government, through the Department for Communities and Local Government, have supported three programmes to help promote faith communities: Near Neighbours, which is operated by the Church Urban Fund; Together in Service, which is operated by FaithAction; and the work of the Inter Faith Network for the UK. Another challenge that I am taking on after standing down is chairing the trustees of the St Ethelburga's centre for reconciliation and peace, based in the City of London, which works with many interfaith institutions right across the country, whether in Huddersfield, Manchester or elsewhere. There is an enormous amount of really good practice going on in interfaith work across the United Kingdom, of which we can all be proud.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Mr Fitzpatrick, are you seeking to come in on this question?

Jim Fitzpatrick: No, Mr Speaker. I was anticipating Dr Offord's question.

Mr Speaker: Anticipation is clearly one of the hon. Gentleman's strengths.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for South West Devon, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Electoral Fraud

5. **Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): What steps the Electoral Commission is taking to tackle electoral fraud. [908041]

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon): The Electoral Commission has worked with the College of Policing to publish detailed guidance for police forces on preventing and detecting electoral fraud. Additional measures are

also being put in place by returning officers and police forces in areas where there have been allegations of electoral fraud at previous elections. The Electoral Commission has worked with political parties to agree a code of conduct for campaigners and is developing a simple guide for voters on how to protect their vote and report electoral fraud.

Dr Offord: My Labour opponent in Hendon has registered himself, and just himself, in a flat he owns in the constituency, even though he lives in Notting Hill with his wife. Does my hon. Friend think that is open, honest and transparent?

Mr Streeter: That is not, directly speaking, a matter for the Electoral Commission, although I certainly agree that transparency in all politics is very important. It might be something that my hon. Friend can raise during the course of the coming campaign.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Can the hon. Gentleman confirm that the Electoral Commission is monitoring events at the election court examining electoral fraud allegations relating to the Tower Hamlets mayoral election last year and that, given that the case is due to finish before the general election, any lessons to help improve the conduct of the election will be communicated to the police, the returning officer and the commissioners in Tower Hamlets?

Mr Streeter: I can certainly confirm that the Electoral Commission is watching that case very carefully indeed. There will be a study of the outcome once the judge has determined it. Obviously, I cannot comment on the details, as the case is ongoing. The report will be provided by the Electoral Commission as quickly as possible and lessons for the entire democratic system in our country will be learnt.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): My hon. Friend will be aware that in the past there have been cases of electoral fraud and abuse in Bradford West. Will the Electoral Commission be keeping a particularly close eye on Bradford West in the forthcoming general election to ensure that no sharp practices are employed? If so, what additional measures are in place to ensure that the election in Bradford West will be free and fair?

Mr Streeter: Bradford is one of the 17 areas of the country that are receiving special attention from the Electoral Commission and the police in the run-up to the general election. There will be a greater police presence in those areas and firm guidance will be given to campaigners. Every police force in the country now has a specialist electoral fraud officer. The public will be issued with clear guidance on how to protect their vote and report any suspected electoral fraud, either to the police or to Crimestoppers.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): In all the years that I have been voting, I have never noticed any clearly displayed signs in polling stations indicating the penalties for electoral fraud. Will my hon. Friend look into that and perhaps arrange to have a clear sign in every polling station explaining that people can go to prison for electoral fraud? Perhaps that will put off anyone intending to defraud the electorate.

Mr Streeter: I must confess to being as unobservant as my right hon. Friend, because I have not noticed any such displays either. I will pass her suggestion to the Electoral Commission immediately. If action is required, of course it will be taken.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Banbury, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Historic Churches

6. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What support is available for the upkeep of historic churches in local communities. [908042]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Canon Sir Tony Baldry): The Heritage Lottery Fund makes money available for church repair and restoration. The Chancellor of the Exchequer recently announced a £15 million fund to assist churches with roof repairs. There are other sources of funding, such as help from landfill tax credits, to a number of charities and foundations that regularly and generously support repair, reordering and restoration work in parish churches. Details of possible funding can be found at www.churchcare.co.uk.

Fiona Bruce: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he agree that parish churches such as St Michael's in Middlewich in my constituency are an invaluable community resource, and that the cost of repairing and maintaining such listed church buildings should not just fall on the shoulders of church congregations but be shared more widely?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: I agree that parish churches are an invaluable community asset. We ought to thank the Chancellor for what he has done during the course of this Parliament. There is gift aid; there is the small gift relief legislation that we passed; there is the listed places of worship scheme, which effectively relieves churches of the cost of VAT on repairs and restoration; and there is the recent £15 million roof fund that the Chancellor made available for helping to repair church roofs. Churches are part of our national heritage, and the whole community has a responsibility to help to maintain and restore them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In my constituency, the friends of the Presbyterian church in Portaferry have a wonderful historic church. They applied for, and were successful in getting, a grant of some £900,000 from the Big Lottery Fund. Those moneys enabled the church to be refurbished, retained and restored to its former glory. What contact have the Church Commissioners had with the Big Lottery Fund scheme to ensure that all churches can do the same?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: May I write to the hon. Gentleman, because I need to pick through that question? I have responsibility only for the Church of England, and I do not think my responsibilities stretch to Northern Ireland, so I need to see what help I can offer him.

8. [908044] **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Five years ago, I started nagging my right hon. Friend about money required to maintain the fabric of Lichfield

cathedral, and I do not intend his retirement to stop me. What hope can he give Lichfield cathedral that we will receive funding in order to maintain the wiring—and when will he come and visit Lichfield?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: My hon. Friend's question on the Order Paper was whether I would visit Lichfield cathedral, to which the answer is yes. The answer to his supplementary question is that, as the House will know, the Chancellor made £20 million available so that we could ensure that all our cathedrals were in a good state to commemorate the centenary of the first world war. Lichfield cathedral needs some serious money to help rewire it, because otherwise it will be unable to function. I am looking forward to visiting Lichfield cathedral shortly to see Lichfield's treasures, including the Lichfield angel and my hon. Friend.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman may be looking forward to his visit to Lichfield cathedral, but I do not suppose he is looking forward to it as much as the people of Lichfield.

Living Wage

7. **Mr Ben Bradshaw** (Exeter) (Lab): What the Church Commissioners' policy is on paying the living wage. [908043]

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: The Church Commissioners and the Archbishops Council are committed to paying the living wage and ensuring that all staff and contractors who are employed at directly owned commercial and residential properties are paid at least the living wage. Other parts of the national institutions, including the Church of England, are committed to paying the living wage and are following the Living Wage Commission's recommendations to put in place a transitional programme that involves all staff being paid the living wage by 2017.

Mr Bradshaw: Given that completely satisfactory answer, Mr Speaker, may I dispense with my supplementary question and simply, through you, thank the right hon. Gentleman for the superb job he has done as Second Church Estates Commissioner? He should be aware that millions of Anglicans and non-Anglicans across the world, but particularly our fantastic women priests, have him to thank for having saved the Church of England from itself in its original debacle over women bishops. On their behalf, thank you.

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those very kind comments. On this, as I hope on much, the work has benefited from cross-party collaboration, and much of what we have achieved we have achieved only by people in this House working together.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for South West Devon, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission was asked—

Online Voter Registration (Young and Student Voters)

9. **Mrs Caroline Spelman** (Meriden) (Con): What assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the effect of online registration on young and student voters. [908045]

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon): The Electoral Commission informs me that 18 to 24-year-olds are the second most active age group in making use of the online registration system, comprising about a quarter of all applications. Research conducted by YouGov for the Electoral Commission in January showed that 53% of 18 to 24-year-olds are still unaware that they can register to vote online. The commission is working with a wide range of organisations to encourage young people to register to vote and to raise awareness of how easy it is to do so online.

Mrs Spelman: I am very concerned that, on 1 December, the electoral register appeared to have reduced by 900,000. Is my right hon. Friend aware that party-branded material is being circulated in schools to encourage 18-year-olds to register to vote? What can be done to ensure that there is political balance with young voters?

Mr Streeter: Since 1 December, more than 2 million applications to register to vote have been made, so it is almost certain that the numbers will be rebalanced by the time we get to 7 May.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): You said that with a straight face!

Mr Streeter: The Electoral Commission is about to launch, on Monday, its TV awareness campaign, which I know the hon. Lady will support, to drive home the message that if you do not register, you cannot vote. The Electoral Commission is working with a number of organisations to make sure that this message has been put across to young people.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Banbury, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Petrochemical Companies

10. **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): What the Church Commissioners' policy is on investing their funds in petrochemical companies. [908046]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Canon Sir Tony Baldry): The Church Commissioners do invest in petrochemical companies. These investments are managed in line with our ethical investment policy. The commissioners intend to continue to engage collaboratively with other shareholders and the industry to encourage greater transparency and transition to a lower-carbon economy.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that reply. It is an honour to be the last person ever to ask him a question. It is just a shame that we are not talking about bats, as we usually do.

I know that the right hon. Gentleman feels that some progress has been made on this issue, but others have said that the Church of England is rather dragging its feet. Will he heed the calls of Archbishop Desmond Tutu to show strong moral leadership on this issue and report back sooner rather than later?

Canon Sir Tony Baldry: I am not quite sure on what specific issue the hon. Lady wants us to show strong moral leadership. The fact is that we have a vibrant

North sea oil industry in this country, so we all have an interest in investing in the petrochemical industry. We need to ensure that we work with other shareholders and institutions to try to ensure that the oil companies act as transparently as possible and move as fast as possible to a lower-carbon economy.

Mr Speaker: In simply adding to the very proper tributes that have been paid to the right hon. Gentleman,

I would like to take the opportunity to say that he has been assiduous, accomplished and avuncular in equal measures, which has been hugely appreciated across the House. I think he is aware that I am visiting Bloxham school in his constituency tomorrow. I cannot claim that I am doing so specifically to pay tribute to him, but it will be a pleasure to be in his constituency. On behalf of the whole House, I would like to thank him for his 32 years' service in this place.

Business of the House

10.37 am

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I associate myself with your remarks about the right hon. Member for Banbury (Canon Sir Tony Baldry)?

Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The First Secretary of State and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr William Hague): Mr Speaker, may I, too, associate myself with your remarks about my right hon. Friend?

The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 16 MARCH—Motion to approve statutory instruments relating to counter-terrorism, followed by a motion to approve the draft Drug Driving (Specified Limits) (England and Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, followed by opposed private business which the Chairman of Ways and Means has named for consideration.

TUESDAY 17 MARCH—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Modern Slavery Bill, followed by a debate on motions relating to the reports from the Committee on Standards on the code of conduct and on the standards system in the House of Commons, followed by a debate on a motion relating to Shaker Aamer. The subject for this debate was recommended by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 18 MARCH—My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will open his Budget statement.

THURSDAY 19 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

FRIDAY 20 MARCH—Continuation of the Budget debate.

The provisional business for the week commencing 23 March will include:

MONDAY 23 MARCH—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

TUESDAY 24 MARCH—Consideration of a business of the House motion, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Recall of MPs Bill, followed by consideration of Lords amendments to the Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to counter-terrorism.

WEDNESDAY 25 MARCH—All stages of the Finance (No. 2) Bill, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to terrorism. The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages which may be received.

THURSDAY 26 MARCH—If necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by an opportunity for Members to make short valedictory speeches, as recommended by the Backbench Business Committee. The House may also be asked to consider any Lords messages which may be received.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the shadow Leader of the House, it might be helpful for the House if I say this: the Leader of the House has just announced that the Backbench Business Committee debate to be held on the morning

of Thursday 26 March is intended to give retiring Members an opportunity to make a short valedictory speech. I gather that there will be many retiring Members who wish to take part and, inevitably, the time will be constrained. I therefore draw their attention to the opportunity offered by the four-day Budget debate, also just announced for Wednesday 18, Thursday 19, Friday 20 and Monday 23 March, in which my colleagues and I are minded to permit some latitude to retiring Members wishing to make valedictory remarks, although without any derogation from any time limits that may be in place.

Ms Eagle: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for the remainder of the Parliament. In the blizzard of last-minute statutory instruments that have appeared on the Order Paper, the Registration of Consultant Lobbyists Regulations 2015 were laid on 26 February. Despite the Prime Minister's pre-election pledge to shine the light of transparency on lobbying, it is expected that the new register will cover just 1% of ministerial meetings organised by lobbyists and would not have stopped any of the lobbying scandals that have hit the Government. We are committed to an effective register of all professional lobbyists, backed by a code of conduct and sanctions, so we will pray against these regulations. Will the Leader guarantee us time for a debate on them?

The Government have a clear track record of avoiding scrutiny. On the European arrest warrant, on the Agricultural Wages Board and now on plain packaging of cigarettes, instead of trying to win the argument, they just try to avoid having it altogether. Last week, the Leader of the House rejected my request for a debate on plain packaging on the Floor of the House, and this week we can see why. A majority of Tory MPs failed to vote in favour of this common-sense measure to protect public health, including eight Ministers, three members of the Cabinet and even the Tory deputy Chief Whip. This morning, an analysis by *The Independent* has revealed that one in four MPs who voted against have declared links to the tobacco industry. Does it not say everything about today's Tory party that a majority of its MPs is more interested in the rights of global tobacco companies than the health of Britain's children? Is not the Prime Minister's refusal to defend his record in the TV debates symptomatic of this Government? Instead of trying to win the argument, they just run away from it.

Next week, we will have the charade of the Chancellor's pre-election Budget, which will reportedly contain large chunks of the Tory manifesto. Perhaps the Leader of the House can tell us whether both parties of Government have signed up to it? It is clear that the real omnishambles is this Chancellor's record. He has broken every promise and missed every target he has ever set himself on the economy. For the first time in nearly 100 years working people are worse off at the end of a Parliament than they were at the beginning. Not only would Tory plans cut public spending back to pre-war levels, the reality would be extreme and dangerous cuts of up to £70 billion.

The Prime Minister is an expert at evading scrutiny and the Chancellor yet again excused himself from Treasury questions this week, but I am sure that, as an honourable man, the Leader of the House will be willing to answer some simple questions. To meet their target, is it not the case that a Tory Government would

[Ms Angela Eagle]

have to cut spending on day-to-day public services by significantly more than they will admit? Is it not the case that to meet their target they will have to either raise VAT or cut the NHS? Is it not right that the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) was speaking for growing numbers in the Conservative party when he said that he did not agree with protecting the NHS budget? Is it not also the case that Tory plans would mean that we would have the smallest police force since records began and the smallest Army since Cromwell?

There are only nine more days of this Parliament and I can see that the Leader of the House is eagerly counting them down. He has led his party, he has toured the world, he has become best mates with Angelina Jolie. However, in a rather disappointing end to his glittering career it seems that Conservative party headquarters has got him doing its e-mails. This week, in a message to Tory Members, he warned of the dangers of entering government on the coat tails of a small party that does not keep its promises. He should know quite enough about that already.

It has not been a good week for the Liberal Democrats either. They have been embroiled in a cash-for-access scandal, but the country is mainly just in shock that anyone wants to donate any money to them at all. The hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert) has apparently been sending leaflets out in his constituency that spell the word “failure” incorrectly. I would have thought that every single Liberal Democrat would know how to spell that word. Lord Ashdown, the former leader of the Liberal Democrats and the man in charge of their campaign, declared on the radio this morning that he was going to be very busy during the general election campaign and that he doubted he would get to do any campaigning. This gives a whole new meaning to the phrase “when the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

Things are looking bad for the Prime Minister, too. His latest ploy to escape the scrutiny of the TV debates was to say that radio hosts can grill him “as hot as they like”. Mr Speaker, I prefer a long slow burn. There are just eight weeks to go until the general election and the only person from Chipping Norton who has come out fighting has just been suspended by the BBC.

Mr Hague: I think the reference to a long slow burn was a reference to the shadow Chancellor’s personal life, although I think we can be confident that it would be a very rapid and immediate crash if he were to be Chancellor of the Exchequer. I am not going to join the hon. Lady in making fun of my Liberal Democrat colleagues—I am going to wait for election night. [Laughter.] There will be a moment for all of us to join in that. I have enjoyed working with them immensely. It has been one of the high points of all the things I have done in my career to be able to work with them in government over the past five years. I will certainly continue to send out e-mails to people about the dangers of the coming together in government of a party that wants to bankrupt the country with a party that wants to break up the country. That is the real threat.

The hon. Lady asked about a number of matters. On the plain packaging vote, the Conservatives had a free vote, which was absolutely the right thing to have done.

The regulations were carried by a very large majority in the House. I voted for them myself and I am pleased that they have been passed.

The hon. Lady asked about the register of lobbyists that is being set up under this Government, as is the declaration of transparency of all ministerial meetings with outside organisations. There have been very important improvements on this issue in the past few years.

The hon. Lady asked about the Budget. I can assure her that the Budget that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer will present next Wednesday will be agreed across the coalition: it will be the Budget of the coalition Government. We will, of course, all be able to set out in our party manifestos what we will do after the general election. When the Chancellor stands up to deliver the Budget on Wednesday, he will be highly unusual in the ranks of Chancellors of the Exchequer in the history of this country in being able to say that during his tenure nearly 2 million jobs have been created, that there is lower inflation than when he began, that he presides over the fastest growth in the G7, and that he has halved the deficit of this country. It is a very long time since a Chancellor of the Exchequer could stand up on Budget day with that as his starting point. That is what he will be able to do next Wednesday.

There will be four days to debate the Budget. That is a great deal of time, so there will be a great opportunity to explore all the issues the hon. Lady has raised. She asked about protecting the national health service budget. I seem to remember that the party that did not offer to protect the national health service budget at the last general election was the Labour party. Indeed, what has happened over the past five years is that its budget has been protected in England but cut in Wales, where it has been under the management of the Labour party—that is the advert. But there will be plenty of time to discuss these issues during the Budget debate.

It has been an interesting week for the Opposition. Shadow Ministers have briefed against their own disastrous tuition fees policies, saying they have other uses for £3 billion. Lord Mandelson has managed to brief against the entire Labour party, saying it will fail to win a majority. According to the *New Statesman*, the shadow Chancellor has briefed against the Leader of the Opposition, saying he has not grown into the job and he feels dreadfully sorry for him. The shadow Chancellor then managed the most unusual feat of briefing against himself, by setting out a number of scenarios for a future Conservative Government and then saying he disagreed with those scenarios. And the whole Labour party briefed against itself over whether to do a deal with the Scottish National party. Meanwhile, the Leader of the Opposition sits rudderless in the middle, not knowing what to say. We hope at least that the shadow Leader of the House will rule out a deal with the SNP, as many of her own Back Benchers wish her to do—perhaps we can look forward to that at next week’s business questions.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): May we have a debate on easier access to funding from local government for community charity organisations such as the Blue Box group in Belper, in my constituency, which is trying to raise funds to rebuild its facilities after they were burnt out?

Mr Hague: I was sorry to learn of the challenging circumstances facing Blue Box and the shocking events that led up to them. We are committed to making it easier for charities and community groups such as Blue Box to gain access to the funding they need. The Cabinet Office is funding the “funding central” portal, a free service offering a simple, searchable database of funding opportunities for charities and community groups. We have also offered fundraising training for small charities. So I hope, through one or other of these means, Blue Box can find a sustainable way forward.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The Government are imposing a 25% cut on further education colleges, despite it having a disastrous impact on colleges. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the Secretary of State to come to the House for a debate on the impact of this policy? Since 2010, my own college, Riverside college, has faced a 47% cut in its adult budget.

Mr Hague: I cannot offer a special debate. As the shadow Leader of the House pointed out, there are only nine days of business left, nearly half of which time will be taken up with the Budget debates, but of course questions about spending and taxation can be highly relevant to those debates, so he might find the opportunity to raise the matter then.

Sir George Young (North West Hampshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend has announced a valedictory debate on Thursday 26 March. Will he do me and others who hope to catch your eye in that debate, Mr Speaker, the honour of responding to it?

Mr Hague: Yes, it is my intention to give a valedictory response to the valedictory debate at the final valedictory moment of the Parliament. By the end of that, I think we will all be pretty confident we have said goodbye to each other.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): For the avoidance of doubt, I intend to be back here after 7 May—so there will be no valedictory speech from me.

There is an extraordinary mismatch between the amount of money raised by the licence fee and the BBC’s investment in the regions in which it is raised. May we have a debate on making it part of the charter negotiations that regional commissioners of programmes be matched to their areas, so that areas such as Birmingham and the midlands can get a fair share of the money raised?

Mr Hague: The hon. Lady raises two interesting points. First, it might be that some Members are giving valedictory speeches who do not know they are—but it is up to the electorate to determine that.

Secondly, on the BBC, I absolutely agree that investment in the regions is vital and that the BBC has a varied record over the past few decades of doing it. The Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee made a statement to the House a few weeks ago about the future funding of the BBC, so the House had a limited opportunity to consider the matter then. Realistically, further consideration will have to await the new Parliament, of which the hon. Lady might or might not be a Member.

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): In reply to a written question on 23 February, the Minister for Schools, my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr Laws) indicated an intention to publish the Government’s review of asbestos policy for schools very shortly. Yesterday, the Prime Minister, in answer to my question, said it would be published in due course. Can the Leader of the House tell us today when this really important review will be published? If he cannot, given the proximity to Dissolution, may I request an urgent debate on the whole issue?

Mr Hague: I can tell my hon. Friend that the Government are publishing the review today. We have been working hard to prepare it, and we will place copies of it in the Library. We will write to Members, such as my hon. Friend, who have a particular interest in the subject, and we will follow that up with a written statement on Monday, so that the House is made fully aware of the publication. The subject of next Tuesday’s Adjournment debate is the report on asbestos in schools and I am sure that my hon. Friend will take a close interest in that.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Last week, I raised with the Leader of the House the question of a statement by the Government on the future of the Chagos islands in respect of the feasibility of return report that has been done. The right hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that tomorrow I am attending a meeting at the Foreign Office with Mr Olivier Bancoult, the leader of the Chagos Refugee Association. Will he please ensure that between now and Dissolution, the Government make a statement on their policy on the right of return in order to allow the historical wrong of the expulsion of the islanders from those islands finally to be put right, as promised by his Government at the start of this Parliament. We were promised that a decision would be made in this Parliament. There is a week to go.

Mr Hague: The hon. Gentleman is a long-standing champion of this cause and is very assiduous in pursuing it. As he knows and as we have discussed before, there has been an extensive and major report—one I initiated when I was Foreign Secretary—on the feasibility or otherwise of habitation of the Chagos islands or parts of them. That is being considered very seriously by the Government. I cannot guarantee to the hon. Gentleman a statement about it before Dissolution, given that we have nearly arrived there. I can tell him that the Government are giving detailed consideration at the highest level to the report, but I do not know when a decision will be made.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a debate on phone hacking at the Mirror Group? I am surprised that I need to ask for one, as I would have thought that the Leader of the Opposition, given his considerable previous interest in phone hacking, would have been all over this like a rash. In such a debate, we could find out why the Labour party needed a judge-led inquiry into phone hacking at the *News of the World*, but does not raise a breath about the extensive phone hacking at the Mirror Group.

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend raises an interesting comparison. It is important, of course, that all such allegations are fairly and thoroughly investigated, and

[Mr Hague]

we expect the relevant authorities to do so. There are many theories with which to answer my hon. Friend's question. It could be that the Leader of the Opposition does not want to offend the one news organisation that is still arguing in his favour.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): With Budget debates, we normally have a theme for each different day of debate, so we know who will be opening and winding it up. May we have as one theme the growing disparity between the wealthy people of this country and the rest of us, so that we have one day of debate in which the losers over these last five years—there are so many of them—can be compared with those who evade their taxes, evade their responsibilities and seem to get away with it?

Mr Hague: Who opens which day of the Budget debate will, of course, be decided. Indeed, the Opposition often have a major influence on the decision. During the Budget debate there will be an opportunity to raise all those issues, and many others. I think that the everyday theme of the Budget debate will be that there are nearly 2 million more jobs in this country than there were five years ago. That is really the dominant theme of the British economy at the moment.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): On 5 February at column 426 of *Hansard*, my right hon. Friend told me that he intended “later” in February to set out the draft changes to Standing Orders to implement English votes for English laws. Why was he not able to meet his own target deadline of the end of February? May I seek an assurance from him that he will meet it before his final departure from this place?

Mr Hague: My right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Sir George Young) asked about this last week. It is true that February has stretched into March, and I am conscious of the commitment that was made to my hon. Friend, so I do intend to publish the proposed Standing Order changes.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): May we have a statement from the Health Secretary about the Government's plans to intervene in and support the most financially challenged NHS areas in England? As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) told the Prime Minister yesterday, his area faces a £200 million deficit, and my own area of Devon faces a deficit of £430 million. I was told that an announcement would be made this week, alongside the new integration pilots, but that did not happen. Will the Leader of the House assure us that the Government are not seeking to bury bad news in the run-up to the general election?

Mr Hague: The House has had innumerable opportunities to debate health matters over the last few months, and I am sure that they will be discussed further during the Budget debates. The national health service is benefiting from 9,500 more doctors and 7,500 more nurses than it had in 2010, but if my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has any further announcements

to make before the election, he will of course be able to come to the House and make a statement in the usual way.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Southend police are doing a wonderful job in keeping local residents safe. Will my right hon. Friend find time for another debate on police funding? I very much want our excellent neighbourhood policing to be kept at its present levels.

Mr Hague: Police reform is clearly working. According to the independent Crime Survey, crime has fallen by more than a fifth under this Government, and I am pleased to say that that includes a fall in Essex.

While we acknowledge that the police funding settlement is challenging, a further debate on it would allow us to point out that chief constables and police and crime commissioners have shown that it is possible to deliver more with less, and to prioritise available resources. However, the best remaining opportunity to pursue the issue on the Floor of the House during the present Parliament will be provided by the four days of debate on the Budget.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I remind the House of my membership of, and support from, Unite, which is recorded in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters is a branch of that union.

Will the Leader of the House arrange an urgent debate on the proposed national framework agreement relating to language interpretation and translation services? I understand that the Crown Commercial Service is due to issue a tender for such services before dissolution, but there is serious concern about the effect of the framework on British sign language interpretation and on the profession. Will it be possible for a debate to take place before the tender is issued?

Mr Hague: At this stage of the Parliament, it is difficult for me to arrange debates in addition to those that I have already announced, but I know from my own experience as Minister for Disabled People—a long time ago—what outstanding work sign language interpreters do, and how important that work is. The best that I can do to assist the hon. Lady is draw her question to the attention of my ministerial colleagues, and ask them to respond to her directly.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Town centres throughout the country are under pressure from internet purchasers and out-of-town retailers. They can respond either by doing nothing or by getting together to promote themselves and build up the trade, which is what traders and retailers in my constituency have done. They have launched a “first Thursdays” initiative, which began last week: there were street entertainers and musicians, and shops were open until eight o'clock in the evening. May we have a debate about the important role that town centres play in our communities?

Mr Hague: I applaud everyone in Rugby for that initiative, and I applaud my hon. Friend for his strong support for it.

The Government are committed to helping high streets to adapt. Our Future High Streets Forum brings together business leaders from the various high street sectors so

that they can understand the issues and drive forward new ideas. When people work together locally, they can really be successful in that regard. Although we will not have time for a specific debate before the dissolution of Parliament, the issue is very important, and I am sure that there will be further opportunities for Members to expand on it during the Budget debates.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The official data revealed today on the state of children's mental health services is clearly shocking. Despite the Budget, we do not have an excess of business between now and the end of the Parliament, so will the Leader of the House organise one final debate so that we can agree a joint plan to tackle this disgrace? In that way we could end this Parliament by doing something genuinely worthwhile.

Mr Hague: That is a very important issue. The hon. Gentleman makes a point about whether the parliamentary agenda is full between now and Dissolution, and I think it is, since there are many Bills that will come back from the House of Lords, there will be a Finance Bill to consider after the Budget and the Backbench Business Committee has utilised all its opportunities for further debate. But of course this will continue to be an important issue during and after the general election. The Government have a strong record on it: funding for mental health is estimated to have increased by £302 million in the last financial year compared to the previous one, and we have legislated to ensure that improving mental health and treating mental illness is given the same priority as treatment for physical health. So this Government have a strong record, but further debate is now most likely to take place in the next Parliament.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware of the concerns of potential fracking across Ryedale. There is a grey area as the law currently stands, because the regulations to apply the Infrastructure Act 2015 will not now be brought forward until July, yet an application may be lodged by the end of this month. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to ensure that this grey area does not remain in place? The grey area relates to whether or not there will be opportunities to frack, or whether there will be protected areas. All the concessions that were given to the national parks, the sites of special scientific interest and the areas of outstanding natural beauty were withdrawn in the Lords.

Mr Hague: Well, we have of course now passed the relevant legislation through Parliament, after considerable debate over the last few months. There will be further opportunities to raise these issues with my ministerial colleagues, because in the remaining days of the Parliament there will be questions to the Department of Energy and Climate Change and the Department for Communities and Local Government. That will provide the best opportunity for my hon. Friend to seek clarification on these issues.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware that Boris Johnson in his own inimitable way once said that he fought Clwyd South and that Clwyd South fought back, and he was helped in so doing by the Leader of the House.

My constituents in Clwyd South are rather concerned because this time the Conservatives have selected a councillor, David Nicholls, who is a commercial lawyer of the royal borough of Kensington and Chelsea. There is much concern that he may get lost around our 240 square mile constituency. We are confident that the Leader of the House knows the constituency rather better than the said gentleman, so could he find a little time to come across from his retirement home in mid-Wales and show the gentleman around?

Mr Speaker: I think the hon. Lady was also asking for a statement, but whether she was asking for one or not, she is going to get one.

Mr Hague: I think that was a question not about the business of the House of Commons, but about the general election campaign, but I am sure this candidate will be a splendid candidate for Clwyd South, as Boris Johnson was—I remember that very well. I assure the hon. Lady that I will be stepping out from my new home in mid-Wales to support Conservative candidates the length and breadth of Wales, to help continue the very strong performance in recent years of the Welsh Conservative party.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On 30 March, there will be no more Members of Parliament, but I understand that the Government will continue and that there will still be Ministers. May we have a statement from the Leader of the House on what is going to happen after the general election? When will Parliament assemble? What would happen if there were a hung Parliament and therefore some delay in forming a Government? In those circumstances, would existing Ministers continue in post? Taking a random example, let us say that the Deputy Prime Minister lost his seat. Would he continue as Deputy Prime Minister until the new Government had been formed?

Mr Hague: The technical answer to my hon. Friend is that when Parliament is dissolved, it is normal at the same time to set out when it will meet again. Indeed, the writs that go out around the country requesting new Members of Parliament will set out when those Members should report to the House of Commons. That happens then, however, and it is not for me to set out such details now. I hope that there will be no doubt whatever about who is the next Prime Minister or about which party has the majority in the House of Commons, and I hope that my hon. Friend will be part of that majority. I do not think it would be helpful to get into other, more chaotic scenarios when discussing the outcome of the election. One has to think about them only for a moment to understand the importance of averting the possibility of their happening at all.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I should like to draw the House's attention to early-day motion 633.

[That this House believes that asylum seekers should be homed widely in the country to assist community assimilation and to share fairly the strains and burdens on services that newcomers create; is astonished that Cardiff has 976 section 95 migrants, double the total in all of South East England outside of London and that Newport has 391, while the constituency of the Home Secretary has one and those of the Chancellor of the Exchequer and

[Paul Flynn]

the Prime Minister have none; and calls on hon. Members to encourage their areas to accept their responsibilities and welcome at least the average total of migrants homed elsewhere.]

The motion seeks the better assimilation of asylum seekers by spreading them more evenly throughout the country so that all areas can have the benefits and the burdens of having asylum seekers. At the moment, Cardiff has about 900 section 95 asylum seekers and Newport has nearly 400, yet the constituency of one of the United Kingdom Independence party MPs has none and the constituencies of the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Home Secretary have a grand total of two. Would it not be a great advantage if those who were shouting the loudest about immigration could have the experience of having asylum seekers in their constituencies? In that way, they might know what they were talking about.

Mr Hague: I think the hon. Gentleman has made his point without a debate. Indeed, he has conducted a short debate on the issue. There will not be time for a debate in the remaining days of this Parliament, although there will be Home Office questions on Monday 23 March, so he will have a further opportunity to advertise his early-day motion and his arguments. I am sure that these issues are well understood by many hon. Members, irrespective of the number of asylum seekers living in their constituencies.

Julian Sturdy (York Outer) (Con): While I accept the success of the cancer drugs fund, recent changes have resulted in the drug regorafenib, which is effective against gastro-intestinal tumours, no longer being funded. One of my constituents, whose partner suffers from a rare form of cancer, has collected more than 45,000 signatures in support of the drug's reinstatement. It is a last resort that offers treatment when others have failed, and it gives patients precious extra time until a lasting cure can be found. Given that we are running out of time in this Parliament, can the Leader of the House advise me on how we can get this matter debated?

Mr Hague: There is little scope for additional debates, as I have been saying in relation to other issues, but I can tell my hon. Friend that NHS England, which manages the cancer drugs fund, has assured the Department of Health that no patient whose treatment is currently being funded through the cancer drugs fund will have their funding withdrawn as long as it is clinically appropriate

that they continue to receive that treatment, and that in addition no drug will be removed from the fund when it is the only therapy available for the condition in question. Furthermore, clinicians can still apply for individual patients to receive a particular drug on an exceptional basis. I would recommend that my hon. Friend pursues the matter directly with Ministers at the Department of Health in order to get further details.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): In recent weeks, a constituent of mine travelled to Kenya, where immigration control accidentally swapped her passport with someone else's. When she attempted to travel back, she was refused entry to the plane, but the person who had her passport had already returned to the United Kingdom. Will a Minister come to the Dispatch Box to tell us what measures are in place to ensure that this does not happen?

Mr Hague: I understand my hon. Friend's concern about that. Border Force officers carry out comprehensive checks on all passengers arriving at passport control, and those checks are set out in an operating mandate approved by Home Office Ministers. They are, of course, meant to include a visual examination of the passenger and their passport to ensure that they are the right holder of the document. The best way to pursue this is for my hon. Friend to give me all the details and I will ensure that it is dealt with by my ministerial colleagues as a matter of urgency.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): As I have previously mentioned in the House, my constituent Laura Thomas was tragically killed in an accident with a truck whose driver was using a mobile phone at the time. The current sanctions for such dangerous driving are too lenient, as are the penalties for using a hand-held mobile phone. May we have a debate on the need to discourage, through stiffer penalties, the epidemic of using hand-held phones while driving?

Mr Hague: My hon. Friend is assiduous in raising this important issue, highlighting the devastating impact that driving while on a mobile phone can have. The Government remain concerned about this. The Department for Transport has commissioned research on the prevalence of such phone use and the report of the survey was published on gov.uk on 25 February. That will help to shape future policy decisions. As for the penalties that are applied, there will be Ministry of Justice questions next week on the Floor of the House, so there are one or two remaining opportunities to pursue this.

Ebola

11.16 am

The Secretary of State for International Development (Justine Greening): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I would like to update the House on the Ebola outbreak in west Africa. First, I refer the House to yesterday's statement from Public Health England, which confirmed that a military health care worker has tested positive and is being flown back, and will shortly be in the Royal Free hospital in London. Our thoughts are with her and her family at this time. We are also assessing four other military health care workers who had been in close contact with the patient. That is a purely precautionary move.

Our armed forces, our health workers, our diplomatic staff and my development staff are risking their lives to help Sierra Leone defeat this terrible disease and stop it spreading beyond west Africa. It is vital that we do that. Halting the rise of the disease in west Africa is by far the most effective way of preventing Ebola from infecting people in the UK. We are indebted to those UK personnel for their efforts; their commitment and bravery, which I have had the chance to see at first hand, have been outstanding.

As the Secretary of State for Health has said previously, the UK remains well placed to respond to this threat. The chief medical officer confirms that the risk to the UK remains low. An enormous amount of work has gone into making sure that we are prepared in the UK, now and in the future. The NHS has world-leading infection control procedures, and we have put in place robust screening and monitoring arrangements to detect and isolate cases at home.

A few weeks ago, I returned from my third visit to Sierra Leone in five months. In that time, there have been significant improvements. The number of cases per week has reduced from well over 500 in November to fewer than 60 now. Our strategy is working, and President Koroma and others have thanked the UK Government and the UK public for our critical and unwavering support. I am extremely proud that Britain's support means that there are now enough Ebola beds, testing labs and trained burial teams, and an effective command and control structure to track down the disease across Sierra Leone and prevent it from spreading further.

The challenge now is to get to zero cases as quickly as possible. That will not be easy—we are looking at months, not weeks, till the end of this crisis—but we have the right people and the right plan in place to deal with this. The UK will continue to provide critical support to this response, particularly in the health sector, through which we will help Sierra Leone to tackle future disease outbreaks. We will hold our nerve and stay the course. This ongoing package of support will bring our total commitment to this response and to the country's early recovery to £427 million.

The UK response will change as we transition to the next phase. After the best part of six months on station, RFA Argus will sail by the end of this month, as previously planned, having provided critical support to military and civilian volunteers on the ground. We will maintain the health care capabilities that it has provided through continued UK military support at an enhanced Ministry of Defence clinic in Freetown. The helicopter

capabilities will be replaced by commercial providers. Military personnel will also continue to play an important role at the dedicated Kerry Town Ebola treatment facility for health care workers, and in supporting our Sierra Leonean partners with command and control to respond to district-level outbreaks.

Although the last planned deployment of NHS staff is due to end this month, we are mindful of further spikes in the case load. To that end, we have arranged for an NHS stand-by team to be on call to deploy within 48 hours. Throughout this response, the co-operation of the NHS, NHS trusts and Public Health England has been tremendous, both in Sierra Leone and at home, and for that I give them my heartfelt thanks. More than 150 NHS staff have so far been deployed to fight Ebola, which is testament to the superb flexibility of its staff at all levels. Our support for labs, through Public Health England, will continue, as testing capacity is vital to the continued effort.

We are also planning for recovery. The Ebola crisis has disrupted markets and access to food and other essentials for many families. It has put an enormous strain on the country's health care system, and it has caused a generation of children to miss nearly a year of school. For too many children, the Ebola crisis has resulted in a breakdown of family and community protection systems. More than 9,000 children are registered as having lost one or both parents in this crisis, and they are vulnerable to neglect, abuse and exploitation.

Continued leadership from the Governments in the region will be crucial to maintain the momentum. I welcome President Koroma's leadership, and his clear message that there can be no half-victories. We will work with the Government of Sierra Leone to reopen schools and hospitals safely, and ensure that those most at risk of stigma, including orphans, have the support that they need.

Throughout the response, we have received critical support from international partners to help us staff treatment centres and labs across the country. I was in Brussels last week to ensure that the international community remains engaged in defeating Ebola, and in helping Sierra Leone and the countries of the region back on to a path to sustainable recovery.

The international community must also learn lessons from this outbreak and, together with the Governments of the affected countries, build a more resilient system for the future. We must do everything that we can to ensure that a crisis of this nature never happens again.

In conclusion, the UK did not stand on the sidelines when Sierra Leone needed us, and our strategy has saved thousands of lives and protected millions more around the world. That response, though far from over, has shown the very best of what the UK can do overseas. I am incredibly proud of the way that we have stepped up to this challenge and delivered in the toughest of circumstances. I am pleased to confirm that Her Majesty has agreed to honour this tremendous effort with the striking of a medal. I commend this statement to the House.

11.23 am

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me a copy of her statement in advance, and for advance warning of the statement.

[Mary Creagh]

I join her in paying tribute to the military health care worker who has tested positive for Ebola. We wish her a speedy and full recovery. Our thoughts are with her and her family and friends. I am sure that the good wishes of the whole House are with her as she returns home to Britain.

The Secretary of State mentioned four other military health care workers who are being assessed. Are they also being flown home to Britain and, if so, in which hospitals will they be assessed? We also pay tribute to the dedication and bravery of the British troops, health workers, charity workers and Department for International Development personnel who have travelled to west Africa to tackle Ebola. They have selflessly put themselves on the front line against this disease. We thank them for their work and salute their courage.

Labour continues to support the Government's efforts to tackle Ebola and get to zero cases as soon as possible. We agree with the Public Accounts Committee that the Department should take a lead role in global efforts to reach that target. The Ebola outbreak has been devastating for the people of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. There have been more than 24,000 reported cases, and nearly 10,000 deaths. More than 20,000 children are now orphans; they are vulnerable, traumatised and often stigmatised. We welcome what the Secretary of State has said about tackling the stigma of Ebola and services for Ebola orphans. Will the Government ensure that their Ebola response prioritises long-lasting psycho-social and child protection services and the education sector in Sierra Leone?

Ebola has revealed the problems that are created when countries do not have sustainable and resilient health systems. It has shown the limitations of the global community's approach to health care in developing countries. It has triggered a huge debate on how we should reform the World Health Organisation so that it meets disease challenges better.

Save the Children's report last week found that 28 countries had worse health coverage than Liberia had at the start of the Ebola outbreak. The world today is globalised; disease outbreaks are everyone's concern, and preventing them is in everyone's interests. Can the Secretary of State tell the House how much of the £427 million that the UK Government have committed to fighting Ebola has been disbursed? The previous figure that she mentioned was £325 million. What will the extra £100 million be spent on?

The Secretary of State mentioned a contract with civilian helicopter providers. How much will that cost each month, and for how long will the contract continue? What steps has she taken to persuade other countries to fill the urgent \$400 million funding gap for immediate response, and the \$900 million gap identified by the United Nations for activities over the next six months? What conversations has she had with her ministerial colleagues about restoring direct flights from the United Kingdom to Sierra Leone, and when will they begin operating again?

Our NHS has shown that the best way to protect against disease is to build a resilient, Government-controlled, Government-funded health service, so how much bilateral funding will the UK give to support the Sierra Leonean and Liberian health sectors next year? How will the

Secretary of State and her Department lead reform of the global health system to move organisations away from concentrating on specific diseases and vaccines to a much broader focus on supporting public health systems?

The global community must never again find itself with another Ebola outbreak, no vaccine to prevent spread, and no treatment to preserve life. At the last DFID questions, I asked the Secretary of State if she agreed that we needed urgently to roll out the Ebola vaccine trials from Liberia to Sierra Leone and Guinea to discover which vaccines work. Have those trials started, and if so, how many people are enrolled in them? What conversations has she had with the World Health Organisation about treatment trials?

There is consensus that the global community failed to respond adequately to this Ebola outbreak. As the Secretary of State rightly said, we need to learn the lessons and ensure that we are better prepared. Lasting health care systems are about more than the delivery of commodities such as vaccines and bed nets, vital though those things are. The WHO, the World Bank and non-governmental organisations in countries such as France and Japan are all clear that universal health coverage is the right answer. Does she agree that that is the way forward?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady asked, understandably, about the four other health care workers. They are now in the process of being flown home, purely on a precautionary basis, and will be dealt with at the Royal Free hospital and the Royal Victoria infirmary in Newcastle.

I had a chance to meet some of the orphans from this crisis when I was in Sierra Leone just before Christmas. They were of all ages, of course. Some of our work is to help UNICEF to provide the psycho-social support that they need and to keep the orphanages going. We are also helping to provide dedicated centres where children can be looked after safely if their parents go to community care centres to be tested because they are concerned that they have Ebola; if the parents end up being taken into care, they cannot look after their children.

There are huge child protection issues. I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are mindful of them, and mindful of the need to work not just with the Government of Sierra Leone but with civil society and the NGO sector to make sure that they are properly addressed.

The hon. Lady asks about the extent of our commitment. The £427 million that I have talked about is essentially the money that we are spending on providing ongoing support, including what we have already done, which has now cost more than £200 million. Over the coming months, we need to keep supporting the beds and the safe burials and all the very practical work that we are doing—social mobilisation, talking to communities—and also put in place a budget, which is about half the increase, for the initial planning on early recovery. We are steadily shifting our strategy to ensure that we have the capacity on the ground still to cope and deal with Ebola and get to zero. That is the principal objective that we have to meet, while transitioning to look at how we can safely open schools and hospitals and deal with some of the issues that the hon. Lady talks about in relation to communities.

The helicopter support has been absolutely vital. The road network is part of the development progress, but there is no doubt that fantastic work has been done by the Merlin helicopters. I had a chance during my trips to Sierra Leone to get to know some of the pilots—I was there regularly enough—and they have been working round the clock. I want personally to say a massive thank you to them. They were incredibly impressive and have really put in the flying hours over the past six months. The civilian helicopter provision will ensure that we can continue to get around Sierra Leone rapidly and that the district-level response is working effectively, which is why we have kept it in place.

On the important point about ensuring that, frankly, we get the international community to step up to the plate, particularly as recovery takes place, we are indeed investing a lot of time and effort in lobbying. The Brussels conference, which happened a couple of weeks ago, was absolutely key in really making sure that we got international focus on the need to get to zero, avoiding complacency and starting to present the forward look at what those recovery plans will need. The \$400 million part is really the initial absolute priority investment that is required to start the recovery process and kick it off. There will be a follow-up conference at the UN, which will be more focused on pledging. We have worked directly with the Government of Sierra Leone to talk to them about how we can ensure that their recovery plan is of good quality and essentially investable and prioritised, and we will continue to do all that work.

The hon. Lady also asks about the Ebola vaccine trials. In fact, we had some vaccines ready to go for phase 2 trials because the UK and DFID had already worked with the Medical Research Council and Glaxo Wellcome to help to support Ebola vaccines in the phase 1 trials. One of the learnings from my perspective is being clearer as an international community about what kinds of vaccine we want to have in stock at phase 1 stage, in order to be able to put them rapidly into phase 2, which is more expensive, if crisis hits. Also, streamlining the regulatory procedures is important, so that we can get the vaccines tested more rapidly when there is a real public health crisis element to them. Obviously, we all appreciate that the regulatory environment is there for a reason, which is to protect patients, but in this case, it was vital that we looked at how we could fast-track the Ebola vaccines. The trials have started in Liberia already. They are about to be started in Sierra Leone and Guinea.

On the number of patients, if anything we have a challenge, because fewer people are suffering from Ebola, but as the hon. Lady will understand, that is the patient population on whom we are testing the vaccines.

On WHO reform, I have had a chance now on a number of occasions to see Margaret Chan, both in London and, most recently, in Brussels. The UK has been a leading player, most recently in the special session on WHO reform, playing a constructive role in helping us all to learn about how not only the WHO but the international community can better respond to such a public health crisis in the future.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I join the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State in paying tribute to all those who have tackled this terrible disease,

some losing their lives in doing so—Sierra Leoneans, Liberians, Guineans and all others, including the British workers. I pay tribute, too, to the Secretary of State for the leadership that she has shown in this crisis. In a video conference which I chaired last month with the president of the World Bank and parliamentarians from affected countries, all stressed the need, which the shadow Secretary of State mentioned, to strengthen health systems. We also talked about the possibility of doing stress tests of those health systems, in the way that has been modelled for the banking sector, to ensure that they are robust enough. Parliamentarians all agreed on this vital point. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the United Kingdom will continue to work with Sierra Leone and the Governments of the other affected countries over the coming months and years, and ensure that we do not leave them at this time of need?

Justine Greening: Yes, I can. The Ebola crisis has shown why the work that we do in development is so important. We saw that countries in parts of west Africa that had better developed health care systems were able to withstand this unprecedented Ebola outbreak. However, in the case of Sierra Leone and Liberia particularly, which had experienced terrible civil wars and comparatively recently come out of them, although their health systems had dramatically improved, they were still at a nascent stage and were unable to withstand such an unprecedented outbreak. I can assure my hon. Friend that the UK will play a leading role, particularly in our relationship with Sierra Leone, which is unique.

I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the bravery of the Sierra Leonean community, who were the ones on the front line, many of them volunteers, who ran towards the crisis and were part of the effort to tackle it, at the very time when most people would have wanted to run in the opposite direction. They were overwhelmingly the ones who helped get the crisis under control, but I am proud of the UK effort in supporting that.

Glenda Jackson (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Lady for her statement, affording the House the opportunity to say thank you and to pay tribute to all those who have played their part in tackling this appalling disease, not least the staff of the isolation unit in the Royal Free hospital in my constituency and everyone in that hospital. I was delighted to hear that the Secretary of State is prioritising the next great step that will be needed—the restoration of health services in the countries affected—and addressing the issue of orphans. I welcome her commitment to working with the international community on these issues. Will she also commit to ensuring that all the voluntary agencies, NGOs and charities begin to work together rather more positively than they have done in the past?

Justine Greening: The Royal Free hospital has provided world-class treatment for the patients whom it has looked after, and I pay tribute to it. On the restoration of health services, it is important that there is a Government-owned strategy in Sierra Leone on health care priorities. Perhaps some of the most pressing priorities right now are malaria—we are about to enter another rainy season, which is a high risk—getting vaccinations back up to combat diseases such as measles, and maternal health, making sure that women are able to give birth safely.

[*Justine Greening*]

I had a chance to visit a hospital that just about managed to keep going through the crisis, but we know that teenage pregnancy, which is partly due to the fact that children have been out of school, has been a huge problem that will need to be addressed. It is important that the NGO community works as part of that overall Government of Sierra Leone-owned health care strategy and we will play our part in helping to deliver that strategy. It has to focus on some short-term imperative deliverables and look at the longer term. That includes making sure that the Ministry of Health in Sierra Leone has the capacity to continue to develop policy.

Sir Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): I welcome the statement, commend the work of all those combating the crisis, and echo the good wishes to the British military in its work of flying personnel home for emergency treatment at the Royal Free hospital. The Secretary of State mentioned the figure of 12,000 orphans created during the crisis, which is probably a vast underestimate, particularly in the rural areas. There will be so much to do afterwards—getting the health system and the transport links sorted and getting the economy going again—but can we make a particular commitment from the UK to help clear up the profound legacy that those orphans will represent?

Justine Greening: I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are already working on that alongside prioritising work to get health care systems back up and running. Interestingly, as part of the response, we have had to improve water, sanitation and hand-washing. We now hope that some of the health care workers whom we trained to be part of the response who were originally teachers can take that into schools, so that as children get back into school we can keep embedded those positive behaviours that are good for health.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The magnificent courage and professionalism of all those involved have earned the gratitude and admiration of all of us, and that includes the work of the Secretary of State herself. Are not the lessons that we must persuade the World Health Organisation to move away from their dominance by commercial interests and reshape our armed forces to concentrate on what we do so well in these humanitarian situations? The challenges in future will be more diseases; the need for clean water; all the impact of global warming. Should we not concentrate on a future not of warring tribes among the nations, but of one human family, which is in deadly peril?

Justine Greening: I am grateful for that wide-ranging question. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that what we have learned from this crisis is not to see problems such as Ebola as someone else's. They are absolutely relevant to us. We can fly from that part of west Africa to the UK in under six hours. He talked about this new model of development, if I can call it that, particularly in response to humanitarian crises: the work that DFID has done with critical support from the Ministry of Defence and the NHS. This triumvirate departmental response shows that the Department can bring to bear a much broader UK offer in responding to these crises in future than we have ever been able to do in the past.

I pay tribute to the willingness of both the Department of Health and the MOD in working with DFID. It is a fantastic working relationship, which has gone from strength to strength.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about the role of the private sector in global health security and the WHO. Some of the lessons that we are learning are as much about the WHO's command and control, and its ability to drive projects from the centre down into the regions, but there is no doubt in my mind that the private sector does have a key role to play, particularly given some of the important ways in which we might more significantly combat Ebola, for example through the development of a vaccine. The key is to find the right role for the private sector. In my previous answer I referred to sanitation and hand-washing, and clearly companies such as Unilever have long played a role in helping to educate the public.

Mr Speaker: These are extremely important and sensitive matters, but we have a heavily subscribed defence debate, to which I wish to move without delay.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): The contribution made by the armed services, 750 of them, the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Argus and the Merlin helicopters, has been superb, and it would not have been possible to battle against Ebola in this way without them. I look forward to welcoming them back here to Parliament in the autumn perhaps. In the meantime, does the Secretary of State, or perhaps the Minister for the Armed Forces who is sitting next to her, agree that if we were to see unwelcome defence cuts, such operations in the future and elsewhere in the world would not be possible?

Justine Greening: This case shows that the work of the MOD is intrinsically linked to the work on development. We need to see the UK foreign affairs strategy in the round and to be prepared to look at it in that light.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): The right hon. Lady says that she will hold her nerve, stay the course and support the recovery of health services, but House of Commons Library figures show that she cut health care support to Sierra Leone and Liberia by more than £10 million during this Parliament, only for the Prime Minister to have to top it up by £80 million to deal with the crisis. Does she not need to admit that that is evidence of poor judgment on her part, rather than evidence of her holding her nerve and staying the course?

Justine Greening: Since 2010 the UK has spent a total of £64 million in the health sector in Sierra Leone, compared with a total of £23 million spent between 2005 and 2010 under the previous Government. I think that a more constructive approach in this sort of discussion is more productive.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A significant number of the service personnel serving in west Africa are from Northern Ireland. Obviously their families and loved ones want them to return safe and healthy. I understand that the incubation period for Ebola can be up to a month. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that a quarantine period is initiated?

Justine Greening: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, we have to follow Public Health England's guidelines. Our duty of care to all the people involved in the UK response is obviously a top priority.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State and to colleagues for their helpful co-operation.

Backbench Business

Defence Spending

[Relevant documents: Third Report from the Defence Committee, Towards the next Defence and Security Review: Part Two—NATO, HC 358, and the Government response, HC 755.]

Mr Speaker: I will very likely want to impose some time limit, but I will make a judgment on that after the debate has been opened by the hon. Gentleman moving the motion. I know that he is suffering from the Westminster cold, but I very much doubt that any cold will dare to impede him. I call Mr John Baron.

11.46 am

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that defence spending should be set to a minimum of two per cent of GDP in accordance with the UK's NATO commitment.

Thank you for those kind words, Mr Speaker. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate and those MPs who supported the application. We live in times of heightened international tensions. We would do well to remember that the adage about defence being the first duty of Government has been forged by events, and we ignore the lessons of history at our peril. The world remains a dangerous and unstable place, and a growing number of countries that are not necessarily friendly to the west are not only rearming at an alarming rate, but becoming more assertive. We need to spend more on defence not only to better protect our interests and support key alliances, but to deter potential aggressors and ensure that we try to avoid conflict in future.

The motion calls on the Government to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence, in line with our NATO commitment. Defence spending as a share of GDP has been falling in recent years, and it is widely believed that Britain will shortly fall below the 2% figure. We all know that 2% is an arbitrary figure; spending should reflect desired capability. I believe that defence spending should be much more than 2%—I suggest 3% to 4%. But the 2% figure does have symbolic value. Having lectured other NATO members about its importance, we should lead by example.

In short, we need to rediscover the political will for strong defence, and that political will transcends the political divide here. Some demons may need to be vanquished first, most notably our recent misguided military interventions, which have probably distracted us from greater dangers, but banished those demons must be. That we have the political will to ring-fence the international aid budget at 0.7% of GDP suggests that such will can be found; it is simply a question of priorities.

We have in this country, I believe, a political disconnect that needs to be put right. None of the main parties seems to question that Britain has global interests and needs to remain a global power, both to protect them and to uphold our international obligations as a member of NATO and a permanent member of the UN Security

[Mr John Baron]

Council. Yet the political establishment, across the political divide, appears unwilling properly to resource these commitments.

So why the disconnect? I can only put it down, in large part, to our misguided military interventions of the past decade, which have led some to question the value of spending on defence. These interventions have been very costly in terms of blood and treasure, and have rarely achieved their original aims, with the extent of civilian casualties and the persecution of minorities being two such examples.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): While I disagree with my hon. Friend about misguided previous military engagements—I do not think that either was misguided—we did see what happens when we try to deploy troops abroad on the cheap without their being properly equipped. We lost a lot of good people because of that, and there were a lot of injuries. We should never put our people in that position again.

Mr Baron: My hon. Friend and I may disagree about whether our interventions were misguided, but he makes a very valid point, which is that we have been intervening with increasingly marginal effect. Helmand in Afghanistan was a classic case of that. It took the Americans putting in another 20,000 troops before we pulled that situation round.

Let me return to the point about disconnect. The military interventions over the past decade have distracted us from the greater danger. Too often in these military interventions, we have failed to take the long view in favour of short-term foreign policy fixes that give rise to as many problems as they solve. A key reason is a deficit of strategic analysis at the heart of our foreign policy making, in large part because of continual underfunding—but perhaps that is a debate for another day.

There is little doubt that we went to war in Iraq on a false premise, and that we foolishly allowed the mission in Afghanistan to morph into one of nation building after we had achieved our original objective of ridding the country of al-Qaeda. Our Libyan intervention has not ended well courtesy of a vicious civil war. Speaking as someone who opposed them all, we must dispel these demons when thinking about defence more generally, because, in addition to being mistakes in themselves, these interventions have distracted us from, and blinded us to, the greater danger of traditional state-on-state threats.

For example, recent events in Ukraine reveal a resurgent Russia that is once again making its presence felt around NATO's borders. Russian bomber aircraft and submarines have resumed their aggressive patrols, some near UK waters and airspace. The Defence Secretary correctly observed last month that Russia posed a real and current danger to Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia—all NATO members covered by article 5. Only by dispelling these previous intervention demons and recognising the bigger danger can we mend the political disconnect between commitments, on the one hand, and funding, on the other. It is absolutely essential that we do that.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that two of the most chilling interventions in recent weeks have been, first, from the chief of staff

of the American army, who said that he thought that a diminished UK defence capability would serve not alongside, but as part of, an American division; and secondly, from the Europeans, who indicated that the best deterrent against Mr Putin was a European army? Are not both those interventions extremely telling?

Mr Baron: I can only agree with my hon. Friend. The idea that British brigades would serve within American divisions would probably have been unthinkable only 10 years ago. That is testament to the alarm in Washington, expressed—this is highly unusual—as we head into a general election. The extent of that alarm is clear for all to see.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Like my hon. Friend, I am suffering from flu.

Does my hon. Friend agree that the intervention in Iraq has allowed Iran to get away with its own nuclear programme, which is what our emphasis should have been on?

Mr Baron: I agree with my hon. Friend. One of the intended consequences of our misguided intervention in Iraq was that we fundamentally altered the balance of power in the region, and we have been playing catch-up ever since.

There are significant benefits to strong defence. As no one can predict with any certainty from where the next substantial threat will emerge, we require armed forces of sufficient capability and capacity to respond to any challenge. The straits of Hormuz or the South China sea may seem a long way away, but we would soon realise their importance should sea lanes become closed, given the fact that the majority of our goods and trade arrive by sea. Argentina is looking to buy sophisticated fighter jets, and that reminds us that our capacity must include the ability to act independently, if necessary.

The heft of a strong military underpins a successful foreign policy. By contrast, a shrinking defence budget threatens our ability to lead global opinion, reduces our foreign policy options and, crucially, sends the wrong message both to our allies and to potential adversaries. It is doubtful that President Putin would operate as he is now if he thought that NATO, especially the European NATO members, would robustly stand up to him. [Interruption.] That is very kind.

Mr Speaker: In deference to the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), I think that that is called coalition co-operation.

Mr Baron: Whatever it is called, the glass of water is gratefully received.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Test it first.

Mr Baron: If I go down, hon. Members will know why.

Falling defence budgets across NATO have emboldened the Russian President, who has concluded that the heart has gone out of the alliance. This is dangerous, and it underlines the point that well-resourced and capable armed forces can, by deterring potential aggressors, make future conflict less likely. How many times have we foolishly discounted or underestimated that fact?

As we heard in the statement, the benefits of strong defence are not confined just to deterring potential aggressors. Strong armed forces can help us and others to face many of the emerging global challenges for which we need to be better prepared. Armed forces training has a wide skill base—everything from medicine and catering to construction and telecoms—and is a key component of our disaster relief capabilities, as shown by our response to the hurricane in the Philippines and the Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone.

That skill base will be in increasing demand because the emerging global challenges include those posed by the fact that Africa's population will be two and a half times that of Europe's by 2050, the reverse of the proportions in only 1950; by resource scarcity, including water scarcity, which now affects one in three people; by temperature anomalies, which increasingly affect north Africa and the middle east; by fast-emerging middle classes who question political systems that struggle to deliver the goods; and by a growing tendency, aided by social media, for social unrest. Yet it could be argued that this is happening at a time when, in large measure, the international community is failing to produce co-ordinated responses on the scale needed to meet many of the most pressing challenges facing mankind, including poverty, organised crime, conflict, disease, hunger and inequalities. All that points to the need for investment in our foreign policy making and defence capabilities not only so that we are better sighted, but so that we can retain the maximum possible number of policy options by way of response.

How are we faring? Following a strategic defence and security review driven largely by financial pressures, rather than strategic design, the current Government have markedly reduced our armed forces. Plans to replace 20,000 regular troops with 30,000 reservists have created unacceptable capability gaps in the short term and false economies in the long term. Particularly given the fact that the original idea was to hold on to the 20,000 regulars until we knew that the plan to replace them with 30,000 reservists was going to work, I suggest that it was incompetent to let 20,000 regulars march out of the door while only adding 500 to the trained strength of the Army Reserve in the two years that the plan has been in operation.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and I agree with every word he has said so far. If trends continue, all the problems that he has just identified will get worse, not better. In that context, he will surely agree that any move to cut expenditure on defence would be sheer lunacy. Clearly, we need to move in the opposite direction.

Mr Baron: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That point is best encapsulated in the recent statistic from the Library, which suggests that if the international aid budget continues to grow as it is, it will be as big as the defence budget by 2030—in only 15 years' time. That is nonsense.

Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I am sympathetic to many of my hon. Friend's arguments, but does he not need to make it clear that the Government had a £38 billion black hole to deal with, and many major challenges had to be addressed in 2010?

Mr Baron: I agree that we inherited a financial shambles, as I have said many times before, but if we are prepared to ring-fence the international aid budget, it becomes a question of priorities. My point is that we need to spend more on defence and we need to reflect what is happening on the international stage: we are failing to do that.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): It may be worth reflecting on the fact that in 2010 we spent 2.5% of GDP, so considerable cuts have already been made. The 2% is a marker.

Mr Baron: I made the point earlier that defence spending as a percentage of GDP has been falling under this Government, but my message is not just to my own Government. There is a political disconnect between the extent of our commitments and the lack of funding that is not being recognised across the political divide. I do not hear either of the main political parties saying that we should scale back our ambitions in the world, but nor has either party made it clear that it is committed to at least 2% in the future. I personally would like to see much more than that, but everyone can see the terms of the motion.

The reservist plan has been a disaster, in my opinion, resulting in unacceptable capability gaps in the short term and false economies in the long term, as we throw yet more money at it to try to make it work. Matters are not much better in the Royal Navy, which has been reduced to a mere 19 surface ships, although a recent SDSR suggested that 30 would be more appropriate. In addition to problems with the new aircraft carrier, the lack of a replacement for Nimrod means that we are in the ridiculous situation of having no maritime patrol aircraft. We have to go cap in hand to the Americans and the French to police our waters against potentially hostile submarines. That is a ridiculous state of affairs for a country of our standing.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): I agree with the point that my hon. Friend makes about maritime patrol aircraft. It is urgent if we intend to deploy aircraft carriers, which are currently being constructed and fitted out in order to come into service in a couple of years.

Mr Baron: My right hon. and learned Friend makes a valid point.

With these major shortcomings in our defence, it was alarming that a report by the Royal United Services Institute published this week suggests that the defence budget might be cut by 10% after the next election. Talk that Britain has the fifth largest defence budget—and the second largest in NATO—rings hollow when MOD reforms are cutting manpower, capabilities and the armed forces' capacity to deploy force. Some estimates suggest that we rank 30th in the world in our ability to deploy force overseas, and my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) told us of the extent of the American concern about this issue.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. If we see defence cuts of another 10% after the election, another major concern will be the impact on our special forces. If we have an Army of 50,000 or 60,000, we will reduce the ability to

[Richard Drax]

recruit men into our special forces—currently probably the most respected in the world—and that will have a significant effect on our ability to project force.

Mr Baron: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. He makes a very valid point, but time is pressing and this is a popular debate, so I will bring my remarks to a conclusion.

At the very least, the British Government should fulfil their NATO commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defence. Having implored fellow NATO members to reach this level at last year's NATO summit, which we hosted, falling below this level ourselves would be a grave mistake as well as a national embarrassment. Given current levels, it would be a dangerous message to send to the Kremlin.

The past decade of questionable military interventions may have bred a reticence among the political establishment on defence. This must end. We must banish these demons and recognise the greater danger of state-on-state threats, which never really went away. It is essential that we have the capability to protect ourselves, our interests and our allies. Reassessing our defence spending should go hand in hand with a wider reappraisal of how we approach foreign policy generally. Budgets have fallen at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Our key soft power institutions, such as the BBC World Service and the British Council, have suffered accordingly. This has resulted in a dilution of skills that has hindered policy making and reduced our options.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): I am following the hon. Gentleman's speech with great admiration. He talks about banishing demons. There are 632 demons that we cannot banish: those who will be commemorated tomorrow; those who died as a result of terrible mistakes made in this Chamber that sent them to Helmand and Iraq. Should we not acknowledge the dreadful delusions, under which we have been operating for the past 12 years, which created those disasters, before we repeat them?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. In fairness, Mr Flynn, you have just asked to be put on the speaking list. I want to hear your speech later rather than now.

Mr Baron: All I will say is that we can have our own opinions about those misguided interventions, or interventions generally. I do not think any of us would say that it has been the fault of the troops on the ground. They did a sterling job in their operations. If the fault lies anywhere, it is with the politicians and the generals who perhaps promised too much and delivered too little.

In closing, I call on both main parties—I do mean both main parties—to recognise their reluctance to commit to spending at least 2% of GDP on defence. As an ex-soldier and an MP now of 14 years, I find it difficult to believe that I am still, with others, having to try to make this case. I make no apologies for repeating that the adage about defence of the realm being the first duty of Government has been forged by events. We ignore the lessons of history at our peril. Whereas

previous generations have perhaps had time to recover from such adverse situations, time may be a luxury we can no longer afford. We must learn those lessons.

12.8 pm

Mr Dai Havard (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I would guess that many hon. Members will make contributions about the symbolism of the 2% target and its relationship with foreign policy and so on. I will try to restrict my remarks to its utility: the purpose for it, the benefits of having the process, and some predictions—guesses may be a better word—and advice on what we might do.

The 2% of GDP NATO target can be defined in all sorts of ways, and there have been many discussions on that recently. It is largely, but not totally arbitrary. It is largely the basis on which we currently spend our money, and so it informs our current decisions. I do not want to discuss what we have done in the past, however. I want to discuss what we are going to do in the future, and why it is important as a mechanism for the future. It should not necessarily be driven by NATO or US ambitions. It should be a matter of deliberate choice for particular strategic reasons, and there should be merit to it.

That is why I want to talk about this. We need certainty with which to plan against the uncertainty, and, in my opinion, the 2% mechanism would help and perhaps provide some structure and context. The truth is that we need a threat-based assessment. No doubt, there will be a new national security strategy, but we can no longer say, "We'll have a long war over here, and then we'll have a short war over there. Can you lot hold on until Christmas, and then we'll come and fight you, because we haven't quite finished this one yet?" That world is dead. We now have a series of threats and concurrent difficulties to deal with, and they will continue to be concurrent. The way we plan against that uncertainty has changed. Our methodologies are different—there was a great example in the Ebola statement earlier. We need an integrated process, not just within the military, but across the other Departments, if we are to deploy and do this properly. That is the big discussion. I have said to boys from my constituency in the military, "I'll tell you two things, right—buy a thermal vest and a pair of shorts, because you'll be in Estonia in the winter and no doubt somewhere warm a bit later. You're going to be around the place, because there are going to be concurrent reasons to be deployed in different places at different times."

I want to set out the benefits of the 2% mechanism. We now have five procurers in the MOD: we have the three chiefs—Army, Navy and Air Force; we now have this joint command; and we still have large projects done centrally. So there are five procurement organisations. I have been involved in the many discussions about how we buy equipment, but the real question is: how do we decide what to buy in the first place? We know where the inefficiencies have been, so the managerial structures have changed and we have a different set of relationships. We have chief executives now who are chiefs of services. These are the people who are going to buy this stuff. They told the Defence Committee, "Well, we have redone the structures in the original plans you gave us", and I said to General Nick Carter when he redid the Army one, "Well done, Nick—you've provided a structure

that protects you from me.” What do I mean by that? I mean we have this structure—adaptive and reactive forces—and it has some utility and it could be made to work, but it will work well only if we make the right decisions about how to fund and resource it and allow it to operate properly. Currently, the chiefs are telling us, “Unless we get 1% uplift on procurement and “flat real”, we cannot make those resources work. If you change that, we will have to change your plans or come back with advice on how you will change them.”

There are also questions about how we build this capability. The industrial agenda is really important, but it is not as well described as it could be. It needs to be better described. The defence growth partnership is a great thing, but it concerns applied research, not the whole business of how we deal with industry. Industry needs to plan. All the contractors—whether their function is to go to war or to provide support so that we can release other people to go to war—have to be factored in and they have to plan. This mechanism could produce some rigour, some tools, a language, an understanding and some certainty with which to plan. It might then allow us to plan strategically and even come together and find this magical thing—integration—that will give us the collaboration we need and which we talk about here and on the National Security Council.

The mechanism would test all sorts of things. It would test individual capabilities too. It could go up and down—because GDP increases and decreases—so some people might say, “Well, Trident—difficult question. It’s been set aside really—it’s a given; and therefore we’re arguing about the rest of it.” The mechanism would have to test itself against all others, and the military would have to decide its continued capability and utility. Everything would be in a process of iterative, continual assessment. In the future, these processes have to be iterative; they cannot be linear, they are not binary and they will not be spasmodic.

If we do that, this is what I think will happen: we will spend 2%, we have spent 2% and we will continue to spend more than 2%. But will we do it well? Will we do it in a strategic and planned fashion? Or will we do it just because we are responding to events? The “dogs of war”, as I call them, are a clear example—all these vehicles we now have: the Jackals, the Bulldogs, the Foxhounds. They are all individually important and useful, but they all came out of what? Urgent operational requirements—that is where they came from; they did not come from any proper strategic planning process. We now have to reintegrate this legacy equipment and fit it into the discussion about future planning. You could have avoided being in that position, if you had done some things differently—not you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not blaming you personally. We could all have been in a better position if we had done those things.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): On urgent operational requirements, the key is in the wording. We do not necessarily have any idea of the threats or requirements in advance. Our soldiers, sailors and airmen will suddenly be in a situation where we have to find a piece of kit to protect them better. That is the key—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Again, the hon. Gentleman wishes to speak later. Please keep something back. Do not use it all at once.

Mr Havard: Obviously, yes, we will continue to need them. I am trying to make the point that this became the process, rather than the exception to the process—it should be the exception—and the money came out of the contingency fund, not the core budget.

The budget should be 2%. As hon. Members might remember, when Labour was in Government and people said, “You should give more money to defence”, I used to say, “Well, if I was Gordon Brown, I’d say, ‘When you can spend the money I’ve given you properly, come back and ask for some more.’” That is the same debate, and it is the debate for the future. How do we plan for it properly? I think that 2% might give us a way of structuring the discussion. Spent well, the 2% could give us ways of planning and the right language, tools and transparency.

I have something to say to us in Parliament. This is probably the last time I will speak in this Parliament, so I will say something to the next one. The next Parliament will have to debate this better than we have debated it up till now. As I have said several times, we do not have structures any more and we do not discuss defence properly. We can make all the criticisms we like of other people and how well they do things, but we would do well to look at ourselves and consider how well we do them. In my opinion, the 2% could give us, if not certainty, at least some process by which to start to plan against the uncertainty, and it could enable other people to plan for themselves. For me, this is iterative; it will have to deal with the concurrence issue; and it is more than just a declaratory or arbitrary figure—it has a purpose.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That was a perfect example of taking up to 10 minutes. If we all stick to that, everybody will get in with the same amount of time.

12.18 pm

Rory Stewart (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard) both for his service on the Defence Committee and for having set out very clearly the two central questions in the debate about defence spending: first, the focus on threat—what is the threat we face?—and secondly the fact that these threats are now concurrent.

The reason we need to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence is that the entire defence planning assumptions created in 1998 and in 2010—those in the national security strategy and strategic defence and security review, leading up to Future Force 2020—have been bypassed by events; they no longer hold. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, the world has changed fundamentally, and those assumptions—this is why we cannot just tweak the NSS or be complacent about the SDSR—were essentially developed on two bases. The first was that the cold war had ended. The NSS stated again and again that the cold war had ended and that we needed to be much bolder about getting rid of cold war capacities.

The second assumption was that what we will be doing in the future is the same kind of things that were happening in 2010—primarily Afghanistan. Absolutely central to the SDSR was the idea that what we need is something called “enduring stabilisation operations”.

[Rory Stewart]

That meant that we were planning to go into a single country—or, at most, in US planning, two countries at a time—for a very long time with a large number of troops. The concept was: Iraq and Afghanistan; 100,000 to 130,000 troops on the ground; Britain contributing 10,000 of those troops—or, in the latest Future Force 2020 structure, 6,600 troops. All our brigade structures were set up to sustain that. The idea was that we would have force structures to keep 6,600 troops on the ground for a decade.

The world has changed completely, however, and as the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney pointed out, it has changed in two ways. First, we have a return to a threat from a conventional state with an advanced military capacity—Russia. That is a major change: it reshapes the entire assumptions from 1998 to 2010. Secondly, as the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney also pointed out, we now have concurrent threats that are not just happening in one state at a time. General Sir Peter Wall pointed out that the basic assumption of the SDSR was for a benign security environment. We had come out of Afghanistan, and we assumed that there would not be anything looking like Afghanistan again very soon. Of course, if we look around the world, we see developments—I shall deal with them in greater detail later—in Yemen, Libya, Syria, to some extent in South Sudan and certainly in western Iraq and still in Afghanistan. We are seeing exactly the same threats, but they now happening in half a dozen countries at one time.

Let me deal briefly with this threat assumption. We need more defence spending because we need to deal with those two things: the conventional threat from Russia and the concurrent threats from all the fragile states that are currently harbouring Islamist groups, terrorist groups—groups that appear to threaten the west. Dealing with this requires imagination, new force structures and spending.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Is not part of the problem of dealing with these threats having a strategy in the first place? There has been an absence of a real strategy.

Rory Stewart: That is a fundamental point, so let me deal with it briefly. We need to work from the assumption of three things. First, we must agree that these things are threats. There is a huge debate within the civil service, where some people are beginning to say, “Perhaps failed states and terrorist groups are not really threats at all; perhaps everything we have done in Afghanistan and Iraq was mistaken, and we do not need to worry about what is happening in Libya, Iraq and Syria.” Secondly, we need to assume that Britain wants to do something and actually wishes to be a global power. There is another danger in this whole debate, with people in Whitehall saying, “Perhaps this is none of our business; perhaps these things are threats, but somebody else such as the United States will deal with those threats for us”—a freeloader problem. Thirdly and most importantly—this comes to the centre of the strategy—we need to believe that we have a doctrine that can deal with these things. We need to believe that we can deal with them and that we have the capability to engage.

I shall deal with resources needs separately. First, the threat posed by Russia’s recent actions requires serious imagination. We have had “reassurance measures”—the grisly jargon we produced in Wales, essentially to talk about setting up a high-readiness joint taskforce, about exercising in NATO at a divisional level and about air policing operations. Those things need to be resourced. It will be surprisingly difficult in practice to have that very high-readiness joint taskforce, with all its enablers in place and functioning, particularly when some of the framework nations are still insisting that they can take their forces out of that very high-readiness joint taskforce and deploy them somewhere else such as in the Central African Republic.

It is much more than that, however. This House will have heard that we need to invest. Here, however, the idea that flat real plus 1% is somehow going to be enough cannot be the case if we are serious about the threats. Let me run through some of the requirements. Maritime surveillance is an obvious one, so there is no point debating it here today. Chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear capacity is another. Any Members present who were in the armed forces will remember training, walking around in NBC suits and thinking about how to deal with that kind of threat. All that capacity has gone out the window. We do not do that any more, because we have been fighting for nearly 15 years against lightly-armed insurgents, and most of our planning was based on counter-insurgency warfare operations that did not require that kind of training.

Ballistic missile defence is a third requirement. If we are serious about taking on a country such as Russia, which has tactical nuclear weapons as part of its normal operational doctrine, we need ballistic missile defence. That will probably mean—I do not want to pre-empt procurement decisions made by the Ministry—finding some way of buying into an existing US system and persuading the US to locate it not just in continental Europe, but in the United Kingdom.

If we look at our Navy, we find that it is currently down to 19 frigates and destroyers. That is pretty radical. What we have heard in the other place from Lord Astor is that our attrition calculations are currently zero. That means that we function on the assumption that we are not going to lose any of these frigates or destroyers. Lord Astor said that we have not lost any of those things since the Falklands war, so we do not need to worry about that. Of course, the Falklands war was the last time that we were fighting a navy, so it does not provide a basis for making this sort of calculation if we are thinking about taking on Russia.

It is the same for the Royal Air Force. As we move down to just seven squadrons, our attrition calculations are again pretty close to zero. If we are serious about carriers, we need to realise that they cost a lot of money. If we are to put one carrier at sea, we need to think about how to resupply it and how to get the fuel and weapons to it. The fuel and weaponry supply vessels will be moving along at 9 knots, which poses a huge challenge to us. We need to work out where to get the money to buy the planes to put on that carrier. How can we have a comprehensive carrier strike capacity? We have not yet paid for it.

Then there is the Army. If we are thinking about manoeuvre warfare again, it amounts to a huge spending commitment. It means thinking about heavy armour and whether we want to relocate the Royal Air Force at

an Army headquarters level rather than two levels up. It means wide water bridging capacity and all the things that any Members present who operated during the NATO era will be able to think of much better than me.

Then there is ambiguous warfare. If we are thinking about dealing with Russia, we are going to have to think about what to do on cyber, information operations, strategic communications; and we will need to think about whether we have the special forces capacity right the way around the edge of Russia to deal with the phenomenon of these “green men” in these insurgency operations. We need the knowledge of places such as Narva in Estonia.

That is the easy stuff. That is before we get on to the concurrent threats, mentioned by the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney. If we in this country take seriously the idea that we care about threats from failed states, terrorists and Islamist groups, we are going to have to think about northern Nigeria, Libya and Yemen, and we are going to have to think much more seriously about Syria and Iraq. We are going to have to think about continuing to support Afghanistan and, potentially, Pakistan, and if we do not do something about these places now as a coalition, it is just going to get worse. We will be reporting back to the House in two years’ time, and the Nigerian problem will have spread into Chad and Niger; the Libyan problem will have re-exploded back into Mali; Syria and Iraq will be destabilising Lebanon and Jordan even more profoundly than they are now.

Unfortunately, in dealing with these problems, we cannot base what we do on the Future Force 2020 structure. That was about the enduring stabilisation operations and heavy investment in counter-insurgency operations, with 100,000 people retained for a decade or more. That works if we have only one of these problems, but it simply does not work if we are dealing with a dozen of them at one time. So we need a much lighter, smarter approach to dealing with these countries. That will mean moving out of the world view of “one at a time” and not losing confidence. That is central; it cannot be about despair. It is about recognising that in Bosnia and Sierra Leone, we did these things quite well, but that if we are serious about them, we are going to have to upgrade our special forces and potentially look at—again, these are just ideas—type 2 special forces of the “green beret” type that they have in the United States. We may need to develop the idea of the Chief of the General Staff on defence engagement, but much more ambitiously, much more imaginatively and much more aggressively, including pre-posting officers into a dozen countries. We may be talking about 50 or 100 officers at a time, not about just one defence attaché covering three Baltic countries, and we may need to rethink the whole force structure that lies behind that.

I have run out of time, so let me say a few things in conclusion. I have sketched out a world which, as was made clear by the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, is very different now. It is different in terms of the conventional threat, but—and this is something that we have only touched on so far—it is, above all, different in terms of the concurrent threats that are emerging from all the fragile states. We have not begun to think those through. We have not begun to consider the deep implications of the skills set, the force structures and the capacity that we would need in order to deal with those states simultaneously.

The 2% of GDP matters for several reasons. First, we can deal with these problems only as a coalition, because they are beyond the sort of problems that Britain can deal with on its own. The 2% matters because it is a way of raising the commitment of more than 20 NATO countries to matching that expenditure themselves. It is essential to keep the United States bound into the system, because it is currently spending 70% of the NATO money. The President, the chief of the United States army, and the United States ambassador to the United Nations have all made it clear that they view the 2% as a sign of seriousness and of Britain’s commitment to keep the United States involved. Above all, however, the 2% is needed because the threats are real. The world is genuinely becoming more dangerous, and Britain cannot be a freeloader.

One of the sad aspects of what I feel is happening is our growing obsession with kit. People stand up and list all the different bits of kit that we have bought, but they do not intend ever to use it. They are freeloading on the idea that Britain will never act alone, that the United States will somehow fill in all the gaps, and that therefore we do not need to be serious about what we are actually doing in countries such as Libya. The challenge to Ministers should be, “Explain how we are to deal with a situation like the one in Libya. Explain what we are going to do in Yemen and northern Nigeria. Explain how this kit will really prevent us from letting the Russians into Mariupol.” Do we care about those issues, or are we creating an isolationist world view?

That 2% of GDP will return confidence to the military. It is an increasing budget, so the military will have £1 billion a year more every year to finance imaginative ideas. They will be able to restructure our forces, invest in defence engagement rather than scrimping and saving around the edges, and give us back the confidence that we need as a nation.

12.32 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): We have heard three excellent speeches, and I found very little to disagree with in any of them, but perhaps I did disagree with the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) when he spoke of our “misguided” interventions. Surely it was not our interventions but the way in which we carried them through that was misguided. We generally did not carry them through with enough stamina and enough commitment to the action that we needed to take.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard), who serves on the Defence Committee and who has provided us with some extraordinary insights. We have occasionally wished that we could edit some of what he said, or make it a little quicker—we ribbed him about that mercilessly at times—but I think that the whole Committee learned from his long-term, strategic way of looking at things and pulling them together.

It might have been beneficial for the entire defence team to listen to today’s debate, for, as I look around the Chamber, it seems to me that it will turn out to be a debate worth listening to. The same applied to our last debate on defence spending: every speech contributed something. Even if Ministers take in what is said by Members on both sides of the House, they do not make

[Ms Gisela Stuart]

it clear that they are taking any notice of some of the friendly advice that is given to them. A classic example arose during Prime Minister's Question Time, when I raised the subject of the 2% target. It was the Prime Minister who, at the Wales summit, lectured other countries and told them that they should step up to the plate. I suggested that he might just feel a tiny bit embarrassed, but all that he could come back with was some reference to the Scottish National party. Defence is not a party political issue; it is an issue for which the House has a collective responsibility. It seems that Back-Bench debates are required to bring Members together to discuss an issue that the Government ought to encourage us to talk about, but do so very rarely.

Let me return to the question of why the 2% matters. We all agree that it is an arbitrary figure, but it is part of an international commitment: it is part of article 5. Article 5 contains no mandate for a particular kind of response, but if we continue like this, we shall have no response except sanctions. We shall not be able to respond militarily except via the Americans. It is deeply irresponsible for the mainland European NATO members to keep cutting defence spending and keep telling their publics that, while their aspirations have not changed, everything will be done through much smarter methods and in co-operation, so they will continue to deliver more by investing less.

A few years ago, someone in the Pentagon described European countries as "no-good, crummy allies". If we continue on our present trajectory, we shall join the ranks of no-good, crummy allies, and I do not want to see that day. The hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay spoke of national and international interests, to which I would add "national and international responsibilities". If we wish to be a significant player in the world and to fulfil those international interests, we must possess not only capacity, but reliability and steadiness.

I do not want to repeat the speech that I made last week. My last point concerns political leadership. It is true that defence is not a vote-winner. I would not like to live in a country where people demonstrate in the streets, demanding more weapons and military action. It is in the nature of our people to want peace, but the leaders must show that they are responsive to the needs of the defence of the realm, and are conscious of their international responsibilities.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some characteristically wise observations, and I think we all agree about the 2%. Surely, however, leadership is not just about calling on all NATO members to match that 2%, but about calling for effective use of that money. Many people feel that if the 2% is not spent wisely, it is not really the end of the story. We need to be sure that it is being spent properly.

Ms Stuart: The hon. Gentleman is right: it must be spent properly. The 2% commitment sends signals, and gives the services and the supply chain certainly, about what is going to happen. It is no good trying to massage the figures and suddenly include war pensions in order to arrive at the 2% figure, because that would render it absolutely meaningless.

I said that I would be brief. Let me end by saying that the 2% is part of our North Atlantic treaty commitment, because part of our commitment is to a capacity that will enable us to respond to an article 5 threat. It is up to all parties in the House—and, in particular, Front Benchers—to show leadership, so that we can bring our voters with us in relation to our commitment. Without leadership, that simply will not happen.

12.38 pm

Sir Malcolm Rifkind (Kensington) (Ind): I strongly agree with what has just been said by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart). I also pay particular tribute to the impressive and remarkable speech that we heard from the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), the Chairman of the Select Committee, who explained the practical implications of our situation in a very detailed and convincing way. I shall not repeat the points that he made, because they were made so well by him.

Let me begin by emphasising that this debate is not just about defence expenditure, but something far wider. If we continue to make cuts in our defence budget of the kind that are being contemplated, we shall find that we are making a profound and irreversible change not just to our defence capability, but the ability of the United Kingdom to conduct a global foreign policy with authority, conviction and credibility. That, in essence, is the fundamental choice that we are being asked to contemplate.

We have had these cuts over a number of years. I have not until now criticised the Government for their defence cuts over the five years of this Parliament, for several reasons. First, I have recognised—as have most of us—that in a period of great austerity it is of course impossible to remove the contribution that the Ministry of Defence, given the size of its budget, might be able to make to resolving matters. I was privileged to serve as Secretary of State for Defence, and I had to implement defence cuts myself, so I am very conscious of the pressures that exist, and the need to try to find a way of resolving them.

Richard Drax: May I counter that argument by saying that, with defence, if we cut ships, regiments or planes, we cannot just reinvent them when we need them? It takes months or years to bring them back.

Sir Malcolm Rifkind: My hon. Friend helps to take me to exactly the next point I was going to make. What also enabled me to modify my concerns—to not feel the need to speak out during those few years—was the way in which the MOD addressed the difficult decisions it had to make. To a considerable extent, it tried to preserve the major improvements to our overall capability—our carrier capability, for example, and the need to renew the Trident submarines because of our strategic requirements. A lot of the reductions were made in the areas of manpower. That is painful and difficult, but the reality is that if we had cancelled the carriers, they could never have been reintroduced. That would be gone for ever, with profound and permanent impacts on our maritime capability. When we reduce Army manpower, it is painful, but the changes can be reversed, if the resources are available and the need is there, over not

too long a period. That will still be difficult, but it can be done without the implications that come from a major reduction in capability.

Perhaps the most important thing that reassured me—rightly, I hope—over the last five years was the clear assurance that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister gave that once we had resolved the immediate economic crisis, and had economic growth and economic development, there would be, as an absolute necessity, real-terms increases, year on year, in our defence expenditure. That was, so far as anything can seem to be a commitment, a commitment at the very highest levels of our Government five years ago, and we have been told ever since that that remains the Prime Minister's view.

We face a most extraordinary situation. The Government say—I happen to agree with them—that the United Kingdom is going through a period of remarkable economic recovery. We are now one of the strongest economies in Europe, we are told; our economic growth is now higher than that of almost any other country in Europe, and our employment situation has improved. All these economic developments, which will rightly be very important in the forthcoming general election, are being shown as examples of how we have succeeded in our strategy, and how the UK is therefore stronger than many other countries in the western world. Yet ironically, simultaneously, precisely because our GDP is growing substantially, meeting that 2% requirement becomes that much more difficult, if not unattainable. It is a great irony that the more our economy improves, the more we seem likely to fall below the 2% requirement, when the reverse should be the case: if our economy is growing and doing well, it should be easier to find the resources required, because the revenues coming into Government will also increase considerably. That irony is not one that I have yet heard explained.

I hope that when the Minister winds up, he can reassure us on how we will benefit from the remarkable economic growth for which we are taking the credit. We certainly did not expect increases in defence spending when the economy was in a mess. Now it seems to be much healthier. I recognise that the budget deficit continues, but that is only part of the overall economic situation.

Something else worries me, too, and it has been mentioned by colleagues and those outside this House. Of course this 2% is a nominal figure, a totem, and it is the real resources that are important, but I find it difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile a cavalier approach towards the 2% objective, which we have held for many years, with saying that overseas development is somehow untouchable, and indeed may have to be given statutory protection in the current economic circumstances. Indeed, it now has statutory protection of a kind that I find extraordinary. These are very curious situations.

The consequence of what is happening, particularly if it continues after the general election, will be not just pain for our armed forces and their capability, but an irreversible change to Britain's ability to conduct a credible foreign policy. After the United States, our armed forces and those of France are unique around the world. We are the only other two countries that have been able to make a meaningful contribution—albeit that we come far behind the United States—to providing a global deployment of armed forces to assist with overall issues of global security. Our role and credibility in the Security Council of the United Nations as not

just a member, but a permanent member, is because of our ability to contribute towards security. That is what the Security Council is all about.

Our foreign policy is conducted on the basis of three assets that we have: first, of course, our diplomatic capability, which is impressive, although it has been under considerable strain in recent years; secondly, our intelligence capability, which is strong, and I pay credit to the Government for the resources provided there; and, thirdly, our military capability. The UK's military capability is in a serious condition, of a kind that we are all familiar with, and that has an impact on our diplomatic credibility.

I read some years ago a remark that I have used since—colleagues may have heard me use it. It is attributed to Frederick the Great: "Diplomacy without arms is like music without instruments." That remains true, not because we will necessarily always wish to use our armed forces, but because if we are pursuing, with good faith, a desire to develop a political and diplomatic solution to some intractable problem—there is a perfect example in our relations with Russia and Mr Putin at present—the fact that we have as the ultimate back-stop a military capability has a significant and profound impact on the likelihood of our delivering the result that we are trying to obtain. However, if we are seen as once having had that military capability, but as having opted, as a deliberate act of Government policy, to reduce that capability so that it remains significant but is not in any profound sense impressive, we will have seriously reduced our diplomatic clout and made the ultimate problem that much greater.

It is always dangerous to draw comparisons with the 1930s, but we know perfectly well that those in Berlin who were planning aggression believed that the western democracies were incapable of providing the resources required for a strong defence, and that influenced their foreign policy. I am not saying that the threats that we face today are of that order, or that the individuals concerned are comparable to the people who led Germany at that time—of course that would be unfair—but the fundamental principle is nevertheless the same.

What I beg of the Government, or any Government who emerge after the general election, is that they do not ask the facile question, "Does this win votes? Are the public demanding it? Is this therefore something we must respond to, or it will hurt us politically?" If a Government have one justification in a democratic society, it is that they do not just follow, or seek to follow, public opinion, but occasionally recognise the need to lead public opinion, and to take decisions that may involve painful choices, and that may be difficult in terms of newspaper headlines, but may have profound and beneficial impacts on our ability to make our contribution to sorting out some of the problems of the world.

Looking around the world, there are very few countries indeed that combine strong democratic institutions, genuine respect for the rule of law, and a military capability that can help build up security, restore peace and achieve the global objectives with which this country has always been proud to be associated. Let it not be the legacy of this Government, or any Government who emerge after this election, that we can no longer say that or make that contribution, not because the public rejected the idea, but because politicians failed to provide the right level of leadership.

12.49 pm

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): It is a pleasure to participate in this debate. I commend all who have spoken, especially the Chair of the Select Committee on Defence, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). I have the privilege of being a member of the Committee but do not attend as often as I might like because of other commitments back home in Northern Ireland to do with the peace process, but what he said made a lot of sense. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard), vice-Chair of the Committee, made an excellent contribution, too. It has been a pleasure to serve on the Committee during this Parliament. The work that it has done has been of real value, and when a cross-party Committee of this nature comes together and says clearly to the Government that a minimum of 2% of GDP should be allotted to defence spending, the Government should listen to the wisdom of that Committee. We look at these issues week in and week out, taking evidence and examining all the facts.

Judging by what I have heard today, there is a high degree of support for the need to get on with the task of strengthening our armed forces and the United Kingdom's defences, especially in the light of our improved economic conditions. Other speakers have rightly said that the world around us is changing, as is the nature of the threat against the United Kingdom and our allies. That threat emerges in various locations, and our capacity is being spread and stretched. I know that there are plans to enhance and improve our armed forces, but we believe that it will be critical for the incoming Government to make a clear commitment to spending 2% of our GDP on defence.

I shall go further than that. I acknowledge what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) said about the debate not being party political, and I entirely accept that. However, the Democratic Unionists are a small regional party in this Parliament and we might have some influence over who forms the next Government. Let me therefore place clearly on record, so that there can be no doubt, and so that this does not become a bargaining chip—it will not—that we will only support a Government of this nation who make the commitment to a minimum of 2% of GDP being spent on defence. That is not a party political comment; it is simply something that we believe to be important.

We have been accused in the past of focusing our interest narrowly on Northern Ireland. It has been said that when it comes to negotiating with coalition Governments or in confidence and supply arrangements, we will always be there with the begging bowl on behalf of Northern Ireland, but that is not the case. We have spelled out today certain key areas on which we want the next Government to make commitments on national issues. We are focusing on the national need and what is in the interests of the United Kingdom, and right at the top of that list are the defence and security of this nation and the need for a commitment to 2% of our national income being spent on defence. I agree that it is not enough just to make that commitment, and that it needs to be made clear how the money will be spent. It must be spent wisely and it must be prioritised towards the areas in which it is required.

Looking at the world around us, we see that we have two aircraft carriers under construction. The Queen Elizabeth is now being fitted out and the Prince of

Wales is being built. There must be certainty that both ships will be brought into service and properly equipped with airframes and aircraft. We need a credible carrier force. That will be an essential component of our defence strategy's capacity and global reach, not only in defending this nation's security but in providing security to our allies. That needs to be a priority.

If I may say so, one of the mistakes that this Government made was to scrap our surveillance aircraft and to cut up the Nimrod aircraft. That was frankly an act of madness. We now have Russian aircraft flying around the coastline of the United Kingdom but we do not have the capacity to deal with it properly. We need to do something about that. That is an area of our armed forces that could, with extra expenditure, be re-equipped, to enable surveillance globally but particularly around the shores of the United Kingdom. The British Isles need defending—they need watching in the most literal sense—but our maritime surveillance capabilities are currently well below par. Vladimir Putin respects force, and we need to respect it too. We need to be able to show that we as a nation have the military capacity to defend ourselves against any possible attack.

Beyond equipment, we need to get the strategy right. Many Members have already referred to the strategic defence and security review. I stated in an earlier debate that we needed to bring forward that review, but in any event it is clear that the current SDSR is not fit for purpose, because the world has changed and things have moved on. It is therefore essential that we get the next SDSR absolutely right. We will need to know why and on what the 2% of national income will be spent, and to set that in the context of our strategic needs and defence requirements. That is not just some marketing commitment to be waved around as a policy commitment during the election. We need to know exactly what the policy will mean in terms of the numbers, what the money will be spent on, and what our strategic requirements are for national defence and security.

Beyond capabilities and strategy, we have to consider the daily needs of the men and women who serve in our armed forces. I get worried when I see the provision of housing and catering for our armed forces personnel, because decisions on these matters are often taken on the basis of the lowest tender that comes into the Department. I have had many complaints from members of the armed forces about the quality of the services that are put in place to support them. We need to improve on that. It should not always be about the lowest tender.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I am listening intently to the right hon. Gentleman's excellent speech. Does he agree that we do not give sufficient consideration to the funding for treating those who have been wounded once they return to this country? Does he acknowledge how much our armed forces have to rely on charity to take care of those who have been wounded, both physically and mentally?

Mr Donaldson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. The military charities play an important role in supporting our veterans, but the military covenant must mean something and it must be real. I still meet too many armed forces veterans who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have been abandoned after a number of years. That applies particularly to those suffering

from post-traumatic stress disorder. Sadly, as a result of Operation Banner being conducted in Northern Ireland for more than 30 years, we have a large number of ex-security force and ex-military personnel suffering from PTSD, and recent research has shown that the number is growing. The armed forces charities are really struggling to support those personnel, and more needs to be done. The hon. Gentleman is right to suggest that if we are going to increase our spending we should ensure that our veterans, especially those who have been injured on operational deployment, get the support, care and treatment that they need, and that they can continue to do so.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr Mark Francois): Specifically on injured service personnel, I would like to give the House just one example of how we have tried to do better. We managed to get £6.5 million from the Treasury special reserve, with the Treasury's full approval, to provide the latest generation of prosthetics—the so-called geniums, or what *The Sun* describes as “bionic” legs—for our wounded from Iraq and Afghanistan. They set the world standard in prosthetics. We spent £6.5 million of taxpayers' money—which no one would object to—to give our wounded service personnel the best that money could buy.

Mr Donaldson: I appreciate that. I have the greatest respect for the Minister and I know from our conversations how deeply and strongly he feels about supporting those who have served in our armed forces. I take on board the point that he has made. My concern, however, is for those who are beyond that point, particularly those who are suffering from mental trauma. There is a need to do more to support those members of our armed forces. We need to support, through infrastructure, those who serve our nation.

I want to conclude by mentioning the reserve forces. We have put a lot of emphasis on their work and there is an urgent need to embed more regular personnel into the reserve forces to help with the training regime there, so that they are better trained and so that we improve the levels of manpower retention. As Ministers know, we have been very successful in Northern Ireland in our recruitment capacity. Many of our units are already fully recruited and we want to build on that work.

I welcome this debate. The Chancellor recently said:

“We can afford whatever it takes to provide adequate security. Defence comes first.”

If in the next Parliament my party is called upon to support a Government, that Government will need to be one who mean just what the Chancellor said.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I call Sir Menzies Campbell.

1 pm

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am not sure whether to call you colonel on this occasion.

I, like others, have been greatly impressed by the quality of the debate so far. I agree with much of what has been said, but let me pick up on a couple of points. First, it is right to say that defence does not win votes, but poor defence can certainly lose them if the public form the view that we are not fulfilling our primary

objective—their protection. Secondly, the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) made an extremely eloquent speech, but I say to him that there was no option but to abandon the maritime patrol aircraft. The original decision to go with Nimrod was questioned by the Defence Committee at the time. Other alternatives were available, for example, the P-3 Orion, but the decision was taken, I believe by Mr Secretary Portillo, that Nimrod it should be. A final irony was that Nimrod, the mighty hunter, never actually fulfilled his responsibility.

Let us consider the following:

“The Ministry of Defence is being led by the nose by the Treasury towards reductions in Britain's armed forces which have no rational basis”.

The House will not recognise that quotation, and neither did I until the BBC drew to my attention, in an article written for its website, that in my capacity as defence spokesman for the Liberal Democrats in August 1991 I had said just that. I do not introduce that to offer some support for the view that I am wise; I do so to point out that nothing seems to have changed. My proposition was put rather more pithily by my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who said that after four years as Minister of State for the Armed Forces he formed the clear view that the enemy was not the Russians, but the Treasury.

Some things have changed, though, and the point has been made by the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard). When I first came into this House and took an interest in these matters, we had five days of the parliamentary year to consider defence. We had a two-day debate on the annual White Paper at the beginning of October, and then each of the services had a single day of discussion devoted to them. When the three service days were amalgamated we were confidently assured that it would not result in fewer opportunities to hold the Government to account—people can form their own view about the value of that assurance.

I have been through it all: “Options for Change”; Front Line First; and Labour's so-called “defence review” of 1998. That came closest of all to being a proper defence review, except for one thing: Labour refused to publish its foreign policy baseline attributes or intentions. As a consequence, what was otherwise a first-class exercise, with consultation the length and breadth of the country, driven by the then Secretary of State, now Lord Robertson, and with Lord Reid, as he now is, a very important part of it, that was the closest we have come to a defence review. We have not, even in this Parliament, had a defence review. It is an open secret that in 2010 the MOD was told, “Here is a metaphorical envelope containing money. Go away and find a defence policy that fits that sum of money.”

Mr Kevan Jones: It is a fact that in spring 2010 the Labour Government produced a Green Paper, which would have fed into the defence—[*Interruption.*] What happened afterwards was what the Conservatives did with it, but we did produce the Green Paper to start the process.

Sir Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is right about that. I know a bit about this because I was invited by the then Defence Secretary to be part of the group of politicians, of all parties, who participated in debates with officials as to what should be in the Green Paper.

[*Sir Menzies Campbell*]

A defence review is not a hugely impossible concept to understand. What one needs to do is set out one's foreign policy objectives; decide what military resources are necessary to fulfil those objectives; and then allocate the financial resources necessary to provide the military capability. We have not had a defence review that fulfils those three principles in all the time I have been in the House of Commons.

The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney made a sound point when he said that 2% cannot be described as a panacea for all the ills of defence. If 2% is to be spent, it must be spent wisely. We do not have to go far in Europe to see that several of our allies spend money, perhaps getting up towards 2%—there are not enough of those countries—which could much more readily be spent otherwise. For example, it could be spent on a greater amount of interoperability, force specialisation and such things. There is no point Mr Juncker talking about a European defence policy when European states have not yet properly fulfilled their responsibilities to NATO, of which almost all of them are members.

Mr Havard: May I take the right hon. and learned Gentleman back a little to the defence and security review? We can have a defence review and we can have a security review, or we can have an integrated process that looks at the whole business of future resilience, which I think is what he is suggesting we have not done and are not doing now. Does he think that when the new Parliament forms, the circumstances will be such that the current budgets for defence might be maintained in order to allow time for a proper, integrated assessment of defence and security, possibly in the next calendar year, if not this one?

Sir Menzies Campbell: The hon. Gentleman makes a very sound point. I am sorry that I cannot give any commitments in relation to the next Parliament, as I shall not be here, but as a spectator outside I shall firmly cling to the view that a proper, full-scale defence review of the kind I have described, and with which he agrees, is necessary if we are to provide ourselves with the proper defences for the foreseeable future.

The situation is worse than I have described, in a way. Not only is the 2% a public commitment, but it was restated at Celtic Manor during the NATO summit and in the final communiqué from that summit. Of course, it is also one that the British Government have been at pains to emphasise to other allies. How are we going to explain away the fact that in recent months, even years, we have been complaining about the level of defence expenditure of other allies yet we are about to breach the very standard we signed up to and advocated only a few months ago? It is a bit worse than that, too, because we know that the possibility that we should fall below 2% has caused great anxiety, particularly in the United States, which is our closely military ally. Senior official after senior official has made exactly that point.

I have another source of embarrassment: in about 10 days' time, the United Kingdom delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, which I have the honour to lead, will be the hosts of the Standing Committee of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. We have in the past 12 months, with the encouragement of Ministers,

sought to persuade the other members of the Assembly of the importance of the 2% figure. We will look rather embarrassed in 10 days if the consequences of the actions that appear to be taken in this country are that we will fall below the very figure which we have been advocating and on which we have been seeking to hold the feet of others to the fire.

Let me finish by saying this: if we do not have sufficient defence—and 2% may not be enough—we will diminish our capability, we will reduce our influence and we will limit the options of government. We cannot afford any of those.

1.9 pm

Mark Hendrick (Preston) (Lab/Co-op): When the cold war ended in the early 1990s, the established view was that there would be a peace dividend. Defence spending would decline as countries spent money on initiatives that would create peace and stability rather than on arms. Russia was expected to become a fully integrated member of the international community; deadlock in the UN Security Council would become a thing of the past; and Russia would engage productively with its European neighbours. There was even talk of it joining NATO.

Those aspirations have since dissolved, and the illusion that we live in relative peace has now been lifted. The hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) painted a very good picture of this new insecurity in the world. The most pressing concern is the continued ambition of Russian President Vladimir Putin to establish his dominance over eastern Europe. His tactics go beyond conventional warfare. Using subversive tactics such as political destabilisation, informal military units, information warfare and energy blockades, he has destabilised and partly occupied Ukraine. We saw such tactics for the first time in the 2008 Georgian war in which, under the pretext of aiding Russian citizens, he annexed South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We have now seen him do the same with Crimea and large parts of eastern Ukraine.

Russia seeks to flex its military muscles across the whole of Europe, as we have seen recently with the incursion into our airspace by Russian bombers. That is not the first time that that has happened and it will not be the last. In 2013 and 2014, there were eight similar incidents of Russian military aircraft invading UK airspace.

Aside from Russia, we are also once again faced with the threat of the spread of nuclear weapons and the question of nuclear proliferation. Since 2006, North Korea has conducted three nuclear weapons tests, and Iran, while at the negotiating table, continues to work on its nuclear weapons programme.

International terrorism has taken on a new form with the rise of Islamic State, which, every day, conducts grotesque, barbaric and despicable acts. Now is certainly not the time for Britain to shirk its responsibilities. After all, we pride ourselves on being a world power. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a member of the European Union and a member of NATO, we should make a minimum 2% GDP commitment to defence. Listening to the debate today, I get the impression that one or two Members think that 2% of GDP is a target, but it is not; it is a floor below which spending should not drop.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In endorsing that important point, may I point out that, during the cold war in the 1980s, we were spending, at times, more than 5% of GDP on defence?

Mark Hendrick: I was not aware of that fact, but I totally concur with the idea of spending anything up to 5%. As I said, 2% should be considered the floor. I am very concerned that some of our NATO and European partners are not getting anywhere near that figure. How can it be argued that we should shut our doors to Europe and, at the same time, commit to working closer with European nations if we cannot work together to reach at least that 2% figure?

The recent report by the Royal United Services Institute says that the strength of our Army, Navy and Air Force could fall from 145,000 to 115,000 by 2020, which is a 26% decline. If we follow that trajectory, we could face a situation in which our armed forces numbers drop below 100,000. If we consider that Wembley stadium can accommodate 90,000 people, our entire armed forces might soon be able to fit into the stadium, which does not bear thinking about. There are also around 92,000 people currently in prison in Britain. We could well end up with more people incarcerated than in our armed forces.

This country has always had a powerful air force. We have always built and supplied the best military aircraft in the world, from the Harrier to the Typhoon. Yet air support today accounts for only £13.8 billion of our £162.9 billion defence budget, which is 8.8%. The numbers of RAF servicemen have been continually cut over the past few years. There are 8,810 fewer servicemen in the RAF in 2015 than there were in 2010, which is a decline of nearly 25%. That is despite the fact that limited military intervention via the deployment of aircraft for bombing campaigns has once again become the norm. We saw that in Libya and we now see it in Iraq where Tornados and Reaper drones have flown 374 missions and released 206 weapons against ISIL targets.

Derek Twigg: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the continual use of the Air Force. That pressure on the Air Force coupled with the cuts that are taking place means that we will not be able to sustain that sort of use in the long term.

Mark Hendrick: That is the point I am making. As I have said, we may soon be in a position where all our defence forces will fit into a football stadium and where our prison population will outnumber our military personnel.

The technological edge that we have in military aerospace has created huge dividends for our economy and is an indispensable part of our economic infrastructure. That is particularly evident in my region in the north-west of England where BAE Systems employs around 15,000 people at sites in Lancashire, Cumbria and Cheshire. Some 10,000 people, including many of my constituents, make military jets at Samlesbury and Warton just outside Preston, which means a great deal for the local economy. BAE Systems currently trains 264 apprentices across those sites and young people are trained to use the high-technology equipment and to develop engineering skills that will secure them permanent jobs into the future.

To maintain our existing military air superiority, our priority is twofold: the upgrading of the existing Typhoon fleet and the purchasing of the F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters. The upgrading of our Typhoon fleet has to be of the utmost importance. Our RAF pilots currently rely on our ageing fleet of Tornado GR4 bombers to conduct missions against ISIL positions in Iraq. That is because of delays to the RAF's upgrade programme for the Typhoon fleet, principally caused by the lack of funding available for the new equipment.

The next UK Government will decide the size of our new fleet of F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters. So far, the Government have approved the purchase of 14 aircraft to provide the first operational squadron, plus four aircraft for testing and training. The current cost of their development is more than £5 billion and their completion is vital for our economy and the future of our security. The next Government must commit to offering clarity over the size of our F-35 fleet and a timetable for its completion.

There can be no doubt that the future security of Europe should be our main priority. Irrespective of whether we are in the EU, Britain will always be a European power and an internationally strong mid-league military power. The threats to European security are threats to Britain's security. We must maintain our technological edge. Technological advancements and investment in skills not only have a direct spin off into other industries in our economy, but support thousands of independent small to medium-sized businesses in the supply chain.

The key to security for the future is our mastery of technology and our ability to stay one step ahead. We see that now with the development of unmanned aerial vehicles. We are leading the way with projects such as BAE Systems Taranis stealth attack drone, which is part of an Anglo-French project to develop unmanned capability by pooling technology from each nation's work so far. In November 2014, a £120 million contract was awarded to six industry partners across the UK and France to invest in the development of future unmanned combat aerial vehicle technology.

A commitment from the next Government in the strategic defence spending review for the next generation of drones would reinvigorate our domestic aerospace industry. Without it, says one BAE senior executive, there will be no UK aerospace industry to speak of in the future. Our military aerospace industry is a source of jobs, skills and pride for many in this country. It is an area where, technologically, we are leading the way. I fear that, if our spending commitment falls below 2%, we could put many of these skills and jobs in jeopardy, not to mention our national security. Therefore, I strongly believe that the next Government, whichever colour they are, should commit to meeting that target and going beyond it. We cannot put too high a price on our security. Our security must come first.

1.20 pm

Sir Peter Luff (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): As for others who have spoken in this debate, it is likely that this will be my last debate in Parliament. I am glad that it is on defence—the defining purpose of the state and of Parliament. I will seek not to repeat what others have said, but I want to say this. We have no more important

[Sir Peter Luff]

role than to keep those who elect us safe from our enemies. This view is not as popular as it was. Elections, we are told, are not won and lost on defence; there are no votes in defence. I am not so sure. If the political establishment is seen to be playing fast and loose with our security, we will all pay a heavy price in further disillusion and alienation.

The 2% NATO floor or target, to which we are all politically and morally committed, is the minimum that we should spend, yet it is far from safe. I do not generally favour targets for spending of any kind, and I certainly do not favour writing them into law, but the unavoidable truth is that if we are to achieve our current objectives, spending of that order is needed. I understand the scope for increased efficiency in the area of human activity; indeed the increased sophistication of the technology behind military equipment enables us to do more with less, which means that fewer people are needed to deliver the same effect than even a decade ago.

A Type 45 destroyer is considerably more capable than the Type 42 that it replaces and needs a smaller crew. And there are opportunities to do more with less. That is one of the purposes of the UK-French defence relationship. The application of the whole force concept could increase the effect and efficiency of defence. So our debate about national security must not lapse into sentimentality. It is not sentimental to speak up for defence. I want to do so by addressing three things—the financial background, the fact that defence is a long-term game and the threat to essential investment in science and technology.

The Chancellor is right to say that strong defence depends on a strong economy. That is why as a Minister in 2010, I swallowed hard and accepted significant cuts to defence capabilities, even though they led to some very challenging gaps in capability. But for a trading nation like ours, the protection of the sea lanes and the maintenance of an open rules-based trading system are crucial. So a strong economy also depends on strong defence. Prosperity is built on peace. The urgent question to both Front-Bench teams today is this. The funding post-2015 that is needed just to achieve Future Force 2020 is based on a 1% per annum increase in the equipment budget and flat real for the non-equipment budget. That is what the Chiefs of Staff and Ministers were promised at the time. So will Ministers and shadow Ministers commit today to both the equipment and non-equipment figures that we were promised?

The commitment on the equipment budget made only by my party is welcome. There is a long list of very important capabilities, but it is not enough on its own. The significant cuts that appear to be pencilled in for current expenditure—RDEL, or resource departmental expenditure limit—are deeply worrying. I commend Professor Malcolm Chalmers excellent paper, “Mind the gap; the MOD’s emerging budgetary challenge.” It is an objective, factual assessment of the cost pressures facing defence. I doubt that the Minister can offer reasons to disagree with any of its deeply worrying conclusions, but even in the optimistic scenario that Professor Chalmers outlines, under which defence is given the same protection as health and education, those cost pressures would still force a total cut of 8.7% over the next 10 years—about £35 billion in total.

If further cuts are to be made, they would sadly have to be based on a refreshed and less ambitious strategic approach. The decisions in the 2015 review, then, could redefine Britain’s role in the world. There are other strategies, depending more on diplomacy, soft power and development assistance, for example. They are all vital components of our national security, but are they credible without strong defences too? No. Not when, for the first time since the cold war, Europe faces a real military threat on its borders. The world is more dangerous than it has been for decades.

In some ways, though, the 2015 SDSR will be easier than the last one. Crucially, a major programme of reform has rebuilt the MOD’s credibility, and its performance on equipment acquisition has been transformed. From both the industrial and security perspectives, the 2010 SDSR succeeded in protecting the very special US-UK defence relationship, but will this last? President Obama, the US Chief of Staff and the US ambassador to the UN have all warned us and are sending us a clear message about what they fear is the future of UK defence spending.

So to my second theme—the need to take long-term decisions to protect our operational advantage and our freedom of action. In layman’s terms, that means making sure that we have superior capabilities to our enemies and that we can use them and sustain them whenever we want to. At the heart of this for me is the alarming engineering skills shortage that we face as a nation, especially in defence. This is the area of the 2012 White Paper on defence acquisition, to which I put my name, with which I am least satisfied. The ingredients were all there, but the urgency of the issue was not properly articulated and opportunities were missed. Crucially, commentators did not understand what the White Paper said. It made it clear that

“We will take action to protect our operational advantages and freedom of action, but only where this is essential for national security.”

Here is the commitment to invest in what industry calls the body of knowledge essential to sustain capabilities in the long terms. We cannot protect all the skills and capabilities that we need and would like to on current budgets, but there are areas of capability that we simply must invest in to sustain our security. Short-term budget cuts make this White Paper promise, which is essential to our security, impossible to deliver, with serious long-term consequences.

My third theme is the priority that we must attach to sustaining investment in technology. The centrality of research investment to UK national security takes on greater significance in a new global security context—a context defined by state fragmentation, asymmetric threats and technology proliferation. Belligerent non-state actors are increasingly using technology to counter the traditional technological advantage of conventional military and security forces. Since the end of the cold war, we have seen widespread development of technology by commercial organisations and individuals driven by a consumer society and business sector hungry for tomorrow’s technology today. This has lowered the bar for entry to conflict, espionage, terrorism and serious and organised crime, meaning that there are far more threats out there now than there were. As a result “conflict” will be far less predictable than we have seen before. It simply will

not conform to set-piece scenarios in the same way that the west planned for in the last century or in the last SDSR.

If we are not committing to investing a realistic amount in science and technology, I see several things happening. First, we will become less relevant to our key strategic allies—the United States and France. Secondly, we will miss the opportunities to build capability by adapting the best of the commercial and international technology sector because we simply will not know what the cutting edge looks like. Thirdly, we will cease to act as an intelligent client. How do you know what you are buying if you do not know what good looks like? Fourthly, we will be unable to evolve during a conflict. This is potentially the most serious if we cannot defeat the novel threats deployed against us.

If the 2015 SDSR correctly prioritises science and technology, logically the MOD must spend more on it.

Mr Havard: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point. The Defence Committee in reports in this Parliament and the previous Parliament has talked about the MOD devoting 2% of the money that it has to S and T as well as R and D so that such spending is structured into budgets.

Sir Peter Luff: I could not agree with the hon. Gentleman more strongly. That is the precise figure that I have in mind for the level of resources from the defence budget that should be spent on S and T. It was 2.6% under the previous Government, but it declined under them to 1.2%. The White Paper on technology put a floor under it of 1.2%. It is far too low a floor, and what is more, as defence budgets have shrunk, the sum being spent has gone down too. It is only a third higher than what the Department for International Development now spends on research. Two per cent. is the bare minimum, of rising budgets as well. The trouble is that the Department sees S and T as the cash cow of the spending round. It is a resource that is easily cut because contracts are short term, but the consequences for our security are devastating.

If cuts to revenue spending happen, the science and technology budget will go straight back into the firing line of the Treasury and the bean counters of the MOD. We must not let that happen. Maintaining operational advantage is a race against time to take innovation from the lab and into the battle-space.

Our partners envy our ability to do more with less. Key to this is understanding the operational advantage of technology and moving it quickly into the hands of the military. As Bernard Gray, Chief of Defence Matériel, put it recently,

“The key question is, of all the desirable things in the world, which are the ones you can afford?”

But the country can afford more, as it should choose to do. In the end, this is not about votes, it is about leadership. We must all in this place do everything we can to sustain the national understanding that we maintain peace through strength, not weakness. That is why it is imperative that the next SDSR is well argued, persuasive and properly funded and why all the political leaders of our nation must show their deep personal commitment to this outcome.

After every major conflict we have cut defence and regretted it. The Crimean war, the first world war, the second world war, the cold war—cut and regret, cut and regret, cut and regret, cut and regret. As Hegel said,

“We learn from history that we do not learn from history.”

In 2015 we celebrate the 800th anniversary of the foundation of our freedoms, Magna Carta, and the 750th anniversary of the beginning of our representative democracy and Simon de Montfort. It would be depressingly ironic if in 2015 of all years a timid Parliament, an intellectually feeble SDSR and another round of austerity combined further to weaken our defences and threaten our freedoms at such a dangerous moment in world history.

1.28 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): It is a happy coincidence that this debate follows the statement on the Ebola crisis and what will be a magnificent page in the history of the armed forces and government. I believe that we have performed splendidly there, with great courage and with great professionalism, and it is what we do best. We also have a great deal to be proud of in the military intervention in the same country—Sierra Leone—and in other countries and in Bosnia. We are very good at humanitarian work, and that is what our role should be.

I would be happy to see 2% being spent if we reshaped our Army to concentrate on what will be the real problems of the world, not on repeating all the divisions of past centuries and the tribal wars between nations, and accepted what the real challenges are for the future. They are mostly environmental. They are the shortage of clean water—a challenge for us all—and all the other environmental tasks that will probably overwhelm us because the future is one in which we should see ourselves not as groups who are plotting against one another and carrying on traditional wars, but as one human family whose future is in deadly peril from various sources.

We are carrying out this debate again with a sense of delusion. We are talking as we could have done 100 years ago or 50 years ago. The 2% Newport pledge was agreed in my constituency, not that the Government were very keen to see me at the summit. I think that the 30 foot wall around it was intended more to keep me out than anyone else. They would not have welcomed my views there, but it had an element of pantomime and farce. How many of the 28 countries will spend up to 2%? Well, I will tell the House: none. How many of the 28 countries will get nuclear weapons. Twenty-five of them are without nuclear weapons at the moment. There will still be 25 in the future. It is all a bit of window dressing and it is fairly meaningless.

What we should be doing, before we decide on continuing to repeat the errors of the past and celebrating them, is looking at the mistakes that we have made in the House. It was not that long ago when we were told that we had to go to war to eliminate non-existent weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. We were also told that we had to intervene in Helmand to protect our streets in Britain from a non-existent Taliban terrorist threat. About 18 months ago, we were told to prepare against Iran, which was threatening us with its non-existent long-range missiles, carrying its non-existent nuclear weapons.

Tomorrow, there will be a commemoration of those who died in the Afghan war. I think that we all had a letter from the Secretary of State for Defence that says:

[Paul Flynn]

“We can be very proud of what we have achieved, which has eliminated the terrorist threat to the UK and from Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan”.

It has also done something else: it has multiplied the terrorist threat. In March 2003, I wrote to Tony Blair and said that, if we carried on with what we were planning to do in Iraq, we would deepen the divide between the Muslim eastern world and the Christian western world. That is precisely what we did. I suggested in that letter that it would deepen the antagonism not only in the far corners of the world, but in the mosques on the corners of our local streets. Now, it has happened. It is unbelievable that young children born and brought up here in Britain think it right to go out and join the barbarous operations of ISIS. Who is responsible for that? There is an element in which the hubris of past Prime Ministers is responsible.

It was not that long ago—29 August 2013—when we were being asked in the Chamber to go to war against Assad, the deadly enemy of ISIL. Now, we are in that area attacking ISIL, which is the deadly enemy of Assad. If we are to take decisions here, we cannot rely on the hubris of leaders or others who are here talking about these great plans. Someone thinks that we should spend money to avoid him embarrassment at an international meeting that he is going to.

We should look at what happened in Afghanistan. We could not look at the truth then. What are we saying now? A number of statements have been made since we pulled out militarily from Afghanistan. Brigadier Ed Butler said that the UK was under-prepared and under-resourced. General Sir Paul Wall said that the calculus was wrong. Major General Andrew Mackay said that the war was a series of shifting plans, unobtainable objectives, propaganda and spin. The former ambassador, Sir Sherard Cowper-Coles said that the UK operation was a massive act of collective self-deception by military and politicians unable to admit how badly it was going. General Lord Dannatt said that the UK knew it was heading for two considerable-size operations and really only had organisation and manpower for one.

I am sure that all those gentlemen will be there tomorrow at the ceremony with a tear in their eye, sincerely regretting the deaths of 453 of our brave soldiers. Where were they when they could have done something about it? Why were their mouths bandaged when those decisions were taken and we were sending those young men to die in vain. They were silent: cowardice by those military men against the reality. They knew that Afghanistan was a hopeless war. They knew that we were not protecting our streets from Taliban terrorism. Yet they remained silent, and that is something that should be on our consciences and teach us that we should never do it again, as we blindly go forward with the delusions that we have here.

A great problem that we have had is this myth, coming back from the 19th century, that we must punch above our weight. We have heard about our role in the world. Punching above our weight has meant in the past 20 years that we spend beyond our interests and we die beyond our responsibilities. We are in the ignominious position now where we pride ourselves on having an independent nuclear weapon, worth spending £100 billion on, but we do not have an independent foreign policy.

No one protests that we have an American general telling us what to do with our budget. When he tells us to spend more on defence, he is also telling us to spend less on the health service and education. What has it got to do with him? America, of course, is our great partner and an admirable nation in many ways. It has lost more of its sons and daughters in wars to bring democracy and freedom to other countries than any other nation in the world, but we must not be tied to the United States. What it did in the Afghan war—the cause of that link there—and our refusal to part from American policy cost us at least 200 of those 453 lives.

Countries such as Canada and Holland pulled out of Afghanistan after making very honourable sacrifices in blood and treasure in the war, but they could see the hopelessness of it. Why did not we? Are we going to do it again? Will we continue to aim for this mythical 2% target? We can have a great role in the world. We have great riches in skills, money and imagination and in our technical equipment, and I believe that we need to redraw the whole purposes of our defence forces.

No one can claim that we were in Iraq or Helmand to defend Britain. It was part of supporting the United States and trying to build a new world. It has gone terribly wrong, and it was counter-productive because we have created and spread these terrible wars. Al-Qaeda is virtually gone. It had gone from Afghanistan by 2002, and we went into Helmand in 2006. What has happened is that we have got the daughter organisations of al-Qaeda. They are more blood-thirsty and more vicious. Can we not understand that the battle for world peace is a battle for hearts and minds and that we can never win hearts and minds with bombs and bullets?

1.38 pm

Sir Richard Ottaway (Croydon South) (Con): I enjoyed listening to the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). It is 32 years since I first came to the House and made my maiden speech on defence and this is probably the last speech that I will make in the Chamber, but during those 32 years, I have never agreed with a word that he has ever said. None the less, I enjoy listening to him.

Dr Julian Lewis: I cannot resist pointing out that the second name on the motion today, which is

“That this House believes that defence spending should be set to a minimum of two per cent of GDP in accordance with the UK’s NATO commitment,”

is indeed that of the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn).

Sir Richard Ottaway: Perhaps I can start again.

What is behind this debate, I think, is a fear of cuts. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who is a valued member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, on bringing this debate. I agree with much of what he said during his opening remarks, except for the points that he made about intervention. It is a debate that we have had in the Foreign Affairs Committee and our latest report on the finances of the Foreign Office makes the point that the Foreign Office, like the defence budget, is at a crossroads. We have such a thinly spread diplomatic

service around the world that either it needs to have more resources or it has to narrow its bandwidth and match its aspirations to the budget available.

Linking a percentage of GDP to any policy is, in my view, bad politics. It is not the way to run Government, and that applies equally to the aid budget and the defence budget. Economies go up, economies come down. Of course, we are not going to have the defence and aid budgets going up and down like a yoyo. These things have to be evened out over an economic cycle. As many colleagues have said, the defence budget has to match our requirements. We must look at it in the context of the threat. What is the threat to the United Kingdom?

I do not think anyone is arguing at present that there is any serious existential threat to the United Kingdom. If there were, the figure on the motion today would be 20%, not 2%. We can safely say that NATO and the EU have given us the longest period of peace for centuries. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said very effectively on the “Today” programme today, we cannot ignore the impact and the deterrent effect of nuclear weapons.

Sir Peter Luff: May I clarify one important point of detail? Early-day motion 757 as originally printed referred to a 20% target. Desirable as that would be, it was a mistake. I think 2% will do for the time being.

Sir Richard Ottaway: I used the figure of 20% for effect, rather than for any serious argument.

On the defence budget in the context of NATO, the same point applies. Russia is now spending heavily. I believe that nearly a third of its federal budget is being spent on defence, though no one is arguing that we are going to see Russian tanks rolling across the central European plain in the foreseeable future. With hindsight, Russia’s intentions have been flagged up for longer than we realise. We should have realised when the intervention in Georgia started. Then Russia’s focus moved to Syria and later to the Crimea. Russia’s human rights record is appalling. It is a country under authoritarian and unpredictable rule at the top and in the Kremlin.

Mr Havard: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Richard Ottaway: I give way, for the last time.

Mr Havard: The Defence Committee produced a report in 2009 after we visited Russia because of the Georgian conflict and we made recommendations then. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree, on the basis of reports from his own Committee and others, that as a Parliament we do not properly debate the recommendations that we advise it to discuss?

Sir Richard Ottaway: I hang on every word of the reports of the Defence Committee. They are authoritative, powerful and impressive. The Chairman of the Defence Committee was once a valued member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and might follow the Foreign Affairs Committee in instigating debates on our own reports, through the Backbench Business Committee.

The focus now may be on the Baltic states. We are right to deploy troops and aircraft there with the Spearhead brigade, and we should make it clear that if there is an

intrusion which poses a threat, we shall not hesitate to use that force. But it is ultimately a political decision and one that will be very difficult to make when it comes because the intrusion will involve the use of militias, rather than an overt use of force.

But we are not going to defend Europe on our own. As has been said by many people, the rest of Europe needs to live up to expectations on its level of expenditure. It is ironic that NATO, which was formed in the aftermath of the second world war and of German re-armament, is now calling for Germany to re-arm. I wonder what will be the public reaction if Germany, the largest economy in Europe, said that it was going to double its defence budget. One thing is certain: that would mark the end of the post-war era.

Russia is spending heavily on equipment and so are we. The two new aircraft carriers soon to be launched are the most powerful weapons that this country has ever produced. As someone who served for several years on aircraft carriers in the 1960s, I am well aware of the projection of power that those bits of equipment bring. Where the mistake has been made is in the lack of support equipment to go with it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) said, the issue is not just the fruit and veg being transported behind the carrier, but the anti-submarine underneath it, the air defence aircraft above it and the air defence screen around it. That is the distortion that we will get. Most of the Royal Navy will be required to defend just that one ship, distorting the whole projection of Royal Navy power. If I had been in the Admiralty at the time, I would have preferred to have a dozen Type 45 frigates, which are equally formidable bits of equipment, than the two aircraft carriers.

We have to accept—again, this point was made in an excellent speech from the Chairman of the Defence Committee—that the nature of warfare is changing. As I said, we are not going to see tanks coming across the central European plain. The real battles of the future lie in cyber-warfare—attacks on both economic and military targets. It is the anoraks inside cyber-warehouses in eastern Russia or in Asia who are the current enemy. It is absolutely legitimate for us to increase our levels of expenditure on the security agencies, in particular on GCHQ, to address that. We can argue about whether that should become part of the budget, but the need to do it is beyond doubt.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Although I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend about the changing nature of warfare, does he agree that it is essential that this country retains its ability to conduct conventional full-manoeuvre warfare?

Sir Richard Ottaway: There is no doubt about that, but the point that I and others make is that the threat is not static and we have to keep adapting.

The second great threat that we face arises from the instability in north Africa. We have seen the flow of boat people coming across the Mediterranean. The drip has grown to a trickle, the trickle is becoming a stream, and 100,000 people are projected to reach Lampedusa. President Sisi of Egypt said the other day that that figure would not be hundreds or thousands; if we do not sort out north Africa, it will be millions. That is the threat that we now face.

[Sir Richard Ottaway]

I distance myself from critics of the aid budget. It is a perfectly legitimate use of public expenditure to protect this country by spending that budget in innovative ways to address the economic instability in north Africa. Hundreds of millions of young men and women are being born into an economic wasteland. They are turning to crime or emigrating and trying to get into Europe. That is the threat that we face and it must be addressed. So it is not just the defence budget that matters, but the agencies' budget and the aid budget, all of which have to be looked at in an holistic manner.

As I said in my opening remarks, this is probably the last time that I shall address the House so, if I may, I shall make one or two other comments. It has been a huge privilege to have served in this House. I would like to convey my thanks to all the people who have made it possible, from the policemen on the gate to the ladies in the cafeteria to the Clerks, the Librarians, the staff and the officials whom we work with. It has been a huge privilege to work with them.

There are three great laws in politics. The first is that you should never ask a question unless you know the answer. I believe we are asking serious questions here today and I hope we are going to get the answers. We have some idea what the answers might be, but it is a law to keep very much in mind. The second great law is that old age and treachery will overcome youth and skill any day. Ask anyone who has served in the Whips Office, where I had two happy years, but just look at the mindset in the Kremlin and the old age and treachery there now. We ignore it at our peril. The third great maxim is that in politics perseverance pays. The British people will persevere in their demand of this House to protect the nation if they consider it appropriate and the circumstances call for it, and the House will persist in asking these questions, and it will be right to do so.

1.49 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to have this debate, and the right hon. and hon. Members who have made a contribution and those who will follow. We should not begin any defence debate without acknowledging the work of our armed forces and those who have lost their lives defending our nation. I commend the fantastic integrity of our armed forces and their continued excellence, standards and recognition globally.

To speak directly, my concern is not wholly focused on meeting the aspirational NATO figure of 2% of GDP on defence spending, not because this is not an extremely concerning issue, but because we do not want to risk figures and budgetary considerations make us lose sight of what we seek specifically to achieve in practice—armed forces who are equipped to deal with any and all circumstances that might reasonably occur. My concern stems from needing assurance that we will be prepared for a number of situations. The Government have a global strategy, but we must have armed forces who can respond to our strategy as a nation. Sadly, we live in a world of ever-growing danger and risk, in the form of both old and new challenges.

My first concern would be not having adequate manpower or provision to step in and offer adequate aid to buttress against further pressures in the areas in

which we are involved. This concern is in the wider context of heightened security tensions across Europe, the middle east and the Atlantic. There are threats of both an internal and existential nature, threats that we need to be prepared to meet, and threats that stretch the capacity of our defence capabilities, first to maintain the standard of assistance in areas that we are involved in, and, secondly, to meet the prospect of further demands.

At this stage the Secretary of State for Defence may be saying that we do not plan to cut the numbers of the Army, but we should remember that manpower has already been reduced, and the reality is that the number of 30,000 reserves that has been bandied about has yet to be reached. Perhaps when the Minister replies he will inform us exactly how many reserves have been recruited to make up the number of 30,000 that was cited.

Our combat mission in Afghanistan has now ended, and about 470 military personnel remain deployed there in support of the national unity Government of Afghanistan to ensure a positive future for all the peoples of Afghanistan, and we are glad to see that. Of course, I praise the UK for helping to fund the Afghan national defence and security forces, in addition to providing important resources such as mentoring and training support. This continued commitment to Afghanistan is commendable, and I hope that it will continue, but the situation requires upkeep. While we are maintaining a commitment, there is a need to recognise that in any defence considerations, we have to take into account the long-term trajectory in places where we already have an involvement, including Afghanistan.

As reports from the European Leadership Network emphasise, the crisis in Ukraine has not only caused death and destruction in the country's east, but poses the most significant existing threat to European security of recent times. The possibility of further Russian antagonistic behaviour and lack of responsiveness suggests that now more than ever we should be thinking carefully about our defence capabilities, how we are spending the money and what areas are vulnerable to being overstretched. The figure that needs to be spent must be at least 2%, but if not achieving this target means that we will be left vulnerable, open to being under-resourced or ill-prepared, the figure needs to be upped, not reduced. We have to be adaptable to a volatile international scene. An arbitrary spending freeze that curtails our ability to respond to new, fast-developing demands would be excessively risky.

Reinforcement of that point comes from military officials and analysts who warn us to increase defence expenditure, though to the majority of spectators on the international stage, that would not be seen as warranted, rational or advisable. Of course there is pressure from our US counterparts, who say that we will be undermining NATO commitments if we do not strive toward our 2% GDP spend on defence. If we do not, who else in Europe will follow suit in aiming to hit the target?

The Ukrainian situation has been much debated in the Chamber, but we cannot be complacent and not take adequate account of the potential for further Russian aggravations—aggravations that seek to send us and our European counterparts signals of Russia's ever-growing muscle. I do not want to be sensationalist, but we are all very aware that between January and October 2014 there was clear evidence of Russia becoming increasingly antagonistic, in the form of 40 highly sensitive close military encounters. That matched cold war levels. That must be of concern to the House. I do not mean to say

that Russia is pushing for a war, but it is certainly playing a game of brinkmanship, and considerable defence cuts send a signal of weakening resolve, and possibly of complacency and disbelief towards a state that poses a very possible threat.

I cannot forget that we had to seek assistance from NATO to search for Russian submarines off the Scottish coast in light of our scrapping of sea patrol planes. Nor can we forget that we had a 10-year purchasing plan for a number of procurements, and intended to plug the capability gaps that were discovered and recognised as needing to be addressed. All of these matters are critically important to the debate. Even more alarming is the gravity of the possibility that our Army could be reduced to its smallest size in some 250 years. We need assurance from the Minister on what will happen in the future.

We as a Chamber must stay mindful of the implications of what we are doing, and also recognise that this is picking at the minds of the public, especially in light of ongoing activity from ISIS, with more of our vulnerable young people being drawn into its toxic activities. I do not question the resolve that led us to ring-fence health and education, as they were extremely important, but I see defence as needing a similar degree of protection as a matter of national safety. I understand that it may be difficult for our constituents to understand what that means, but we must deliver and make sure that defence spending is also ring-fenced and looked after.

In the 2010 spending review, the Government could and did say that they were building up our political and security dialogue with Russia; that was part of the considerations for that budget. But in 2015, what can we say of this political and security dialogue? What does this say about how rapidly the global context and our relationship with countries, including Russia, can change? Can we confidently ever predict any more, if we ever could, the threats in the next five years? Whether or not we hit the 2% target on the head, we should be ever mindful of our capability gaps, and of whether a budget can or should prioritise areas where we can feasibly make cuts. At the same time, we must be careful where that is done.

The gradual run-down of our armed forces is a matter of grave concern. A great many of my constituents have served in the armed forces and will continue to do so, so this issue is important. On hearing about this debate, one of my constituents asked why, at this time and at this political juncture, we would consider weakening our forces, and whether there was another agenda at work. He suggested that there would be a European army—that a British Army would not be able to stand alone and would need co-operation, or to stand alongside others. My first response was that there was no chance of that; that it could not happen. But it would be wrong to say that that has not weighed heavily on my mind during the last few days. Whether the agenda is to be part of an EU army with co-operation, or to have stand-alone British forces who can react and respond to our Government's foreign policy, I nail my colours to mast and ask: why would we dilute the best armed forces in the world? The answer is: we should not and we cannot. Is it not enough that much of our trading is ruled by the EU, without our defence and sovereignty being called into question? Minister, we must not be put in a situation whereby we cannot meet our obligations. Allow our armed forces to do what they do best, and let our British Army continue to be simply the best.

1.58 pm

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I first remark upon the absence of my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash)? He had wished to be here to support the motion but is attending the funeral of Sergeant Doug Lakey, who was awarded the military medal and was with my hon. Friend's father, Captain Paul Cash, on the day he was killed in Normandy in July 1944.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and his colleagues on pinning their support for any future coalition Government to the 2% commitment, which is a significant benchmark. I hope that we will not be relying on his support after the general election, but I think that it sends a strong signal, both to people in my party and to others, so I commend him for that.

This debate is about the importance of defence. Every Member who has spoken in the debate seems to understand the importance of defence, but I hope that the House will forgive me if I go right back to basics and explain why defence is important. It is about what defence is expected to achieve: security. Security can be hard to define. It is best understood as a state of mind: how safe and secure people feel in carrying on with their daily life without undue anxiety about what might happen to them, to those on whom they depend, and to those who depend on them. It is also about providing security of expectation. We expect access to reliable supplies of clean water, food, energy and communications, which we all take for granted, and in the longer term we expect access to health, economic security, jobs, incomes and pensions, and education in order to strive for a secure future for the next generation.

It is true that military capability is just part of what we need in order to achieve true security. We want to shape the world for our own benefit and to advance democracy, human rights and free trade for the benefit of all humanity. We and our allies must therefore separately and together conduct campaigns to advance those ends. For the most part we want to use soft power—diplomacy, trade, aid and cultural links—to succeed in those campaigns. In a peaceful world, the exercise of soft power is the only acceptable way to conduct international relations.

During periods when it is less obvious how expensive military capability can be of much value, as was the case in the period immediately after the end of the cold war, it is tempting to believe that national or European defence is not about being prepared to repel invaders or protect from potential aggressors. The use of soft power can seem to be the only way to combat insurgencies driven by religious tensions or extremist ideologies, but there is another danger in that regard. Some offer soft power as an alternative to hard power, and that is particularly attractive due to the war-weary sentiment that pervades our politics today. Some even warn that using or threatening to use hard power—we heard this from my friend and Public Administration Committee colleague, the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn)—undermines and discredits our commitment to the objectives that we Europeans wish to achieve in the world. That is a dangerous fallacy.

The lessons of history are very clear. We cannot enjoy a soft-power world unless we also have recourse to hard power when necessary. Central and eastern Europe were able to emerge from under Soviet communism and

[Mr Bernard Jenkin]

join the western family of democratic nations only because the west's determined hard-power stance succeeded in facing down Russia during the cold war. Today, democratic nations must be ready and willing to deploy hard power to maintain global peace and security. The successful resolution of the 1990s Balkans crisis, which was not a humanitarian operation, proved that when NATO threatened a ground invasion in order to resolve the conflict.

Therefore, as we Europeans—I say “Europeans” because this spending problem is a European problem—conduct our global campaigns to promote peace, security and prosperity around the world, and we seek to do so by using our influence through trade, aid and diplomacy, we need to remember that global security and the rule of international law depend on our ability to defend them—in the last resort, by force, if necessary. The commitment to foreign aid, which eschews the national interest, is no more important an indication of the national will than our commitment to spend the NATO minimum of 2% of GDP on defence.

This concept of defence rests on the concept of deterrence, which has already been mentioned. It is a grave mistake to see defence merely as a collection of tools to be kept in a box that is taken out of the cupboard under the stairs only when something goes wrong, and is put away again when the job is done. Some like to see defence as a kind of insurance against worst-case scenarios. Britain's nuclear deterrent is often described in that way, but the analogy is deeply misleading and dangerous, because it encourages a false belief that we can balance what we have to spend on defence against what we perceive to be the risks or threats. Not even the nuclear deterrent can buy national or European security on its own.

Mr John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is it not also the case that if someone belongs to a club, they have to pay the subscription? We are never allowed to cut the subscription we pay to the European Union, from which some of us do not think we get value, and now people are suggesting that we can cut our subscription to NATO, which is vital to our security.

Mr Jenkin: Yes, and it should not be forgotten that our subscription to the EU is also written into legislation, and that we are not allowed to change that. I am thinking of asking the Library to speculate on when our contribution to the European Union will overtake what we spend on defence.

The question is what role defence plays in shaping the kind of world we want. We need to possess and be able to deploy the capacity to discourage, or even to retaliate against, those who would disrupt that. Opponents of the maintenance of our minimum nuclear deterrent systems in the UK and France often assert that they are a waste of money “because they are never used”. Actually, our nuclear deterrent is used every hour of every day of every year. All that we require potential adversaries to know is that we can and might use it, if circumstances arose that would make that expedient. That is how we influence the global strategic environment.

The same applies by degrees to all military capabilities that nations, or groups of nations, possess that can inflict harm or disadvantage on adversaries who threaten

our interests or global security. The mere possession of military capability is not a threat to international security. The lack of it on our part, in the face of those who do have it and have the intention of using it, is the threat we confront today. Money spent on our capability is not wasted if we never use it. It is an indication of our will—our determination to succeed in our aims of promoting international security and the rule of international law. We need military capability in order to be peacekeepers. What we possess changes how potential adversaries perceive us because of what we can or might do in response.

Defence is not just about having the armed forces to match the particular military threats that we can see or imagine. Defence policy is about how we decide what military capability we need to possess in order to help shape the world to be more as we want it to be, rather than subject to the will of those who seek to take unfair advantage, or to disrupt that. These days, defence policy extends beyond the traditional domains of land, sea and air, as was so ably described by my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart). In the globalised and technological world of today, we need to think of defence in wider domains such as economics, trade, aid, cyberspace, technology, industry, media, communications and even politics, and throughout the whole sphere of global society.

For each nation to be effective in international statecraft, we need to act collectively where we can, which is why we Europeans must be prepared to commit national resources to defence, to harness our potential together, and to join with other global allies, or we will find that we have failed to provide for our own security.

That brings me to the absolute primacy of NATO. The idea of a happy new world order, which some still seem to believe we can enjoy, is disappearing before our eyes. That is evident from the failure on a spectacular scale in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in the emergence of a more Soviet-style leadership in Russia. Putin pursued a brutally repressive war in Chechnya and then tested his revived military capability in the invasion of Georgia. The subsequent diplomatic stand-off was resolved only when President Sarkozy of France made a unilateral visit to Moscow and effectively conceded permanent Russian annexation of the Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Perhaps that led to his later boldness. We have seen the Arab uprising lead to chaos in the middle east, not the spreading of democracy that we had hoped for.

It is clear that we live in a world where soft power must still be sustained by hard power. We will need to continue to live up to the 2% commitment that all NATO members agreed to at the summit in Wales. If we will not do that, which countries will we have to rely on for our security and for the future of world peace, stability, freedom and democracy around the world?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Dawn Primarolo): Order. May I remind hon. Members that we need to conclude the debate by 3.30 pm to allow for the Front-Bench contributions? That means that we have about an hour, with six speakers in the Chamber at the moment. If each Member aims for about eight minutes, we will

comfortably get there; otherwise the last few speakers will have their time severely squeezed. That would not be particularly fair, so I ask for co-operation.

2.10 pm

Sir Nick Harvey (North Devon) (LD): I start by apologising because, as I explained to Mr Speaker, a long-standing engagement elsewhere, and an almost as long-standing train reservation, mean that I will have to depart almost as soon as I have spoken, but I am grateful for the opportunity briefly to do so. This has been an excellent debate marked by contributions from colleagues who are leaving the House and will be deeply missed, not least my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Sir Peter Luff), who was a first-class colleague in the Ministry of Defence during some very tough times.

Before the last election, all three parties committed to a strategic defence and security review following the election. I had fondly imagined that that process would be allowed to take some 18 months or so, as had the 1998 review, and that it would be a deep and profound study of what we needed. What we actually found coming down the tracks at us was a brutal comprehensive spending review, and we had to make a very quick decision as to whether we were going to allow ourselves the luxury of the 18-month review or would do a quick and dirty review and try to equip ourselves with the arguments that might help us to increase the size of our cash envelope, to which my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Fife referred, recognising that more detailed work would have to take place afterwards. In the event, the cut of some 7.5% that was applied to the budget—or a little over 16% to the programme, which was at that time overheated—led us to make some very unpalatable decisions that none of us came into politics wishing to make. Decisions such as axing the Harrier were absolutely wretched and painful things that nobody wanted to make.

The painful decisions that were made in 2010 by Ministers and by defence chiefs were, as others have said, made against the background that the sunny uplands would follow and that for the period after 2015 the Ministry of Defence could at least look forward to a flat real budget supplemented, as came later, by a 1% real-terms increase in the equipment budget. If this year's comprehensive spending review visits further cuts on the defence budget, bearing in mind that there have been a couple of mini-CSRs in the past couple of years that have already done some damage, it simply will not be affordable for us to come up with anything like Future Force 2020, which was articulated in 2010, let alone the wider and more ambitious prospectus that was outlined so lucidly by the Chairman of the Defence Committee. I would not demur from that in any significant way, although that would certainly have taken the budget way beyond the realms of 2% of GDP and rather, as the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) said, nearer to 3% or even 4%.

Of course, it is right that we have another review now. I am a firm supporter of having a review at least every five years, because the world can change an awful lot in five years, as it has in the past five years. We would do

well to try to break ourselves out of the unfortunate cycle where we propel ourselves into one of these reviews at the outset of a Parliament, when there is a comprehensive spending review looming over the whole thing. It would be better if it could be done at a later point in the Parliament so that we get out of this unfortunate cycle.

The significant changes in our security assessment since 2010 are the diminishing relationship with an increasingly aggressive Russia, the rise of Islamic State, and the ever-growing threat of global terrorism and cyber-attack. When one looks at some of the specific issues that will be on the table, with which Defence Ministers, whoever they are this summer, will have to grapple, it is clear that the painful decisions we thought we were taking in 2010 may be but nothing compared with some of the agonies that will be on the table from now on.

I think there is a general consensus that the nation will not find acceptable the 2010 conclusion that we would spend £7 billion on building two aircraft carriers, and then tie up the second one, and that we must in some way deploy the second. That will have a manpower implication which was not taken into account when cuts in naval headcount were made in 2010. We also have a general consensus that we must make good the pledge to go back into the realms of maritime patrol. We have to do that if we are going to embark a carrier fleet in Plymouth. That will have a resources implication and potentially even a manpower implication.

We do not know how many joint strike fighter aircraft we will be able to afford. We seem to have forgotten all about DPOC—deep persistent offensive capability—and the role that air-based joint strike fighters were supposed to have fulfilled. As the saga—I think it would be fair to call it that—of the F-35 rolls on and on, we still do not know what the unit cost of these aircraft will be or how many we will be able to afford. At the time when BAE got its work share, our commitment was meant to be 130. So far, as I understand it, we have bought four, and we are talking about sailing carriers with 12 on board. I have absolutely no idea where the number is going to end up. This is not just a shopping list; there are also manpower implications for how many of these things we have.

We are supposed to be having 13 frigates in order to get us back to the princely goal of a destroyer frigate fleet of 19, but one hears worrying rumours that some of the past mistakes are being repeated and that this is getting almost as big and expensive as the Type 45. I wonder how many we are really going to end up with. Again, that has manpower implications. On amphibious shipping—the ability to enter a theatre of war from the sea—HMS Ocean is due out of service in 2018. Is she going to be replaced? Albion remains tied up. What are we going to do about this? We will lose a serious capability if we do not resource that.

We need more ISTAR—intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance—assets. The lack of that capability inhibited what we were able to do in Afghanistan and was conspicuously a problem in Libya. We have not resolved the saga of Army vehicles. The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard) was extremely pertinent in his observations on that. We have all sorts of balls in the air relating to the future of remotely piloted aircraft—a matter of great importance to our future capability. Again, there

[*Sir Nick Harvey*]

are cost pressures there that are not even factored in. Chinook and Apache both need upgrading. I could go on; this is not an exhaustive list.

The existing budget as predicted cannot pay for all that, let alone withstand any cuts that might come this autumn. Let us remind ourselves of the gap. The RUSI paper, with which I entirely agree, and whose figures accord with what I recall from the last time I saw any, suggests that we will be at 1.95% spending next year—one might hide one's blushes there with a bit of creative accounting—but that by year 2 there will be a gap of £3 billion and by year 4 a gap of £6 billion. That is if no cuts at all are made this summer; if any are made, the situation will get worse and worse.

We seem to have got to a situation where all three political parties recognise that Britain has global interests and have a genuine will that we ought to be part of international coalitions to protect those interests. All three parties agree, in principle, with the commitment that the Prime Minister gave, in principle, at Newport, that we ought to be spending at least 2% of our GDP on defence. Yet given those figures, with an extra £6 billion a year needed to do that by year 4 of this Parliament, it is small wonder that neither the Chancellor, the shadow Chancellor, nor—I am not trying to score a political point here—the Chief Secretary to the Treasury have exactly been on the front foot so far in explaining where £6 billion a year could possibly come from.

I would say to everyone who has taken part in this debate, because we are, by definition, defence enthusiasts, that whether or not this issue takes light during the election campaign, we will have to come back—those of us who manage to come back—to debate these things again and again through the rest of this year as we conduct an SDSR and a CSR and keep the pressure on our Treasury colleagues, of every colour, to honour the commitments given at Newport and the needs so powerfully outlined by the Chairman of the Defence Committee in describing where the shortfalls will occur.

2.19 pm

Simon Reeve (Dewsbury) (Con): Last August, I was reminded of something that happened to me more than 25 years earlier. Back then, as a young infantry officer on a night-time exercise and navigating by the stars, I had to get my men through some woods. We eventually got to the edge of the trees and saw open ground ahead, but there was only a narrow point at which to exit the woods and the exit would be slow, so the gun group went first and then the rifle group, and it all seemed to go very well. I used what moonlight there was to look around and make sure that not only had everybody got out of the woods, but that they were now in position, which they were. The only thing spoiling the view was that, 250 yards to the right, a particularly distinctive tree marked where we had gone into the woods in the first place. We had not gone through the woods at all: we had got lost in the middle of them, and we were now in a very nice position, but facing completely the wrong way.

The plight of the 10 Russian paratroopers reminded me of that incident. Bless them, they too had become geographically embarrassed: they had ended up in Ukraine

and been captured by the Ukrainian military. They were not of course any sort of force supporting the rebels; they had simply got lost in the woods. What was more interesting was the detail of where they had come from. They were from the 331st Regiment of the 98th Airborne Division. To put having at least 98 divisions into context, the Football League has more divisions than the British Army. Even making allowances, to have 331 regiments of a 98th Division means there are a lot of them; there are not a lot of us. That is illustrated by something else that happened last August. As Ukrainian troops faced Russian paratroopers, we amalgamated two of our tank regiments into one that was smaller than a single regiment would have been even a few years ago.

As summer turned to autumn, we hosted a bit of a do in Newport in Wales. We had previously written to all the potential guests to remind them of a few house rules, one of which was about spending 2% of GDP on defence. Along with whatever going-home gifts there received, they were all reminded of that on departure. However, we are suddenly shy of that same 2% commitment in our attitude and, potentially, in our contribution.

There are only two reasons why people do not spend money: the first is that they cannot afford to do so, and the second is that they can afford it but choose not to do so. We do not seem shy of making spending commitments. We have just committed to spending 0.7% of GDP on overseas aid. There is not necessarily anything wrong with that, but it would be moon-howlingly mad to be committed to foreign aid at the expense of the defence of the realm. No one ever suggested that swords should be beaten into ploughshares before the danger is well and truly passed, and passed for good.

We can afford the 2%, but we are not doing it, which must mean that someone has decided that we will not. How can that be? The idea of allocating a percentage of GDP to defence, rather than a particular annual amount, is clearly designed to ensure that the necessary resources will be made available over a period of time: 2% of a lower GDP in year x is offset by 2% of a higher GDP in subsequent years.

Some people use the phrase “fixing the roof while the sun shines”. That is a particularly commendable approach, so why on earth would anyone contemplate abandoning it for defence spending? Why would they even dream about abandoning it at a time when Russian bombers are being intercepted in the channel, over Cornwall and just off the south coast? Why would they dream of abandoning it when we have yet again learned to expect the unexpected—this time in Libya, against ISIS in Syria and Iraq and, most importantly, with article 5 commitments in the Baltic that the founders of NATO could never have contemplated? Why would we abandon it at a time when if we renamed our frigates and destroyers after premiership football teams, one of the clubs would miss out because we do not have enough ships?

I am not alone in having given the Government the benefit of the doubt on defence matters in the early years of this Parliament. I did so because it was clearly intimated that the effects of the measures introduced would be offset by increases in defence expenditure as the economy healed and grew. Now I hear that to come good on that deal, a search is on for anything that can be fudged as defence spending to get us to the 2% level. That sort of kindergarten economics is bad not just for

defence, but for politics. It leads to damaging speculation, such as the whisper that while Regular Army numbers may be safe, the numbers of reservists is not guaranteed, at a time when we are in the middle of a campaign to offset cuts to the Army with a recruiting drive for non-regulars.

It has even been suggested that former senior military figures are misrepresenting the situation to sell books. Criticisms may be made of some former senior figures, not for misrepresenting the situation now, but for the fact that—for all their later book talk of gritted teeth and near resignation while in post—no one stepped forward and spoke out at the time; in fact, quite the opposite. I do not thank them for that, but the Government certainly should.

I have heard this phrase used at a party conference:

“It’s not the size of the dog in the fight, it’s the size of the fight in the dog”.

Courage and bravery are of course the hallmark of our armed forces, but the Estonian soldier waiting in his foxhole for Russian tanks may well believe that the size of the dog in the fight is also critical. We plan to underfeed our bulldog, while its potential adversaries are thrown red meat.

Outside those woods back in the summer of nineteen-eighty-whenever, I may have been 180° out, but no-one else noticed and, in the scheme of things, it did not matter. This does matter. In this context, it is those reinforcing the impression that we care only so much about defence who face the wrong way. In doing so, they face away from the first duty of any and every British Government, which is the duty to ensure the security of these islands, and that is a disappointing and dangerous state of affairs.

2.27 pm

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torrige and West Devon) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Simon Reeve), who has given us a salutary reminder of the importance of defence. He and I share a profession, and I have to say that this is the first defence debate that I have attended in my 10 years in the House. I say so not out of pride, but out of shame, as well as to emphasise the growing unease I have felt from reading and listening to such important debates—it has been a privilege to listen to the speeches of hon. Members from both sides of the House. I am now better informed, and perhaps even a little wiser and more enlightened, but none of them allayed my anxieties or convinced me not to make the effort to attend the debate this afternoon.

I must say that my only qualification—a tenuous one—for speaking in a defence debate is that my father was a career soldier and that I was brought up on Army bases and camps around the world in the 1960s. He was a gunner for 40 years, and left the Army only in the mid-1980s. The experience of growing up within the Army taught me not only its values—its ethics, its morality, its discipline and its code—but that it was essential to the very fabric of this country for us to maintain our armed forces in a state of readiness and properly resourced to be able to defend its people. Following my increasing concern over the past few years, I have to say that I am no longer convinced that we give our defence forces the priority that they require.

I should not have been in the Chamber this afternoon; with the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who has responsibility for defence equipment, support and technology, I should have been in Appledore visiting the last English shipbuilder, which is just completing its third Irish—I stress, Irish—naval patrol vessel, having already completed the bow sections of both of the carriers. I believe that our visit would have been widely welcomed by the 400 or 500-strong work force of that shipyard because they feel that the defence establishment should nurture the last remaining skill bases that exist for the production of naval vessels and ships. I am grateful to the Minister for having expressed his wish to visit, and I hope that he will visit after the election—and I hope that he will still be in his present job or some even more senior and illustrious position.

My purpose today is not to contribute to the weight of opinion, authority and expertise that I have been awestruck to listen to this afternoon, but by appearing here today as the representative of a sedentary and dusty trade, a long way removed from the military or the armed forces, to demonstrate to the Government, including Ministers from my party, that the issue of defence is not a specialised interest confined merely to a few dozen of our colleagues. It was suggested earlier that those present are “defence enthusiasts”, but concern about defence is spreading widely, not only through the Conservative party, but the country. It would be wrong of us to believe that it is a specialised interest of significance only to a narrow circle: it is becoming ever more widespread.

I attend this debate not to send a message to my hon. Friend the Minister, who I know grasps these points, but to those in charge of the Treasury that enough is enough and that 2% is a line in the sand. Beyond it we must not go. It represents a demonstration of will and the fulfilment of a commitment, and no amount of creative accounting, sneaking or ducking and diving will deflect the attention of the British people from the solemn responsibility of this Government and the next to defend our interests and the integrity of our borders. I say to my hon. Friend as a messenger to those who sit in Cabinet and have the decision-making power in the councils of the Government that if we were to compromise that 2%, the message it would send to the dictators, and the enemies of freedom and all the values and principles we hold dear, is that we are no longer willing to stand by our commitments and to pay the price of freedom.

I agree with those who have said that to do business in terms of proportions and percentages of GDP is not good politics, but we have made the 2% figure the line in the sand. We have said it to other countries and we cannot now compromise on our determination to fulfil our responsibility to the international community. If we allow ourselves to become weak, impliedly we expect others to take up—to the same measure and in the same proportion—the burden of defending us. That has never been Britain’s way and cannot be the way that this House regards as appropriate. I ask all my hon. Friends to hold the Government to the 2% commitment and not to let it go.

2.34 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): I, too, have been awestruck by what I have heard this afternoon, not least the speech we have just heard from my hon. and learned

[Richard Drax]

Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) and the excellent speeches by my hon. Friends the Members for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) and for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin). I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) who made a fantastic speech from the Opposition Benches.

Tribute has been paid to the armed forces this afternoon, but I do not think that we can pay high enough tribute to them. Year after year and throughout history, we in this place have sent our armed forces into harm's way. Ultimately, we decide how to finance and nurture them, and take care of them when they come home. It is a huge responsibility.

I wish to make the point to the Ministers that any comments I make—and I know others feel the same way—are not aimed personally at them. They are both honourable men. I know the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) well and I know that he feels very strongly about the state of our armed forces.

I find it strange that defence is a partisan subject, not just in the House but as reported by commentators and others, although there is an element of truth in that even in my own party. It is suggested that the right represent the armed forces and the left represent overseas aid. That should not be the case, and I do not believe it is. As the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston said so eloquently, it is the collective responsibility of the whole House to ensure the defence of our island and our dependants, and the meeting in full of all the commitments that we have—not least to NATO.

Allegedly, polls show that there are no votes in defence. I would like to put any politician who claims that in front of a battalion of the Coldstream Guards that has just returned from its second or third tour of Afghanistan. I do not think that that politician would return to the House in one piece. Millions have died to defend peace, democracy and freedom throughout history, many of whom were servicemen and women. Are we saying that all that sacrifice does not get any votes? Do we really mean that? I do not think we do, but what concerns me greatly is where politics has got to. I read a very good book recently about Winston Churchill and when he was shown the results of a poll, he threw the poll in the dustbin and did completely the opposite. Some would argue that on some occasions that is rashness, but some would call it leadership. It is on subjects that do not necessarily seem to attract the voter that parties, of all political persuasions, have to lead. If we do not lead, we will endanger our country.

Expenditure on defence has never been—and I suspect never will be—a popular political topic. It is, as someone said earlier, like an insurance policy. We groan as we pay the annual fee, but we do so because when the dread day comes that we shuffle off this mortal coil, our loved ones will benefit from the investment that we have made. By god, if we did not have such an insurance policy, we would rightly be attacked by members of our family, our wives or anybody else whom we have not provided with security. That is what we should bear in mind when we debate expenditure on defence.

How many times throughout our great island history have we spent less money on defence? I am an avid reader of military history—as an ex-soldier it is particularly pertinent to me—and politicians of all colours have made the same mistake that we are making today countless times. Why do we go on making the same mistake? We are told that tanks will not rumble across the plains of central Europe. I suspect they probably will not, but I would not like to bank on it. I suspect that the Poles did not bank on their country being invaded at one end by the Russians and at the other by the Germans, but it happened. It is happening again, as we know, in Ukraine. Without defence, there will be no security at all for the other subjects we have to meet and pay for.

I would like to touch, if I may, on a very delicate subject: overseas aid. How many of us in this Chamber set ourselves a target every year to give, say, £500 to charity? I bet no one does, but if, at the end of the financial year, we had spent only £300, would we then splurge £200 on any old charity? Of course we would not. We would keep that money for a better cause. That is where I think we are getting it wrong. We have to target better what few resources we have for overseas aid. We have proof that much of the money we spend does not get to where it is intended to go.

One or two hon. Members have suggested that somehow the military should be incorporated into overseas aid. There are arguments for and against, but on the whole when it works there is no one better than the British serviceman or servicewomen to deal with such predicaments. That again has proved what an honourable and fantastic task they all do. Overseas aid has been ring-fenced. Other areas have been ring-fenced. If we cannot defend our country, our people, our dependants, meet our commitments and stand together—we are never going to stand on our own; we cannot afford to—and for the Americans to publicly now say to the world that Great Britain is not meeting its commitments, that means the position is incredibly serious. I know friends who have contacts in America. Their contacts say that they really hate saying that publicly, but they do so because they are so concerned.

It is not just hon. Members in this House who are concerned. It is the former US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton; former US Defence Secretary, Robert Gates; former British Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth); former British Defence Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Sir Peter Luff); former NATO Secretary-General, Anders Rasmussen; current NATO Secretary-General, Jens Stoltenberg; President of the United State of America, Barak Obama; US army chief of staff, General Raymond Odierno; former defence attaché to Washington, Sir Anthony Dymock; former ambassador to the United State, Sir Christopher Meyer; former UK Chief of the General Staff, Sir Peter Wall; US ambassador to the United Nations, Samantha Power; former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord West; and my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), the Chairman of the Defence Committee. That is by no means the whole list. It is not just us who are saying that we must meet at least—at least—the 2% commitment; it is everybody else who is looking to this island for leadership to protect all the things that we hold dear.

2.43 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Twenty five years ago, we spent more than 4% of our gross national product on defence. There were some 306,000 regular personnel and 340,000 reservists. The Army had 153,000 regular soldiers who manned three armoured and one infantry division. We had 1,330 main battle tanks. The Royal Navy had 50 frigates and destroyers, two aircraft carriers, 28 attack submarines, three Harrier squadrons and a Royal Marine Commando brigade. For its part, the Royal Air Force had 26 fast jet squadrons, two squadrons of maritime patrol aircraft and specific aeroplanes tasked with suppressing potential air defences.

In the next Parliament, however, the Army will be reduced to 82,000 regular soldiers and 400 tanks. The Navy will have 19 frigates or destroyers, seven attack submarines and only about 24,000 sailors. It may be that by 2020 we will see the first of two new aircraft carriers, but as yet not one aircraft has been ordered to put on them. The RAF will have seven, or maybe only six, fast jet squadrons, and no means to suppress enemy air defences. Nobody knows whether by then we might again have some maritime patrol aircraft. That remains the worst gap in our current military capability.

Some argue that there are few votes in defence—we have heard that repeated all afternoon—but that is certainly not what I hear in Beckenham. People there are increasingly fearful of what is happening in the world.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): As my hon. Friend knows, I back the minimum 2% spend of GDP on defence. He knows how important that is to the Ribble Valley. Does he welcome the announcement today by the Prime Minister and BAE Systems that a new training academy will open at BAE Systems Sablesbury, not only to train the new apprentices but to tune up the great skills we already have at BAE Systems?

Bob Stewart: I was born close to Sablesbury, so I know it well. I certainly applaud that news.

Leaders on both sides of the House consistently maintain, quite rightly, that defence is the first responsibility of Government. If that is so, whether there are votes in defence hardly matters. It is the duty of our political leaders to ensure our defences are sound, whether there are votes in defence or not. The defence of our country is the paramount requirement of our Government. If we had been beaten by Hitler in 1945, there would not even have been a national health service. Health, education, pensions and overseas aid budgets are largely ring-fenced and apparently untouchable. Obviously, that is not so for the defence budget. If defence is vital, its budget should be protected too.

Some hon. Members have touched on our long-standing and close defence partnership with the United States, which is being increasingly questioned there. Both the American President and, more recently, the United States army chief of staff have signalled their alarm at what is happening to our MOD budget. We have favoured status so far, but yet more cuts to our defence budget are likely to have an irreversible impact on our special defence relationship with the United States. If we, as America's most steadfast ally, are not prepared to put at least 2% of GDP into defence, why should United

States citizens, who currently pay more than double per head than us, continue to fund more than 70% of NATO's budget?

Others argue that the dominating factors of mass and firepower in conflict are no longer as important as they were, and of course they have a point. It is true that cyber, data fusion, information, robotics and the like spawn a different form of war fighting—truly they are important developments, and they might even influence how we go to war—but I dispute that they are war-winning factors. It is unlikely that they will be able to dislodge the Daesh from Syria and Iraq. They might help, but they alone will not do it. In military terms, the job might well require good old-fashioned kinetic energy—soldiers closing with the enemy on the ground and destroying them in face-to-face fighting—although I hope this time it is done mainly by soldiers from our friends in the middle east, rather than our own armed forces.

Some say that the cold war is dead. Others suggest that the day of the tank is over. The Russians obviously disagree. Perhaps we are not really seeing T-64 and T-72 tanks cruising around eastern Ukraine. Russia has once more formally declared NATO to be its enemy and stated plainly that external conflicts can justify its use of nuclear weapons. The MOD is a unique Department of State because it provides us with both the insurance and endowment policies necessary to deal with the unexpected. Threats to our national security tend to explode suddenly and with very little warning. Of course, we all want a strong economy, but defence is too important to depend just on that. We only have to look at the lack of political resolve in the 1930s, which translated into our armed forces stagnating, giving clear signals to Hitler that we were not prepared to arrest his ambitions. Such stupidity cost us dear.

In truth, a strong economy needs a safe security environment. Defence must be affordable. The international situation is as bad as I have ever seen it in my lifetime. Welfare, education, pensions and overseas aid will count for nought if defence goes wrong, so, particularly now, the defence of our country is far too important a matter for it to become a party political football. It is a bipartisan matter for serious political parties. Looking around the Chamber, I think that all the parties present are serious. I call on all the parties present, including the Democratic Unionist party—I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his fantastic speech today—to commit wholeheartedly to ensuring that we spend 2% of GDP on defence.

2.52 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Not for the first time, my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) has done the House and the country a service by bringing to the Chamber a matter that the coalition Government might perhaps have preferred he had let lie. I believe it is his intention, if we do not get the assurances we want from both Front Benches, to give the House the opportunity to put its opinion on the record by dividing. If the Whips did not know that, they had better get busy.

One of the advantages of speaking last from the Back Benches in such a debate is that I do not have to repeat all the points made by everybody else. This has

[Dr Julian Lewis]

been particularly worthwhile today because I could not have made a stronger strategic case than the Chairman of the Defence Select Committee made in his excellent speech, and I could not have made a stronger economic case than was forcefully made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind). I pay tribute to him for his outstanding service to this country, both in high office and, more recently, as Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee, which I have had the pleasure of serving on throughout this Parliament.

Any suggestion that the budget spent on the intelligence agencies should be redefined as defence to edge us closer to the 2% minimum would be not only outrageous, but dishonest, because we would no longer be comparing like with like. Let us compare like with like. It came as a surprise to the hon. Member for Preston (Mark Hendrick), who made a thoughtful speech, when I pointed out to him that at the height of the second cold war, in the 1980s, this country was spending more than 5% of GDP on defence. I know the economy has got bigger, but defence has got more expensive, so that excuse will not do.

Let me put on the record that between 1982 and 1986, the amount spent on defence varied from 5.1% of GDP to 5.3%. From 1986 to 1990, as a result of perestroika, the intermediate-range nuclear forces treaty and other measures, the figure gradually declined from a maximum of 4.8% to 4%. When we took the peace dividend, following the break-up of the Soviet Union—in other words, in the first five years of the 1990s—the figures were 3.6%, 3.6%, 3.5%, 3.3% and 3.1%.

When Labour came into office in 1997, the figure was 2.5%, and it remained, as Tony Blair said and as I have quoted here before, roughly constant at 2.5% for a decade, although that hid the fact that the costs of Afghanistan and Iraq, which should have been met from the Treasury reserve, were being included in the overall calculation. Even as late as the coalition coming in, in 2009-10, the figure was 2.5%, and it remained the same in 2010-11. It went down to 2.4% in 2011-12 and since 2012 it has been 2.2% and 2.1%. Frankly, I regard it as a disgrace that defence spending has declined even to that level, and I will be far from satisfied if—without redefining things—we spend only 2% of GDP on defence in the future.

I have to ask myself why, at a time when we have not only the threat from international terrorism to deal with, but a re-emerging threat from a newly aggressive and revanchist Russia, politicians are calling into question even the basic NATO minimum of 2%. The only answer I get has nothing to do with grand strategy and everything to do with low politics. This is the politics of the pollsters who are trying to tell my Prime Minister that there are no votes in defence.

My mind goes back to a conversation I had in Conservative central office with the then general director of campaigning of the Conservative party in about 1985. When I said that we needed to focus on Labour's defence policy at the next general election, he said, "Well, just because nuclear weapons and defence policy was a big issue in 1983, it does not mean that it will be a big issue in 1987." My response was, "Of course it will not be a big issue unless we make it a big issue." Of course, if we poll people at the moment and ask them

how high defence is in their sense of priorities, we will not get much of a reaction. Believe me, however, things would be different if we went into the election campaign fighting hard to explain to people the dangers that threaten us and the terrible signal it would send to Vladimir Putin if we, having exhorted everybody else in NATO to meet the 2% minimum, then fell below it ourselves for the very first time—which would be appalling.

I do not know who is more to blame. I do not know whether it is the American strategist who is advising my Prime Minister or whether it is the British Chancellor who is advising him, but I like to think that my Prime Minister has more sense than to fall for it. Let me put it in "low" political terms: if the Prime Minister is worried about the UK Independence party taking a chunk of the Conservative vote, he should bear it in mind that even UKIP has made the gesture—it is only a gesture on its part—that it would support the 2% minimum. If the Prime Minister is worried about losing votes to UKIP, he had better match its pledge.

We have had a pledge from UKIP. We have had a pledge—a very important pledge—from the Democratic Unionist party today. We need a pledge from the official Opposition, and we need a pledge from the Government. Otherwise, in the words of an excellent editorial that appeared in *The Times* yesterday, we shall be practising nothing short of "a false economy", along with a dangerous delusion about the action that we need to take when doing our duty for this country.

3 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): This has been a very good debate. We have heard 19 speeches from Members in all parts of the House, although, yet again, no Scottish National party Members have been present for a debate on defence. I congratulate the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) on making the debate possible, and also on maintaining the role that he has played throughout this Parliament of political pain in the posterior of the Prime Minister.

I particularly want to mention four Members who spoke today: my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard), the right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), the right hon. and learned Member for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind), and the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Sir Richard Ottaway). I understand that they will all be retiring at the general election, and I thank them not only for the speeches that they made today, but for their wisdom, and for their contribution to the House during their time here.

Another feature of the debate is that it has been completely void of Whips' narks, although, in an intervention, the hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), who is no longer in the Chamber, produced the usual narrative of the "£38 billion black hole" that the Conservatives claim to have inherited. In a report published in July 2011, the Defence Committee said:

"We note that the MoD now state the genuine size of the gap is substantially in excess of £38 billion. However, we also note the" former

"Secretary of State's assertion that 'for the first time in a generation, the MoD will have brought its plans and budget broadly into balance, allowing it to plan with confidence for the delivery of the future equipment programme'. Without proper detailed figures neither statement can be verified."

The debate has, of course, been dominated by the issue of the 2%. We have seen a great deal of “blue on blue” this afternoon, and I feel sorry for my hon. Friend—as I call him—the Minister. *[Interruption.]* Yes, he has drawn the short straw. However, he is passionate about defence, and he is very committed to it.

The right hon. and learned Member for North East Fife said that when it came to defence, the Treasury was always the problem. I am sorry, but that is not true in this instance. Last year’s autumn statement set out what the Government, including the Prime Minister, would need to spend between 2016 and 2020, not only to eliminate the deficit but to be in surplus by 2018-19. If, as we heard from the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), there is flat cash over that period, we are talking about a £6.8 billion cut in the defence budget, not counting the other cuts to which the Chancellor referred in the autumn statement. As has been pointed out, health, education and overseas aid have been ring-fenced, so any further cuts made over that period would have to fall on Departments that have not been ring-fenced. That would bring us to a point at which defence spending would be not 2%, but 1.4% of GDP.

However, it is worse than that for defence. The Government’s policy is to ring-fence the equipment budget and increase it by 1%. Any cuts made will not be made to the entire budget; they will fall on 55% of it, which means operations. As we all know, the main cost driver in that area is people, notwithstanding the nonsense that the Prime Minister keeps reiterating—as he did during Prime Minister’s Question Time a few weeks ago in a reply to the hon. Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth)—about the Army remaining at its current levels. Unless he has some magic formula to which we mere mortals are not party, I do not understand how he will ensure that that happens.

The Prime Minister now has a defensive strategy. It goes like this: “We try to massage the figures.” However, as the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) has said, that would be dishonest, and he is not alone in saying that. In *The Times* this morning, the former Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup, says he rejects including, for example, the intelligence budget in the figure:

“This is the kind of book-keeping for which you would go to prison if you were running a company.”

So clearly there is a concern. There are people in No. 10 who think if they massage the budget in some way, people will not spot the difference, but it appears from today’s debate that there are many on the Prime Minister’s own Back Benches with a lot of experience of, and commitment to, this sector, and he will find it difficult to pull the wool over their eyes.

I say to those on the Government Benches that I do not for one minute question their commitment to defence, because I know most of them very well, and they have spoken passionately over many years about their commitment to defence. But they have a dilemma, because in a few weeks’ time they will be standing on an election platform calling for a reduction in defence spending; they will have to somehow explain that to their electorate.

Mr Gray: I know of the hon. Gentleman’s personal commitment to defence; he is passionate about it, as we all are. He will also be standing for election in a couple of weeks’ time. Will he be standing on the platform that an incoming Labour Government will definitely commit to 2% or more on defence spending?

Mr Jones: Well, what I am not being is dishonest, which is what the Government’s position is. I shall reiterate the point that I made in the debate last week: what we have a commitment to, and will argue for, is maintaining the 2015-16 budget. Also, we will start the defence review—the detailed work that needs to happen, not the rushed job we saw last time—and that will inform the debate on future budgets.

Mr Gray: The same as us.

Mr Jones: No, it is not the same, because the Government and the hon. Gentleman have got the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s fiscal straitjacket round them—his commitments to reducing spending. There is a big difference, and it gives us a lot of leeway in making sure that we can deliver on our defence needs and foreign affairs commitments, whereas what the Government are putting forward will lead to a situation in which the budget is set, and there is no way that they can meet those commitments.

Something else has come out in this debate. The right hon. and learned Member for Kensington, the hon. Member for North Devon (Sir Nick Harvey), who is in a good position because he was a Minister in the Department at the time, and the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Simon Reeve) raised the idea that the Prime Minister convinced his Back Benchers and the military to take the pain of the 8% cut in 2010, and that somehow once we reached the sunny uplands—I think the hon. Member for Dewsbury referred to that—we would have an increase in the budget. That is clearly not going to happen if the Prime Minister’s commitment to deficit reduction is followed. We have come to expect such smoke and mirrors from the Prime Minister. We have had that narrative again; I do not for a minute question the former adviser of the right hon. Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox), who has written in today’s newspapers in a similar vein. It is clear that that commitment cannot be met if the Prime Minister is to keep to the deficit reduction process laid out in the autumn statement.

We need honesty from the Government on what they are going to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) and I are not going to stand here and make the ludicrous promises we heard at the last general election from those now on the Government Benches. They promised a larger Army, more helicopters, and more of everything for the armed forces, but the Conservatives reverted to type, as they always do in government. The hon. Member for Dewsbury said that this was a right-left issue. No, it is not. The Conservatives’ record in office shows that they always cut defence, whereas Labour has always protected defence.

Sir Peter Luff: I genuinely want this to be a bipartisan debate, but could the hon. Gentleman clarify the shadow Chancellor’s comments in *The Times* on Tuesday this week, when he stated that his party would go

[*Sir Peter Luff*]

“nowhere near the huge scale of defence cuts you are going to see under the Conservatives”?

Does that mean that Labour will commit to at least the 1%-plus real-terms-equivalent budget increase?

Mr Jones: I know that the hon. Gentleman is not standing for re-election, but he needs to understand that the huge impediment to his party's adopting the 2% target is the autumn statement. His party will have to bin that if it wants to commit to the 2%. This allows us a lot more flexibility. We will ensure that the findings of the defence review are what drive our defence needs. That is in contrast to what happened in 2010 and what is happening now, with the Chancellor of the Exchequer driving the debate with the support of the Prime Minister.

The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) made a clear commitment that his party would seek a commitment to the 2% expenditure target from any other party before supporting it in a future Government. The Prime Minister has employed a lot of diversionary tactics in the past 24 hours, because he knows that he has a problem in this area. He clearly wanted to massage the figures, but that has now been blown out of the water.

Then we had the nonsense last night of the Defence Secretary writing to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition about whether the nuclear deterrent would be up for negotiation in any future deal with the Scottish National party. I want to nail that one quite clearly: no, it would not. We are not going to do what the Conservatives did when they came into office in 2010. They played fast and loose with the nuclear deterrent by doing a deal with the Liberal Democrats to delay the implementation of the decision to replace Trident, which the Labour Government had already voted for. It was this Government, in the deal that was done in May 2010, who delayed that implementation, so I am not going to take any lessons from the Conservatives about doing deals, or using our nuclear deterrent in some kind of political poker game as a means of getting into office.

Simon Reeve: In passing, may I point out that the quotes recently attributed to me were not in fact mine? Is the hon. Gentleman in any way embarrassed by the fact that, within the space of 10 minutes, he has turned what was a sensible debate into a party political broadcast?

Mr Jones: Not at all, because I am actually on the hon. Gentleman's side in trying to expose the Government's illogical approach. I think I am right in saying that it was he who described the attempts of the Prime Minister or his advisers to massage the figures as “kindergarten economics”. There is an honest argument to be made to the British people about what we are doing on defence, but the hon. Gentleman cannot have it both ways. He cannot stand before his electorate in Dewsbury in a few weeks' time and say that he wants his Government to commit to 2% when he has also signed up to the Chancellor's deficit reduction strategy. I am on his side when we argue about defence—I have argued passionately about the subject from the very moment I entered this House, as people know, and I will continue to do so—but will he be able to look his electorate in the eye

and say that his party is committed to 2%? No, he will not. The manifesto on which he will be campaigning will actually offer the opposite: it will propose reducing defence expenditure.

Simon Reeve: This afternoon's debate has been contributed to by a large number of people who put a belief in defence above party politics, and they have been objective in their criticism of both sides. That mood has changed since the hon. Gentleman got to his feet, and that is a shame.

Mr Jones: I am a very thin-skinned individual, as people know, and I am wounded by the hon. Gentleman's suggestion. However, if I have exposed the inconsistency in the Government's—

Simon Reeve: This is party politics.

Mr Jones: Well, it might be party politics, but if I have exposed the inconsistency between what the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Prime Minister have said about deficit reduction over the next five years on the one hand, and what the hon. Gentleman and others on his side have said about their support for the 2% on the other, then I am sorry, but I am guilty of that.

This is an important debate and I am glad that we have had it. May I also say that the Members who said we should have more of these debates made an important point? We used to have the Back-Bench debates annually, and they were important to Members on all sides in ensuring that defence went up the political agenda, and that we had the scrutiny needed.

Let me finish with this final point: irrespective of party politics—the hon. Member for Dewsbury will have more of that in the next few weeks, if he is standing for re-election—if there is one thing that unites us, it is our thanks, support and admiration for the vital job the men and women of our armed forces do daily. We sometimes forget the sacrifice that they and their families make. That is one thing that, irrespective of our disagreements on the detail of defence policy, we should never forget.

3.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Philip Dunne): This has been a timely debate, secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron), who, as the House knows, takes a particular interest in defence. I gently point out to the House that although the Backbench Business Committee is responsible for this debate and a number of hon. Members have said it is a shame there are not more debates on defence, there was a debate on Monday of last week on this very subject in Government time. Hon. Members need to recognise that the Government are giving due time to these important matters.

This is a timely debate because it comes as we prepare for the comprehensive spending review and the strategic defence and security review, which will follow the general election. There is no doubt about the support for our armed forces from all 20 Members who have spoken today, including the Opposition spokesman, and about the importance of defence to the nation's security. Fittingly, this debate was used as an opportunity to speak by a

number of hon. Members who are leaving the House later this month having served the House with particular distinction, particularly on defence. I pay tribute to my right hon. and learned Friends the Members for Kensington (Sir Malcolm Rifkind) and for North East Fife (Sir Menzies Campbell), who unfortunately has had to catch a train, although I told him I would mention him; to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Sir Peter Luff), who I am delighted to see in his place; to my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Sir Richard Ottaway), who has given considerable service to this House—I had not appreciate that he had also served on a carrier in an earlier career; and to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Mr Havard), who has been a very influential figure on the Defence Committee. I am pleased they have all been able to participate, alongside the many other Members whose contributions I may or may not have time to commend.

Clearly, in a democracy, strong defence requires a strong economy, and as we head into the next Parliament, securing our economic recovery will be vital to securing defence spending. We do recognise—we were challenged by some hon. Members on this—that the threats we face have changed since the last strategic defence review, and they will be carefully reviewed in the next SDSR, which will help to determine the investment choices of the next Government.

I listened carefully to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), a former Defence Minister, whose commitment to defence I do not doubt. I have, however, had the opportunity not only to listen to his remarks today, but to read the interim report—I believe it is described as No. 8—of Labour's so-called "zero-based review", the defence element of which was published only on Saturday. I gently remind the House that he was making some claims about defence being in a better place under a potential Labour Government, but the zero-based review's foreword indicates that, were Labour to have the opportunity, it would carry out

"a root and branch review of every pound the government spends from the bottom up".

The defence volume foreword says

"we will make appropriate savings in the Defence budget".

I take that to mean that every pound of defence spending will be up for review and is not secure as a consequence.

Mr Kevan Jones: It is a sensible way forward to ensure, as I said in the debate last week, that every single piece of our defence expenditure is reviewed to ensure that we get maximum value for money. If we are going to meet the targets for 2015-16, savings will have to be made and that will be reinvested in what can actually be done. What we do not have is the fiscal straitjacket that the Minister has come 2016-17.

Mr Dunne: The only comfort that this House can take from the Opposition's position is that one of the very few Government Departments that the shadow Chancellor would not abolish is the Ministry of Defence.

I wish to set out some context about how, since 2010, defence spending has required, and has undergone, significant reform. The situation we inherited from the Labour Administration was chaotic. There was a severely overheated programme with costs that outstripped the

available budget, which left a black hole of £38 billion. Difficult decisions were routinely ducked. The Gray report, commissioned by the previous Government, identified that the average equipment programme overrun was five years, and with an average increase in cost of £300 million. The National Audit Office's major projects report for 2009 evidenced an increase in costs in that year alone of £1.2 billion across the major projects, including the infamous decision to delay the carriers in a desperate attempt to cram that year's spending into the available budget. To sort that out required one of the biggest defence transformation programmes undertaken in the western world. Today, the defence budget is in balance—

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Mr Dunne: No, the hon. Gentleman has had his chance. The defence budget is in balance and our plans are affordable. We are on track to deliver £5 billion of efficiency savings in the next Parliament, including £1 billion from the equipment support plan alone. Incidentally, the half-baked plans in the Labour review "A New Deal for UK Defence" would deliver only some 1% of what we are already saving in the Department. The proof of our transformation was set out in the National Audit Office major projects report for 2014, which showed a reduction in cost of £397 million across our 11 largest projects. That was the Ministry of Defence's best performance on cost since 2005 and best performance on delivering projects on time since 2001.

Mark Hendrick: Will the Minister tell the House how much money was wasted in the Government's decision to move two cats and traps for the two aircraft carriers and then to back away from cats and traps?

Mr Dunne: Yes, it cost just under £100 million to make that decision, which is substantially less than the £1.2 billion cost of the deferral to which I referred earlier. I should congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his contribution today. I had not appreciated that, like me a few months ago, he faced some impediments to getting in and out of the Chamber. I hope that his leg gets better soon.

Even the chair of the Public Accounts Committee, not known for lavishing praise on this Government, said only last week that she had

"seen a step change and improvement in performance, which is incredibly welcome."

She was referring to the transformation in defence.

Sir Nicholas Soames: I congratulate Conservative Ministers on making such a tremendous improvement to the capital budget. May I urge them to seek big savings in the bureaucracy of the armed forces? There is no bureaucracy in Whitehall that is worse than that in the Army, Navy and Air Force, and those services really need sorting out.

Mr Dunne: I thank my right hon. Friend for his advice. It is the case that vast majority of the headcount reductions across the Ministry of Defence have taken place within the bureaucracy—as my right hon. Friend calls it—of civil service support to the armed forces.

[Mr Dunne]

The lesson here is that it is no use having a budget of £34 billion if it is not spent efficiently. Driving efficiency savings out of our budget is an important part of what we have achieved, which is to get more capability for our armed forces out of the money that we spend on defence.

In 2010, the defence budget was the second largest in NATO, and the largest in the EU. In 2015, it remains the second largest in NATO and, by some margin, the largest in the EU. Using NATO's figures, the UK defence budget is now some \$8 billion larger than the next largest EU budget, which is that of France. That gives the UK one of the most effective and deployable armed forces in the world. This very day, the UK has more than 4,000 military personnel deployed overseas on 20 key operations, in 24 countries worldwide.

Our funding also enables the UK to be and remain the most reliable partner to the US in NATO. Since August, we have been the US's largest partner in the coalition air strikes against ISIL, conducting more than 10% of air strikes. A key capability in the effort, for example, has been the result of investment in the Brimstone missile, the most advanced precision missile system in the world. We are now working to integrate Brimstone on to other platforms such as Typhoon. This is just a single capability within our £163 billion costed, funded, affordable equipment plan, which in turn enables the UK to be one of only four NATO countries consistently to meet the key metric, spending 20% of defence expenditure on major new capabilities.

The clarity of this plan allows us to invest in next-generation capability. I shall give a few brief examples. Our new aircraft carriers will deliver a step change in capability. They are half as long and weigh almost three times as much as the previous *Invincible* class, yet will deliver their cutting-edge capability with the same size crew. They will have the next-generation F35 aircraft flying from them, and we have ordered four aircraft to form part of the operational squadron in addition to the four currently in test and evaluation in the United States. That platform will be far more capable than the *Harrier* that they replace. As the Prime Minister confirmed again yesterday, the Conservative party is committed to maintaining a continuous at-sea deterrent and will build a new fleet of ballistic missile submarines, with the final investment decision due in 2016, of which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) will approve.

Ms Gisela Stuart: Yesterday I suggested to the Prime Minister that he might be just a tad embarrassed by the fact that less than a year ago he lectured other NATO countries about not reaching 2%, yet we were falling below it. He failed to answer that question. Would the Minister like to add anything?

Mr Dunne: I will come on to the issue of the 2% in a moment. We are not falling below it and we do not intend to do so in the period of the spending review. We have also presided over the modernisation of our air mobility fleet, which is now the envy of the world. Many of our NATO allies rely on our capability during operations. The *Voyager* air-to-air refuelling capability is being used today across Iraq by a number of our allies, not only the RAF. We are transforming our

helicopter fleets. As I saw earlier this morning, we have invested £6 billion over the past four years in state-of-the-art lift, attack and surveillance capability, on time, on budget, providing flexibility so that more can be done with less.

For the Army, last year we placed the Scout vehicle contract—the biggest single order for a UK armoured vehicle in 30 years. It will provide the Army with its first fully digitised armoured fighting vehicle to give it the kind of manoeuvrability that the Chairman of the Select Committee and other hon. Members have called for. I can also confirm to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Sir Peter Luff), who did such a good job in laying the foundations for this transformation work, that we remain committed to spending at least 1.2% of the defence budget on defence science and technology. We achieved more than that last year and will do so this year. This will include more investment in disruptive areas of technology such as directed energy weapons and others, where we have committed to shift more of the balance of science and technology investment as we move into a contingent posture.

The Government's position on the motion before the House this afternoon is clear. We will meet the 2% commitment in this financial year. We will meet it in the next. As we have been consistent, after the general election this will be a matter for the next spending review. The Prime Minister has been clear. We are committed to a 1% year-on-year real-terms increase in spending on defence equipment for the next spending review period. He has also been clear that the size of our regular armed services will remain at the level it is now, with a continuing commitment to grow the reserves to 35,000. It is not just about 2% of GDP; it is about how you spend it and what you are prepared to do with it.

The results of our reform programme speak for themselves. Four and a half years ago, we were in chaos. Today, we have earned a strong reputation across Whitehall for competence and have transformed defence capability for the better. The Treasury, even, has granted the Ministry of Defence the largest delegated budget of any Department. So we have replaced Labour's chaos with Conservative competence. Where there was a deficit, now there is a balanced budget; where there were cost overruns, now there are cost savings; and where equipment programmes were late and over-budget, now they are overwhelmingly on time. The MOD is on far firmer foundations as we head into the next SDSR and spending review.

3.30 pm

Mr Baron: I want to thank all hon. Members for their contributions. There have been many good speeches here today, and I am pleased to say that we have all benefited from them. There has been almost universal acceptance that we live in times of heightened tensions. A growing number of countries not necessarily friendly to the west are not only increasing their defence spending and rearming but becoming more assertive. We need to spend more on defence not only better to support alliances and better protect our interests, but in deterring potential aggressors, to help to avoid conflict in the future.

We all know that 2% is an arbitrary figure. Money must be well spent and should reflect desired capability. I personally believe that we should spend 3% to 4%, but

2% has a symbolic value in that, having lectured other NATO members on the importance of 2%, it is important that we lead by example. We need to rediscover the political will for strong defence across the political divide. There is presently a disconnect in that the main political parties accept that we have global interests and responsibilities but seem reluctant to fund them, and perhaps our misguided military interventions have contributed. If so, these demons must be vanquished, because they have distracted us from the greater danger of potentially hostile nation states.

In short, as for the line that there are no votes in defence, we are shirking our duty to lead on this issue, and votes are lost through bad defence. We have acknowledged the adage that the first duty of Government is the defence of the realm. That has been forged by events, and we forget the lessons of history at our peril. Therefore, given that those on neither Front-Bench have clearly committed to 2% of GDP—[*Interruption.*] If they have, they will have no trouble in supporting the motion. On that basis, I wish to test the will of the House if it will allow me.

The House divided: Ayes 37, Noes 3.

Division No. 175]

[3.32 pm

AYES

Afriyie, Adam	Lefroy, Jeremy
Amess, Sir David	Lopresti, Jack
Baron, Mr John	Loughton, Tim
Beith, rh Sir Alan	Luff, Sir Peter
Bone, Mr Peter	McIntosh, Miss Anne
Bottomley, Sir Peter	Offord, Dr Matthew
Chope, Mr Christopher	Reevell, Simon
Cox, Mr Geoffrey	Rifkind, rh Sir Malcolm
Davis, rh Mr David	Rosindell, Andrew
Drax, Richard	Shannon, Jim
Evans, Mr Nigel	Smith, Sir Robert
Freer, Mike	Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
George, Andrew	Stanley, rh Sir John
Glindon, Mrs Mary	Stuart, Ms Gisela
Gray, Mr James	Sturdy, Julian
Havard, Mr Dai	Twigg, Derek
Hendrick, Mark	Whittingdale, Mr John
Hermon, Lady	
Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Tellers for the Ayes:
Latham, Pauline	Dr Julian Lewis and
	Bob Stewart

NOES

Clark, Katy	Tellers for the Noes:
Lucas, Caroline	Mr Philip Hollobone and
McDonnell, John	Philip Davies

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that defence spending should be set to a minimum of two per cent of GDP in accordance with the UK's NATO commitment.

Education Regulations and Faith Schools

3.43 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House believes that Ofsted should respect the ability of faith schools to teach their core beliefs in the context of respect and toleration for others.

Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing the time of these debates, and a number of colleagues, including the hon. Members for Southport (John Pugh) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Robert Ffello), would have liked to have taken part in this important debate, but they have unmissable commitments in their constituencies. I am grateful to those of my colleagues who are here to support me.

Faith schools do a marvellous job. That is why parents love them, and I am one of those parents. Of course, when we say faith schools, we are overwhelmingly talking about Church schools. In the state sector there are almost 7,000 faith schools, of which 4,500 are Church of England, almost 2,000 are Catholic, 48 are Jewish, 18 Muslim, eight Sikh and four Hindu. Last year, of the 693 best-performing state primary schools, 62% were faith schools—a staggering percentage—even though they account for only a third of primaries nationally.

Church schools are great motors of social mobility. They perform well whatever the background of the pupils. Faith schools are ethnically diverse. About a quarter of pupils of faith schools have an ethnic background other than white British. In my son's school it is over 60%. Far from preaching intolerance, these schools, because of their strong, unifying, religious ethos, do more for social cohesion than a thousand Home Office initiatives.

Many people's experience of the Church of England or Roman Catholic school at the end of their road is that it is a delightful haven of well-behaved pupils from all backgrounds and highly motivated teachers putting their heart and soul into the school and its community. But it is faith schools that are under attack from the forces of intolerance, so we must recognise their great contribution and encourage them to carry on doing what they are doing so well.

Groups such as the British Humanist Association would like to ban faith schools. They do not seem to care how much parents and pupils love them or how well they perform—the very definition of intolerance. They try to smear faith schools with what happened in Birmingham with the Trojan horse scandal, but we all know that none of the Trojan horse schools was a faith school. Faith schools should hold their heads up high and not engage in the pre-emptive cringe and kowtow to the latest fashion. They should stand by the principles that have made them such a success: love of God and neighbour, pursuit of truth, high aspiration and discipline.

We do not want any dumbing down. Jewish schools should teach the Jewish religion, and Christian schools should teach the Christian religion. That is likely to give their pupils a better idea of their place in the world, of their potential and of their obligations to others. Yes, they should learn about other religions, which is necessary not only for being a good citizen, but for being culturally aware, but that can take place in the context of the school's faith ethos. Of course pupils can accept or reject the school's world view, whether religious or

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

secular. There are plenty of Christians in secular schools and plenty of atheists in Christian schools. The law guarantees freedom of conscience. But by the same token, governors, teachers, parents and pupils who want a religious education also have freedom of conscience, and we must guard their freedoms carefully.

Mrs Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Does he agree that what is important is the teaching of religious education in all schools so that all children can understand religions and non-religions as they progress through school? We should have proper RE teachers to give young people the wide breadth of knowledge they need to understand everyone else in the country and all those who live in their communities.

Sir Edward Leigh: Yes, of course I agree. It is very important that RE is a rigid academic discipline. Children must be aware of other faiths and of comparative religion, but they must also have a firm grounding in their own faith's teachings, because that gives them a sense of belonging and place.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman rightly talks about the need for a firm grounding. Is not the line that must be drawn that no taxpayer-funded school should ever be involved in proselytising or indoctrination?

Sir Edward Leigh: I absolutely agree. I mentioned the thousands of Church of England and Roman Catholic schools. I do not think that there is any evidence that any of those schools are creating Christian jihadists. I have six children, and they have attended faith schools in the state and private sectors. The thought that any of those primary schools in the maintained sector, whether Catholic or Anglican, is teaching intolerance is completely absurd.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The hon. Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) mentioned the importance of understanding other faiths. Is that not the critical factor? We should all understand other faiths and schools should teach an understanding of other faiths, but that is very different from promoting other faiths in a faith school.

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. The cornerstone—may I dare use that word?—of faith schools is that they start from their own religion, and what do all of the great world religions teach? They teach understanding, tolerance and love of God and neighbour, so nobody should be teaching intolerance.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): In Windsor we have some really excellent faith schools as well as secular schools—a good mix. I have observed that the pupils who go through the faith schools are equally open minded and tolerant as those in the secular schools.

Sir Edward Leigh: The evidence for that is absolutely overwhelming.

I now want to turn to Ofsted and the terms of this motion. It may be that the time has come for Ofsted to put itself in special measures, in certain respects. It appears to be guilty of trying to enforce a kind of state-imposed orthodoxy on certain moral and religious questions. This has provoked huge controversy and has

rarely been out of the news. We have to ask whether we can any longer have confidence in Ofsted's reports. Ofsted's own director of schools, Sean Harford, has admitted that the reliability of inspections is a problem. Sadly, Ministers deflect every question by saying, "It's a matter for Ofsted." Perhaps Ofsted is out of control because it is not being held accountable by the Department. That is why we are having this debate.

In September, the National Association of Jewish Orthodox Schools wrote to the Secretary of State complaining that Ofsted inspectors asked hugely inappropriate questions and bullied their pupils into answering insensitive and anti-religious questions.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Jonathan Rabson, who is chairman of NAJOS in my constituency, has said:

"Jewish schools now have the sense that our Jewish values and ethos are being questioned. We have experienced a campaign to discredit Jewish schools and to challenge the values we espouse... We ask you to take this matter extremely seriously."

Does my hon. Friend agree that Jewish people feel under attack as a result of Ofsted?

Sir Edward Leigh: Absolutely. It is no secret that I admire enormously the Jewish religion and the ethos that it creates. What a pity that one of the school's year 11 girls said that the questioning made them feel "threatened and bullied" about their own religion. Another young girl said that she felt "traumatised" after they had been asked whether they had a boyfriend, knew how babies were made, and knew whether two men could marry. Rabbi David Meyer, the incoming director of the educational oversight body, Partnerships for Jewish Schools, has said:

"We are seeing a worrying trend of Ofsted inspectors showing a lack of respect of the values and traditions of our community."

I fully support the right of Jewish schools to promote their own ethos and religion.

Let us turn to some other schools. In 2013, St Benedict's Catholic school in Bury St Edmunds tied for first place in national state school tables for the proportion of pupils going to Oxbridge. What a marvellous school! In September 2014, it was subject to a no-notice inspection. No-notice inspections were part of the response to the Trojan horse scandal. Clearly Ofsted thought that there could be a fundamentalist Catholic conspiracy within St Benedict's Catholic school. No-notice inspections are quite devastating for the school. Ofsted turns up, rings up, and says, "We're in the car park. We're coming in now." It usually happens because it suspects that something quite serious is going on. The head teacher of St Benedict's thought that perhaps a no-notice inspection was started because he had not printed a statement on citizenship, although he does not know. The resulting draft report downgraded the school to "requires improvement". It said that in three of the five inspection areas, the

"younger students show less awareness of the dangers of extremism and radicalisation".

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): I am surprised that Bury St Edmunds is a place where these things are taught.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am very surprised that Bury St Edmunds, of all places, is possibly a centre of extremism and radicalisation. That is not the town that I know.

The idea that Catholics are being radicalised in state schools is as ridiculous as it is offensive. The local reaction forced Ofsted to remove the offending phrase, but the downgrading remained in place. This suggests that once Ofsted has decided that a school does not support “British values”, it will mark it down in all areas. The unreality of its report was underlined when the exam results for St Benedict’s were finally published. At A-level, the school was placed in the top 100 schools nationally, state and private. Its GCSEs, too, put it among the best-performing schools in Suffolk. The Catholic Education Service took the rare step of demanding an apology from Ofsted. Anybody who knows the Catholic Education Service will know that it is not an extremist body, by any manner of means—it is very quiet and restrained. Why have the inspectors who handed this ridiculous report never been brought to account?

Let us look at Trinity Christian school in Reading. I wrote to the Secretary of State in October 2014 after Ofsted had failed the school under “British values”, whatever they are. In November 2013, the school had been rated good in every category, and its spiritual education was deemed excellent. That report said:

“Pupils are well prepared for life in modern, multicultural, democratic British society through the teaching of the Christian principle to ‘love thy neighbour’.”

However, the inspection in October 2014 predominantly focused on the new rules on British values, which had come into force a week earlier. The inspector expressed doubts over the continued existence of the school—I stress, its continued existence—because of its non-compliance with the new rules. She stated that the representatives of other faiths should be invited to lead collective worship, and that the school must “actively promote” other faiths. That is directly antithetical to the school’s Christian ethos. There would be justified outrage if Ofsted demanded that secular or atheist schools actively promoted Christianity, so why should Christian schools “actively promote” what they hold to be untrue? I agree that they should inform children about other religions, but actively promoting them is immoral, impossible and, I believe, a crime against their conscience. We have to wonder how far Christian schools need to go to satisfy the new standards.

On the subject of the Church of England, only two days ago I had a word with the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is concerned about this matter. I have also had a word with Vincent Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster, who is also concerned. This is a mainstream concern in the Catholic and Anglican Churches. By their very nature, such people are not alarmists or extremists, but good and open-minded, but they are deeply worried about what is going on.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Does my hon. Friend know whether the one report he has so far quoted was from an aberrant Ofsted inspector, or is it because of a direction from Ofsted or from Ministers? Who is responsible?

Sir Edward Leigh: I have not yet finished my speech. I do not want to weary the House, but I have several examples. If this was an aberrant inspection of one

school out of thousands, we might say that we should not worry too much about it, but I will quote several examples. There is undoubtedly evidence that such inappropriate questioning has taken place. The schools have complained—I will deal with that in a moment—and there is no adequate evidence that Sir Michael Wilshaw, the head of Ofsted, has gone back to the schools and questioned pupils, parents and teachers about the inappropriate questioning.

This debate is terribly important: if it achieves nothing else, it will ensure that there is no kind of pre-emptive cringe on the part of Christian schools worried that they might be marked down if they do not promote “British values” rather than their own ethos. I hope that there will be a kind of pre-emptive cringe on the part of Ofsted. Given that all my hon. Friends have come into the Chamber, inspectors will now be worried about asking such inappropriate questions because they might be held to account.

There is a bit of a pattern. I will mention other examples before I sit down because it is important to establish that pattern, and to convince the House that this is not about one aberrant inspector, but has happened in several schools and across several faiths.

Kevin Brennan: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the problems have arisen parliamentary because of the knee-jerk way with which British values were introduced last summer? In fact, the requirement is actively to promote not other faiths, but respect for, and tolerance of, other faiths. If this had not been introduced in such a rush and with such a knee-jerk reaction, perhaps that would be better understood throughout the system.

Sir Edward Leigh: I agree entirely, and we are looking forward to hearing the Minister make that clear. There was a bit of a knee-jerk reaction, and perhaps over-zealous Ofsted inspectors have not understood what British values are about. Surely British values are about what our country has always been about, which is tolerance and understanding, not a requirement to promote other people’s religions or values.

We have to wonder how far Christian schools have to go to satisfy the new standards. In September, Bolton Parish Church primary school was told that although “events such as...Diwali are celebrated...pupils’ understanding of life in modern Britain is underdeveloped.”

Middle Rasen school in my constituency was marked down, apparently because it was too British—a strange problem for north Lincolnshire. How many non-Christian festivals does a Christian school have to celebrate before Ofsted is happy? Faith schools have a legal right to teach their own faith, and English law stipulates that school assemblies and RE should normally be “mainly Christian”, but that has been overridden by inspectors.

Grindon Hall Christian school is one of the top state schools in Sunderland for GCSEs and the top school, state or private, for A-levels. In May 2014, Ofsted rated it good in all areas except leadership and management. In November it was also subject to a no-notice British values inspection—quite alarming for the top performing school in Sunderland. Its primary school pupils were asked if they knew anyone who thought they were in the wrong body. Well, I have sometimes thought that maybe I am in the wrong body—[Laughter.] One parent

[*Sir Edward Leigh*]

complained that her 10-year-old daughter was asked if she knew what lesbians did. One sixth-former said that the inspector was

“manipulating the conversation to make us say something to discredit the manner of teaching in school.”

Another said:

“She seemed to have the view that since we are a Christian school we don’t respect other religions and views.”

A third said:

“It felt like she wanted a certain answer from us and wouldn’t be satisfied until she got that answer.”

Ofsted issued a report that rated the school “inadequate”. Despite the fact that it is the best in terms of results, the Ofsted report marks it as the worst of any school in Sunderland. Clearly, results count for nothing.

As with St Benedict’s, Ofsted issued a draft report with phrasing that tipped its hand. The report said:

“The Christian ethos of the school permeates much of the school’s provision. This has restricted the development of a broad and balanced approach to the curriculum.”

I thought the reason why we are such a tolerant and successful country was our Christian heritage, which teaches tolerance and respect for others. Those inspectors clearly regard a Christian ethos as inherently negative. Although the phrase was withdrawn after complaints, the report attacked every area of the school’s performance, not just British values. Hundreds of parents signed a letter to the Secretary of State to urge a review of the report which, they said,

“paints a picture of our school—and our children—that we just do not recognise.”

The Durham free school is a Christian faith school. DFE monitoring visits in December 2013 were very positive, but the school was targeted in the November 2014 no-notice inspections. After the inspections, pupils came forward to report questions asked by inspectors that made them feel uncomfortable. Again the views of the inspection team were revealed in the draft report which claimed that

“RE is a narrow study of the Bible”.

Well, I do not know, but I would have thought that in RE it is not a bad idea to study the Bible fairly rigorously. The school told Ofsted that

“only a very small proportion of the RE teaching at any time has constituted study of the Bible...your inspectors simply could not have seen any evidence during the inspection to support this conclusion.”

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does this not, to some extent, call into question the quality of some of the inspectors? A state school in my constituency said that it would be willing to be inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, because by and large it has practising teachers doing inspections, whereas Ofsted by and large does not.

Sir Edward Leigh: My hon. Friend and I had a meeting with the Secretary of State earlier and he put that point to her. It is worth looking at, and we should learn lessons from the ISI and how it does things.

Ofsted issued a report that rated The Durham free school inadequate in all areas. That caused panic in the DFE and within hours the Secretary of State announced that she was closing the school—

Ian Swales (Redcar) (LD): For the sake of completeness, the hon. Gentleman should mention that both the north-east schools that he has used as examples were found to be teaching creationism as fact in science and biology.

Sir Edward Leigh: That is not what I have been told. What I have been told is that the pupils were questioned inappropriately and that they were frightened and alarmed. I know nothing about whether the schools were teaching creationism and I make no comment on that. Once the inspectors took a dim view of the schools’ performance on British values, they were marked down heavily. All the Trojan horse schools are still open. Whatever one says about Durham, the allegations against the Trojan horse schools were more serious than anything that was said about Durham. They are still open, yet Durham is to be closed.

Ofsted, too, went into panic mode. Questioned about Durham and Grindon in the Education Committee on 28 January, Sir Michael Wilshaw claimed there was

“very bad homophobic bullying going on in these schools”.

The written Ofsted reports do not say this. Sir Michael’s statement is not being backed up by the Ofsted report. I have had a conversation with the Secretary of State. She has claimed to me and my colleagues that the comments are not true, but they have been reported on and parents have complained to Ofsted in large numbers that the reports are nonsense. One lesbian mum at The Durham free school went to the press to say her daughter had been victimised at a previous school because of her mother’s sexuality, but not at The Durham free school.

Under questioning from the Education Committee, which had been contacted by parents of children at both schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw said that if the inappropriate questioning had taken place, the inspector would be

“dealt with very severely by Ofsted”.

He said, however:

“I assure you that the sort of allegations that have been made in the north-eastern schools have been investigated very thoroughly and we found no substance to them.”

What does “investigated very thoroughly” mean? Does it mean contacting the parents who made the allegations? Does it mean interviewing the pupils? Does it mean interviewing teachers? It does not. According to one of Ofsted’s regional directors, Nick Hudson, who wrote to the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling) on 16 February, it means that Ofsted interviews its own inspectors. Unsurprisingly, the inspectors deny saying the things that would result in them being “dealt with very severely”. No wonder, then, that Ofsted gives itself a clean bill of health.

Sir Michael and Mr Hudson claim there is no evidence. Parents’ letters are, apparently, not evidence. They are simply being treated as if they are untrue. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth), who would have been here today but for attending an event in his constituency, has written to the Secretary of State demanding to know why Sir Michael claimed on 28 January that the allegations “have been investigated”—past tense—while the Schools Minister, in a written question on 10 February, told Parliament that “Ofsted is investigating matters raised”.

Which of these statements is true?

The Minister needs to come to the Dispatch Box and announce that there will be a proper investigation into the complaints of parents at these Jewish and Christian schools. There are too many, with too many similarities, for us to believe that they are all just made up. The Minister must tell us that new guidance will be issued to Ofsted on what constitutes age-appropriate questioning—that is all we are asking for—on sex and sexuality. He must make it clear to Ofsted that having a religious ethos is not a negative thing. Contrary to certain inspectors' fantasies of Anglican or Catholic jihadism, the religious ethos of a school has the ability to imbue its pupils with lifelong virtues that will make them model citizens. That should be welcomed, not persecuted.

The Minister should remind Ofsted that the law prioritises the teaching of the Christian faith in RE and school assemblies because we are a Christian nation with a Christian heritage. He should require Ofsted to respect religious diversity in education. The problems of a few non-faith schools taken over by Islamic fundamentalists in Birmingham do not justify any aggression towards mainstream faith schools. So-called "British values" is a classic bureaucratic response to a problem and it is damaging Christian schools. The truth is that the real basis of actual British values are Christian values. It is the influence of Christianity that has made us one of the most tolerant and successful nations on earth, not this artificial nonsense—a knee-jerk reaction—dreamed up by officials.

The so-called British values the Government are attempting to force through purport to be upholding a status quo, but they are nothing of the kind. In fact, what we are dealing with is an attempt to destroy the rich diversity that currently exists and replace it with a stultifying conformist ideology that is enforced on all people at all times and everywhere. They are happy for people to be slightly Christian, slightly Jewish or slightly Muslim, so long as that is just a pretty façade for agreeing and conforming with an unforgivingly liberal ideology.

We believe in a different Britain. We believe in a Britain where one is free to be truly Catholic, free to be deeply Anglican, free to be an outright atheist, free to be a faithful Hindu, Sikh, Methodist or whatever one's conscience calls one to be, or even free not to care at all.

We are faced with two roads—one of narrow ideology and the other of broad tolerance and co-existence—and the Department for Education is at the heart of the decision about which road to take. It must be robust with Ofsted. It should tell it to focus on results and to drop the politics. I agree with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, who said that it was not Ofsted's place to follow every ministerial fad on British values. Ofsted should look at maths and English, not political correctness. The "Book of Proverbs" says:

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom".

Church schools are a great blessing to our young people, spiritually, morally and educationally. I hope that the Minister will tell us he agrees with these sentiments and will require Ofsted to encourage them in its good work, not undermine them.

4.10 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): This debate is vital, because dedicated teachers in faith schools across the country are deeply worried. Reports of the approach

taken by inspectors, as described by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), in applying these schools standards and regulations has generated such concern that in my view Ministers have a duty to step in to clarify the confusion and allay teachers' fears.

A constituent wrote to me, saying that the school and early years funding regulations

"will cause many early years providers with faith links to be excluded, or to compromise their teaching for fear of being excluded from receiving funding".

In response, an Education Minister wrote:

"The Government...does not believe that it is appropriate to fund early years settings that teach creationism as evidence-based scientific fact... Nurseries continue to be free to tell creation stories, provided that they do not assert that these are scientifically based".

What exactly does that mean? A nursery school teacher reading the Biblical account of creation has to say to her three-year-olds, "But children, this is not being taught as evidence-based scientific fact". That is absolutely ridiculous. The concern is, however, that for fear of contravening the Department's requirements, teachers are feeling pressurised into the safer option—as they see it—of not teaching the creation story or any other aspects of the Bible.

Another confusion concerns the application of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural standards. The Department states:

"It is not necessary for schools...to 'promote' teachings, beliefs or opinions that conflict with their own".

It is important that the Minister confirms that at the Dispatch Box and that there is no requirement to promote other faiths. What is required is actively to promote mutual respect and tolerance of those with other faiths and beliefs. It is the freedom to follow other religions and a respect for that freedom that we should promote. It is entirely right that we should respect other people, including those with other beliefs, and to respect their right to hold those beliefs, but this is being conflated with a requirement to respect all other beliefs, which is quite a different thing altogether.

I respect Scientologists, but I do not respect Scientology. This confusion is very real. It appears in inspectors' minds. Her Majesty's chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, wrote of schools teaching "respect for...various faiths", making no distinction between the believers and the beliefs. I understand that a Jewish Ofsted inspector has said that Ofsted wants to clamp down on schools that

"don't conform to their ideology".

Will the Minister confirm that it is not the intention that the standards should discriminate against any religion or undermine religious freedoms, because that appears to be exactly what is happening?

That brings us to yet another cause of confusion mentioned already: what exactly are British values? The Department's consultation on British values—such a major issue—was hurried, mainly over the school summer holiday period, and inadequate. To then require the active promotion of those values by teachers is presumptuous and has contributed to the current confusion. The Church of England, in its response to the consultation on independent schools regulations, expressed concern that there had not been a sufficiently broad public consultation to inform the definition of British values

[Fiona Bruce]

and remains of the view that they are inadequately expressed and that broad public debate is still required. Ministers need to act on such concerns expressed by the Church of England, which oversees almost 5,000 church schools, both primary and secondary.

Another source of confusion that has been mentioned surrounds the phrase “age-appropriate”, with reference to Ofsted inspectors’ questions. We hear of different head teachers reporting pupils variously feeling

“bullied into answering inspectors’ questions”,

distressed, “traumatised and ashamed”, and “uncomfortable and upset”. As we have heard, a girl in year 11 felt “threatened about our religion”. It is a rich irony that, if that is the case, the inspectors’ approach contravenes the very recommendation to respect people that these standards extol. Far from promoting British values, these standards seem to be undermining them.

A fundamental British value stated in the standard is “individual liberty”, yet a teacher from an Orthodox Christian school, whom I have known for more than 20 years, wrote to me to point out that

“there are issues of erosion of...freedom”

here.

Ministers need to step in and clarify what questions are and are not suitable for inspectors to ask young children, and how this issue should be approached, so that young people of different faiths can feel comfortable about living out their faiths in today’s diverse society.

Will the Minister confirm that he and his colleagues will look towards giving clear direction to Ofsted inspectors on these and other issues of concern to ensure that common sense prevails, to clarify what teachers in faith schools can expect when being inspected and to ensure that teachers’ ability to work according to their religious ethos is protected, so that the Department’s statement that

“it is not necessary for schools or individuals to ‘promote’ teachings, beliefs or opinions that conflict with their own”

is made a reality and not just rhetoric?

4.16 pm

Ian Swales (Redcar) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on securing this debate. It is a shame that so few Members are here for this debate on an extremely important subject. The two previous speakers have made important points, to which I am sure the Minister has been listening.

Let me say straight away that this is a matter of conscience, so I speak for nobody but myself. I have a lot of sympathy with what has been said, particularly on tolerance, and on the rights of children, which we need to think about very seriously. I come to this issue from a different angle; I confess that I am an atheist, but I am probably a model of tolerance for other ways of living. I think it extremely important that schools set people up for a full life in modern Britain. I shall come on to give one or two examples of where I feel that is not happening. To me, religious education is about education, not indoctrination. I shall briefly cover four areas in my speech: admissions, staffing, curriculum and community cohesion.

On admissions, it is interesting to note that only four countries in the whole of the OECD allow state schools to select on the basis of religion: the UK, Ireland, Israel and Estonia. No other country does. In fact, we are the only country in the OECD that has a legal commitment to an act of collective worship. That law is broken in about 80% of schools every day; if we think about the number of people involved, this must be the greatest act of collective law-breaking in history. I think it is time that we looked again at the collective worship provisions of the Education Act 1944. Given that so few schools go through with this, we need to clarify the position. It is interesting that we have heard a lot about the aggression of Ofsted, but in theory, it should be marking down and reporting the schools that are not carrying out proper acts of collective worship and are therefore breaking the law.

On staffing, my party’s clear is about its policy. We believe that there should be a discriminatory recruitment process only for the staff needed to carry out religious activity in schools. A lady who lives two doors away from me in Redcar found her school in south Middlesbrough taken over by the Vardy Foundation, a creationist organisation, about 10 years ago, and she had to reapply for her job. I believe that the head of the foundation has now sold the schools that he took over. That woman, who was a drama teacher, was told that her new job would largely involve biblical tableaux. Not surprisingly, she left the school, and subsequently pursued a very successful career at a different school in my area. The issue of staffing is extremely important; young people deserve a range of staff to provide for their needs.

As for the curriculum—I mentioned the drama curriculum a moment ago—I suspect that that is where some of the trouble starts. Other Members have said that Ofsted appears to have been over-zealous in some of our more moderate schools. It certainly sounds as though it has, and I think that clarification is needed. However, it has recently identified various practices. I have already referred to the teaching of creationism as fact; that is happening in quite a few schools in the science and biology curriculum. It is a particular issue in the north-east, partly owing to the Vardy Foundation and some of its successor organisations.

GCSE science exam papers have been redacted in girls’ schools because the questions were deemed unacceptable. Some schools have not observed the legal obligation to teach anatomy, puberty and reproduction. Access has been denied to art or music. Schools have espoused a narrow view of the role of women and girls, homophobia, and exposure to extremist views. Those are all real, recent cases, and we need a system that is capable of picking them up.

I was a member of a parliamentary group that recently heard witnesses speak about three topics. The first was the “Trojan horse” situation in Birmingham, which has been well reported, so I shall not repeat all the arguments now, but I think it is well known that it was a problem for young people. We also heard from an ex-pupil from a Jewish Orthodox Haredi school in north London, who, despite having been born and raised in the United Kingdom, could speak only Yiddish at the age of 17 because he lived in such a tight, closed community. His education had been incredibly narrow. Some may say

that his community is free to behave in that way, but I personally think that it is a poor preparation for life in modern Britain.

We also heard from a former Accelerated Christian Education pupil. ACE bases its entire curriculum on the Bible, and the former pupil said that he had left the school, at the age of 18, believing that the national health service and the welfare state were against biblical teaching. In other words, the teaching at the school was a cover for a very right-wing political agenda. Was that person well prepared for life in this country?

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I realise that I approach this issue from a slightly different standpoint, but I have to say that the examples given by my hon. Friend are unbelievably alien to the experience of faith schools in areas such as Northumberland. I would not want him to think that that is what faith schools are like. The motion refers to

“the ability of faith schools to teach their core beliefs in the context of respect and toleration for others.”

I am sure that that wording reflects his views as well as mine.

Ian Swales: Absolutely. Indeed, my right hon. Friend has anticipated the next part of my speech. I have very little against most faith schools. The head of Ofsted is the former head of a Catholic secondary school, and he said recently that most faith schools “have nothing to fear”. There are outstanding faith schools in my constituency: Sacred Heart in Redcar and St Peter’s in South Bank, and their four Catholic feeder primary schools. The point that I was making in giving those rather extreme examples was that we need an inspection system that is fit for purpose and picks up such instances. If anyone has been given the impression that I think faith schools are riddled with this kind of thing, I wish to correct the record, because that is not what I was suggesting.

Sir Peter Bottomley: May I say something in fairness to Ofsted, which has not sent me a brief? On average, there are probably up to 10 faith schools in each of our constituencies, and I think that most of us have not received any complaints about Ofsted inspections. I suspect that we may be hearing about outlying cases. I do not know whether there is a new procedure, or whether some people are not up to the job or need more training, but I believe that most of our constituents want to be protected from both extreme teaching and the odd bad inspection.

Ian Swales: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Extreme teaching—and, indeed, extreme inspection, I suppose—is maybe what we are hearing about. Like him, I have not had any complaints from schools in my area about this issue. I do not want to predict the Minister’s speech, but the Department for Education itself has said that it is not true to suggest that schools would ever be penalised for having a faith ethos, so clearly the Department is not taking that position. If there is an issue, it is somewhere in the middle.

I talked about community cohesion, and there are undoubtedly potential issues there. I know we do not always like to talk about this in this House, but it is not new. We still have a huge sectarian problem in the UK

in Northern Ireland. The Netherlands in the 1930s had major Protestant-Catholic problems, and one of its policy solutions was to stop educating people separately. I do not put that forward as a policy I think we should necessarily jump into, but it is notable that there are now 62 schools in Northern Ireland that are educating people on a multi-faith basis, and I think the people who live in those communities do see it as part of the peace process, in a place where sectarian divisions run very deep. I am happy to say that there are few parts of the mainland where that seems to be the case.

In a multicultural society, which we undoubtedly have,

“respect and toleration for others”

are vital, and those words are in the motion, so I do not have a problem with its wording. What we are really talking about is Ofsted acting where those things are not seen to be in place. It may well be over-acting, but it is right that it has a role to act if it sees that.

This is not just about parental rights, religion or the state; it is also about the child. It is important to note that article 14 of the UN convention on the rights of the child—the one that is in child-friendly language—says:

“You have the right to choose your own religion and beliefs.”

To be fair, it goes on to say:

“Your parents should help you decide what is right and wrong, and what is best for you”,

so there is an issue about the extent to which children should be indoctrinated and what sort of freedoms they should have. That is encapsulated in the UN convention on the rights of the child. I think children also have a right to be educated to be fit for life in the country in which they live—in this case, Britain. That goes to the heart of what sort of education they should get. Many groups have different views about this. I am standing down in a couple of weeks, but I am sure that this issue will not go away. I think it could grow with the proliferation of religions and cultures. Our laws need to be fit for purpose, as do our inspection processes and the way we fund schools.

As I have said, I have a partial view that not everyone in the House will agree with, but I shall finish with a quote from the chair of the Accord Coalition, Rabbi Jonathan Romain from Maidenhead synagogue. He recently said:

“I want my children to go to a school where they can sit next to a Christian, play football at break time with a Muslim, do homework with a Hindu and walk home with an atheist—and with other children getting to know what a Jewish child is like. Schools should build bridges, not erect barriers.”

4.28 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on securing this debate. He has said everything that needs to be said, so I shall now be accused of speaking for the sake of it.

I was born a Catholic and I will die a Catholic, but if I had been born Jewish, I would have been proud to have been a Jew, and so on, but I absolutely understand, like the hon. Member for Redcar (Ian Swales), who has just spoken, that there are many colleagues who have no faith at all. Until we are dead, we just do not know, so I am erring on the side of caution; I certainly do not want to go to hell, because I can only imagine that

[*Sir David Amess*]

hell will be like the prospect of a Labour-Scottish National party coalition, so I am now sticking to my faith.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough on what he said, and I very much agree with everything that he shared with the House. My constituents, like his, have raised certain concerns about Ofsted's system of inspection. The hon. Member for Redcar mentioned the gentleman who is in charge of Ofsted, Sir Michael Wilshaw. I went to St Bonaventure's grammar school, and Michael Wilshaw was the headmaster of that school. Indeed, he was knighted during his period as a head teacher. So the head of Ofsted knows only too well the value of a faith school, because St Bonaventure's is a wonderful school. There are some wonderful faith schools in Southend, including Our Lady of Lourdes, St Bernard's, St Thomas More, St Mary's and St Helen's.

I have been alarmed about the way in which Ofsted's inspections of schools are unannounced and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, I think that some of the questions being asked by the inspectors—certainly in a sexual context—are most inappropriate. Parents should be consulted much more readily on the questions that are being asked.

In November 2014, Sir Michael Wilshaw announced that no-notice inspections were used only where there were serious concerns about the breadth and balance of the curriculum, about rapidly declining standards, about safeguarding, or about standards of leadership or governance. As we all know, faith schools are some of the best performing schools in the country. They are marked as either good or outstanding by Ofsted. There is therefore no ground for Ofsted to carry out unannounced inspections on these excellent schools. As far as faith schools are concerned, it is absolutely nonsensical to say that a suspicion of extremism is a ground for making a no-notice inspection.

I also want to raise a shocking example of self-policing following parents' complaints about the inappropriate and unannounced questioning of their children. I fail to understand how Ofsted was allowed to investigate the complaint made against it. Even more surprisingly, the Department for Education accepted Ofsted's conclusion that the complaints raised by the parents were "false".

Mr Andrew Turner: Is my hon. Friend saying that there is no evidence of the complaint being investigated by any body other than Ofsted?

Sir David Amess: Yes, that is absolutely what I am saying.

A leaked internal Department for Education document shows that there has been a significant breakdown in trust between the DFE and Ofsted over this issue. The document describes Ofsted's controversial drive to carry out British values inspections, and accuses the regulator of sending "confused and mixed messages". However, the Government put the British values agenda in place and they have been quick to say that complaints about inappropriate questions are a matter for Ofsted, apparently without taking any steps to rein in the regulator. There

are therefore questions for the Minister to answer today, and I am sure that we are anxious to leave him plenty of time to deal with them.

The Secretary of State sent a letter to colleagues stating:

"The changes we are making were first outlined in a letter to the Education Select Committee by Lord Nash in March of this year. In that letter, Lord Nash explained that the rationale was: 'to tighten up the standards on pupil welfare to improve safeguarding, and the standards on spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils to strengthen the barriers to extremism'."

The letter went on to state:

"The Prime Minister's Extremism Task Force was clear in its December 2013 report that 'Islamist extremism...is a distinct ideology which should not be confused with traditional religious practice'—but the vague school standards allow Ofsted to treat social conservatives as extremists."

That is absolutely ridiculous.

The Secretary of State also told us that there are "twin aims that lie at the heart of the reforms.

The most significant change strengthens the reference to fundamental British values, requiring schools not only to 'respect' but to actively promote them. This gives force to a policy first set out by my predecessor in response to events in Birmingham.

The fundamental British values of democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs are not new.

They were defined in the Government's Prevent Strategy in 2011".

However, the Secretary of State also said:

"The new standards, which require the active promotion of British values, mark a dramatic change in education policy. The previous standards simply required respect for British values and made no mention of the Equality Act 2010...

No pupil should be made to feel inferior to others because of their background. This has long been a central tenet of British education. But it is of course also essential to protect freedom of speech and it is in no way true to suggest that these changes would fetter the views of individual teachers or censor the discussion of relevant matters. A teacher who, for instance, disagrees with same-sex marriage because of their Christian faith will not be prevented from expressing that view by these changes any more than they would now."

Fiona Bruce: My hon. Friend has spoken about the changes in these standards, but what has been an important change is that the Secretary of State now has power to take regulatory action where a school is in breach of these requirements. That is why it is so important that we seek clarification and that the Minister gives it, because the repercussions on a school if it is in breach of these standards, in the inspector's view, are devastating.

Sir David Amess: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's advice, and I am sure the whole House will reflect on what she has said. Let me return to what I was saying before she intervened. The letter continued:

"The experience in Orthodox Jewish schools has been that inspectors were actively hostile to traditional Jewish beliefs about marriage held by children and staff."

That is absolutely shocking.

In conclusion, I believe that tolerance and inclusion are some of the most important British values, however the way in which they are passed on to young pupils should not be imposed on schools. Ofsted needs to cease making unannounced inspections on our brilliant,

wonderful faith schools, and stop questioning pupils in a way that is not considered age-appropriate by parents.

4.37 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): As we have to finish at 4.58 pm, Madam Deputy Speaker, I apologise for the fact that I may not be able to leave the 15 minutes I had hoped to leave for the Minister, because if I did so I would have only six minutes. I will try my best.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on his contribution and his passionate defence of faith schools, in which he admitted to the House that he felt trapped in the wrong body. That was an unexpected revelation; we are all intrigued. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also expressed concerns that the consultation on British values had been rushed. I agree with her on that and I will say something more about it in a moment. The hon. Member for Redcar (Ian Swales) rightly gave some worrying examples about the teaching of creationism. He was also right to intervene earlier in the debate to point out those concerns and to detail concerns about things such as the redacting of examination questions and the failure to teach legally required subjects. Those are serious issues and we should take them seriously in this debate. The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) told us about the excellent faith schools in his constituency.

I, too, attended a faith school. I attended a Catholic comprehensive school in Pontypool, and before anyone intervenes to ask me, yes I was taught by nuns, including the wonderful Sister Josephine, who taught me English, and Sister Mary Vincent, who was famous for her ability to deal with boisterous boys and therefore was known by all the pupils as Attila the Nun. It was a school in which it was perfectly possible, as hon. Members have described, to have a balanced education in a faith context. Everyone should take note of that fact.

As hon. Members have said, the debate has come about because of the sudden scandal that broke out in relation to the Al-Madinah free school and other schools involved in the Trojan Horse affair. In fact, the secondary part of the school was closed down as a result of that scandal, so it is not the case that just The Durham free school has been closed down.

There is no question but that British values are important. Given the recent concerns that have been expressed about the young girls who have travelled to Syria, it is clear that we need a national debate about the whole matter as well as about the role that schools should play in teaching British values. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State said, there has not been enough deep thinking about what that involves and about how schools should develop a whole school approach to the discussion of British values.

A couple of things have played into the problems that have been outlined this afternoon. One is the carelessness—I can only describe it as that—of the Department for Education and of Ministers in relation to their free school policy. That carelessness and that desire to make the policy a success in terms of numbers has led to some unsuitable people being given charge of our children. As the hon. Member for Redcar (Ian Swales) said, it led to things going on in schools—we know they were going on in schools such as the Al-Madinah free school

and The Durham free school—that should not have been going on in state-funded, taxpayer-funded schools. Those things happened because of a carelessness in the introduction of that particular policy. Whatever we think about the concept of free schools, it should not have been a rushed job just to get numbers up. The policy should have been introduced with thought, and we should have applied the utmost rigour in testing the suitability of those people who were being given the charge of our children.

The other matter that has played into the problems is that knee-jerk reaction to the consequences of that carelessness in policy, namely the Trojan Horse scandal, which involved a number of schools, including some free schools. That knee-jerk reaction resulted in this rushed idea that we had to teach British values. That very quick consultation resulted in the confusion that Members have outlined this afternoon.

As a result, we have confusion—we have heard about that—and condemnation. We get complaints from schools about the way that they are being treated. That is what happens when policy, particularly education policy, is made on the hoof. Last year, when this issue first came up, we had a debate on British values. At that time, I warned against the rush to put the policy in place. I also mentioned the systematic problems that had led to the Trojan Horse affair. However, as Members have pointed out, it was not faith schools that caused the problem. Faith-based education is a positive part of our system, and some of the finest schools in this country are faith-based schools. None the less, those schools must still respect and understand other views. As Members have said, that is what happens in the vast majority of our faith schools across the country.

Faith schools should never be places of indoctrination and proselytisation. The hon. Member for Gainsborough agreed with me on that. Of course those are the words used by the Catholic Education Service in its briefing on these subjects. Faith schools of whatever faith, academies or community-run schools must understand that the teaching of religion in our taxpayer-funded schools is not about proselytisation or indoctrination. It is of course perfectly valid that we should have a faith-based element in our system. Indeed, it is a long and proud part of our tradition.

We believe that had a better approach been in place, we would not have encountered the problems that have been outlined today. A classic example of the British values issue was when the then Secretary of State hit the headlines—he used to do that very effectively—but totally missed the point. As a result of that, we have the debate that we have had today.

I will conclude, as I wish to leave the Minister plenty of time in which to respond. Ultimately, the problem is taxpayers' money being handed over too freely without accountability to groups who fail to understand that they cannot proselytise and indoctrinate in our schools. The fault for the emergence of that problem lies largely, I am afraid to say, with the approach that the Government have taken.

4.44 pm

The Minister for Schools (Mr David Laws): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on securing this debate and giving the House the

[*Mr David Laws*]

opportunity to discuss this important issue. I also thank other hon. Members who have spoken and express my gratitude to the Labour shadow Minister for being generous with his time and for issuing a clear reprimand to his boss for his views on the contribution of nuns to the education system. That will have been noted by the House and no doubt by his hon. Friend.

I welcome the opportunity that my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough has given me to provide some clarity about this issue, if that is needed. I hope that I can offer him the assurances for which he has asked. I am grateful to him for notifying me of some of his concerns before the debate so that I could study them in detail. As he mentioned, he also spoke recently to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, who takes these matters extremely seriously. I will conclude my remarks with some of the comments that she has asked me to pass on about the Government's position on these matters.

I should say, especially given the time that I have to respond to the debate, that a lot of the allegations that have been made today about the inspection of particular schools are, as my hon. Friend will understand, contested. It is impossible for me to rebut each of the allegations today. Both the Department and Ofsted take them seriously, but as the Minister responsible for Ofsted I must make it clear that many of the allegations are not accepted and Ofsted has done its best to investigate them closely. The time I have does not allow me to go through each of the schools that my hon. Friend has raised in great detail so I will ask the chief inspector to write to him before Parliament is dissolved explaining Ofsted's views about the allegations that have been made. I hope that that will be helpful to my hon. Friend.

A number of hon. Members have said, and I am grateful to the shadow Minister for putting the Government's position on the record, that schools are not required to actively promote other faiths. They have to actively promote respect for those of other faiths. Those two things are different, and that needs to be clearly understood.

The Government recognise the huge contribution of the Churches and faiths to education in our country. As my hon. Friend said, Church and faith schools continue to be included among the highest-performing schools in the country, regularly topping the league tables. It is therefore unsurprising that they continue to be popular with parents, but this is not just about their academic record, as my hon. Friend said. Parents value their strong ethos, and their commitment to the development of character and discipline and to acting for good in society.

There has been a lot of discussion about whether fundamental British values are compatible with the values of different groups and communities in our society, especially those with different faiths and beliefs. For most of us—this has been reflected in the debate today—it is self-evident that these are shared values in our society, but we should be explicit about what the Government require. Our expectation is that every school will promote and teach about democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, and mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs. I believe that the vast majority of people in Britain, whether they

have a faith or not, would agree that schools should be teaching these values, and challenging views and behaviours that are contrary to them.

One of the reasons why I am so confident that we are talking about shared values is that so many schools already do a great job of promoting them, including many Church and faith schools. The Government—my hon. Friend raised this with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—are keen to highlight the excellent practice in many schools. For example, Ofsted inspectors recently highlighted excellent practice in Sinai Jewish primary school in Brent. They found that pupils were not only “proud to be Jewish” but also

“enjoy working with pupils from different ethnic and religious backgrounds”.

The report notes that pupils are

“exceptionally well prepared for life in modern Britain”.

Inspectors noted that St Ethelbert's Catholic primary school in Slough encourages pupils to see the world from different perspectives and has the notion of tolerance and mutual respect running through its core. Ofsted inspectors singled out the contributions of schools such as Christ the King school in Bristol and Tauheedul boys school in Blackburn, which was commended for having children who are

“very well prepared to take their place in modern British society and embrace British values”.

These examples demonstrate that there is no inherent tension between schools having a strong faith ethos and providing well for their pupils in relation to fundamental British values. They show that Ofsted's approach successfully reconciles those two aspects in reporting on schools, so the Government do not accept the assertion that schools cannot be expected to know how to promote British values effectively, or that doing so creates an excessive burden. Good schools have always ensured that their pupils learn about the values we share, as well as the beliefs and practices that make us different.

Just as the benefits of promoting British values are clear, so are the risks of failing to prepare pupils for life in Britain. What we saw in Birmingham last year—often in non-faith schools, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough rightly pointed out—and since then in a small minority of cases outside Birmingham were the dire consequences of schools failing, in some cases deliberately, to fulfil their responsibilities. In some schools, girls were treated as second-class citizens in the classroom, made to sit at the back and offered less choice of subjects than boys, limiting their aspirations and career opportunities. Homophobic bullying took place, and there were discriminatory attitudes about other faiths, lifestyles and cultures, with teachers and school leaders failing to intervene, and a lack of any learning about the different faiths and beliefs that make up British society, leaving pupils unprepared for adult life and, in some cases, more susceptible to extremist ideologies and their divisive narratives.

An intolerant extreme ideology is, of course, anathema to the vast majority of people of faith in Britain, but the lesson we must learn from Birmingham and other school failures is that it is right and essential to keep focusing on schools' work to develop their pupils' character and understanding of others in society and to hold schools to account fairly where they fail to do so.

My hon. Friend knows that Ofsted is a non-ministerial Department and has independence in its reporting and professional judgments. As such, Her Majesty's chief inspector is accountable to Parliament, appearing before the Education Committee twice a year. One important aspect of Ofsted's inspection of maintained schools is the consideration of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. I emphasise that that has not been added to Ofsted's remit in response to recent events and concerns; it has been enshrined in inspection legislation since Ofsted's establishment in 1992.

There have been reports about schools being unfairly targeted for inspection and, in some cases, quite selective reporting of the outcomes of some inspections asserting that schools have been marked down for aspects of fundamental British values. Ofsted has made it absolutely clear that this is not the case. In an article for *The Independent* on 5 February 2015, Sir Michael Wilshaw said:

"As a former headteacher of a Catholic secondary school, the charge that I am presiding over some sort of state-sponsored anti-faith school 'witch hunt' would be laughable—were it not so serious. I have long been a staunch supporter and proponent of faith schools in this country, believing, as I do, that they are a valuable and enduring feature of our education landscape".

He went on, which will please my hon. Friend, to say:

"Let me offer this unequivocal reassurance—the vast majority of faith schools have nothing to fear either from Ofsted or from the recent guidance issued by the Department for Education on promoting British values as part of the curriculum".

Schools are neither discriminated against nor given special treatment based on any religious belief. All schools are treated equally and inspected under the same framework.

Ian Swales: The Minister is right to mention partial reporting. At The Durham free school, there were many issues, including the failure to attract pupils.

Mr Laws: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In all the cases drawn to our attention, there are much wider issues than those that have been described. Quite often, the reasons for the schools being failed in some way by Ofsted inspectors have been not primarily about some of those concerns but about other issues.

In conducting inspections, inspectors are required to uphold the highest professional standards and ensure that everyone they encounter is treated fairly and with respect. I know that Ofsted inspectors receive thorough and comprehensive training in how to plan, manage and conduct a wide range of interviews and discussions with pupils during inspection, in both formal and informal situations. Ofsted has made it clear that it is not looking for answers from pupils that are contrary to any faith, but it must be clear that pupils can express views that are neither intolerant nor discriminatory.

Although Ofsted inspectors will, of course, act at all times with respect for the faith and values of the school, there are key statutory requirements that state-funded schools must nevertheless comply with, including ensuring that the theory of evolution is taught in science, although faith schools can and do teach that it is a theory that their religion does not believe in; the provision of sex and relationship education; and the teaching of pupils about other faiths—Ofsted describe this as "tolerance through understanding"—although this does not mean having to promote or celebrate other faiths. Failure

to adhere to these requirements is unacceptable to the Department and Ofsted, and Ofsted would always treat very seriously complaints about any other matters.

Where concerns have been reported in the media, these have often overlooked, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Ian Swales) indicated a moment ago, wider concerns about provision in the schools visited, rather than just weaknesses in promoting British values. That becomes apparent from reading the full inspection reports. Regarding Grindon Hall and The Durham free school, Ofsted inspectors found that the curriculum in both schools was too narrow, resulting in pupils not being adequately prepared for life in modern Britain. Worryingly, the pupils showed a lack of respect and tolerance towards those belonging to different faiths, cultures and communities, and this was unchallenged by staff.

Because of the allegations made by hon. Members and others, I have looked at all these schools. In many cases there are other issues that have led to the schools receiving criticism from Ofsted, often to do with the progress and attainment of pupils. In relation to Grindon Hall, following initial concerns from the principal of Grindon Hall Christian school in December, Ofsted undertook a detailed examination of the inspection evidence. This was conducted as part of its rigorous pre-publication and moderation process. These checks of the inspections found no evidence to indicate that inspectors failed to act with care and sensitivity, or to ask age-appropriate questions when they spoke to pupils. Sir Michael made this clear to the Education Committee in January when he said that Ofsted had "investigated those allegations" and found them to be false. However, subsequent to Sir Michael's appearance in front of the Committee, Ofsted received formal complaints from the schools in February. These are now being investigated in line with Ofsted's published complaints policy, and Ofsted will respond in due course.

I am sure we all agree that we need a cohesive, strong and safe society and that all schools, especially faith schools, have a vital role to play in this. The Secretary of State has asked me to underline a number of points. First, where concerns about the inspection of faith schools are raised with us, we pass these to Ofsted to ensure that any misunderstandings are cleared up. Where myths are growing, Ofsted will tackle these by communicating directly with faith groups. Secondly, we will ensure that best practice in relation to faith schools is spread around the system. The Secretary of State has asked me to make it clear that she has raised these issues directly with the chief inspector. I hope that what I have said today will give reassurance to my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough, but I am happy to take up any further concerns directly with him.

4.58 pm

Sir Edward Leigh: I am grateful to all who have taken part in this debate, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Redcar (Ian Swales) and for Southend West (Sir David Amess), the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) and my right hon. Friend the Minister.

In a few moments we are going to pass the motion

"That this House believes that Ofsted should respect the ability of faith schools to teach their core beliefs in the context of respect and toleration for others."

[Sir Edward Leigh]

That will be an important moment and the motion will be a guide to Ofsted. We have all agreed that faith schools—I think I am quoting the Minister here—do not have to promote other faiths, only respect for other faiths. We can all agree on that.

With regard to the particular allegations, there has not been time, unfortunately, for the Minister to deal with them all. They are hotly contested. When the chief inspector writes to me, I hope he will cover the point I made that there is no point in his asking his own inspectors; he must go back to the pupils, parents and teachers. We do not want any more inappropriate questioning of very young people. We want to create an atmosphere in which faith schools have the confidence to actively promote their own faith in the context of respect for others. On that, I am sure we can all agree.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House believes that Ofsted should respect the ability of faith schools to teach their core beliefs in the context of respect and toleration for others.

PETITION

Funding for grammar schools in Southend

5 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I am honoured to present the petition signed by more than 4,000 grammar school pupils and their families in Southend. The signatures were gathered mainly by the Southend high school for boys and Westcliff high school for girls. The grammar schools in the area that I represent face a funding crisis, despite making all possible savings. Other secondary schools in the same area receive up to 50% more per pupil per year. A similar online petition organised by a former student of one of my grammar schools has also gathered nearly 4,000 signatures. Grammar schools are

some of the best performing schools in the country and something needs to be done to address this funding discrepancy.

The petition states:

“The Petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to request that the Department for Education addresses the funding discrepancy between grammar schools and other secondary schools to ensure that the funding system does not discriminate against some of the best performing schools in the country and some of the most ambitious pupils who wish to take up extra subjects.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The Petition of grammar school pupils and their families in Southend,

Declares that the Petitioners are concerned that the outstanding grammar schools in Southend are facing an urgent funding crisis, as their two and three year budget forecasts show that they cannot cover the costs of all of their lessons; further that the Petitioners believe that many successful schools across the country, including the grammar schools in Southend, have long accepted a lower rate of funding while other secondary schools in the same area receive 50% more per pupil per year; further that the Petitioners are concerned that the local Schools' Funding Forum cannot close this gap and that successful schools such as the grammar schools in Southend are facing the worst cuts; further that the Petitioners recognise the fact that their schools have reduced staffing to the minimum, have stopped replacing equipment, while at the same time increasing class sizes and reducing the number of subjects taught; and lastly that the Petitioners believe that there is nothing left to cut.

The Petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to request that the Department for Education addresses the funding discrepancy between grammar schools and other secondary schools to ensure that the funding system does not discriminate against some of the best performing schools in the country and some of the most ambitious pupils who wish to take up extra subjects.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

[P001452]

HIV Prevention

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

5.1 pm

Mike Freer (Finchley and Golders Green) (Con): Thirty years ago we became aware of AIDS. The 1980s saw a ground-breaking public information campaign about AIDS. Leaflets to every household as well as television and radio all made us aware of the illness and the risks. The term “safe sex” and the knowledge of the need to use condoms became established and behaviours changed. I lived through that period and I remember the fear and the stigma. We have made progress in combating the stigma, and we have made progress in challenging the misconception that it is a gay disease. But it is worth reminding ourselves that in fact 55% of people living with HIV in the UK acquired the infection through heterosexual sex.

Having lived through those years and having lost too many friends to AIDS, it saddens me that we continue to have a problem with new HIV infections. Today, it is estimated that 108,000 people live with HIV in the United Kingdom. Today, the infection rate means that an additional 6,000 people a year are diagnosed. Ten years ago, the figure was 7,700 a year, so that reduction of more than 30% is welcome. But if we dig below that headline figure, there are some troubling trends. Among men who have sex with men—MSM—the rates are increasing, up 33% from 2,450 a year in 2004 to 3,250 a year in 2013. So while we are having success on many fronts, we still need to combat the rising levels of infections in those groups where infection rates are increasing.

I have already mentioned one group, MSM. Another group is black Africans. The rates per 1,000 head of population are similar. In the MSM cohort, it is 59 per 1,000, and for black Africans it is 56 per 1,000. I must stress that it would be wrong to stigmatise MSM or black Africans. The majority of both groups do not have HIV, but they are groups in which more work needs to be done, not least because it is thought that 25% are unaware of their HIV status and so are at risk of passing on the infection.

Some of the other issues we need to address are: aversion to safe sex; unwillingness to be open about male-to-male sexual partners; drug use, particularly what is known as chemsex; and a lack of knowledge about how HIV is transmitted and how to protect oneself. Therefore, the key issues appear to be prevention through education, prevention through intervention and medical intervention.

The obvious starting point is to educate when people are becoming sexually aware. I appreciate that that is not in my hon. Friend the Minister’s portfolio, but if we are to be innovative in tackling the problem we need to work across Government. Sex education in schools is always controversial, as Members who were present for the previous debate will have heard, but we have to accept that teenagers will have access to online pornography. Not only does the sexualisation of teenagers mean that they do not learn enough about loving relationships, but the imagery can undermine information on consent and on the health implications of behaviour.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Is not the hon. Gentleman making a strong argument for mandatory personal sex and relationship education in schools, which is something the Opposition now support? Sadly, his party has not quite got there yet.

Mike Freer: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. If he bears with me for just a minute, he might find that I am in agreement.

We have to accept that many teenagers will become sexually active, yet sex and relationship education—SRE—remains poor. The National Aids Trust recently published a report showing that in SRE there is little teaching about, among other things, same-sex awareness or HIV transmission. Teachers can be nervous of sex education full stop, let alone same-sex issues, sexual health or, in particular, HIV. That is compounded when schools struggle with homophobic bullying, which can contribute to teenagers feeling uncomfortable about seeking advice or information about their attractions or about having a safe sexual relationship when the time comes.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Is my hon. Friend as alarmed as I am by recent newspaper reports that it appears an increasing number of youngsters are being bullied or harassed at school for being gay, and in some cases even being taunted by teachers? Surely there has to be a completely different attitude in the 21st century UK.

Mike Freer: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I agree entirely. In the Department for Education—I apologise to my hon. Friend the Minister for straying away from health, but this is a cross-Government issue—work has been done to fund teacher training on dealing with homophobic bullying, but we need to go one step further and make it integral to teacher training, not an add-on paid for by schools and local education authorities. One of the problems is that if gay men or men who declare as MSM are bullied for showing any form of attraction to other men, for seeking advice or for showing that inclination in any shape or form, they will simply not seek that information. In school they may be afraid of being bullied, whether by other schoolchildren, teachers or other members of staff. They will close down and withdraw, and as a result they might make ill-informed decisions about their sex lives.

In my view, therefore, it is time for SRE to be made compulsory and inclusive. I appreciate that that is not the view of my colleagues in the Department for Education, but I think that they are wrong and that they need to reassess that. We are talking about people’s health and future relationships, so this is too important to get hung up about the ideology of compulsion.

There is also the issue of new technology. When I was at school, in the dim and distant past, sex education was skirted around and pupils, if they were lucky, were given a rather dusty old book with some rather dodgy drawings—clearly that did not teach me very much. Today, teenagers have access to technology. They are accessing sex differently, and accessing information differently, so we need to educate and inform differently. The increasing use of dating apps—I use the term loosely—means that increasing numbers of teenagers are finding

[Mike Freer]

sexual partners through their phones. Are colleagues in Government and in health authorities nimble enough in using that technology effectively to ensure that appropriate sexual health messages are there too? Are we constantly playing catch-up, or can we innovate too? How can we intervene differently to support those who are HIV-positive? I said that we need to start with education and that we need to use technology, but when people present as HIV-positive, how can we intervene differently?

It is true that new anti-retroviral drug treatments—ARVs—have transformed the lives of those who are HIV-positive, and they help most people to live near-normal lives, but it is still a life-changing diagnosis. ARVs have to be taken every day for the rest of the person's life. Relationships can be harder to find and to maintain because potential partners often reject someone who is HIV-positive. Despite anti-discrimination laws, few employees volunteer their HIV-positive status. To my knowledge, only one Member in the history of this House has ever declared his HIV-positive status. That former Member is now in another place. People will not volunteer their HIV-positive status for fear of discrimination—not just overt discrimination but the subtle passing over for promotions or snide comments in the workplace. Then there is the fear of shunning or harassment by co-workers. Despite all the work over the years, some people still believe that HIV can be transmitted through saliva or through sharing crockery and cutlery—30 years after a major education programme.

All these factors combine such that the human cost of HIV-positive status can be significant. Despite the medical breakthroughs and ARVs, the costs of depression, isolation and the fear of being open remain. We still have work to do to ensure that health education is provided in the workplace, and not just in health education teaching or clinics. The impact on mental health is often missed by health services and sexual health clinics. Sexual health clinics should be more about general well-being and not just sexual health. It should not just be about treating a symptom. If someone goes in with gonorrhoea and comes out with a pill, it is “Job done” for many clinics, but what if they are treating someone who is presenting as HIV-positive? What is the back-up? What about their mental health? Are we providing that total well-being package?

I mentioned chemsex, where men use drugs that enhance sexual performance combined with drugs such as crystal, methedrone or GHB. This can lead to reduced sexual inhibitions and so increased risk-taking. I understand that someone presenting at a sexual health clinic who has chemsex is more likely to have broad sexual issues, and the clinic will deal only with those issues, while the drug-related issues will often be subject to referral to a drug treatment facility. That is often a separate facility and the referral may take six, eight, 10 or 12 weeks, during which time the person who has been interested in seeking treatment falls through the cracks. The separation of treatments, particularly for those involved in chemsex, not only breaks the treatment plan but increases the chance that the patient will not take up the treatment referral, and so behaviours are not changed.

Only this week I had the chance to visit 56 Dean Street and Dean Street Express in Soho. They are absolutely stunning facilities that look nothing like what we imagine

the NHS to look like. It was not clinical and there was no plastic seating—it looked for all the world like an attractive boutique hotel. Dean Street Express has harnessed technology. Rather than someone having to go into a clinic, stand at a counter and announce to the world why they are there, or having to sit in an open waiting room, with everyone looking sheepish because they may recognise somebody else, they can book in using technology. They can also swab themselves, and then use the technology. That is the way forward if we are to make the system friendly and receptive, to innovate and to make it worth while and easy for people to seek help and treatment. Most importantly, it provides help on total well-being, not just sexual health. In my view, the Department of Health should look at rolling out that innovative technique.

I have mentioned the black African community. It is a difficult community to reach, and I do not have any answers, but we need to work harder to reach it, whatever the method—perhaps through its community groups or churches—both to educate and to support those who disclose themselves as MSM or those who are afraid of doing so for fear that their own community will reject them.

We have to accept that people will make poor choices and have unprotected sex, which leads me on to intervention. I pay tribute to the PROUD report. Its initial studies show that post-exposure prophylaxis and pre-exposure prophylaxis—treatments taken immediately after suspected exposure to HIV or as a preventive measure—work. The initial findings show that they are cost-effective approaches to the prevention of transmission, or at least to ensuring that infection rates drop dramatically.

I accept the fact that the use of PEP and PrEP has cost implications. I understand that PrEP costs up to £6,000 a year, but we should compare that with cost of treating someone who is HIV-positive. The lifetime cost of treatment for a person with HIV is between £250,000 and £330,000 a year, so a £6,000 investment could save between a quarter and a third of a million pounds a year.

I have outlined some of the human and financial reasons for understanding what is driving up infection rates, and the action we could take. That brings me to my last point, which is that we need to increase testing. We need to make it easier and less clinical so that people do not fear that it means always having to go into clinics. A clinic is not a friendly—to overuse the pun—environment.

If clinics are used, they should at least make routine tests for HIV across the board so that people who are HIV-positive can have early intervention. Early diagnosis and early treatment dramatically improve the lives of individuals and reduce transmission rates. Let us remember that 25% of those who are HIV-positive do not know it. Easier and faster testing will help to reduce the number of transmissions and new infections. That should include the roll-out of home testing, because it must be right to make testing accessible and easy.

We often shy away from talking about sex, and we certainly find it uncomfortable to learn about sexual practices outside our own experience. Yet if we are to tackle the issues, we have to deal with the problems that exist and with the world as it is, not as we might like it to be. That is why I call on my hon. Friend the Minister to explain how we can redouble our efforts to educate and innovate in HIV prevention.

5.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jane Ellison): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Mike Freer)—my friend in every sense—on securing this debate on a very important subject. As he said, it is one that we perhaps do not discuss enough. I am delighted to have the opportunity to respond. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his long and distinguished record of campaigning in this area, and for the important work he has done in our party on equalities and in this Parliament in championing HIV prevention and other important matters.

Other distinguished colleagues are in the Chamber this evening. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), a former Health Minister, has done long and distinguished service in this field, and it is good to see him in his place. It is also good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) in his place, and he highlighted the important issue of homophobic bullying in a telling intervention. I also wish to place on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Simon Kirby), who has done great work, with others, in lobbying Ministers extensively on the subject of HIV prevention.

Many good points have been made, and I will pass on the passionate views on sex and relationship education to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education. I am sure that she will want to be aware of those comments, but I shall not attempt to respond to them myself.

I am proud of the Government's record on tackling HIV, including on prevention. In 2012-13, the Government spent an estimated £630 million on HIV treatment and care, which has been key in enabling people with HIV to live long and healthy lives. The success of that treatment is shown by that fact that 90% of those on treatment are virally suppressed, substantially increasing their lifespan and significantly reducing their risk of passing HIV to others. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green said, we need to do far more to stop people getting HIV in the first place.

On top of the money I have just mentioned, we have given local authorities a ring-fenced public health grant of £8.2 billion over three years and mandated the provision of sexual health services as part of that. We welcome the fact that new HIV diagnoses have fallen from 6,333 in 2010 to 6,000 in 2013, and the proportion of late diagnoses continues to decline—down to 42% in 2013 from 50% in 2010—but we have a lot more to do, and my hon. Friend outlined some of the concerns in his speech.

The Government have taken action beyond awareness-raising and testing, for example through lifting the ban on the sale of home testing kits. Reducing the number of HIV infections, especially in men who have sex with men—MSM—is important because we have seen a worrying trend in new infections. In 2013, there were an estimated 3,250 new diagnoses, the highest number ever reported. That really is a cause for concern and one of the reasons why it is good that we are debating the subject this evening. We also know that transmission is continuing among black African men and women who are acquiring their infection within the UK.

It is estimated that one in eight gay men in London are HIV positive, and while that might sound alarming, it also reflects the success of treatment and that more

and more people are now living into old age with HIV. My hon. Friend rightly put a focus on being more innovative, and the importance of preventing the spread of HIV is one of the reasons why the Government have committed to protecting the HIV prevention budget—but I am clear that we need to be more ambitious and innovative. That is why we are redesigning our HIV prevention programme for England in 2015-16. I see this as a transitional year towards the updated long-term strategy for HIV prevention and sexual health promotion more widely. In future, this work will be led and managed by Public Health England, which is consistent with its wider work on health promotion and social marketing. I expect PHE to work closely with local authorities to promote the health of their populations.

One of the most exciting innovations to promote HIV testing is postal home sampling kits. Public Health England and local authorities will establish, for the first time, a national home sampling service. Through this, we will be able to deliver up to 50,000 home sampling kits in 2015-16, around three times as many as last year. That will augment the continued growth in HIV tests performed in genito-urinary medicine clinics—more than 1 million tests in 2013, which was 100,000 more than in 2010. People knowing their HIV status is important not only in getting treatment and allowing them to live a long and healthy life, but, critically, in preventing HIV from being passed to others. We now know that being on treatment substantially reduces the risk of passing on HIV. That testing is critical and a key component of our public health response to HIV.

We will continue to contract with the Terrence Higgins Trust in running public awareness campaigns. Changes to that contract have been made for 2015-16, but it is a respected charity in the field and its work remains an important strand of our HIV prevention programme. THT will have an increasing focus on digital platforms to meet the needs of the 21st century, including using Facebook and Twitter. The potential is huge. A single push on a phone app has consistently generated more than 1,000 postal test orders. In addition, those contacted through Facebook have turned out to be three times more likely to return a postal test than those contacted through any other route. Facebook is used by all age groups. It is therefore an important access point, particularly given the middle and older age profile of many of those diagnosed HIV positive.

THT will also continue to work with local partner organisations to talk to those at highest risk face to face, particularly those without access to the internet or to more traditional media. Those conversations include encouraging tests in GUM clinics, use of postal test kits and offering point of care tests in a diverse range of settings, including in churches and shops. That work is particularly important in reaching black African populations who are less likely to attend GUM clinics, but more likely to be diagnosed late.

Mr Bradshaw: I thank the Minister for her kind comments about the Terrence Higgins Trust. I refer hon. Members to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—I am a trustee. Can she clarify whether she has announced specifically how the Government's public health HIV prevention budget will be spent? If not, will she tell us when she expects to make that detailed announcement?

Jane Ellison: In about four paragraphs' time, if the right hon. Gentleman will bear with me.

As I have said, I want to be more innovative in how we prevent the spread of HIV. I am pleased to announce tonight an innovation fund up to £500,000. We want to give grants of £50,000 to £100,000 to local organisations or groups of organisations, who want to work in new and innovative ways to tackle HIV. As of tomorrow, those who wish to apply can contact PHE and register their interest. PHE will work with chosen organisations to ensure the work they are doing is aligned with the work local authorities are doing to prevent HIV infections in their area. Applicants must seek endorsement from their relevant local authority before submitting a final application. The grant awards process will take place through late spring and early summer this year.

In addition, PHE has invested £150,000 in new innovative work on reducing late diagnosis of HIV, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation has generously matched funding. My hon. Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green mentioned the Dean Street Express model. We also think this is an excellent model. We support that approach and will promote it in other areas.

Turning to the long-term strategy, as I have said I want the HIV prevention programme in 2015-16 to be a transition towards our longer-term strategy for HIV prevention, and for sexual and reproductive health more widely. PHE has today initiated a process of engagement with stakeholders in this field to seek their views in drawing up the strategy from 2016-17 and beyond. That will set out the short and medium-term priorities for HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health promotion. It also considers how all of this work needs to pull together and highlights the level of need that will need to be met in the future. As part of that engagement plan, PHE will meet key stakeholders in this field in the next Parliament to discuss its plans in more detail and be able to give them more information.

Turning to pre exposure prophylaxis, which my hon. Friend mentioned in his speech. The results of the PROUD research trial are very encouraging: 86% of the men, many of whom were at very high risk of acquiring HIV, remained HIV negative. Importantly, those taking PrEP in the trial did not have an increased rate of sexually transmitted infections. The PROUD research trial results are an important first step and the work continues. NHS England has set up an expert group to consider whether PrEP should be managed on the NHS and how this might be practically delivered.

Mike Freer: I am grateful to the Minister for that announcement. Is she able to give us any indication of how quickly the expert panel will report?

Jane Ellison: I am sure we would all want the panel to do that work in a timely fashion. I am not able to provide a date tonight, but I will convey the sense of urgency here in the Chamber to NHS England.

Hon. Members made important points about stigma and discrimination. I can only support everything they said. There is some encouragement: in the latest Ipsos MORI poll in 2014, the National AIDS Trust reports that overall public support for people with HIV is higher than ever, with 79% agreeing that people with HIV deserve the same level of support and respect as people with cancer. That is up from 2010. There is room for improvement, however, and a need for engagement across the spectrum. The NHS, local authorities, the Government, community and faith groups, the media—everyone has a part to play in eliminating HIV-related stigma. I note the comments about the role of schools—I will convey them to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State—and the intervention about homophobic bullying. The Government have invested money in tackling such bullying and take it extremely seriously. It remains a concern for all of us.

It is positive that the number of new HIV infections overall continues to fall, and I believe that the Government can be proud of their record in this area, but the rise in the number of new MSM infections and the high levels of late diagnosis among black African populations are of great concern. Today I have set out how we will be more bold and innovative with the HIV prevention programme, including through a new national home sampling programme—one of the first of its kind in the world—increased use of social and digital media platforms and the setting up of an innovation fund to trial new approaches. Importantly, we are working in partnership with local authorities in taking this work forward. I see this as a transition to a long-term plan for HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health promotion, and it is our ambition to see infection rates falling, not rising, and late diagnosis becoming a much rarer event. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this excellent debate.

Question put and agreed to.

5.31 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 12 March 2015

[ANNETTE BROOKE *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Police and Children

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(*Anne Milton.*)

1.30 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Brooke, to discuss a subject in which I know you are very interested. You may have to restrain yourself from nodding, disagreeing or making a contribution. I am pleased that we have been granted the opportunity to debate this important subject; it is a shame that the 643 other hon. Members were not able to join us, or at least a good portion of them. However, the relationship between children and the police is important and topical.

We come here in an environment of falling youth crime figures, which is welcome, and a falling number of young people held in youth offender institutions. We also come here in the wake of significant recent publicity about child sexual exploitation and the role, historically and recently, of the police in recognising and dealing with that.

We are also here at a time of continuing high levels of children in care and, as an interesting article in today's *Times* shows, high levels of children suffering from mental health problems—all children and young people who disproportionately come into contact with the police. Perhaps even more topical is the relationship between the police and children and young people who are vulnerable to being radicalised and end up leaving our shores to go and fight for causes in other places, which is another aspect of the relationship between children and the police that I want to touch on.

Clearly, as I think we would all agree, a good, positive, constructive relationship between the police and children and young people is needed from an early age; it is important to get off on the right footing. If I remember rightly, thinking back to the ancient history of my school days, the local bobby was a friendly figure that we could not just ask the time from, but confide in. The police community liaison bobby would come to the school regularly and was somebody we could trust and approach, not somebody we feared.

The attitude is very different these days, 40 or 50 years on. We increasingly see headlines about high levels of stop and search involving young people, although, fortunately, there has been progress on reducing that through the initiative from the Home Secretary. We hear a lot about children in the care system in particular—very vulnerable children—getting into trouble with the police. The debate about the age of criminal responsibility is ongoing; at the age of 10 in this country, that is obviously one of the lowest in the western world.

There seems to be a looming mindset in society that often sees children as part of the problem, rather than, as I would support, part of the solution to society's ills. Too often, we are telling young people and children what not to do, rather than encouraging them to take their initiative and develop their character and self-confidence. There has been a culture of what I call “No ball games here”, where society is becoming increasingly intolerant of children and young people in public spaces, with a willingness to label their behaviour as social or anti-social, when in fact it is normal, growing-up behaviour for children, teenagers and so on, as we have all experienced.

In that environment, the all-party parliamentary group for children, of which I am a vice-chair and in which you are involved, Mrs Brooke, produced a comprehensive and worthwhile report entitled “It's all about trust: Building good relationships between children and the police”. It was published at the end of October, following an interim report that we published in July and 18 months of work in which we interviewed and took written evidence from senior police officers, front-line officers from Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and Her Majesty's inspectorate of probation, police commissioners, the Youth Justice Board, justice organisations, children's charities, youth groups and, crucially, a great many children and young people. We held a number of evidence sessions at Westminster, took many written submissions and arranged a visit to Cookham Wood young offenders institution.

On behalf of the all-party group, I thank all the many people who were involved and gave generously of their time in this study, and especially the police for their enthusiastic and positive engagement. I am sure that Baroness Massey, chairman of the all-party group, would like me to make that point and to thank our secretariat, the National Children's Bureau, for the enormous amount of work it did in producing the report.

The report's aims were threefold. We asked, first, what do children and young people think about the police, and what are the experiences of particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people who have higher levels of contact with police forces? Secondly, how do police forces work and engage with children and young people? Thirdly, does police practice and the policy and legislative framework underpinning the work of the police need to be improved to promote better well-being of children and young people?

The report comes in a climate, as I saw in my time as Minister for children and young people, of a disproportionate cut in youth services at local authority level, which in some cases has removed a number of safe, positive places for children and young people to go to. Alongside that, however, I have to say that that has helped to foster a new partnership between many people in the youth sector: between youth charities, local authority youth departments and, in many cases, private businesses that are interested in providing facilities and helping young people.

There was also the Government's “Positive for Youth” paper, which I published two years ago, and which came up with lots of innovative projects going on with young people. There has been the roll-out of 63 myplace state-of-the-art youth centres, mostly in inner-city areas around the country. Initiatives such as OnSide, which took on some of those myplace centres, have engaged young people with the local community, the police,

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businesses and many other organisations. However, we all need to realise that there has been a disproportionate cut to what is seen as a soft touch—youth services at local level—which is unfortunate.

The inquiry's work was based on two key principles that reflected our commitment to the UN convention on the rights of the child: first, that in every context, every person under the age of 18 should be treated as a child first and foremost, with all professionals who come into contact with them having regard to a child's welfare and well-being. Too often, we treat children—if they are under 18, they are children—as mini-adults, rather than age-appropriately, particularly when it comes to contact with the police that may lead to arrest and custody.

The second key principle on which we based the inquiry was that children and young people's voices must be heard and their opinions respected, which is a subject that you and I, Mrs Brooke, have often raised in Committee on various pieces of legislation over the many years in which we have worked on those subjects.

The report comes up with a number of worrying, if not wholly surprising, findings. The inquiry heard that children and young people's attitudes towards the police are often characterised by feelings of mistrust and sometimes fear, and that encounters between the two groups are often characterised by poor, unconstructive communication and a lack of mutual respect. However, many children and young people accepted that the police have an important job to do and work to make their communities safer, although many also said that they do not believe that the police are there to protect them. That is particularly worrying because, as we all know, children and young people are statistically much more likely than older people to be victims of crime. It is therefore even more important that they see and appreciate that the role of the police is to protect them.

Some children and young people told us that they feel humiliated by the police and are convinced that the aim of the police is to target and undermine them. As one person said to the inquiry,

“if young people feel like they are being targeted, this alone is enough to create a negative attitude towards the police—regardless of whether... the police are in fact targeting them.”

It is worth noting that feelings of mistrust and negative perceptions can be passed on from generation to generation. Some young people who gave evidence described being wary of the police from a very young age, before they had actually had any interaction with them, because of the negative attitudes of their own parents, older siblings or other family members. That cultural apprehension about and mistrust of the police is much more difficult to address and remedy, hence my opening gambit that the earlier we establish positive relations and images for young people, the more likely we are to succeed.

There is some inevitability in all this. A degree of confrontation is inevitable. The police represent authority at a time in young people's lives when they are perhaps least likely to be receptive to having their behaviour regulated—as the father of three teenagers, I think I can vouch for that. However, this is a big issue that affects a large number of children and young people, who do come into contact with the police.

The figures that we have available for 2013, which we put in our report, are that in England and Wales there were 129,274 arrests of children and young people, including 11,369 under the age of 14, so 9% of all the arrests were of those aged 13 and younger—young children. The good news is that that represented a fall of some 59% between 2008 and 2013, and the number of young people in young offenders institutions has fallen substantially.

However, stop-and-search has been a particularly contentious manifestation of the frequent interface between police and children and young people. The Home Secretary is to be congratulated on the new approaches that she has driven forward in that respect, but we heard from children and young people that, too often, police still do not explain the process or the reason for the stop in the first place.

The all-party group sent freedom of information requests to all 43 police forces and the British Transport police. Of those 44 forces, 26 responded, so this is not based on a complete response. We learned that between 2009 and 2013, more than 1 million stop-and-searches were carried out on children under the age of 18. What was particularly interesting about the figures was the big divergence between one force and the next. The percentage of stop-and-searches within a force area carried out on under-18s varied from 13% in one right up to 28%—well over one quarter—in another, and in 19 of the 26 force areas, between 20% and 25% of all stop-and-searches carried out were on children and young people. That is worrying in itself. Why are police in one area stopping on average twice as many children as they are in another? That gives rise to concerns about inconsistency in the way guidance and the law are being applied.

There was a feeling among many of the children and young people we interviewed that stop-and-search is being used on children and young people too frequently and without good reason. Clearly, the Home Secretary agreed, given her intervention. Indeed, HMIC itself found that 27% of stop slips, which provide a record of stop-and-search, did not record reasonable grounds for a lawful search. That would provide evidence for the claims made by many of the witnesses who came to us. Another worry is that stop-and-searches have been used disproportionately on certain groups of children and young people, particularly those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and those from disadvantaged city areas.

Why is all this important? As I said, if the first contact between a child and the police is negative, let alone one that is really unreasonable and unjustified, that will shape the young person's attitude to the police the next time he or she comes into contact with them. That can change the dynamics of how children and young people view the police—not so much as people who are there to protect them and to whom they should go for help and safety, but as a body that they should be wary of because they are viewed as a suspected offender rather than as the victim they are much more likely to be, as I have already explained.

There is also a worrying impact on certain vulnerable groups. One is children in care. We are all too familiar with the disadvantages to which children in the care system, despite the improvements, are subject. They are greatly over-represented in the youth justice system and

among children registered as missing. It is the case that 6.2% of children in care who are aged between 10 and 17 are convicted of a criminal offence or subject to a final warning. That compares with 1.5% of children and young people as a whole, so a child in care is over four times more likely to get involved in the youth justice system.

There is an additional group of people with vulnerabilities through special educational needs, language or communication difficulties and mental health needs. As we know, those with mental health needs account for more than 60% of people in the youth justice system. The needs of those young people can be overlooked or exacerbated in encounters with the police, which can be particularly frightening for them if things are not carried out in a way that is sensitive to their disabilities.

More topically, the way police treat children who have been trafficked or experienced sexual abuse was described to our inquiry as a “postcode lottery”. Those are the very children, as we have seen in Rotherham, Rochdale and Oxfordshire recently, who most need to be able to trust the police, to go to the police when they are being abused in some way, to ask for their help and to be believed and to have their case taken up. However, they can also be at increased risk of involvement in crime themselves, committing offences, often as a survival strategy—stealing food or money—when fleeing from abusers. That is not to excuse their crime, but, again, sensitivity is required as to the particular challenges that they face.

We heard from the witnesses to the inquiry that there is something of a postcode lottery in the way the police deal with children and young people. There are big variations in the figures between police forces. The most vulnerable children, who most need the protection and comfort of the police, can often be those who are least trusting of the police. For too many children, their first contact with the police is in a crisis situation. There appears to be a lack of opportunities to meet and communicate with the police in a positive, non-conflict environment, where they could create the empathetic relationship that bodes well for the future.

That was the negative stuff, and there is a good deal of negative stuff in our findings. They are findings in the report are comprehensive and we need to be open and frank about appreciating the extent of the problem, but I want now to look at the good practice, what can be done to improve things and, indeed, where things are improving.

As I said at the outset, the police engaged very constructively and fully with the inquiry. After the report’s publication, we held a summit in the House of Lords. It involved the all-party group and some very senior police officers. There will be a further follow-up meeting in June to report on the progress that has been made. The report will not simply be put on a shelf and left to gather dust; we will keep coming back to it and looking at the progress that police and others are making in taking our findings seriously. The signs that the police are keen to do so are encouraging.

Throughout the inquiry, we saw numerous examples of good practice, which were largely based on encouraging positive contact between children, young people and police at an early stage, not simply when the finger of blame is being pointed at those children or young people. Hon. Members will be familiar with some of

those initiatives. The volunteer police cadets initiative is particularly strong in my constituency. They are a fantastic and impressive group of young men and women. Safer school partnerships help to break down barriers and negative perceptions. In some of those partnerships, community support officers are based in schools, where they work with pupils who are particularly at risk of offending.

I want to speak up for the police and crime commissioner in Sussex, Katy Bourne, who has been at the vanguard of efforts such as those I have described. She has engaged closely with the inquiry and been very proactive in promoting this agenda in Sussex. She reported on the results of a 2010 survey of more than 3,500 young people, which showed that younger children who had less contact with the police viewed them far more positively than did older children who had experienced more contact. Surely the reverse should be true. If we and the police are getting it right, the more people see of and know about the police, the more positive people will feel towards them. The survey made it clear that, for too many people, the reverse is true.

Katy Bourne set up the Sussex youth commission, and I have been to several of its meetings. In September, at the Amex stadium in Falmer, we had an event called the big conversation. The young people who participated in that exercise engaged with senior officers, including the chief constable and the police and crime commissioner, and they came up with some interesting and impressive suggestions, which were not rocket science but were well researched and had the backing of other young people. The original members of that group have formed a youth independent advisory group, which will help Sussex police to examine and implement their recommendations and has proposed solutions on an ongoing basis. The police commissioner’s office gives support and training to youth members of the advisory group, which provides a constructive and creative environment in which to challenge existing police practices and policy.

The chief constable engaged fully for the whole of the big conversation event, and I found it really encouraging that at the end he got up and undertook to take away the recommendations; to implement, as a matter of urgency, as many of them as he possibly could; and to report back to the young people on the progress that had been made in doing so. That was a real commitment. The new chief constable, Giles York, is doing a fantastic job and really appreciates the importance of engaging and dealing appropriately with young people. Next week, a meeting of the independent advisory group will focus on the use by Sussex police of stop-and-search. There is some really encouraging stuff going on in my area.

If I may blow my own trumpet, I would like to mention a project that I set up a few years ago called Midnight Football. People had complained to me—as they probably do to you, Mrs Brooke, and to the Minister and shadow Minister—that on Friday and Saturday evenings, young people sometimes get a bit the worse for wear in the town centre, one thing leads to another, there is a bit of antisocial behaviour and the police become involved. Many people say, “There is nowhere else for them to go.” I found out about the Midnight Football project, which started in Dundee, in Scotland, and I went to see the local chief inspector to ask whether we could run a similar project in one of the town centres in my constituency

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where we had had a few problems. He said that it sounded like a good idea, and he offered to give us a couple of officers for every evening on which we wanted to run it.

I spoke to a couple of local councillors, who were very positive about it and found us a little bit of money—it did not cost much. The local leisure centre offered the use of its facilities between 10 pm and midnight on a Saturday evening, and the local football club, of which I am president, gave us a couple of referees. Interestingly, the only people who were not terribly positive about the project were from the local youth service, who told us, “We already run a football project at 4 o’clock on a Thursday afternoon.” Great, but that is not when the problem is happening.

We went ahead with the project and ran it throughout the summer on a Saturday evening. We had between 40 and 50 13 to 17-year-old boys coming along, and a few girls as well. The project went really well. The police rated it so much that they sent a police football team along to play against some of the kids. That went down fantastically with the kids, especially when the chief inspector was carried off with a damaged knee. The interesting thing about the project was that the dynamics between the police and the kids completely changed. Some of the kids said to me, “If I was not here doing this, I would probably be getting up to no good on a street corner.” For some of the children and young people, their only previous interaction with the police had been when they had been hauled up on suspicion of having done something wrong. The next time the police came into contact with them, they said things like, “You’ve got a handy right foot, haven’t you?” They started to talk about football and some of the positive things that the young person had done. This is not rocket science but that sort of positive stuff absolutely changes the relationship between authority and children and young people, who are too often victimised. We need more such projects to happen in every town centre around the country.

I recognise the pressures on funding for police officers working closely with schools. Gone are the days when the local bobby was seen frequently in our schools telling us how to keep safe. However, it is a false economy not to do more at an early stage with our children and young people. I am glad that the Mayor’s office, for example, has dedicated funds to enabling Metropolitan police officers to continue the work of some of the safer schools projects in London schools.

The volunteer police cadet scheme is open to members between the ages of 13 and 18 and there is an expectation under the national police cadets framework that a quarter of cadets should come from a vulnerable background. That is not rocket science if we want to engage with children in care, those who have disabilities or who are at risk of exclusion. If those children see other kids from the same background putting on a police cadet uniform and engaging positively with the police, they are more likely to take notice than if we tell them that that is what they should be doing. The scheme is a really good one. As Jack, aged 17, told the inquiry:

“Being a police cadet has helped me to build confidence in myself, and it’s also helped me understand who the police are, what they do on a day-to-day basis, and it’s really helped me build relations with officers, and others, in social situations. Also, from a care end, an independence is gained. It’s given me vital experience that can only benefit me when that aspect of life changes.”

That was a common refrain that we heard from young people who took part in the volunteer police cadets and similar projects. It was pointed out during the inquiry that the cadet scheme may appeal only to certain children and young people, and that those who were most disengaged from society and most hostile to the police might be the least likely to consider involvement with a uniformed group that was run by the police. We need to put in the extra effort that is required to show them that the police are their friends and protectors as much as anyone from any other backgrounds.

We saw other examples of good practice, such as that of Telford and Wrekin children in care council. I was keen to promote that organisation during my time as a Minister and to make sure that every local authority area in the country—with the exception of the City of London and the Scilly Isles, which had no children in care—had a children in care council. They are a great interface between children in care and social workers, directors of children’s services departments, councillors and police officers. Telford and Wrekin children in care council has been working with the police to improve negative attitudes towards the police among children in care. To start with, officers have attended meetings in plain clothes, allowed children to try on their uniforms and demonstrated some of their equipment.

There is a gap in police training. I believe that that is a particular problem. In Sussex, the youth commission has enabled young people to have direct input into face-to-face training with police officers, and to do some of the interviewing for senior police appointments. According to Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary, 90% of police officers receive no further training on stop-and-search once they have completed their initial training programme. That is why it is really beneficial to deploy children and young people in a training role for the continuous professional development that is required in many aspects of policing. None of that is rocket science, but it is not happening in enough places.

Youth members of Second Wave came to see us. They described working with the Metropolitan police in Lewisham to develop specialist police training for the use of stop-and-search against under-18s. That training programme includes key elements of effective practice to ensure that the stop-and-search process takes place in a calm and positive manner, with young people made fully aware of the reasons for the stop and of how they can raise any concerns. Training methods include role play, trust building and communication exercises, which are presented by Second Wave members.

Data collection on stop-and-search in relation to children and young people is a problem because data are not collected nationally, which is why we had to go down the freedom of information route. Details of where good practice or bad practice are happening are patchy, so we welcome the Home Office proposals for national crime maps and best use of stop-and-search schemes, which will be created by the Home Office and the College of Policing and endorsed by all 43 regional police forces. National consistency, which we do not have at the moment, is crucial. That is why we are greatly encouraged by ACPO’s response to the report, which has been sent out to other hon. Members. I will read out some of the highlights from that response:

“The ACPO National Children and Young Person Business Area were very grateful to the APPG for undertaking this enquiry... the lead of the business area changed to DCC Olivia Pinkney.”

Olivia Pinkney is also the deputy chief constable of Sussex—we lead where others follow. ACPO also said that it was choosing

“to align...priorities with the ones highlighted in the “It’s all about trust” report. Since the enquiry we have developed a new national strategy for the policing of Children and Young People. Within the strategy are 4 key priorities namely: Stop and search; Custody detention and criminalisation; Children in care; Relationship between young people and the police.”

ACPO has also been

“talking with the College of Policing to explore options regarding vulnerability training for officers. We have established a network of strategic leads for the policing of children and young people in every force, and we held our first national conference...last November. We have also established a Chief Officer lead for every region and this will be the mechanism for providing strategic leadership and sharing good practice across the country.”

ACPO says that the Home Office’s best use of stop-and-search scheme will be used, following the scheme’s key principles, which will lead to increased scrutiny and transparency. ACPO looks forward to a further meeting with the all-party group to report on progress. That is positive, constructive and practical action, which has come from ACPO’s engagement with the inquiry, and it is to the police’s great credit.

ACPO also stated:

“Through the College of Policing we will be working with the Early Intervention Foundation to identify good practice in the area of crime prevention and young people. We will be using our national network to share this good practice and also look at promising practice, which is yet to be evaluated.”

We all know the benefits of the Early Intervention Foundation, and you and I, Mrs Brooke, fought to have it established. The principle of getting in early to work with children and young people is at the heart of ACPO’s plans.

There are a couple of other areas that I want to address before I finish; I know that many others want to speak, not least those on the Front Benches. There is a problem with the detention of children and young people. Research by the Howard League for Penal Reform in 2011 found that there were more than 40,000 overnight detentions of children aged 17 and under in police stations across England and Wales, including 2,000 children aged between 10 and 13. That equates to almost 800 children being kept overnight in police cells each and every week. The all-party group welcomes the commitment of HMIP and HMIC to address the situation through a joint thematic inspection on the welfare of vulnerable people in police custody, which will include a focus on children and young people and will report later in the spring.

There is a worry about young people being kept in police custody overnight following charge, because that breaches legislation stating that, if a child or young person under 17 is refused bail following charge, they should be transferred to local authority accommodation prior to their court appearance. That is not happening. There is a further issue about 17-year-olds. A 17-year-old is a child but, as it stood, the guidance referred to under-17s. We are pleased that the Home Secretary has responded and that the regulations are being changed so that a 17-year-old will be treated in the same way as any other child, because he or she is a child.

There is also an issue of how we deal with children and young people with mental health problems. We know that the closure of child and adolescent mental

health services in some places led to the police increasingly holding children and young people in detention for child protection reasons. In 2012-13, 580 children and young people aged under 18 were detained under section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983, of whom an estimated 45% were taken into police custody. Again, the all-party group welcomes the Government’s commitment to ensuring that children and young people are no longer detained in police custody under section 136, as set out in the mental health crisis care concordat published jointly by the Department of Health and the Home Office in February 2014.

Children held in custody need to be dealt with differently from adults held in custody. The all-party group recommends that children should be held in appropriate accommodation separate from adults; I have made the point about their going into local authority care. Children should be kept out of police custody wherever possible, and the environment in which they are held should be improved better to reflect the rights and needs of their ages.

The all-party group recommends that the Home Office should ensure that all newly built custody facilities include a separate custody area for children and young people, with police forces designating existing facilities for that use wherever possible, and that a requirement should be placed on local safeguarding children boards to monitor that transfer. There are key issues regarding children and young people with mental health problems who are kept in custody overnight. Practice needs to be improved, and the guidance needs to be beefed up. Those are two key recommendations from our report.

I have a couple of minor points to make and then I will finish on our major recommendations. Children and young people should be able to access high-quality advocacy and legal support during their time in police custody. In some cases, that advocacy will not be provided by their parents, whether or not their parents are available and whether or not their parents understand the situation.

Other responses to how we deal with vulnerable children include the initiative by the communications charity I Can, which has developed a training course called “Talk about Talk.” The course is co-delivered by young people with speech and learning needs to support youth justice system workers, including police officers, to improve the way in which they communicate with children and young people suffering from speech and language difficulties. We need to be much more sensitive to particularly vulnerable groups of young people who are coming into contact with the police.

Finally, our report makes 24 recommendations. All those recommendations are doable, and they are all perfectly sensible and practical. All the recommendations ring in tune with the points that I have raised. First, we want the Home Office, working with the College of Policing and the Youth Justice Board, to identify and share examples of good practice. Governments of this country are rubbish at disseminating best practice. When I was a Minister, I found that if a really good project to safeguard young people or children was taking place in one authority, it was no surprise if the neighbouring authority had never heard of it and was not beating a path to the door to ask, “Gosh, how can we do that here?”

Secondly, every police force should have a designated senior officer of ACPO rank with responsibility for procedures and practice for children and young people.

[Tim Loughton]

Thirdly, police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy assessments should include a focus on the quality of engagement with children and young people. Fourthly, police and crime commissioners should establish mechanisms for involving young people in their work, as we clearly already do in Sussex.

Fifthly, the national policing lead for police cadets should encourage police forces to work with the National Volunteer Police Cadets to extend the reach of the volunteer police cadet programme. Sixthly, the Home Office should examine how all police forces could deliver safer schools partnerships; I know that there has been a problem with Government funding for that. Seventhly, the College of Policing should review police training, and I have mentioned some ways that we could achieve that. Eighthly, the College of Policing should promote the direct involvement of children and young people in the training of police in their local areas.

Ninthly, the best use of stop-and-search scheme to promote good practice in relation to the stop-and-search of children and young people should be carried forward by encouraging police forces to improve the recording of data, enabling young people to participate in public scrutiny, promoting clear complaints mechanisms and setting out procedures for police liaison with child protection teams. Tenthly, the national policing lead on stop-and-search should ensure that all police forces have in place independent stop-and-search scrutiny panels. Eleventhly, the HMIC annual review of stop-and-search should report on its use on children. Twelfthly, the Home Secretary should announce that stop-and-search data will be made available to the public in local crime maps, including data on the stop-and-search of children.

Thirteenthly, the Government should revise statutory guidance to the police on carrying out stop-and-search so that the safety and welfare of the child must be a paramount consideration and the date of birth of children stopped should be recorded. Fourteenthly, the College of Policing should publish guidance with an authorised professional practice following public consultation on the use of stop-and-search procedures for vulnerable children. Again, I have discussed that. Fifteenthly, there should be a presumption against the stop-and-search of under-10-year-olds, except in exceptional circumstances. Sixteenthly, the Home Office should ensure that all newly built police custody facilities include a separate custody area for children and young people. Seventeenthly, the Government should amend section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983 to ensure that no child or young person is detained in police custody under the Act by 2017, and preferably sooner.

Eighteenthly, the definition of a juvenile in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 should be amended to ensure that 17-year-olds are treated as minors. That recommendation has already been picked up by the Home Secretary. Nineteenthly, the Home Secretary and Education Secretary jointly should write to all police forces and local authorities reminding them of their statutory duties under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, to ensure that where a child or young person is to be detained post-charge, they are transferred to the care of a local authority.

Twentiethly, all liaison and diversion should provide dedicated and tailored support to children and young people. Twenty-firstly, the College of Policing should

set up standards requiring all police forces to have a scrutiny panel in place to monitor the use of out-of-court disposals. Twenty-secondly, the College of Policing should ensure that the training of custody officers covers legal representation for children and young people, and the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives should develop an accredited training course for solicitors and legal practitioners wishing to work with children and young people in police custody. Penultimately, crimes committed by children and young people within residential care homes should be managed appropriately. Last but not least, the College of Policing should work with the Youth Justice Board and local criminal justice boards to develop a protocol to reduce the prosecution of children in care.

The recommendations are well thought out. They can be taken on board, as some already have been, jointly by Government, the College of Policing, the Youth Justice Board and others responsible, working with local authorities, to consider how they can be brought into effect over the next few years. I am pleased with the report and proud to be a member of the all-party group that produced it.

There is a problem in this country with how too many of our children and young people view the police. The way to start addressing that problem is to recognise its extent. There is a big differential among certain forces and how they deal with the issue, and there are great examples of good practice already happening that need to be disseminated nationally. Children and young people are the same whether they are in your constituency, Mrs Brooke, mine or those of the Government and Opposition spokespeople. We need greater consistency in practice around the country.

I think that progress has been made, and that there is a genuine recognition of the need to deal with the issue much more seriously and urgently—not least because of recent revelations about child sexual exploitation and the potential radicalisation of children and young people, which the case of three young girls going to Syria has highlighted. This is an important subject. It is important that we get it right for our children and young people. It is important that the police get it right, and I have no doubt that they want to. It will make their job easier if young people trust them, feel safe with them and provide them with information about how they can do their job better.

It is in everybody's interests for the report to be read and taken seriously, and for its recommendations to be taken up by all parties. I have no doubt that the positive response and attitude demonstrated by the Home Secretary is a good omen in respect of our recommendations being carried forward by the Government over the coming weeks and months.

2.15 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Brooke. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on initiating the debate and on his distinguished track record on these issues. Most recently, he has championed the victims of child sexual exploitation and abuse, playing a role in helping to create the great national will to which we in the House must now rise.

I welcome the report of the all-party parliamentary group on children on building good relationships between children and the police. It is, dare I say, one of the finest examples of work by an all-party group in the House in a very long time. The inquiry took the best part of 18 months and involved going out, listening to, engaging with and learning lessons from young people and the police. The report is exemplary, and the hon. Gentleman and all those involved are to be congratulated on what they have done.

I start by telling a story from my constituency that I hope will warm the cockles of the hon. Gentleman's heart. The November before last, we had the first Erdington convention; there are 10 devolved districts in Birmingham. We had a session on the police, with particular emphasis on the police and young people. In the spirit of the all-party group, a local councillor—I will not mention which party he was from—made a prolonged intervention with a five-point critique of the police for failing to deal with the problem of young people. He must have mentioned “the problem” at least a dozen times. Sitting to my left was Inspector Paul Ditta, who listened patiently. When the tirade ended, he said, “Councillor, you are entitled to your view, but I have to say, I could not disagree more. For us, young people are not a problem; they are a community to be engaged with.” I thought then, as I think now, “Wow. That's exactly the kind of mindset you want on the part of the police.”

I remember another occasion when a sergeant was presiding over a meeting of the Castle Vale tasking group, which at one stage got quite heated on the issue of ball games. Two individuals in particular were arguing. One of them said, “It's about time you felt their collar.” The sergeant, again, listened patiently and said, “I'm not sure that that is the appropriate response. What we'll do is, one of us, together with the youth worker, will go and sit down with those young people, have a chat and help them recognise that they are inconveniencing local people by playing in this particular part of Castle Vale, and encourage them to take advantage of local facilities.” Indeed, one of the sergeant's constable colleagues said, “We might even challenge them to a game of football.” Again, that is exactly the right mindset on the part of the police.

An oft-quoted Robert Peel maxim is that the police are the public and the public are the police. Effective modern policing is based on mutual trust and the building of good relationships—in this case, crucially, at the earliest possible age—between people and the police. Indeed, as the all-party group's report states, children's first encounter with police officers can have a lasting effect on how they view the police and how they subsequently engage with them as adults.

Again, I have seen such examples—good and bad. On the one hand, I remember in Rossendale and Darwen talking to a community group, and an excellent local community activist said that her daughter, who is now 18, had known the local police constable and the local police community support officer since she was eight. They were on first-name terms; in fact, they even sent each other Christmas cards. On the other, there are bad examples. I remember a young African man from Kingstanding in my constituency who came in with his mother to see me and spoke graphically about his experience of having been stopped and searched. He is a fine footballer of the future and an admirable young

man who has never been in trouble; his behaviour is exemplary. He said to me, “Jack, I was out with my mum in the high street. I crossed the road to go to another shop. As I came out, I was stopped and I was searched, and I couldn't believe it. I asked, ‘Why?’ I couldn't believe it. Then, I saw my mum on the other side of the street, looking distressed.” He said, “I felt humiliated.” He went on to say, “I know bad boys, but I'm not one of them, Jack.” Fortunately, that young man from a good family will not draw the wrong conclusions, but too often there have been such bad experiences, which have poisoned the relationship between young people and the police.

Therefore, for the reasons that the hon. Gentleman spelled out in considerable detail, first impressions are crucial. It is vital that the police deal with their relationships with young people in the right way.

The report is balanced in its approach; it celebrates what is good and the progress that has been made, but it is also challenging. It is worrying that it found that there is a lack of trust in the police on the part of too many children and young people, and that encounters between the two can often be characterised by poor and unconstructive communication and sometimes, quite simply, a lack of mutual respect.

As set out in the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, children and young people have a distinct set of rights and entitlements. As the all-party group found, however, even if improvements are being made, the policy and legislative framework governing the police does not yet pay sufficient attention to the particular needs of children and young people. That must now change.

I will now touch upon certain areas of the report. First, there is the controversial issue of stop and search. The hon. Gentleman was absolutely right to say that only a small proportion of searches lead to arrest and are, to be frank, ultimately found to be justified. The fact that we have too often had too many stops and searches has been damaging to police relationships with young people; there is no question about that. There is that particularly stark statistic in London—someone is seven times more likely to be stopped if they have a black face. That cannot be right.

The resentment caused by that has created barriers between communities and the police. Police officers should act only where there are good grounds for them to do so, and they must ensure that the welfare of children being searched is their utmost priority. Therefore, I strongly support the recommendation of the all-party group that the rights and specific needs of children must be reflected in the guidance relating to the stop-and-search process. The hon. Gentleman is also right to refer to the fact that progress has been made, with support from all parties in the House in recent months for changing the framework governing stop and search.

I will move on briefly to the detention and custody of young people, with particular reference to those suffering from mental ill health. We agree with the recommendation in the report in respect of section 136 of the Mental Health Act 1983, which deals with detentions, and we also believe that it is inappropriate to detain young people in police custody. It is far better that they are dealt with in other, more appropriate ways; it is better not only for young people themselves, which is the main consideration, but for the police, as less of their time will be taken up.

[Jack Dromey]

Again, I see that situation in my own area. It is not based in my constituency, but the Oleaster suite in Birmingham is an excellent example of collaboration between the police, the local authority and the NHS to provide a non-custodial place of safety, and many of the people who go there are young people in distress. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman is right to remind us that so many of the children caught up in the policing system are often not only vulnerable, but suffer from mental health problems, so it is right that we assert that a police cell is no place for young people who are suffering from mental illness.

We welcome the work that is already being done to improve practice across the country. Greater Manchester has been particularly exemplary in its approach. There are many examples I could give, but I will give just one: 17 police constables have had comprehensive mental health awareness training to become crisis intervention officers. The police in the region have also had success with their triage arrangements. Elsewhere—for example, in Nottingham and Derby—I have seen really good examples of the police themselves learning lessons and working in collaboration with other agencies on how those going through trauma in their life should best be supported.

Next, there is the point about good practice. As I have said, the report is balanced, because—I stress this again—it is challenging but also reflects much good practice and urges that that good practice be generalised throughout the police service. I say again that the report is right to identify failures and shortcomings, but also right to celebrate admirable behaviour and practice.

I have seen examples in my own constituency. I remember launching—quite literally—in a shaky canoe on Brookvale park a club run by Sergeant Simon Hensley, which was ultimately joined by a couple of hundred young people locally. Again, there was an incredulous councillor who said, “What’s a canoeing club got to do with police?” As a consequence of that initiative, young people came to have a different relationship with the police. They had a laugh with the police, canoed with the police and—depending on their age, of course—would go and have a drink with the police. In turn, the police were able to identify young people with particular problems in their lives and signpost them towards other routes they could take.

Classically, the role of neighbourhood policing has been not only to detect and fight crime, but to prevent it from occurring in the first place, and that initiative was highly successful. Also, when there was an outbreak of burglaries locally, young people in particular worked with the police to identify the wrongdoers. It is absolutely right that such good practice is showcased and promoted to show what is possible and what works.

The report is right to say that what we have to do at every level—from Government downwards, and at the level of the police service itself—is not only to showcase such examples of positive engagement but to drive that engagement in the next stages. The hon. Gentleman told us the story of some of the initiatives in Sussex. We strongly support the all-party group’s recommendation that there should be a lead for young people in each force.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned youth services and said that local authorities are now under financial pressure. Of course, it is not just youth services that are affected, but the police themselves. Other agencies are crucial to policing. The relationship of the police with young people is particularly important. Therefore, the hon. Gentleman is right to mention the mounting pressures on youth services. I gave the example earlier of police and youth services intervening in a situation before it became a problem, and thereby solving it.

I am bound to say that 17,000 police officers have gone and 32,000 will have gone by the general election. With the thin blue line stretched ever thinner, not only are the public seeing fewer bobbies on the beat—neighbourhood policing in many areas has been hollowed out—but there is potential for a lasting impact on relationships between children and the police. If we believe in the kind of neighbourhood engagement demonstrated in the report—I strongly support it—neighbourhood officers who are able to undertake that engagement are needed.

The report rightly highlights the work in local schools. In another example from my constituency, when the current North Birmingham academy was called College High, five or six years ago, parents were queuing up not to send their kids to the school, which was riven by gang warfare. A highly successful collaboration was instituted between the local police and the school, with a particular police officer attached to it for three years, although not for the whole time. There was an intimate relationship between the police and the school and, progressively, the culture of the school changed dramatically. The head said to me, “It was almost like there was a red mist on the path leading into the school. Whatever problems may have been in the community, they no longer came into the school.” But it is more than that. She said, “Because of how the police engaged with those young people, when going back into the communities from which they came, they had a very different perception of the police.”

Inevitably, the rapidly reducing number of police officers has an impact in terms of the necessary work that they have to do.

Tim Loughton: I should have mentioned earlier that, when filming a Channel 4 programme, “Tower Block of Commons”, with other hon. Members a few years ago—I was in Birmingham—eventually the police came along and played a football match against some of the young people I was working with. The hon. Gentleman might like to try the same in his part of Birmingham.

Can I try to tempt the hon. Gentleman away from being slightly partisan on this? This week the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, giving evidence to the Home Affairs Committee, confirmed that the number of police officers in London, which had been at 32,000, had dropped to 30,000, but that within the next few weeks the number will have returned to over 32,000. The police force has saved £600 million in the process. So police numbers are on the rise in many parts of the country, but the police will have made considerable savings and will also have prioritised projects, such as some of those involving working with young people, which I have already mentioned.

Jack Dromey: In the spirit of the all-party group’s work, I am striving not to be overtly partisan, but I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me; I had to make

the point. It is not just about resource, but if one is to achieve the type of engagements that are necessary, which are described in the report, resource is important. He said, in the context of youth services, that there can be false economies. That is right. What are the medium-term consequences? One must have regard to the avoidance of false economies. Incidentally, on getting it right and sensible economies, if we reduced youth reoffending by 10%, it would save £1 billion but, more than that, the pain often suffered by the victims of crime carried out by young people would be avoided. Therefore, neighbourhood policing is crucial in respect of everything said in the report about the importance of local engagement.

In conclusion—this relates to the point I just made to the hon. Gentleman—resource is important, but it is never enough. What is so good about the report is that it celebrates much that is good and it is profoundly challenging at every level, including in arguing for continuing and fundamental culture change regarding the interrelationship between the police and young people. He mentioned the role that the College of Policing plays in inculcating good practice in all police officers and in communicating to them the problems attached to seeing young people as the problem. The report is an excellent piece of work. I congratulate all those involved in its production. I strongly suspect that there will be a warm cross-party welcome for the proposals.

2.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Brooke. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this debate and bringing this important matter to the House. I congratulate the members of his all-party group, of which you are an esteemed member, Mrs Brooke, as is the noble Baroness Massey, among others. The report “It’s all about trust” is a comprehensive, extensive and thorough piece of work that shows what all-party groups can achieve when their members get together to do incredibly detailed and thorough work.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Norman Baker), then Minister for Crime Prevention, attended the launch of the report. His successor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), gave the Government’s response to the noble Baroness Massey on 14 November last year.

Young people may come into contact with the police for various reasons and it is crucial that, when they do, police treat them in a way that is appropriate to their age and status as children. The police have a statutory duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and they must take it very seriously. My hon. Friend made interesting points about early familiarity and getting to know the police, and about not being fearful and there not being a “them and us” situation. He makes exactly the right points. The report is informative about such ideas, and I will mention my thoughts about how those can be achieved.

My hon. Friend also said that children are often treated as mini-adults. We are in a strange world for children and young people. They grow up so quickly: the age of sexual maturity is being reached at an ever younger age, but the age of emotional maturity is not

coming down. There are children who are sexually mature, but not emotionally mature. There is a temptation to treat children as adults.

As a mum, I often want to treat my children as mini-adults and expect them to behave as mini-adults, but I have to remember that they are children. Children behave in ways that adults would not, and they do things that an adult simply would not do. A child’s relationship with certain individuals can mean that those people appear almost parental. Those in authority—particularly the police—have to remember that their relationship with a child is a distorted one compared with their relationship with adults.

My hon. Friend talked about the use of stop-and-search on under-18s, as did the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). I am proud of the steps taken by the Home Secretary with regard to stop-and-search across the board. The Government are clear that powers of stop-and-search, when used correctly, are vital in the fight against crime. Regardless of age, the powers must be applied fairly and only when needed. No one should be stopped on the basis of their race, ethnicity or age.

My hon. Friend mentioned different outcomes in various forces, some of which are clearly better than others. He also talked about the police and crime commissioner in his constituency, Katy Bourne, who was the first evidence giver in the report’s evidence sessions. Clearly, good work is being done in Sussex. He is right: we should all learn from that and ensure that all forces take on board such good work. All forces can learn. There is always more that can be learned, even for those that are exemplary at the moment.

In summer 2013, the Government launched a broad public consultation on the use of stop-and-search powers, following which the Home Secretary announced a comprehensive package of reforms. The measures are designed to ensure that the powers are used lawfully and proportionately and in a targeted and intelligence-led way.

An important announcement was the best use of stop-and-search scheme, to which all 43 forces in England and Wales and the British Transport police have voluntarily signed up. The scheme introduces public scrutiny and ensures that the police collect and publish thorough data on the outcomes of stop-and-searches. Additionally, the Government have revised Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 code of practice A to provide clarity to police officers on what “reasonable grounds for suspicion” means.

There is no doubt that the Government’s reforms will impact positively on all sections of society, including children. To support all that work, the Government commissioned the College of Policing to review the national training on stop and search for all officer ranks. It is undertaking that review with the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and we have specifically asked that the college consider children as part of it.

On young people in custody, children who come into contact with the police are afforded important safeguards by virtue of section 11 of the Children Act 2004. It places the police under an obligation to make arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children when exercising their functions. Additionally, the 1984 Act provides a clear legal framework for all interactions in police custody, and there are special provisions for children and young people.

[Karen Bradley]

In the past 18 months, two significant legal changes to the PACE codes of practice have impacted specifically on children and young people. The first was an amendment to code G to ensure that police officers ascertain whether when adults are arrested it is also necessary to arrest a child and bring them into custody. The second change was that, following the Hughes Cousins-Chang judicial review in April 2013, the Government amended PACE codes of practice C and H to give 17-year-olds the same safeguards in police custody as children aged 10 to 16. Specifically, that concerned the provision of an appropriate adult and the provision for the police to inform the child's parent or legal guardian of their detention.

I feel particularly strongly about that because of the work we are doing with the modern slavery strategy and the Modern Slavery Bill. We have seen significant evidence that child victims of trafficking need additional support. We are trialling child trafficking advocates with the assistance of Barnado's. I hope the evidence from that trial will enable us to introduce those advocates across the country in the near future specifically for child victims of trafficking. Obviously, the learning and evidence we receive from that trial will assist in all children-in-custody issues.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham talked about the identification of victims, an issue that appears across the board in so many areas of safeguarding and vulnerable people. Often, the first time the authorities will find out that someone is a victim, whether that is of slavery, child sexual abuse or other forms of abuse, is when they come into contact with the police through a custody sergeant. They often will have been arrested for committing crimes that they were forced to do as a result of their circumstances. We need to make it a matter of course that the police and in particular those first points of contact identify victims, spot the signs and do not treat them as criminals. By getting in at the earliest possible opportunity, we will ensure that children are not criminalised when they should not be and be able to give them the support they need and find the genuine criminals. I feel strongly that we need to ensure that all police officers are trained in victim identification.

My hon. Friend talked about 17-year-olds. We discussed that issue in the Modern Slavery Bill, which refers to those "under 18", and the Serious Crime Act 2015, where we looked at how various provisions affected 16 and 17-year-olds. The Government have recognised that there continue to be some ways in which 17-year-olds are treated as adults in the 1984 Act. For that reason, the Government launched a review of the provisions, and it reported to the Home Secretary in October. It recommended that all provisions in the legislation that treat 17-year-olds as adults should be amended. The Government are clearly committed to making that change.

Another recent change we made was in the Serious Crime Bill, which I am pleased to say became an Act this month. That change was to remove the term "child prostitution" from legislation, which was an incredibly important step. It could be called symbolic, but it is more than that, because it says that children cannot choose to enter into a life of prostitution. Children never choose to be prostitutes; they are always the victims. I am pleased that we could make that change through the 2015 Act.

The most significant provision of PACE concerning the overnight detention in police custody of 17-year-olds has been amended. The Government seized an opportunity in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015 to ensure that the requirement to transfer children to local authority accommodation will now also apply to 17-year-olds who have been charged and denied bail. In addition, just this week Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary published its thematic inspection of the treatment by the police of vulnerable people in custody. The report covers the treatment of children and some of its findings are extremely concerning. It is hard-hitting in its call for improvements, particularly on the unnecessary overnight detention of children in police custody. The Government welcome the report and are carefully considering its findings.

The police play a crucial role in safeguarding children and young people from abuse. As well as their duty to investigate criminal offences, the police have emergency powers, for example, to enter premises and ensure they can provide immediate protection for children believed to be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. Officers work with a number of partners in protecting children, including community safety partnerships, drug action teams, the multi-agency risk assessment conference and the multi-agency public protection arrangements. They have a duty to share information with other organisations, if that is necessary to protect children. Shared offices and such models as the multi-agency safeguarding hub are designed to encourage partnership working and the exchange of information needed to protect children and the public.

The police have an important role in protecting missing children. Children and young people make up approximately two thirds of missing reports in the UK. Although the vast majority of people who go missing return or are quickly found, many vulnerable children and adults suffer harm and exploitation while missing. Some never return. Identifying and ensuring the safest return possible for those vulnerable children and adults is a key part of the police service's child protection and wider safeguarding roles. Protecting those at risk of abuse and exploitation is a key priority for the Government, and we work closely with the police to deliver the aims of the cross-Government missing children and adults strategy. The strategy highlights the issue's importance and provides a core framework for local areas to consider whether they can and should do more to protect children and vulnerable adults who go missing. It requires a range of local and national partners, including the Government, to contribute to the prevention, protection and provision of support for missing persons and their families.

Every effort must be made to prevent looked-after children from being drawn unnecessarily into the youth justice system. Where the police come into contact with looked-after children who may have committed an offence, they have a range of powers that enable them to exercise discretion on the necessary response. Such approaches as community resolution may allow them to resolve the situation without children being charged over relatively trivial incidents.

I was struck by Members' contributions on antisocial behaviour. My father is a pub landlord, and he was the chair of the local pubwatch. They had problems with kids playing football in one of the car parks, and all the residents were complaining. My dad said, "Why do the

police not pick a ball up and play football with them? Why are they trying to arrest them? These are kids. They are not doing anything wrong. They are playing.”

I visited a slavery safe house recently that backs on to a primary school. I asked, “Do you have a problem with the school? Is the school nervous about the fact that you have people in here who have been through some of the most horrendous experiences?” They said, “No, the school is very understanding. There is nothing more wonderful for those victims than hearing the laughter of schoolchildren playing at lunch time. To hear those children out at break time, kicking a football, playing and laughing—those joyous noises make such a difference for those victims.” I will suggest the Midnight Football idea to my local police.

I want to mention the street pastors. I am sure many of us have them in our constituencies. I went to join the Leek street pastors a while ago, on the night the Christmas lights were being switched on. Lots of young people were around. The street pastors were fantastic. They have many weapons in their arsenal, but my favourite were the lollipops. They would go around near the bus station and places where young people might be hanging around—possibly looking like they were about to cause trouble, if one wanted to see it that way—and hand out lollipops. It turns out that, particularly when any sort of tension or aggression starts, the lollipops act like dummies. People suck away on them and the sugar rush gets a bit of sobriety into their bloodstreams, should they be slightly older and therefore allowed to drink, and they all calm down. They suck away like a child sucking on a dummy, and all the aggression goes. It was fantastic, so I recommend lollipops as a very good approach.

The Government take domestic violence and abuse extremely seriously and recognise that young people can be victims in both the home and their relationships. We are continuing to work with victims groups and other Government Departments to raise awareness and signpost where to seek help, which is why, in March 2013, we extended the definition of domestic violence and abuse to include 16 and 17-year-olds, with additional wording to capture coercive control.

The Government deplore the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and will not tolerate at any level failure to prevent harm, support victims and bring offenders to justice. We must protect children from sexual exploitation so that we never again have another case like those in Oxford, Rochdale or Rotherham, where local authorities and the police failed the children whom they had a duty to safeguard. The police have already taken action. For example, all chief constables have committed to a policing action plan that aims to raise the standards in tackling child sexual exploitation. Police and crime commissioners also have a clear role in holding chief constables to account. Nevertheless, the Government are clear that more can and should be done to protect children from sexual abuse.

There are three key challenges for the police. First, to improve the quality of their child sexual abuse investigations in order to bring offenders to justice. Secondly, to improve the identification of victims and survivors, including victims of organised offending, which we discussed earlier, so that they can better target offenders and protect those at risk of further abuse. Finally, the police must improve the support that they provide to victims during investigations. That means that they must focus on the credibility of the allegation, not the victim and

their behaviour; they must work together with local agencies, particularly social services, and better share information to ensure that victims and offenders do not slip through the net; and they must work together with the National Crime Agency and other police forces to better identify organised child sexual abuse.

On 3 March, in our report on tackling child sexual exploitation, the Government set out a number of actions to support the police and local agencies to address the challenges that they face. Those actions include: giving child sexual abuse the status of a national threat in the strategic policing requirement; funding a new network of regional police co-ordinators, located in regional organised crime units, who will help to better identify organised child sexual abuse across police force boundaries and ensure that cases are tasked appropriately; and setting up a new centre of expertise to combat child sexual exploitation. All that will help the police and other agencies to understand national data and evidence and the front-line practice and models of integrated working that work best.

Preventing and disrupting offending must be a priority for the police. That is why, on 8 March, the Government commenced new powers, including sexual harm prevention orders and sexual risk orders, which the police can apply for where an individual poses a risk of sexual harm in the UK or abroad, and powers to close an establishment that might be used for sexual activity with a child. Finally, the National Crime Agency has a key role to play in tackling these disgusting crimes. Through the national tasking process, it leads work to identify those individuals and organised groups of offenders who pose the greatest risk to children, and agree a comprehensive, targeted response.

Clearly, this is not a simple matter; if it was, we would have dealt with it years ago. The report from my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham and the all-party group makes for compelling reading and sets out some excellent recommendations. He has worked so hard, both with the all-party group and when he was a Minister, to raise awareness of this incredibly important issue. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and his all-party group, and I pay tribute to this debate.

2.54 pm

Tim Loughton: With the leave of the House, I would say that we have had a good debate, but in my case it was a 45-minute uninterrupted soliloquy, which is a first in my 18 years in the House. I am pleased and grateful that we have had the opportunity to air the really good points from our inquiry, which were published in the report. There was a good degree of consensus from both Front Benchers that we need to recognise these issues, which we can and must take up and progress for the good of our children and the good of policing in this country.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), and strongly recommend that he organise some football in his part of Birmingham—either at midnight or another time of day—and get the police involved. Members can be part of the solution, working with children and the police.

My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned street pastors: I have been out with my local street pastors and police, and I shall be going out with the police again in a

[Tim Loughton]

couple of weeks to see their new triage system, which includes a mental health nurse. The last time I went out with the police in Worthing, before Christmas, far from it being young people causing problems, those causing the most antisocial behaviour were the off-duty members of the police force having their Christmas dinners in various establishments around the town. In many cases, young people can give advice to police officers as well.

I urge the Minister to disseminate the good practice that the report flags up, particularly the really good initiatives in Sussex resulting from the energy, enthusiasm and good services of our police and crime commissioner. It also helps that we now have a really good chief constable, something with which we have not previously been blessed in Sussex.

My hon. Friend was absolutely right when she reinforced the importance of early familiarity. If we can get it right in the early stages and recreate the much more friendly, natural, empathetic relationship that school kids had with the police in my time at school—the same is probably true for other Members—when we naturally trusted the police, we will have a far better chance to avoid children falling into greater crimes and child sexualisation. We might also be able to avoid the more recent problem of radicalisation, because the police could share the intelligence gained from working with children to keep them on the straight and narrow.

I am grateful to all Members who have taken part in this exercise—it was not so much a debate—and urge others who have not attended to read the report and take it back to their own local police forces. Along with local authorities, their local forces must do their utmost to ensure that policing is fit for purpose and has the sensitivities and sensibilities required for dealing with vulnerable groups of young people. It is a false economy not to do that.

I am grateful for the opportunity to reinforce those points. I hope that, beyond this Chamber, a wider audience has taken note of our work. The all-party group's report is one of the best examples of how, through cross-party, consensual work with experts, the House can produce really decent research that will benefit us all.

Annette Brooke (in the Chair): Thank you very much, Mr Loughton, and to all the contributors to that debate. Officially, we must keep going and move on to the next debate, but we are going to try to accommodate a large number of young people in the Public Gallery, so it would be sensible if Members waited a moment while we try to get people in.

Violence against Women and Girls

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

In the week of international women's day, I express my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) for securing this important debate on violence against women.

Gender-based violence is a serious bar to development. As a member of the Select Committee on International Development, I have seen how it can affect women overseas. In 2013, a UK study estimated the annual global cost of domestic violence at \$42 billion, as a result of lost productivity at work and other expenses such as medical bills, police support and counselling. It is therefore abundantly clear that eradicating gender-based violence goes hand in hand with ensuring economic stability in developing countries—[*Interruption.*] At this point I break, the Minister having returned to her place, to wish her a happy birthday.

To continue, early and forced marriage also limit girls' access to education, which has an effect on the quality of the economic contribution that they will ever be able to make. I am pleased that violence against women and girls has been a focus of the Department for International Development's policy programme and, in a recent update to the International Development Committee, the Department reported a substantial 40% increase in the number of programmes that work to change harmful social norms. In Ethiopia, for example, we have seen that it is not enough to pressure Governments to impose laws on violence against women and girls; there needs to be a shift in culture, which is best supported by educating men and boys as well as women and girls.

Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I echo my hon. Friend's thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod).

Does my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) share my concern that so much of the increase in violence against women is being channelled through social media and websites? Will she join me in congratulating the Government on recognising that and on some of their work such as making revenge pornography illegal, and in urging them to go further to ensure that crimes against women are not committed so easily online?

Pauline Latham: The bullying of or violence against woman and girls is not always physical; a lot of the stuff on social media now is verbal and mental bullying, which girls find difficult to resist, in particular during their teenage years when they might sometimes be having difficulty in coming to terms with their life, lifestyle and where they are going. Social media need to be curbed and we need to look hard at how they are used. I am pleased to see that the Government are involved in dealing with the problem.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I, too, echo the thanks to the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) for securing the debate.

Will the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) join me in welcoming the Secretary of State for Education's announcement that lessons on consent, whether in sex and relationships education or personal, social, health and economic education, are hugely important? Does the hon. Lady share my disappointment that the Secretary of State fell short of saying that such lessons ought to be mandatory in all our schools?

Pauline Latham: I welcome the fact that the subject of consent can be included in such lessons. That is down to the school, and I am sure that most schools will include it, as well as education about female genital mutilation and all the other things that women and girls have to put up with. The schools—head teachers and governors—should take the lead, but I welcome the fact that the opportunity to include consent is available to them.

Since I came to Parliament in 2010, I have been particularly interested in FGM and involved in working against it. I am now chair of the all-party group on female genital mutilation. I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), for all her work before she became public health Minister—a portfolio that includes responsibility for FGM—when she campaigned against FGM alongside some powerful women in this country. Sadly, however, last year we lost a great and tenacious campaigner, Efua Dorkenoo, who died unexpectedly. The FGM movement has a lot to thank Efua and her tireless campaigning for. It is sad that she will not see the fruits of her hard work over many years.

The problem with FGM is that it is on the rise in this country. Only a decade ago the number of girls and women who had undergone FGM in England and Wales stood at approximately 66,000. Shockingly, the figure is now estimated to have more than doubled. I have seen the devastating effect that the practice can have on young women and girls, and I am fully behind any attempt to eradicate it within or outside the UK.

Recently, I worked alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) and the Justice for Victims of FGM UK charity to make amendments to what is now the Serious Crime Act 2015 to safeguard girls from the risk of FGM.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I am listening carefully to what my hon. Friend is saying. She said that the incidence of FGM has more than doubled in the UK over the past decade. Is she therefore, like me, disappointed that we have not seen the same increase in prosecutions for the promotion and practice of FGM?

Pauline Latham: I certainly am. I hope that under the new Act we will see some serious prosecutions, because there have been problems with earlier ones. I want to see prosecutions that might show the way, so that people who want to carry out FGM of young girls will be persuaded that it is not a good idea because they will be prosecuted. Until that happens, we will continue to see not so much an increase, but probably a steady number of girls who are at risk or have had FGM done to them.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is good that people are now talking about FGM? There is much more understanding of it and more support for victims, such as from the Kaiza project

in my constituency. I met with those working on the project only a couple of weeks ago and it is drawing attention to the problem and encouraging young women to come forward and confront what has happened to them.

Pauline Latham: I certainly agree. Any project such as the one in Rugby is welcome, because we want more organisations to educate and to help people to come forward and talk about FGM, which has been a taboo subject—something done behind closed doors—with families closing up and not talking about it. Girls have suffered as a result. I welcome anything that any organisation, such as the one in my hon. Friend's constituency, can do.

I also welcome the fact that we have some men in the debate. The subject is not women only and we should recognise that we need men to engage with it. I am pleased that in this place we seem to have a lot of men who are concerned about violence against women in this country and abroad.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Lady is being generous in taking interventions. I thank her for making a powerful speech and for her work on the APG.

The Opposition supported the amendment that the hon. Lady tabled to the Serious Crime Bill to ensure that girls at risk were supported in relation to FGM protection orders. Does she recognise, however, the importance of making FGM an offence? That has been supported by a large number of campaigning groups, and the Labour party tabled an amendment on the issue in Committee. Taking action would mean that, in communities where there were pressures on parents to cut their daughters, action could be taken against those involved.

Pauline Latham: Yes, but FGM has been illegal in this country for many years; it is just that we have had no prosecutions. Those are the one thing that will reduce the incidence of FGM. We need to look much more at how France has had successful prosecutions, so that we can have some here. That will show the country, and the world, that we are serious about combating FGM.

One of the amendments I mentioned was designed to give judges explicit guidance to allow them to grant FGM protection orders for girls at risk of FGM. Such orders would stop an at-risk girl leaving the country and prevent the commissioning of an FGM offence. Those offences do not always happen in this country; they can happen when girls go abroad, to places such as Ethiopia, and they often happen when girls go away during the summer holidays. We need to stop that, and education is the only way we can do it.

The amendment would also have provided a concrete framework for social workers, law enforcement agencies and other bodies to operate in. We know from previous experience that non-statutory guidance simply would not provide enough support for workers concerned about a girl at risk of FGM. That lack of direction, coupled with a fear of offending culture and tradition, as well as confusion as to what protective measures are appropriate, has more often than not resulted in a failure to put in place the appropriate safeguarding mechanisms. It is not acceptable to let more girls slip through the net, and I implore the next Government to provide the support that the judiciary and health care

[*Pauline Latham*]

professionals need. Cutting is not cultural, and it is not something we accept in this country—it is child abuse. We need to recognise that these girls are at risk of child abuse.

Stephen Metcalfe: We cannot say often enough that cutting is not culturally acceptable. We must never use cultural sensitivity as an excuse for not acting when we think people are at risk or have been abused.

Pauline Latham: I completely agree. This is quite simply child abuse, and there is no more to be said about it. Everybody has a responsibility to ensure that we do not accept cutting in any form, because it is wrong and it is child abuse.

Forced marriage is another issue affecting women and girls in this country, and the steps the Government took in passing the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to identify it as an act of violence and as a crime are admirable. The forced marriage unit, established in 2005, has been instrumental in offering young men and women the help they need if they are at risk of forced marriage. Happily, there have been reports of an increase in the number of people coming forward to the unit, and I hope that trend continues. In the coming years, I believe the UK will see a significant drop in the number of women affected by forced marriage, with the new law serving as a strong deterrent, and education helping girls and men to understand that forced marriage is wrong.

I am particularly proud of the incredible work the charity Karma Nirvana does to combat honour-based violence, including forced marriages, although I do not agree that this violence is honour based—it is violence. The charity runs the UK's only helpline offering support and advice to those affected by those issues. Its founder, Jasvinder Sanghera, is originally from Derby, and she would have undergone a forced marriage herself had she not run away.

Earlier this year, the charity ran a petition on introducing a day of remembrance for those who have lost their lives in so-called honour-based killings—they are actually murder—as a result of refusing to enter into an arranged marriage. The petition proved incredibly popular, and it contained the signatures of more than 110,000 supporters when it was presented in November. I am pleased to say that the day of remembrance received cross-party support and was given the go-ahead for 14 July, which coincides with the birthday of Shafiea Ahmed, a young girl who was murdered by her parents in 2003 because she refused to have an arranged marriage. Sadly, Jasvinder's own sister committed suicide by pouring petrol over herself and setting herself alight because she was the unhappy victim of a forced marriage.

I hope that, on 14 July, we will remember not just those who have been murdered as a result of forced marriage, but those who have committed suicide.

In the global arena, positive steps have been taken to prevent FGM, and Ethiopia, for example, outlawed it in 2004. However, the number of women affected by FGM has remained relatively high. The procedures take place in unsterilised and poorly lit conditions, which increases the risk of post-operative infection and further mutilation, and girls can lose their lives as a result.

I am encouraged, however, by the Department for International Development's response to the situation, because supporting those in the community, such as church leaders, village elders, fathers, sons, mothers and daughters, to speak out against FGM helps to challenge ideas about the practice. I have seen the Department's programme, and it is having positive results, which I am really pleased about.

On violence against women in Nepal, the police have a very robust system. A feisty female police officer is helping women and girls and challenging attitudes. She helps women to come forward to explain what has been going on. That, again, is an important step forward.

I pay tribute to the Government for all the hard work they have done to improve the lives of women here and overseas, but there is much more to be done, and it is important in the final days of this Parliament that we do all we can to ensure that the good work continues. I hope that the Government, in their aid programmes, continue to recognise women as making a significant economic contribution to their communities and to educate men and boys to change traditional views on women and women's place in society.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady for her excellent, wide-ranging speech, which addresses many issues that are so important to women and men across the world.

As the hon. Lady says, FGM should not be seen as a cultural practice, but does she agree that it is also important to say that FGM, the exploitation of women and violence against women are not associated with one religion or culture? Those who try to incite division in our community by implying that should be told very clearly that this is, unfortunately, a very broad-based challenge.

Pauline Latham: I agree with the hon. Lady—it is broad based. As she says, it has nothing to do with religion and culture; it goes across a number of societies, and it is completely wrong—it is mutilation and violence, and it has no place in modern society.

I am hopeful that the statutory framework put in place to protect girls in this country will yield positive results in eradicating the scourge of FGM and forced marriage.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. It might help Members to know that a Division is expected shortly. When it happens, we will suspend for 15 minutes, but we will add on the time that is lost. I intend to call first those who have notified the Chair that they wish to speak.

3.19 pm

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the debate. I missed the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) because I was bringing in one of the young women who is attending the event organised for those in their final year of school. I was going to call them sixth formers, but that is not a term we use in Scotland.

The debate is an important one for the week of international women's day. Violence against women and girls is an international issue. It is estimated that internationally about a third of women and girls experience such violence, but the issue is unfortunately alive and kicking in all parts and communities of the United Kingdom, across all classes. Women and girls of all backgrounds can be affected, at any stage of life. I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words and want to focus in particular on some issues from North Ayrshire and Arran, which has some of the worst domestic violence statistics in Scotland. That does not necessarily mean there is more domestic violence there than in other areas of Scotland; we do not know. However, more crimes are reported there than in many parts of Scotland.

The issues that I want to focus on are within the power of government. Many services and support mechanisms available to women and girls have been under threat in recent years, as there have been budget cuts from all parts of government—Westminster, the Scottish Parliament and local government. Unfortunately, as often happens when public finances are squeezed, some of the services that are less fashionable or that were developed for the most vulnerable are the first to be attacked. That is happening to services that were developed over decades for women and girls who are subjected to violence and abuse. North Ayrshire is not immune to that effect.

I want to discuss the future of North Ayrshire Women's Aid. Like Women's Aid throughout the country, the service was set up by women concerned about the issue, with an ethos very different from that of many services in the voluntary and public sectors. It had the aim of providing support to people in difficult situations and was a women-led service.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am glad that the hon. Lady has brought the debate to the subject of violence in this country, important though it is to consider the matters that have been covered so far. I do not know whether she has read the "Building Great Britons" report produced a couple of weeks ago by the all-party group on conception to age two. We gave the cost of getting things wrong with respect to perinatal mental health and maltreatment of children as £23 billion. Interestingly, about three quarters of child safeguarding cases are from homes where there is domestic violence. Often, women who suffer perinatal mental health problems and parent their children badly have themselves been victims, coming from parental homes where there was domestic violence. The matter is generational. Does the hon. Lady acknowledge that we need to do much more to make kids safe from domestic violence—not just the women who are in the front line of it?

Katy Clark: The hon. Gentleman makes his case powerfully and is of course right that it is difficult to quantify the cost of violence—to the individual and the country. However, there is no doubt that there is a vast cost to the country—millions, and probably billions, of pounds—in consequence of the effect of violence on individuals, whether they suffer it as children or in later life. A great deal of work has been done on the cost to business of people having to take time off as a direct result of physical violence in domestic situations, but, as the hon. Gentleman powerfully expressed, things are far more complicated than that. Government has an interest in addressing the matter, to ensure that all parts of society function as well as they can.

I am particularly concerned that the women's aid services in North Ayrshire are currently out to tender. There is no guarantee that the service will continue to run as it has in the past if Women's Aid does not win in the current tendering process.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): We experienced the same thing in Slough. Berkshire East and South Bucks Women's Aid did not succeed with its tender; the process was constructed in such a way that it was not possible for it to win. The housing association that won has now withdrawn from providing the service. Berkshire East and South Bucks Women's Aid has changed its name to Dash, and continues to provide a service using charitable and other funds. Those women will not allow women to continue suffering, and have carried on, but it is shocking that local government, and our tax money, are not backing an effective service. Instead there was investment in a service that turned out to be a paper straw.

Katy Clark: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has illustrated the point I am attempting to make extremely powerfully.

Even if North Ayrshire Women's Aid wins the tender, the impact will be a cut of 22% to its budget. My hon. Friend is correct to say that many such services began as voluntary services. Women provided them out of their convictions, in their own time. However, it is practically impossible to provide a service on a purely voluntary basis throughout a local authority area. There is a need for state support. My case is that women-led services may be the most effective among those provided for women and girls in this country. It will be a sad indictment of Members, irrespective of party, if we allow the current budgetary position and the tendering exercises that are happening throughout the service to lead to a situation in which services cannot continue operating in the way that developed over generations.

With a 22% cut in its budget, North Ayrshire Women's Aid will no longer, if it wins the contract, be able to help with addiction or children's issues, which are part of its core service at the moment. Workers have already been issued with redundancy notices. A cause for concern is that the tendering process is such that whoever wins the contract will have to operate differently from previously. The council will control opening times and decide the nature of the service provided to women. Historically, the service has been led very much by women. Women have been employed by it and run it, and there is a woman chief executive.

Previously, of course, it was a co-operative operation. However, pressures from the public sector have meant that Women's Aid could not continue to work in that way, so a male chief executive could be appointed. He might be good at the job, but that does not accord with the ethos in which Women's Aid developed—of a women-led project, with recognition of the fact that women are often best placed to provide the relevant services to women and children. Things might be different in the context of men suffering domestic abuse, which we have debated previously, but the debate today is about women. The council will decide on recruitment and selection, and there will be a more limited service dealing with housing and shelter, rather than the more holistic approach developed by Women's Aid over a long time. That is just one example of how services are under threat as a result of budget cuts.

[Katy Clark]

When the previous Administration were in power in Scotland, Women's Aid budgets were ring-fenced; it was decided that they should be because it was recognised that when times are difficult, services of that kind are the first to go. Services that are there for the most vulnerable do not have big lobbying groups providing them with protection and so they will be the ones to go when times are tough. However, the decision was then taken in Scotland not to ring-fence budgets for such services, and we are now seeing the consequences.

As we debate the effect of these issues on women and girls throughout the world, it is important that we also remember what is going in our own backyards—in our constituencies and communities. We should make sure that we protect the kind of services that are required when women and girls are most vulnerable—the point in their lives when perhaps they are at their lowest and so need support—and that there are the resources, commitment and vision to develop better services in future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I should say that when we suspend for the Division that will be, as I said, for 15 minutes, but as there is a lot of public interest in the debate and an overflow of visitors, if hon. Members get back as quickly as possible we will continue straight away. Perhaps during the suspension would be a good time to try to squeeze in a few more chairs.

3.31 pm

Mary Macleod (Brentford and Isleworth) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the debate, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) for helping to secure it. We have already heard about some important aspects of our subject today. The debate is about what we can do, as part of the work of international women's day, to "make it happen" and to make a difference to lives in this generation and the next.

The statistics on domestic abuse and domestic violence are still horrific. Two women a week in this country still get killed by a partner or former partner, and one call in 10 to emergency services relates to domestic abuse. There is a real reason why we are discussing this subject today: the statistics should not be at those levels. In London, reported incidents of domestic abuse increased by 23% last year, although that is not necessarily to say that the incidence is increasing. However, it is good that women now feel that they can come forward and talk about those issues more, which we should encourage even further.

3.32 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.45 pm

On resuming—

Mary Macleod: We have already heard about female genital mutilation. In my part of west London, there have been about 50 cases of FGM in one of my local

hospitals in the past year, which shows the scale of it. Those cases were in the maternity wing, where the women were giving birth. That is definitely something that we need to take account of.

I must pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr Hague), who, with Angelina Jolie, has been leading the campaign on sexual violence in conflict. It really has raised awareness at an international level, which is important. Domestic abuse is very much a hidden crime that affects every community and all backgrounds in this country and around the world.

I was at an international women's day event last Friday. One of the speakers, a lawyer, said that she had no knowledge of domestic violence until one day when she heard screams outside her house. She went out to see what was happening, and a man was banging the head of his wife against the roof of a car, so she tried to do something about it. She found out later that he was banging his wife's head against the car because she had bought a new pair of shoes that day. It was absolutely ridiculous. That was a visible sign of abuse, but so much happens behind closed doors and we do not see it. That is why it is important to encourage people to speak out about it. It affects men and women, and it is important to encourage victims to speak out and get the support that they need.

We have taken some steps forward in this Parliament. We have had £40 million of stable ring-fenced funding for specialist domestic and sexual violence support services, and the Home Secretary recently announced £10 million to support refuges, which was great. She came to the London domestic abuse summit, held in Chiswick in west London. The very first refuge in the world for women was in Chiswick. I wanted to show that London was responding to the problem and that we were a core part of finding a solution.

We have also widened the definition of domestic abuse, as the Minister said in the previous debate, so that it also includes the emotional and psychological abuse of 16 and 17-year-olds. We have opened 15 new rape support centres, in addition to the 84 that already existed, and we have increased the prosecution rate to 74.6%. We have introduced Clare's law—the domestic violence disclosure scheme—and domestic violence protection orders. There has been a rigorous review by Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary into the approach by police, which I have chased up with my local police. They say that body-worn cameras are making a real difference on domestic abuse cases. We have also investigated ways to strengthen the law to provide a single offence of domestic violence, and introduced stalking offences as well.

We have issued new guidance for the prosecution of FGM cases, and issued guidance to councils on how to identify domestic abuse quickly. We have signed up to the Council of Europe's convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, and held the first violence against women and girls global conference. So some things have been done.

I am also trying to work with the Mayor of London's office; I really want London to be a city with an absolutely zero-tolerance no to domestic abuse. In announcing £5 million in respect of domestic abuse recently, the Mayor said:

"This is a horrendous and frightening crime and all victims should have all the support they need, no matter where they live, which this new service will guarantee. But we've also got to get

tough on the perpetrators of abuse by making it very clear that domestic violence in form will not be tolerated and give victims who have the courage to report abuse the support they need to get the justice they deserve.”

That is absolutely right, and that support is critical.

Things can be done on a small scale. One of my local residents in Isleworth, Lesley Miller, recently did an art exhibition in South street to raise money for domestic abuse charities to help to create something positive from this. I have pushed my local council in Hounslow to prioritise victims of domestic abuse on the housing waiting list, especially when they have children, to save them going into temporary housing and then on to other housing, and to try to get them as stable as possible, so that children can get that support.

It was really good to hear the Secretary of State for Education announce the other day that all school pupils will now be taught a curriculum for life. I must pay tribute to my local Youth Parliament member, Dunja Relic, who raised the issue in a recent meeting that the Secretary of State was having in Brentford and talked about the curriculum for life. Only a month later, the Secretary of State has announced that everyone will be taught the curriculum for life, which is about emotional resilience to cope with the modern internet age.

Sexualised images on the internet, bullying and incidents of revenge porn are creating unimaginable pressures for young people, so schools need to do more to help pupils—to help young people—to manage their lives and stay safe. Teachers will be urged to improve sex education lessons and new topics will be drawn up to be covered in personal, social, health and economic education lessons.

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech, and indeed, we have worked in similar ways on those issues in Hounslow. I wonder whether she can clarify something: in my understanding, the announcement made by the Secretary of State for Education is for non-statutory guidance, so it is not clear how many schools will implement it.

Mary Macleod: The information from the Secretary of State’s office said that all schoolchildren will be taught it, so that is something that we definitely need to push on and ensure is happening in each of our schools. An important part of that is the dangers of the internet, which are not included. That raises lots of additional issues. The Secretary of State said:

“A good PSHE education should cover all of the skills and knowledge young people need to manage their lives, stay safe, make the right decisions, and thrive as individuals and members of modern society.”

To make progress on the issue, we have to look at the four Ps: prevention; protection and support for victims; prosecution of offenders; and how the policies are integrated. I want to raise three key things, the first of which is people continuing to raise awareness. All of us, including hon. and right hon. Members, as well as young people, can raise awareness of the campaign to get rid of domestic abuse. The “This is abuse” campaign has been really effective in raising awareness—if anyone has not seen “This is abuse”, I urge them to have a look at it. It is supported by “Hollyoaks”.

Stephen Metcalfe: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Domestic violence is obviously an important issue and she is highlighting

some of the challenges, but public awareness and awareness among those who might be able to influence policy are important. Will she encourage local organisations and local charities to contact their Members of Parliament directly about the work that they are doing? In Basildon, Basildon Women’s Aid contacted me. I have seen the incredible work it is doing, but it took a number of years for it to highlight that to me. Perhaps more interconnection between Members and local charities would help.

Mary Macleod: I agree with my hon. Friend. We can also take such things into schools. My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) and I visited one of my local schools, Chiswick school, for a discussion with 14 to 16-year-olds on sexual violence in conflict and domestic abuse. They were absolutely fascinated. They were brilliant, asked intriguing questions and got engaged with the topic. If we can help to link up all the organisations and people who know a lot about the issue and can offer support, the situation will be all the better.

There is also the use of technology and global social media to consider. We know that technology can be used by perpetrators to commit abuse, and we are battling against the tide of porn online and the impact it has on young people’s views on sex and relationships, but we can also work to use technology as a major part of the solution, not just the problem. The issue has been discussed this week in New York at the UN Commission on the Status of Women, and it will come up with some ideas on how that will be addressed.

Women’s Aid has launched an interactive billboard for international women’s day, with a photo of a female victim of abuse and an invitation to “Look at me”. When passers-by focus on the bruises, their photo appears on the advert and they help to heal the bruises, which is a nice way of doing it. 3M has developed a unique technology to provide victims with an early warning of possible danger. It has been used in Spain, where it has been credited with reducing the number of domestic-related homicides. Body-worn cameras, which I have mentioned, are improving the capturing of evidence by the police. In global campaigning on social media, the Salvation Army is sharing its message about “The Dress” in its campaign.

Furthermore, it is important that we involve men, which is why I am pleased to see my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) here today. This campaign affects so many people and families in our communities that we all need to work on it together to make a difference. This is not just a women’s issue; in fact, 700,000 men are also victims. That is probably the tip of the iceberg, as many men would not necessarily report abuse.

I return to the role of schools. If we want to change things for this generation and the next, we have to work with young people in schools—boys and girls, young men and young women—to say, “You can help us with this campaign. You can make a difference in your local community. Work with your MP and with the organisations and agencies to spread the word among the next generation so that they understand the warning signs of an abusive relationship and understand what a good relationship is.” Young people can help and support their friends who are going through those problems. They are more likely to see some of the signs, and their friends are more likely to confide in them.

Stephen Metcalfe: My hon. Friend has been generous in taking interventions, and I am grateful to her and to all hon. Members who have given way to me. Physical abuse is very serious, but I want to highlight the fact that psychological abuse can be equally serious in its long-term effects. It might not have the immediacy of physical abuse, but in an ongoing situation psychological abuse can leave as many scars as what might be considered ordinary domestic abuse, if there is such a thing.

Mary Macleod: My hon. Friend is so right. If someone went into a relationship in which their partner hit them on day one, they would walk out, but they do not hit on day one; they wait for a point months down the line, when the other person is closer to them—loves them, is involved in the relationship and may also have children with them. That is why the situation becomes difficult. It starts with emotional or psychological abuse and often financial abuse—isolating the person and telling them that they are useless—and it just builds from that. Often, the women are dependent on the men and want to try to solve the situation. Then they are told, if there is any violence, that it is their fault anyway.

All the stories are so similar. Every time we speak to a victim, the stories are almost identical in terms of the process undertaken. That is what we need to get across to young people—that this absolutely should not be tolerated. We therefore need to go further in raising awareness, encouraging respect in relationships, using technology and social media where we can and involving both men and women in our efforts. It would be so good if we could use today's debate, as part of the international women's day campaign, to make that happen. Let us really make a difference to the lives of not just men and women in our society who are going through domestic abuse, but women across the world, and for not just this generation, but the next.

4 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I want to make three main points. One is that violence against women and girls is serious. I want, secondly, to discuss better ways of preventing it and, thirdly, to raise issues about ensuring that policies and law actually work in practice.

The issue really is serious. I was looking at the statistics for Thames Valley, the police area that covers Slough, which I represent: one third of the assaults with injury, in the latest year for which figures are available, are as a result of domestic abuse—and actually not just assaults with injury are involved. If we look at the homicide figures for the Thames Valley area, we see that in the past five years there have been 86 adult homicides, of which 27 were domestic abuse-related homicides. One in three murders in the Thames Valley police area is domestic abuse-related.

This is a real problem, which is life-threatening for women and girls. We have to start from realising that and recognising that it is not just a question of bringing the perpetrators to justice. This debate has illustrated that very powerfully. It is also a question of preventing these kinds of incident in the future. That is mostly what I want to focus on—the education not just of girls but of wider society in how to protect girls and women from violence.

I held a meeting with women in my constituency about child sexual exploitation. They were concerned about the issue. They felt that policies were being developed

“somewhere up there” and their experience, as anxious mums, was not part of the debate and discussion. It was striking that again and again they came back to the issue of education—education not just for their daughters, but for themselves.

One of my asks for the Minister is that every school should have not just education for girls, but PSHE education for mums and dads. That was the demand that came from the meeting in my constituency, and I think it is a brilliant demand, because lots of mums there said that they did not really know what their daughter or son was seeing on the internet. They did not realise that internet safety should mean that they keep the family computer in a room where they can see what is going on. They should not allow their sons to have access to computers in their bedrooms, because if they do, they will be looking at things that Mum and Dad do not want them to see.

Pauline Latham: I arranged an evening in a school to talk about just that. I invited two lots of parents from two very large schools to talk about what was happening. Do you know how many actually came? It was an official meeting at the school, and I had the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), and child protection people there. Twenty people came, and most of those were teachers. There were probably four or five parents.

Fiona Mactaggart: I think that part of the reason for this situation is that we do this education too late. I do not know whether the hon. Lady's school was a primary or a secondary school, but if we did it in primary schools, with which parents have a more intimate relationship, it is more likely that parents would do it. I think that we should do it in primary schools.

In Slough earlier this week, I talked about this issue at a meeting—a kind of youth question time for parliamentary candidates and their MP. A young woman came up to me and said, “Do you know what? The PSHE I got was much too late. It was when I was in year 10 or 11—something like that. Actually, it's in year 7 that you are trying to make your first relationships with boyfriends.” I had the impression that she had been a victim of exploitation. She did not say anything that implied that she had been, but the fact that she wanted to take me into a corner and talk to me about this made me feel that she had been vulnerable and had not known what to do about her vulnerability. My anxiety about the welcome announcement from the Secretary of State is that this education will not happen young enough.

I used to teach year 6 in primary school. Some of my colleague teachers—this was a lifetime ago—were frightened of doing sex education, so I tended to be the person who did it, but I think that we have gone past that. It is really important that before girls have boyfriends and develop a sense of their own sexuality, they are able to have these conversations with trusted adults who can advise them on ways to be resilient to exploitation.

Mary Macleod: I want to give the right hon. Lady this example. I ran the London domestic abuse summit, in Chiswick, with the Home Secretary. I invited a couple of students from each of my local secondary schools, and some of the schools came back and said, “Sorry, we

think it's inappropriate." I think that there is some work to be done to educate teachers that this is a very important issue and they have to play their part in it.

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Lady is right to say that we need to educate teachers. I used to be a teacher educator—a teacher trainer—and it is true that we gallop through so much training for teachers so fast that we do not train them in how to teach this. Primary school teachers in particular can feel anxious about teaching it, but in my view it should be mandatory at every level of a child's education.

Children should have relationships education from the age of five. At five, children will be talking not about sex and sexuality, but about what to do about bullies and about sharing toys. Those are very important lessons about relating to other people that at the moment schools avoid. Not every school does so, but it is not mandated, as part of the national curriculum, that schools have to teach this, and many parents do not have the confidence to teach it. As a result, we leave our children vulnerable because they do not know how to protect themselves. The best form of protection against exploitation is self-protection. The police cannot be there all the time; Mum cannot be there all the time. We need to develop young adults who can keep themselves safe and who know how to resist exploitation.

Seema Malhotra: My right hon. Friend is making a very important point in a powerful speech. I was struck by a story that I heard recently about the impact of sex and relationships education in school. A young boy went home after some classes and realised that the domestic abuse—the violence—that he was seeing at home was not normal. He then raised a challenge at home, which led to the mum disclosing the abuse. Given the impact that SRE can have, not just in raising awareness but in making a change, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is right that it should be compulsory and that it can be age-appropriate and safe to teach from the age of five?

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is also right to admit that dealing with such things is complicated for teachers. We need to support and educate teachers. I remember reading a story that a pupil of mine had written; it was obvious to me that she had been watching utterly inappropriate movies at home. I thought that they must have strongly informed her writing, because I did not believe that she could have imagined all the things that she had written about. As quite a young teacher, I did not really know how to respond to that situation. Young teachers will encounter that kind of thing, and we need to train them to deal with it.

Education is one of the keys to prevention, but I believe that there is another way of reducing violence against women and girls. Hon. Members probably know that I regard prostitution, as it actually happens, as usually being a form of violence against women and girls, particularly vulnerable women. I believe that the way to prevent that form of violence is to reduce girls' vulnerability to being seduced into prostitution.

There has been much greater awareness of child sexual exploitation in debate and discourse recently, and that is an important step, but we need to reduce the number of women who are prostituted. As a state, we

need to help women leave prostitution, and we need to deal with the demand for prostitutes. In my view, we should follow the Swedish example and criminalise the customers, who have choice, rather than criminalising the women, who have little.

I praise the Government for creating section 76 of the Serious Crime Act 2015, which makes controlling and coercive behaviour an offence. That offence has the capacity to play a role in the prevention of physical violence, because physical violence is often not the first step; it follows on from, and is bound up with, controlling and coercive behaviour. Will the Minister tell the House the exact steps that she will take to ensure that police forces deliver on that? Earlier in the debate, we heard how for decades we have had legislation against cutting girls' genitals, but there have been no successful prosecutions. I want to make sure that section 76 of the 2015 Act does not follow that trend, and that it is instead used by police services as an effective way of preventing violence against women and girls.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) referred to the additional £10 million of support for refuges announced in November 2014. I was glad to see that, but I have to say that, too often, services for women, whether it be Rape Crisis helplines or funding for refuges, are sorted out at the last minute with no time for people to apply. The requirements often mean that, as on this occasion, lots of brilliant services cannot get themselves together to access the money, because they get the rules and regulations too late.

We need to make sure that in the provision of such services, as with other things, women are not seen as an afterthought. It must not be a case of a Department—in this case, I believe it was the Department for Communities and Local Government—saying, "Oh, whoops, we have a £10 million underspend here, and we do not know where it came from. Let's shush the women by giving it to them." I suspect that that is what happened, although I might be wrong. That happens too often, and we need to make such services absolutely mainstream. If we protect women and girls, we will reduce violent assaults and cut by a third the number of women who are murdered. We must make sure that that is front and centre of everything we do.

The Minister will speak on Tuesday next week in ping-pong on the Modern Slavery Bill. I believe that the Bill gives us an opportunity to help a number of women who have come to Britain as domestic workers and who have been vilely exploited and hurt. I am glad that the Minister has agreed to take a step in the right direction on the Bill, and I hope that she might turn it into a leap and support the Lords amendment. The Bill offers us another opportunity to support a number of people, mostly women, who have been victims of violence and exploitation. I look forward to the Minister's response on that.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): I know that the right hon. Lady—she is a passionate advocate on this topic—cannot be here for my closing remarks, so I wanted to comment now. We are drawing up an implementation plan to deal with the domestic abuse offence. Officials from the Home Office have met the national policing lead on domestic abuse and the College of Policing, and they

[*Karen Bradley*]

will be meeting the CPS, to work on implementing the offence in such a way as to ensure that it genuinely offers better protection to victims. We have debated the generalities today, but I wanted to make sure that the hon. Lady knew the specifics before she left.

Mr Peter Bone (in the Chair): Ms Mactaggart, had you concluded your speech?

Fiona Mactaggart: I have concluded. I thank the Minister for her comments.

4.16 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) on securing the debate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) and the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) for their contributions. I want to acknowledge the girls who are shadowing us today. They have given us feedback on the impact that the debate has on them.

Some important points have been raised. The hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire talked about the work that she has done to tackle female genital mutilation. She called for an even stronger prevention strategy, which would include making the encouragement of FGM an offence so that parents know that they will be prosecuted if they put pressure on their daughters to undergo FGM. She raised the huge concern that exists about the poor level of prosecution, and she made the point that cutting is indeed child abuse. I reiterate the point, which she made powerfully, that there is absolutely no cultural excuse for violence against women and girls. We must take a stand against all such violence, whether it be forced marriage, child marriage, FGM or domestic violence. I acknowledge the work done on the matter by Karma Nirvana, Jeena International, the Sharan Project, many FGM campaigners, Women's Aid, Rape Crisis and others.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran raised concerns about the impact of the Government's funding cuts on the survival of her local Women's Aid refuge. Refuges around the country are under threat of closure. That has led Labour to commit to providing a £3 million annual national refuge fund to make sure that that much-needed and life-saving service has the resources that it requires to survive.

The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth talked about the horrifying statistics on domestic violence, which has increased in London, and described how things that go on behind closed doors are a matter for all of us. My hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) spoke powerfully about the fact that we need not only a serious justice response to ensure that many more perpetrators are brought to justice for violence against women and girls, but a stronger and more effective prevention strategy. She also stressed the importance of compulsory sex and relationship education.

As Members of Parliament, I am sure that we have all discussed the problem of violence against women and girls in our communities. As I have travelled around the country on the pink bus, I have held discussions with women about issues that they are extremely concerned

about. As you may be aware, Mr Bone, 9.1 million women did not vote in the last general election. We want every single one of them to vote this time.

The issues that many local campaigners, victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence have raised with me bring home that every community is affected. Whether we are rich or poor, and whatever our social or ethnic background, this issue unites us all, which is why it is so important that we talk about it through international women's day. The solution to so many of these issues can be found only by working across nations and cultures.

I am proud to have been part of the One Billion Rising event co-ordinated by Lynne Franks over the past few weeks. One in three women across the planet will be raped or beaten in her lifetime, which is a staggering statistic—1 billion women will be affected. The hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth mentioned the women of the world festival, in which I participated last weekend and which explores these issues. Men are also campaigning through initiatives such as the white ribbon campaign against domestic and sexual violence. It is important that men also play their part.

In the past week we have seen "India's Daughter," a powerful documentary that sheds light on the appalling rape, suffering and death of Jyoti Singh. The cultural contexts within which that happened truly need to be addressed. As well as shocking India and the world, the documentary highlights the fundamental truth that violence against women and girls is a global issue. We need to support nations, but we also need to work together in this country.

Yesterday, I attended the Women's Aid and Girlguiding event in Speaker's house to launch the girls matter campaign, which calls for young girls' voices to be heard—we must see her, hear her and believe her. The event also highlighted the staggering statistic that one in three young girls are subject to different forms of sexual harassment, even in school. We must ensure that their voices are heard and that they do not continue to suffer in silence.

We have heard the statistics about domestic violence, which is a national scandal. Millions of men and women are affected each year. In some areas, almost one in five 999 calls are related to domestic violence. One in three 16 to 18-year-old girls have experienced groping or unwanted sexual touching in school. Some 750,000 children a year witness domestic violence. Shocking rape statistics have been made public today through the rape monitoring group. The number of recorded rapes in England and Wales has shot up in the past year. Indeed, since 2010 we have seen a 38% increase, but the number of prosecutions has gone down. There has been a staggering 50% increase in the number of recorded rapes in London in the past five years.

We recognise that there is a huge amount to do, but we are extremely concerned about the collective impact of some of the Government's funding and policy changes, which have been implemented without evaluating their cumulative impact on women's safety. One example is the scrapping of the welfare assistance fund, which left local authorities struggling to provide women who have left abusive relationships with basic items to start a new life, including bedding, cooking equipment and school shoes. Also, the lack of expertise in commissioning has sometimes led local authorities to ring-fence refuge beds for local women alone, which has had an enormous

impact because women sometimes need to flee to areas away from where they live in order to stay safe. We have heard examples of other commissioning arrangements in which the right questions have not been asked and a quality service has not been provided and has subsequently failed. We also know that 43% of domestic violence survivors do not have the prescribed forms of evidence to access legal aid. We cannot have a situation in which women are not able to get justice because they cannot access the support they need. All regions have lost services supporting children living with domestic abuse, with the biggest losses occurring in the south-west, the south-east and the west midlands.

There is still a long way to go. I will say a few words about where there is good cross-party agreement on what needs to be done but where we need to go much further. The previous Labour Government made significant progress in a number of areas. Convictions for rape increased by 45%, and there was a decline in domestic violence. We introduced specialist domestic violence courts, multi-agency risk assessment conferences and independent domestic violence advocates. Many of those measures, including IDVAs, have been continued by this Government and have made an important difference. We have supported the Government's work to introduce the new offence of domestic abuse. I am pleased to hear about the work to ensure that there is sufficient guidance and that training is implemented, so that there is understanding and awareness of the new offence of domestic abuse and so that that makes a difference to the lives of families across the UK. We pressed for legal aid for FGM protection orders, and I am pleased that the Government have confirmed that that legal aid will be available for girls at risk, but we have also called for the encouragement of FGM to be an offence. We will certainly be looking at that.

If Labour comes to power, we will put women's safety much more centre stage. We will appoint a new commissioner to address domestic and sexual violence, and we will integrate the protection of women and girls across Government. There will also be new standards for policing. We will publish domestic abuse and sexual violence league tables for every police force across England and Wales to expose poor performance and poor standards.

We will also make sex and relationship education a compulsory part of school curriculums. In the past week there has been another missed opportunity for the Government to do that. Those issues have been raised by hon. Members on both sides of the House, and the Select Committee on Education has made its recommendation on that subject in the past few weeks with cross-party support. The recommendation is supported by girls and young boys to whom I have spoken in a series of girl safety summits across the country.

We need to ensure an understanding of zero tolerance of violence in relationships. People must understand the difference between an abusive relationship and a normal relationship. They must know what rape is. One girl said to me, "Nobody ever taught us what rape was. I had to go on the internet to find out." To hear such stories from young girls and boys growing up across Britain is a travesty. We need to take our responsibility much more seriously.

Although we welcome the moves by the Secretary of State for Education, it has taken the Government five years to recognise that sex and relationship education

guidance needs to mention the internet. We are concerned by the announcement of what we understand to be non-statutory guidance for schools, which is just not good enough. Despite being urged by the Opposition, by charities, by parents, by young people and by the Education Committee, the Government have not taken this opportunity to make sex and relationship education compulsory in schools.

This has been an important and valuable debate. We face a real challenge, and not just in responding to the rising demand for services and support. I have talked to rape crisis centres, and they are dealing with not only historical but new reports and disclosures of rape and sexual assault. Some of that service needs to last a lifetime, and resources must be made available to do that.

The Government must commit to a long-term strategy for the effective prevention of violence against women and girls in all its forms, and we must play our part on the world stage to ensure that that work happens not only here but across the world. We must ensure that women and girls are safe not just in their own homes but wherever they work and wherever they are in society.

4.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Karen Bradley): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Mary Macleod) and for Mid Derbyshire (Pauline Latham) and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) on securing this debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. The Committee showed great foresight in granting a debate on violence against women and girls, an important subject, on today of all days: we have seen so many young women coming to Parliament to see what we do here and to learn about the debates we have on such important issues that rightly concern us all.

There is no doubt that violence against women and girls ruins lives and has a devastating impact on victims and their families. The Government have taken strong measures to tackle all forms of violence and abuse, including domestic violence, sexual violence, forced marriage, female genital mutilation and stalking. Too many women have been subjected to unacceptable violence. We have heard in contributions to this debate some powerful examples of the sort of violence that women endure, both here and overseas. The Government have been unequivocal that such violence must stop, and I am proud of the progress we have made since 2010 to realise our vision of a society where no woman is subjected to violence and abuse.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Maria Miller) made the point that the issue is wider than raising awareness among women and girls; we need to educate boys and men and ensure that people understand social media. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for her tireless work on revenge pornography. That is the sort of work and those are the sorts of measure that will make tangible differences for women and girls here in Britain. She should be incredibly proud of what she has achieved.

We have made significant legislative changes since 2010 and ensured that more forms of violence and abuse are explicitly enshrined in law as criminal offences.

[Karen Bradley]

The Government understand that domestic violence and abuse are more than just physical. To quote one victim who responded to our consultation last summer, “my bruises faded, but the psychological scars didn’t”.

Last week, the Serious Crime Act 2015 received Royal Assent, and with it we created a new law that will ensure that manipulative, controlling perpetrators who cause their loved ones to live in fear will face justice for their actions. The new law captures coercive and controlling behaviour in intimate or family relationships and is a significant step forward in improving the protection available for victims of this sinister and pervasive form of abuse. The right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) asked what approach we would take to ensure that it works on the ground, and in my intervention I specified what action we are taking to make that tangible difference.

Within the same Act, we also introduced a requirement for mandatory reporting of female genital mutilation. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire, who has done such incredible work on that issue. I will say more later about our work on it but in terms of legislative change, it is another significant step forward. We introduced two new offences of stalking in 2012 to reflect properly the seriousness of that insidious crime, and I am pleased that in 2013-14, more than 700 prosecutions were brought under the new legislation. We criminalised forced marriage last year, and the possession of realistic depictions of rape and revenge pornography both became offences under the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015.

Protecting those at risk is fundamental to reducing violence. We rolled out the domestic violence protection order and domestic violence disclosure scheme, or Clare’s law, nationally last year. Those innovative measures are about stopping violence in its tracks, and there is clearly a demand for them; more than 2,500 domestic violence protection orders are now in place across England and Wales.

The orders sanction the perpetrators of violence and lay the culpability exactly where it should be. Victims are able to stay in their own homes, as they should be able to, and the perpetrator is the one who must stay away. More than 1,300 disclosures have already been made under the domestic violence disclosure scheme, which allows people to make an informed decision about their relationships. Women are absolutely entitled to know whether the person whom they have met has a violent history and to get out of the relationship before it is too late.

These crimes are often hidden and under-reported, but positive indications are emerging from data sources. I am particularly encouraged to see that the prevalence of sexual assault against women has fallen to its lowest ever level since the data began to be captured in 2004-05. At the same time, the reporting of sexual offences has increased by 19%, showing that more victims have the confidence to come forward. The Office for National Statistics has said clearly that the increase in reporting is due to more victims coming forward and better recording by the police. We must continue to do everything that we can to ensure that the victims of those terrible crimes have the confidence to come forward and that the criminal justice system does all in its power to support them through the difficult journey to justice.

Criminal justice outcomes for violence against women and girls have improved, with rape referrals from the police to the Crown Prosecution Service increasing after swift Government action to tackle a fall-off in referrals last year. In addition, the Director of Public Prosecutions anticipates that the number of rape cases going to trial this year will be about 30% higher than in 2012-13, meaning that there will be about 550 extra jury trials this year and 650 extra decisions to charge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth made an important point about body-worn cameras. We want them used to ensure that we have appropriate evidence and to make the criminal justice process as painless as possible. For women and girls who have already suffered horrendously at the hands of perpetrators to go through the criminal justice system without the support that we can give them through body-worn cameras is not acceptable.

Prosecutions for domestic abuse have increased. In 2013-14, there were just over 78,000 prosecutions nationally. Current projections estimate that the figure will increase to nearly 90,000 by the end of this financial year—by far the highest number ever—while out-of-court disposals for domestic abuse at the pre-charge stage have reached their lowest levels. “No crime” rates for rape have fallen year on year since 2010. More adult sex offenders are currently in prison—11,119 in 2014, compared with 8,980 in 2010—and the average sentence length has increased from 50 months in 2010 to 60 months in 2013. The number of sexual offenders with multi-agency public protection arrangements charged with a serious further offence has dropped from 162 in 2009-10 to 143. The conviction rate for domestic violence and abuse is also at its highest ever level: almost 75% in 2013-14, up from 72% in 2009-10.

Those figures are encouraging, but as we know, criminal justice and legislation are only one part of the picture when it comes to an effective strategy to tackle violence against women and girls. That is why we have taken a wider-ranging approach in our work—for example, by launching our “Body Confidence” campaign to challenge media representations of women and the highly acclaimed “This Is Abuse” campaign alluded to by my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth, to encourage teenagers to rethink their views of violence, abuse, controlling behaviour and what consent means within their relationships. Since we first launched the campaign in 2010, the website has had more than 2 million unique visitors to the website, and we have spearheaded groundbreaking awareness campaigns within communities affected by forced marriage and female genital mutilation, which, as numerous contributors have said clearly, is child abuse, with no ifs or buts.

Seema Malhotra: The Minister is highlighting the effective work of the “This Is Abuse” campaign. Have the Government any plans to rerun the public campaign to raise awareness through marketing?

Karen Bradley: There are a number of plans to ensure continuing awareness. I could not tell the hon. Lady definitively about that specific campaign, but may I write to her on the Government’s plans to ensure that we continue to raise awareness? She is right that we need to keep hitting it home. We cannot let up now; we must ensure that we get the message across.

Ending those terrible forms of child abuse within one generation has been an ambitious vision of this Government. Through our work, public and media awareness of those crimes has rocketed. Our work to tackle FGM is an example of how the UK has provided global leadership on issues of violence against women and girls. My hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) made the point that there have been no prosecutions to date for FGM. Legislation was first introduced in 1985, but not even a single referral was made to the CPS until 2010. Raising awareness is key, and we all hope that the measures in the Serious Crime Act 2015 and other legislation will prompt more prosecutions and convictions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire mentioned protection orders and their wording. We had lengthy discussions about the wording of the orders, but I assure her that protection orders are meant specifically to protect girls at risk of FGM; there is no doubt or ambiguity about that. The Serious Crime Act 2015 introduces statutory guidance that will make it clear to all front-line professionals what indicators they should look for and how to ensure that we protect girls, including those being taken abroad who are at risk of FGM. We have played a significant role, as have my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire and others, in pushing hidden, sensitive and neglected issues into the spotlight—not only FGM, but sexual violence in conflict and the need to address violence against women and girls in humanitarian emergencies.

We have hosted three major international summits on violence against women and girls: the call to action on protecting women and girls in emergencies; the global summit to end sexual violence in conflict; and the Girl summit, on eliminating female genital mutilation and child, early and forced marriage in a generation. By doing so, and by driving forward the agenda for change, we have cemented our standing as a world player in relation to this important issue.

However, if raising awareness leads to increased reporting of these crimes, then we need to ensure that the systems are in place to manage that increase—not only in the criminal justice system, but across the board. Broader recognition of violence as a public health issue, and specific training on domestic and sexual abuse, means that at every point of contact—whether in A and E, or with a midwife, health visitor, teacher or police officer—there is a greater chance that abuse will be spotted and stopped.

Sadly, I myself had to visit A and E last weekend with my little boy, who was not very well. However, I was very impressed by the way that the health care professionals there treated us as a family and asked what I now consider—with the knowledge I have about this issue—to be really appropriate questions, to get to the bottom of whether there was any risk of abuse within the family relationship. I am pleased to say that they did not think that there was any such risk, and clearly there is not. Nevertheless, I was impressed by the way they handled matters, and I pay tribute to the A and E professionals whom I encountered last weekend.

We have invested more than £600,000 since 2010 to provide training programmes for independent domestic violence advisers and independent sexual violence advisers, an FGM e-learning package and stalking training for professionals. We have also supported enhanced training on VAWG for health visitors and general practitioners,

with more than 6,500 professionals having been trained in recognising domestic violence and abuse.

Our investment has had an impact. For example, following intervention by a multi-agency risk assessment conference and an IDVA service, up to 60% of domestic abuse victims reported that there had been no further violence against them. For victims who had engaged with an IDVA following the charge of a perpetrator, 72% reported a complete cessation of abuse, compared with 59% of victims when there was no charge following a report to the police.

We have taken steps to ensure that every agency, including the police, responds to VAWG crimes to maximum effect. In 2013, the Home Secretary commissioned Her Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary to undertake a comprehensive review on how the police deal with domestic violence, because she was concerned that the response was inadequate. HMIC's report, published in March 2014, exposed significant failings, including a lack of visible police leadership and direction, poor victim care, and deficiencies in the collection of important evidence.

The Government have been determined to ensure that HMIC's recommendations are implemented across all police forces, with the establishment of a national oversight group chaired by the Home Secretary. Every police force has now published its own action plan, setting out how it will address the findings of HMIC in its own area.

The Government have ring-fenced nearly £40 million of funding up to the end of 2015 to provide stability for specialist local support services, such as IDVAs and ISVAs, and for national helplines. Of course, that money is for England and Wales. The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran talked about the situation in Scotland, where this matter is, of course, a devolved issue. Last week, we confirmed that that funding for England and Wales will continue at the same level into 2015-16 for those services, with an additional £10 million up to March 2016 for the funding for refugees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth talked about the Chiswick refuge. Of course, that was the starting point for the Refuge charity, one of the leading charities in this sector. I was delighted to visit its head office recently and to learn about so much that they are doing to protect victims of sexual and domestic abuse. We have also announced an uplift of £7 million in additional funding to support victims of sexual abuse during the next two years, which will provide a critical bedrock of support to victims.

Of course, we have to get things right locally. We need to support local areas to get their responses to violence and abuse, and their provision of services to victims, right and correct on the ground. We have devolved power, resources and accountability to local areas, which is the right thing to do. Local areas are best placed to make decisions about local need. However, we need to ensure that they deliver those services in a consistent way.

In conclusion, we have made significant progress during the course of this Parliament and we have seen some encouraging outcomes. However, when it comes to violence against women and girls, we can never be complacent. There is always more to do to ensure that no woman ever suffers in silence or lives in fear of violence.

4.44 pm

Sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(11)).

Written Statements

Thursday 12 March 2015

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Land Registry Chief Executive

The Minister for Business and Enterprise (Matthew Hancock): I am pleased to announce the appointment of Graham Farrant as the next chief executive of the Land Registry and Chief Land Registrar. He will take on his new role in June. His appointment follows an open competition following the announcement in September that current CEO, Ed Lester, will stand down.

Graham is currently chief executive of Thurrock council and recently took on the same role at Brentwood council as well. In the recent past, he also held the chief executive role on an interim basis at the London borough of Barking and Dagenham. In addition to his time in public service, Graham gained valuable experience of leadership while in the private sector as CEO of first Leisure Connection Ltd and then Pmpgenesis Ltd. With 15 years of experience as a CEO in the public and private sector, Graham has the skills and knowledge to lead and manage the organisation through its transformation into a modern, digital organisation. His time in local government will also be essential as the Land Registry takes responsibility for local land charges.

[HCWS378]

CABINET OFFICE

Conflict, Stability and Security Fund

The Minister for Government Policy and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Mr Oliver Letwin): I wish to update the House about our plans for funding conflict prevention, stabilisation, security and peacekeeping activities for the financial year 2015/16. As announced in the spending round 2013, the Government have introduced a new, more strategic approach to work in conflict-affected states where the United Kingdom has key interests, which pools new and existing resources from across Government into a new conflict, stability and security fund (CSSF) under the strategic direction of the National Security Council (NSC). The new approach seeks to streamline Whitehall structures, enable further collaboration and create a closer link between the NSC's strategic decision-making and action on the ground. It will ensure our work in fragile or conflict-affected states supports the full range of UK objectives, as set out in the national security strategy and underpinned notably by the building stability overseas strategy framework. We will draw on the most effective combination of defence, diplomacy, development assistance, and national security assets at Her Majesty's Government's disposal to promote peace and stability and to tackle threats to UK interests

arising from instability overseas. This work will be funded from core departmental budgets, supported by the new CSSF worth £1.033 billion.

The NSC has agreed a range of country and regional strategies, along with approaches on peacekeeping and multilateral institutions which together form a strategic framework for NSC departments to prioritise HMG's effort to tackle instability and insecurity overseas. These strategies are designed to cover the breadth of HMG interests and resources. They set the objectives which will guide our stabilisation and security-related activity, whether funded by the CSSF or from other sources.

Bureaucracy has been reduced, with a streamlined Whitehall structure. Newly created regional boards, will be chaired by FCO senior officials and include senior representation from all NSC departments. The regional boards are responsible for effective implementation of the strategies in their region, including monitoring of all activity funded by the CSSF. The National Security Council (officials) will provide oversight and assurance to support NSC level decision-making.

The CSSF will come into being on 1 April 2015 and replace the conflict pool. The CSSF's larger scope will include conflict reduction and development assistance as well as tackling threats to UK interests. It will also be used to fund the UK's contributions to multilateral peacekeeping budgets and related commitments. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office will continue to be responsible for managing and reporting to Parliament on the peacekeeping element of the CSSF, which it manages on behalf of Government.

The NSC has now agreed CSSF allocations for FY15/16. These allocations may change during the course of FY15/16 to reflect changing priorities or to enable the Government to respond more effectively to new cases of conflict and instability.

<i>Conflict Stability and Security Fund resources, FY15/16</i>	
<i>CSSF</i>	<i>FY15/16 (millions)</i>
Peacekeeping and Multilateral	462
Regional/Country Strategies	482.8
Security and Defence	75
Delivery Support, including the Stabilisation Unit and National School of Government	13.2
International	
TOTAL	1033

[HCWS392]

TREASURY

Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr George Osborne): Today I am announcing the Government's intention for the UK to apply to become a prospective founder member of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB).

The AIIB is being established to address the shortage of infrastructure investment in Asia. The Government believe that the AIIB has the potential to become an important part of the international financial architecture,

working with existing multilateral development banks to strengthen growth in the region and benefit all our economies.

The UK will become the first major western country to apply to become a prospective founder member of the AIIB, which has already received significant support in the region. This Government have actively promoted closer political and economic engagement with the Asia-Pacific region and is forging links between the UK and Asian economies. Joining the AIIB at the founding stage will create an unrivalled opportunity for the UK and Asia to invest and grow together.

Subject to agreement by the existing prospective founder members, the UK will become a prospective founder member and participate in negotiations on the bank's founding principles, with a view to ensuring that the new institution adheres to existing global best practice on governance and safeguards.

The Articles of Agreement establishing the AIIB will be finalised later in the year. At that point, based on the outcome of the multilateral negotiations, the Government will make a final decision on whether to join the AIIB.

[HCWS409]

Terrorism Asset-freezing etc. Act 2010 (Annual Report)

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): My noble Friend the Commercial Secretary to the Treasury (Lord Deighton) has today made the following written ministerial statement:

Mr David Anderson QC has completed his fourth annual report as independent reviewer of terrorist asset-freezing legislation. The report covers a 12 month period of the operation of the Terrorist Asset-Freezing etc. Act 2010 and will be laid before Parliament today.

The Government are grateful to Mr Anderson for his thorough report and will consider carefully the recommendation he has made. The Government's response to this report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

[HCWS411]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

VistBritain and VistEngland (Triennial Review)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mrs Helen Grant): On 22 July 2014, I announced in a written ministerial statement the commencement of the triennial review of VisitBritain (VB) and VisitEngland (VE). I am now pleased to announce the completion of the review and publication of the final report.

The review concluded that VB and VE should continue to deliver the functions set out in the Development of Tourism Act 1969, but that they should be fully separated into two independent executive non-departmental public bodies with some changes to their respective roles and responsibilities. The review considered that this would help to clarify responsibility for delivering the functions and the accountability and governance arrangements.

The review has made a number of recommendations for changes and improvements in the functions, delivery and governance arrangements of VB and VE. In particular, the review recommends that VE should in future focus on supporting the development of high-quality tourism products and offers in England, while VB should be responsible for international marketing of both Britain and England.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport will now discuss with VB and VE how the recommendations can be implemented.

The triennial review has been carried out with the full participation of VB and VE, as well as a range of stakeholders from across Government and the tourism sector. I am grateful to all those who contributed to the review.

The final report of the review is available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements> and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS382]

DEFENCE

AI-Sweady Inquiry

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): I would like to update the House on the implementation of the recommendations made in the report of the AI-Sweady inquiry, chaired by Sir Thayne Forbes, and published on 17 December 2014.

As I explained in my statement to Parliament, *Official Report*, columns 1407-1421, the Chairman made nine constructive recommendations, all of which I immediately accepted in principle. I said that I would provide more detail about how these recommendations would be implemented once I had had an opportunity to consider them carefully, and in particular to ensure that they would not put at risk the lives of British service personnel by unduly constraining essential tasks. The House will recognise that in developing coherent policy for the handling of captured persons, the Department must be mindful of the different operating environments and operational constraints faced by the different services.

I am pleased to report that the Ministry of Defence has implemented in full four recommendations (recommendations 3, 5, 7, and 9). These call for, respectively, the dating and retention of training material; the introduction of procedures to ensure the adequate recording of the capture of individuals and their physical condition on capture; the introduction of safeguards during the strip-searching of detainees; and provision for the recording of medical decisions on the suitability of detainees for detention and questioning. The Department has partly implemented, or intends to implement, the other five (recommendations 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8).

The third edition of Joint Doctrine Publication 1-10, Captured persons (CPERS) was published on 23 January 2015 and implements changes that anticipated three of these recommendations (recommendations 5, 6, and 7) in whole or in part. An update to this doctrine, which will make further changes in response to the recommendations, will be published within the first half of this year.

I have today placed in the Library of the House a fuller report on the implementation of these recommendations.

[HCWS383]

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): The 2015 report of the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body (AFPRB) has now been published. I wish to express my thanks to the Chairman and members of the review body for their report.

In line with the Government's 2013 Budget statement, which announced an extension of the restraint on public sector pay by limiting increases to an average of up to 1% for a further year, the AFPRB has recommended an increase of 1% to base armed forces salaries for 2015-16. In addition, the AFPRB has recommended a 1% increase to compensatory allowances and recruitment and retention payment categories, except for mountain leaders, and parachute jumping instructors where there is no increase, and aeromedical and escort duty, which is frozen this year prior to being withdrawn on 1 April 2016. The AFPRB has also recommended an increase to food and accommodation charges, together with a number of targeted measures.

The AFPRB's recommendations are to be accepted in full and will become effective from 1 April 2015, except where the AFPRB report indicates otherwise.

Copies of the AFPRB report are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS403]

EDUCATION

School Teachers Review Body

The Secretary of State for Education (Nicky Morgan): The 25th report of the School Teachers' Review Body (STRB) is being published today. Its recommendations cover the remit that I issued in September 2014. The report contains recommendations on how to apply the pay award for teachers that is due to be implemented from September 2015. Copies of the STRB's 25th report are available in the Vote Office, the Printed Paper Office and the Libraries of the House, and online at www.gov.uk.

The STRB has recommended an increase from September 2015 of 1% to the minima of all the pay ranges and allowances in the national pay framework, including the:

- Unqualified teachers' pay range;
- Main pay range;
- Upper pay range;
- Leading practitioner pay range;
- Leadership pay range;
- Head teacher groups;
- Teaching and learning responsibility (TLR) payments;
- Special educational needs (SEN) allowances.

It has also recommended an increase of 1% to the maxima of all the pay ranges and allowances, except the main pay range, the leadership pay range and the eight

head teacher group pay ranges. It has proposed an uplift of 2% to the maxima of the main pay range and no uplift to the maxima of the leadership pay range or the maxima of the eight head teacher group pay ranges.

My officials will write to all of the statutory consultees of the STRB to invite them to contribute to a consultation on my acceptance of these recommendations. The consultation will last for six weeks.

I am grateful to the STRB for these recommendations and, subject to the views of consultees, I intend to accept all the key recommendations.

My detailed response contains further information on these matters. It is also available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>.

[HCWS399]

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

EU Energy Council

The Minister of State, Department of Energy and Climate Change (Matthew Hancock): I am writing to report discussions at the Energy Council in Brussels on 5 March at which I represented the UK.

The Council discussed the Commission's communication on the energy union which had been published on 25 February. The Commission described the key themes underpinning its vision of the energy union: making trust and solidarity between member states operational in policy; regarding the free flow of energy as the "fifth freedom"; considering "energy efficiency first", as energy source in its own right; and the low-carbon economy, including in the transport sector.

The Commission also set out five priorities for implementing the energy union: making the energy market work; energy efficiency; gas security strategies; driving interconnection; and putting climate protection at the heart. It also noted the importance of a fit for purpose governance framework and outlined plans for an annual "state of the energy union" report.

All but one member state signalled support for the energy union agenda. Some member states, including the UK, noted their support for a technology neutral approach to decarbonisation under the energy union including the use of nuclear power, while others argued against any EU support schemes or tax breaks for mature technologies such as nuclear power.

Other issues raised by member states included the need for careful consideration of proposals for changing rules on intergovernmental agreements and options for collective gas purchasing. There were strong calls to complete the internal energy market including swift action on key infrastructure projects; proposals for regional co-operation were welcomed unanimously. Finally, many member states, including the UK, Germany and others, supported strong action on the climate elements of the proposal and in particular reform of the EU emissions trading system, with a view to optimise outcomes in the climate negotiations in Paris in December.

The Council discussion on energy infrastructure and strategy for meeting the EU's 10% interconnection target was more subdued. The Council welcomed the signing

of the Madrid declaration on 4 March, which gave a political push to interconnection projects between France, Spain and Portugal. The UK supported the drive for interconnection to complete the single energy market and the proposals for the new European fund for strategic investment to facilitate investments in energy infrastructure.

Under “any other business”, the Czech Republic updated the Council on plans for the European Nuclear Energy Forum (ENEF) in Prague, which will cover nuclear safety, nuclear in the energy union and the EU as world industry leaders in nuclear technology.

Finally, the Commission gave an update on the trilateral gas discussions that had taken place earlier in the week between Russia, Ukraine and the Commission. The key success of the talks had been the agreement by both sides that the winter package agreement on gas supplies should be implemented. The complex issue of delivery to rebel areas had also been discussed; the Russians had agreed not to subtract the deliveries to these regions out of the quantities assigned to Naftogaz in Ukraine, but the issue would need to be revisited. The Commission was optimistic that both sides would now continue to work towards a summer package.

[HCWS377]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Elizabeth Truss): The next Agriculture and Fisheries Council will be on 16 March in Brussels. My hon. Friend, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice), will represent the UK. Richard Lochhead MSP and Rebecca Evans AM will also attend.

As the provisional agenda stands, the following items will be discussed.

On agriculture, there will be an orientation debate on the proposal for a regulation on organic production and labelling of organic products. This will be followed by a state of play item on the milk sector. The Council will then hold a policy debate on the implementation and simplification of the common agricultural policy. Finally, there will be an update on international agricultural trade issues.

No fisheries items are expected, but this remains to be confirmed at a meeting of Coreper on 11 March.

There is currently one any other business item:

Wool and fur from maltreated rabbits and furred animals.

Spread of *Xylella fastidiosa* in Southern Italy.

[HCWS380]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Human Rights and Democracy Report 2014

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I have today laid before Parliament a copy of the 2014 Foreign and Commonwealth Office Report on Human Rights and Democracy (Cm 9027).

The report summarises the global human rights situation in 2014. It provides examples of what the Government are doing to promote human rights and democratic values overseas. It reviews the situation in specific countries and against the thematic priorities around which our work is organised. And it reports on the benefits for UK citizens of all our overseas work on human rights, in terms of prosperity, security, and for British nationals overseas, and the overseas territories.

The full report can be read at www.hrdreport.fco.gov.uk and is also available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>.

[HCWS394]

EU Partnership and Co-operation Agreements (Philippines and Vietnam)

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): The Partnership Co-operation Agreements (PCA) concluded between the EU and its member states on the one hand and the Republic of the Philippines and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, on the other, provide a legal framework for further engagement and co-operation between the EU and the Philippines and the EU and Vietnam across a broad range of areas, including political dialogue, trade, energy, transport, investment, human rights, education, science and technology, justice, asylum and migration.

The proposed Council decision on the conclusion of the PCAs was brought forward by the European Commission citing two legal bases on trade and development. This did not reflect the earlier Council decision on signature which included transport, readmission and environment legal bases as well as trade and development. The Government supported the addition of the legal bases and judged that the provisions concerning readmission included Justice and Home Affairs (JHA) obligations, which engaged the UK’s JHA opt-in. The Government decided not to opt in to these provisions.

It is normal practice to issue a written statement to Parliament advising of the Government’s opt-in decision. This did not happen immediately as the Government wanted to consider any impact on its opt-in policy from the judgment of the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) in case C-377/12 (EU/member states PCA with the Philippines). This case focused on whether additional legal bases should be cited for JHA and other content in PCAs.

Following the judgment, the Government accept that the opt-in is not engaged for agreements where the predominant purpose is development co-operation, unless there are relevant provisions that contain obligations so extensive that they constitute objectives distinct from those of development co-operation; or where it is arguable that the relevant provisions do not fall within the ambit of development co-operation for other reasons.

The Government consider that since the predominant purpose of the Philippines and Vietnam agreements are development co-operation, and the agreements do not contain JHA content which is sufficiently distinct from that aim, the UK’s JHA opt-in is not engaged in relation to the Council decision concluding either agreement. However, the UK reserves the right to engage the opt-in where any future agreements, concluded within the

context of the Philippines or Vietnam PCAs, contain JHA provisions. Furthermore, in relation to other types of agreements between the EU and third countries which do not have a predominant development co-operation purpose, it remains the UK's policy to assert that the opt-in applies.

[HCWS395]

Gift of Equipment to the Lebanese Armed Forces

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): I have today laid before the House a departmental minute proposing the gifting of equipment to the 3rd Land Border Regiment of the Lebanese armed forces.

Contagion from the worsening crisis in Syria is having a direct effect on its neighbours, particularly in areas adjacent to Lebanon's eastern border. The UK remains firmly committed to Lebanon's stability, and in supporting the Lebanese armed forces (LAF) to minimise contagion from the Syrian conflict, and to combat the spread of ISIL. As part of this commitment, since 2012, the UK has been assisting the LAF, through the rapid land border security assistance project, to establish and mentor the LAF land border regiments (LBRs). The mission of the LBRs is to observe, identify, deter and interdict activities by illegal armed actors in the near border areas, in line with agreed international human rights standards. Between 2012 and 2014 around £20 million of conflict pool funds was allocated to provide observation, protection, mobility and communications equipment to 1 and 2 LBRs, and to establish the lead elements of a 3rd LBR, as well as a programme of training and mentoring.

The command element of 3LBR has been established and equipped, and 3LBR is preparing its deployment plan for a 50 km area of responsibility south of Aarsal to Tfail. Recent ISIL actions in the Aarsal area, and the threat that ISIL poses to UK interests, make it imperative that the LAF completes the expansion of the LBRs southwards, as part of an overall strategy to bring the entire eastern border with Syria back under the authority of the state.

The departmental minute laid today therefore sets out our intention to gift a package of £3,056,975 of protection, IT and communications equipment to complete the establishment of the 3rd Land Border Regiment of the Lebanese Armed Forces. The proposed gift will be funded by the Government's conflict, security and stability fund and will consist of the following UK sourced equipment:

Community outreach and LBR operations performance measurement IT hardware and software, with training (£349,997)

Three protected border observation posts and two mobile observation platforms, with observation aids and ballistic protection for fixed 3LBR positions (£1,207,027)

Radio equipment to allow the operational elements of 3LBR to link back to 3LBR HQ (£1,499,951)

Alongside the gift, the UK is continuing its existing package of training and mentoring with additional operational expertise worth £1,932,783. The combined total of £4,989,758 of equipment plus training and mentoring aims to complete, between April 2015 and March 2016, building the capacity of the 3rd Land

Border Regiment of the Lebanese armed forces to observe, identify, deter and stop the illegal movement of weapons and personnel across the central sector of the eastern land border with Syria.

The proposed gift has been assessed against the consolidated EU and national arms export licensing criteria. The proposed gift has been scrutinised and approved by a senior, cross-Whitehall Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) approval board, which has confirmed that it fits with the Government's strategic and delivery objectives. Foreign and Commonwealth Office officials also assessed the project for human rights risks, using the overseas security and justice assistance guidelines established by the Foreign Secretary in 2011. They concluded that the risk of human rights violations arising from the project's delivery could be successfully mitigated.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle, and given the need to provide the LAF with suitable equipment at the earliest possible opportunity to allow them to retain the initiative in blocking and containing ISIL, has agreed the proposal to reduce the period for parliamentary scrutiny, pending the Dissolution of Parliament. If, during the period to 26 March 2015, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the minute, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval of the gift will be withheld pending an examination of the objection.

[HCWS391]

Ministerial Correction

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): I wish to make a correction to the verbal statement I made in response to a point made by the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr John Redwood) on 9 March 2015, *Official Report*, column 98. The correct figures for the European fund for strategic investment are that €16 billion will come from the EU budget, €5 billion from the EIB, giving a total of €21 billion, used to leverage additional sources to reach a total of €315 billion investment.

[HCWS398]

Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (James Duddridge): I wish to inform the House of progress the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has made on preventing sexual violence in conflict since the June 2014 global summit to end sexual violence in conflict.

The summit resulted in a number of important and ambitious commitments to end sexual violence in conflict. Since the summit we have worked to implement these commitments and to deliver practical and far reaching change in those countries worst affected by conflict-related sexual violence. This has been focused on six priority areas:

implementing the international protocol on the documentation and investigation of sexual violence in conflict launched at the summit;

promoting legislative reform;

providing more support to survivors of sexual violence and the organisations and individuals who work with them;

incorporating sexual violence issues into military training and doctrine;

working with international organisations to encourage their greater work and support on the issue; and

supporting those Governments who announced new plans or strategies at the summit.

We have translated the international protocol into French, Spanish, Arabic, Nepalese and Bosnian. We are developing training materials to support its use, regional training events on its implementation in different local contexts and training courses. This includes developing long-term training and mentoring programmes on documentation and investigation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); providing financial support to NGOs to implement the protocol in Colombia; a year-long training project for local human rights NGOs and lawyers in Nepal; and launch events in Bosnia to raise the profile of the protocol with the Government, judges and NGOs. This work aims to help these Governments and civil society organisations to prevent and prosecute sexual violence crimes. The results of the training will inform future versions of the protocol to ensure that it meets the needs of those using it on the ground and our ambition that the protocol becomes widely used and recognised as international best practice.

In November, a joint UK/Canada scoping mission to Iraq looked at what support we can provide in response to the crimes being committed by ISIL. Our subsequent work includes strengthening local women's organisations, including their capacity to investigate sexual violence crimes. This supports the Department for International Development's wider humanitarian programming in the region. In January, we organised an event with local and international NGOs which brought together women from Syria and Iraq to be trained on the protocol as well as to develop wider ideas on how they can work in the most challenging of circumstances. We are hosting a follow-up meeting at the Commission on the Status of Women to encourage donor support for the work of women's human rights defenders in Iraq and Syria.

We continue to lobby more countries to accede to the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court and to implement it fully in domestic legislation. We are encouraging recognition and support for the policy paper on sexual and gender-based crimes released by the Office of the ICC Prosecutor, which will help ensure the effective investigation and prosecution of these crimes from preliminary examination through to appeal.

We have supported a number of projects with human rights defenders and NGOs working to end sexual violence in DRC, South Sudan, Somalia, Guatemala, Nigeria, Kosovo, Colombia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Burma. These projects have helped survivors rebuild their lives by accessing justice, legal advice and psychosocial support and challenging the cultural or social stigma associated with being a victim of these crimes. We will support similar projects over the course of 2015-16. We recently co-hosted a meeting of international faith leaders as a follow-up to the summit discussions on their role and responsibility in supporting survivors and their communities and challenging traditional attitudes to

gender and sexual violence. The recommendations from this meeting developed by the participants provide an important basis for future action.

We have deployed members of the UK team of PSVI experts to Kosovo, the Syrian borders, Bosnia and Herzegovina and the DRC to provide support to survivors, improve investigations and increase prosecutions of sexual violence in conflict. We have also deployed members of the team to the EU training mission in Mali, training the Malian army on how to protect civilians from human rights violations, including sexual and gender-based violence. Improving military standards to prevent and respond to sexual violence is critical to achieving change. The action plan on sexual violence for the army announced by the DRC Government after the global summit is a welcome example of this commitment. My right hon. and noble Friend, Baroness Anelay of St Johns, Minister of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, discussed its implementation with President Kabila's personal representative in the fight against sexual violence and child recruitment in the DRC, during her recent visit to London. The UK also has some valuable expertise to share in this area, including the work of the Peace Support Operations Training Centre in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the recent training provided by the British Peace Support Team in eastern Africa to African Union peacekeeping personnel troops. We are using this expertise to inform the forthcoming UN Secretary-General's peace operations review.

In September 2014, I co-hosted an event at the UN General Assembly with the Under-Secretary-General and special representative of the UN Secretary-General on sexual violence in conflict to encourage implementation by the 155 UN member states who have endorsed the declaration of commitment to end sexual violence in conflict and to reiterate the critical role of the special representative on this issue. Her work has been fundamental to achieving progress over the last year, such as her agreement with the Government of South Sudan in October of a joint communiqué on preventing conflict-related sexual violence and the work of her team to support implementation of the Federal Government of Somalia's national action plan for addressing sexual violence, presented at the summit.

We have encouraged other multilateral organisations to do more, including at the NATO summit in September and through the work of the European Union. We provided funding to support the deployment of the African Union team of experts to help victims of sexual violence in the Central African Republic that the AU announced at the summit and discussed opportunities for greater future AU leadership on this agenda with the AU special envoy for women, peace and security last month.

In our work since the summit it has become clear that there is a need for a greater academic underpinning on these issues and the most effective ways of tackling them. I am proud of the support that we have given to establishing the UK's first academic centre for women, peace and security at the London School of Economics. Working with experts in the field and universities around the world, the centre will create a critical mass of expertise and knowledge focused on the empowerment of women and the ending of impunity for sexual violence crimes and play a critical role in future efforts to bring an end to sexual violence in conflict once and for all.

Westminster Foundation for Democracy (Triennial Review)

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Philip Hammond): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) will today publish the report of the triennial review of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD), which the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Mr William Hague), launched in February 2014. The WFD currently receives funding from the FCO and the Department for International Development. The review has recommended that the WFD retain its status as a non-departmental public body at arm's length from Government. The review also recommends a range of organisational, policy and governance measures to increase the relevance and impact of the WFD's work, enabling it to become a world-leading organisation in the field of democracy assistance.

The Government consider the WFD an important tool for building open, inclusive and accountable democratic systems overseas, which are strongly in our national interest. We are working with the WFD and its board to ensure implementation of the review recommendations.

The review is available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>

[HCWS412]

HEALTH

Non-Departmental Public Bodies (Triennial Reviews)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Dr Daniel Poulter): I am today announcing the start of the triennial reviews of the NHS Pay Review Body (NHSPRB) and the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB).

All Government Departments are required to review their non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) at least once every three years. In order to ensure that the Department is an effective system steward and can be assured of all the bodies it is responsible for, the Department has extended the programme of reviews over the next three years to all its arm's length bodies and Executive agencies.

The reviews of the NHSPRB and DDRB have been selected to commence during the first year of the programme (2014-15). The reviews will consider the two pay review bodies' functions and corporate form, as well as performance and capability, governance and opportunities for greater efficiencies. The Department will be working with a wide range of stakeholders throughout the reviews.

[HCWS408]

Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I am responding on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to the 43rd report of the Review Body

on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration ("the review body"). The report has been laid before Parliament today (Cm 9028). Copies of the reports are available to hon. Members from the Vote Office and to noble Lords from the Printed Paper Office.

We thank the review body for its 43rd report and note its recommendations and observations. General practitioners and primary care staff more widely are at the centre of the NHS, and have an important role in ensuring the sustainability of the health service for future generations. That is why we have announced additional funding for primary care and why we are working to increase the size of the general practice workforce. It is also why we were pleased to be able to accept the DDRB's recommendation of a 1% increase to GP pay.

Subject to the views of consultees, therefore, we intend:

in respect of general medical practitioners, to accept the review body's recommendation for an increase of 1% to general medical practitioners' income. As the review body only made recommendations in respect of general medical practitioners' income net of expenses, we intend to use the methods employed by the review body in previous years to calculate the overall contract uplift. The staff expenses element of the formula will be the maximum possible under public sector pay policy. The non-pay expenses element will be uplifted in line with the retail price index, excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX). On this basis, therefore, the uplift equates to 1.16% uplift to the overall value of general medical services contract payments for 2015-16; and

in respect of general dental practitioners, to accept the review body's recommendation for an increase of 1% to general dental practitioners' income. As the review body only made recommendations in respect of general dental practitioners' income net of expenses, we intend to use the methods employed by the review body in previous years to calculate the overall contract uplift. The staff expenses element of the formula will be the maximum possible under public sector pay policy. The non-pay elements will be uplifted in line with either the retail price index (RPI) or the retail price index excluding mortgage interest payments (RPIX). On this basis, therefore, the uplift equates to 1.34% uplift to the overall value of general dental services contract payments for 2015-16.

As stated in our evidence to the review body and recommended in the review body's report, the minimum and maximum of the salary range for salaried general medical practitioners will be increased by 1% for 2015-16.

[HCWS405]

HOME DEPARTMENT

European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL)

The Minister for Policing, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): The Government did not opt in to the European Commission's proposal for a regulation establishing a European Union agency for law enforcement training (CEPOL), repealing and replacing the Council decision 2005/681/JHA.

The Commission's proposal is intended to improve EU security through the implementation, by CEPOL, of a new training approach for EU law enforcement officers. This approach is set out in the European law

enforcement training scheme (LETS), which aims to equip law enforcement officials of all ranks with the knowledge and skills they need to prevent and combat cross-border crime.

The Government value UK membership of CEPOL as currently established. It brings together senior police officers from forces across Europe and encourages cross-border co-operation in the fight against crime by organising training activities and sharing research findings. However, the Government are concerned that the proposed regulation goes beyond the current scope for CEPOL and creates additional obligations for member states.

The proposed measure gives CEPOL the legal mandate to implement the LETS as set out in the Commission communication published in March 2013. The Government are concerned that the LETS limits the flexibility for member states to decide how law enforcement training should be delivered, something that should remain very much their responsibility. The Government consider that the professionalism and training of the police and other law enforcement agencies should be led and developed by those organisations themselves, at a national or local level.

The draft regulation also mandates member states to establish a national unit responsible for carrying out tasks obliging them to contribute to CEPOL's work programmes and to supply, and respond to, requests for information. The existing Council decision left it to member states to decide whether to set up a national contact point, whose remit is the effective co-operation between CEPOL and the relevant national training institute. This function is currently carried out by the College of Policing and the Government are concerned that any additional obligation would represent increased financial and administrative burdens for the college.

The Government believe that the focus of an EU-wide law enforcement training strategy should be to encourage member states to collaborate on matters that are mutually beneficial but to avoid mandating training requirements. The Government do not want the police and other UK law enforcement agencies to be accountable to an EU agency and we need to be satisfied that our training and other operational priorities are not subject to EU determination.

The option to opt in to this measure post-adoption remains open to the UK and Government will make a decision on that when the final text has been agreed.

[HCWS388]

Immigration and Nationality Fees

The Minister for Security and Immigration (James Brokenshire): The Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Order was laid on 2 February 2015. The order, which was made under the fees provisions in the Immigration Act 2014, was the first of two statutory instruments setting immigration and nationality fees. It set out the functions that the Home Office may charge for, and maximum amounts that may be charged for different categories of function.

The second statutory instrument, containing the individual fees for immigration and nationality applications, services and other products provided by the Home Office, will be laid shortly.

The Home Office has given careful consideration to individual fee levels to ensure that those who use and benefit directly from the immigration and border system make an appropriate contribution to the costs of managing the system. This is fair and helps to reduce public spending on the system. The requirement that the immigration and border controls are properly and sustainably funded must be balanced against the need to continue to attract and welcome tourists and the "brightest and best" migrants from around the world. That balance has been achieved by:

applying smaller increases to, or freezing, fees for products that support economic growth. For example, the fee for a tourist visa will increase by 2%; fees for many workers and students will increase by 4%; other "growth routes" will be restricted to an increase of 8%; and fees for 10-year visit, shortage occupation work and airside transit visas will remain unchanged.

applying targeted increases where the benefit to the customer is greater, the service is optional, or UK fees are below comparable charges made by other Governments.

ensuring that estimated processing costs are fully recovered where fees are tied to unit costs.

applying a fee increase of up to 12% for other products and services.

Further detail on fees changes will be provided in the explanatory memorandum for these regulations. A copy of the revised fees table will also be published on the Home Office website at www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Full details on how to apply for all of the Home Office's products and services are provided on the Home Office website.

[HCWS393]

Firearms Licensing Fees

The Minister for Crime Prevention (Lynne Featherstone): Firearms licensing is a priority for this Government both in terms of public safety and in ensuring that a fair and effective service is provided.

Today the Government published the response to our consultation on increasing firearms licensing fees administered by the police.

The large majority (73%) of respondents to the consultation supported an increase to the current fees and the Government agree that the fees will change. The new fees will come into effect on 6 April 2015.

The consultation also sought views on future reviews of the fees. Consultation with police and stakeholders was seen as an integral part of future reviews. A working group will be reconvened to oversee the review process to enable an annual change to be agreed if appropriate. We will then consider conducting a more comprehensive review after five years.

The Government will also work with the police to introduce an online licensing system to drive down costs across the system overall. This will be reviewed in 12 months to assess whether costs are being fully recovered with a view to increasing fees further if it is not.

Work continues on improving the efficiency of the process and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary are currently conducting an inspection into how the licensing system works in practice.

The Government's response to the public consultation will be placed in the Library of the House and published on the gov.uk website:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/a-proposal-to-increase-firearms-licensing-fees-administered-by-the-police>

[HCWS404]

National Crime Agency (Inspection)

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The National Crime Agency was established to lead the fight to cut serious and organised crime, and to focus on the relentless disruption of serious and organised criminals. It has the power to task other law enforcement and a capability that reaches from local to international serious and organised crime impacting on the UK.

Last year, HMIC carried out a review into the efficiency and effectiveness of the NCA. This is the first such inspection of the NCA since its creation. I have placed a copy of the report in the Library of the House. I have asked HMIC to publish this report on my behalf and it is available online at: <https://www.justiceinspectors.gov.uk>

The inspection took place in summer 2014 and it provides a valuable snapshot of the NCA's development as an organisation. HMIC finds that the NCA is discharging its statutory functions, and that work is under way to further strengthen its capabilities. HMIC found that the NCA inherited weaknesses in its information technology, analytical capability and relationships with police from its precursor agencies. But HMIC is satisfied that, at the time of the inspection, significant work was already under way to improve this position and that considerable improvement has already been made to key partner relationships including those with police forces. Seen against this background, the report concludes that the NCA has made a strong start since its establishment in 2013 and that its leadership understands the capabilities the NCA needs to develop, has good plans in place to develop them and is on a trajectory to achieve its aims.

HMIC identifies that the successful delivery of Novo—the NCA's ambitious transformation programme—will be key in ensuring the NCA continues to develop into an agency fit to tackle the evolving and future threat from serious and organised crime. Over the next three years this programme will give the agency the shape, culture, operating model and approach to further improve its ability to tackle serious and organised crime.

The report notes a number of areas for improvement—where the NCA already has action under way to improve its capabilities and effectiveness—and makes five recommendations. It is for the Director General to respond to these recommendations, in line with the requirements of the Crime and Courts Act 2013.

[HCWS390]

Police Federation Reform

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): The Police Federation commissioned Sir David Normington to lead an independent review of

its own operation and structures, which published its report early in 2014. The report raised significant concerns about the functioning and culture of the Police Federation and made 36 specific recommendations for change.

The Police Federation has committed to implement those recommendations in full and has made steady progress. The Police Federation has adopted a revised core purpose, which reflects the need to act in the public interest, and is now operating under a reformed structure of an interim national board and interim national council, in line with the Normington recommendations. I have continued to take stock of progress in this reform programme in my regular discussions with the Police Federation national leadership.

I am laying regulations today to implement the further changes I announced at the Police Federation's annual conference in May last year. These changes will mean that, with effect from 2 April, new officers will need actively to choose to join the Police Federation and choose whether they wish to pay subscription fees. Membership will no longer be automatic and the Police Federation will need to demonstrate its integrity and value in representing its members. Further, the existing rules around transparency and powers to call in the accounts for any money held by the Police Federation will be strengthened, ensuring it is fully accountable for use of its members' funds.

Following consultation with the Police Federation, additional changes are being made at their request. These changes will allow the Police Federation to pay for the salaries of members elected to the joint central committee from the Police Federation's funds, rather than police forces continuing to pay for officers who are not available to them. The changes will also mean that the Police Federation branches are required to pay a proportion of their subscription fees directly to the national Police Federation joint fund, and also any excess at the end of each year. This will ensure greater transparency and oversight of their finances.

Last year I also set out my intention to bring forward proposals to extend the Freedom of Information Act to cover the Police Federation. This would require a change in primary legislation. In the absence of a suitable opportunity in this Parliament, I am today publishing a draft clause that demonstrates how that change could be made in legislation, with the intention this would be fulfilled in the next Parliament. I will place a copy of the draft in the Library of the House.

[HCWS387]

Police Integrity

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): On 22 July, *Official Report*, column 1265, I gave a statement to the House on this Government's ongoing work to ensure the highest standards of integrity in the police.

This Government have carried out a radical programme of police reform. We have given the police greater operational independence, by scrapping national targets, while at the same time strengthening local accountability to the public through the creation of directly elected police and crime commissioners. We have reformed police pay and conditions, established the College of Policing to improve police standards and beefed up the

Independent Police Complaints Commission to take on all serious and sensitive cases. Crime has fallen by more than a fifth under this Government, according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. The reforms I am announcing today build on this programme of work.

I have always been clear that I believe the vast majority of police officers in this country do their job honestly and with integrity. They put themselves in harm's way to protect the public. They have cut crime by a fifth even as spending has fallen. And the vast majority of officers do their work with a strong sense of fairness and duty. But as I have said before, the good work of the majority threatens to be damaged by a continuing series of events and revelations relating to police conduct.

That is why today, following the responses to the consultation "Improving Police Integrity", regulations have been laid in the House to make a series of changes to the police disciplinary system.

Police disciplinary hearings will be held in public to ensure that the robust response the police take to misconduct is visible and open. Hearings will be led by legally qualified chairs.

The legislation will create a new power for police disciplinary hearing panels to remove or adjust the compensation payments due to chief officers on termination of their appointment where a disciplinary finding is made against them. Also, police whistleblowers will have protection from disciplinary action for taking the necessary steps to report a concern.

In addition to these regulatory changes, I am today publishing the Government responses to two further public consultations, following the end-to-end review of the police complaints system and independent review of the police disciplinary system, led by Major General (Retd) Chip Chapman, that I announced in the House in July.

Following the conclusions of those reviews, I launched two public consultations on reforms to improve the police complaints and disciplinary systems, proposals to strengthen protections for police whistleblowers, an extension to the remit of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, and changes to the role, powers and governance of the Independent Police Complaints Commission.

The reforms the Government set out will, once set out in legislation, substantially improve the handling of police complaints and police disciplinary systems in England and Wales. They will enable Police and Crime Commissioners to take on a greater role in the police complaints system, allowing them to decide how complaints should be handled in a way that makes sense for their local electorates. The changes will give Police and Crime Commissioners the power to take on responsibility for how complaints appropriate for local resolution are dealt with, as well as requiring them to take on responsibility for appeals against the outcome of complaints—appeals that are currently considered by chief constables. Alongside these changes, I will also expand the remit of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary to enable it to continue to inspect the efficiency and effectiveness of the way police complaints are dealt with regardless of who carries out that work.

Alongside these structural changes, I propose a system of super-complaints for policing to allow bodies outside the police, such as charities and advocacy organisations,

to raise complaints on behalf of members of the public who may otherwise be reluctant to come forward, as well as to raise issues and patterns of aspects of policing that may be harming the interests of the public.

The proposals include radical reform of the police disciplinary system, following the recommendations made by Major General (Retd) Chip Chapman in his review of the police disciplinary system.

New protections for police whistleblowers will be introduced, including strengthening the independent routes for whistleblowers to raise their concerns to the Independent Police Complaints Commission and allowing it to conduct investigations in a way that protects the identity of a whistleblower.

The reforms also introduce new powers for the Independent Police Complaints Commission, strengthening its role as an independent oversight body and building on the Government's commitment to transfer resources to enable the Independent Police Complaints Commission to investigate all serious and sensitive cases.

Alongside the responses to the consultations, I am also publishing the outcomes of the triennial review of the Independent Police Complaints Commission. The review makes a series of recommendations about improving the governance, efficiency and performance of the Independent Police Complaints Commission. I have asked the Independent Police Complaints Commission to present further proposals regarding structural reform by the end of June.

Many of the changes the Government intend to make will require primary legislation, which the Government will introduce at the earliest available opportunity.

I am grateful to all those who responded to both consultations. Copies of the Government's response to the consultation "Changes to the Police Disciplinary System" and the triennial review of the Independent Police Complaints Commission will be placed in the Library of the House. A copy of the Government's response to the consultation "Improving Police Integrity (Cm 9031)" will be placed in the Vote Office.

[HCWS406]

Police Reform

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): When I became Home Secretary in 2010 I initiated a programme of radical police reform to improve accountability, increase efficiency and continue to cut crime.

We have given chief constables greater independence from Whitehall by scrapping national targets, while at the same time making the police more accountable to the communities they serve through directly elected police and crime commissioners.

Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary has been made independent of the Government and of the police so it can act directly in the public interest. The Independent Police Complaints Commission is now strengthened to take on all serious and sensitive cases.

We have reformed pay and conditions, opened up the senior ranks of the police through direct entry and established the College of Policing to improve standards

and professionalism. The National Crime Agency is operating with the powers and mandate it needs to tackle serious and organised crime.

The further reforms I am announcing today build on this programme of work.

I have brought forward changes to improve the transparency and accountability of the Police Federation, as I set out to the Police Federation conference last year, and published a draft clause to make it subject to the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

I have launched a statutory inquiry into undercover policing to get to the bottom of past injustice and ensure we learn the lessons for the future.

Lastly, the Government have today published their response to two integrity consultations, setting out a package of measures to overhaul the police complaints and disciplinary systems to increase public confidence in their ability to hold the police to account and promote the highest standards of integrity among police officers.

These reforms have been made during a time in which crime is down by more than a fifth according to the independent crime survey for England and Wales. I commend the reforms under this Government to the House.

[HCWS410]

Report by Independent Reviewer of Terrorism

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, David Anderson QC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, prepared a report on the operation of the Terrorism Act 2000 and Part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006, which I laid before the House on 22 July 2014.

I am grateful to David Anderson for his considered report and have carefully considered the detailed observations and the recommendations made. I am today laying before the House the Government's response to his report. I wanted to wait for the provisions in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 to receive Royal Assent before responding formally, given that the Act gives effect to a number of David Anderson's recommendations.

Copies of the Government response (Cm 9032) will be available in the Vote Office and it will also be published online at: <https://www.gov.uk>

[HCWS407]

Riot Damages Compensation

The Minister for Policing, Criminal Justice and Victims (Mike Penning): Following last summer's public consultation on reform of the Riot (Damages) Act 1886, I am today publishing the Home Office response to that consultation, together with draft legislation that shows how we intend to implement our final proposals. These proposals are intended to replace the outdated provisions of the Riot (Damages) Act and provide a robust and sustainable framework for compensation arrangements in the future.

Copies of the consultation response, draft Riot Compensation Bill and economic impact assessment will be placed in the House Library. They will also be available on the Home Office website at: <https://www.gov.uk>

[HCWS389]

Child Sexual Abuse (Statutory Inquiry)

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): On 4 February 2015 I made a statement to the House announcing my intention to appoint Justice Lowell Goddard to head the independent child sexual abuse inquiry, and that I would be disbanding the former inquiry and would be setting up a new statutory inquiry under the 2005 Inquiries Act. I am pleased to be able to confirm today the setting up of the statutory independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, Justice Goddard's appointment as chairman and the appointment of the panel to the inquiry.

Justice Goddard appeared before the Home Affairs Select Committee in a pre-appointment hearing on 11 February. The committee subsequently published a report unanimously endorsing her appointment and making a number of recommendations. I will be writing to the committee today with the Government response to that report.

From today, the inquiry will be set up with statutory powers to compel witnesses to determine whether state and non-state institutions have taken seriously their duty of care to protect children from sexual abuse within England and Wales.

Having heard the concerns of survivors that the appointment of the former panel was not transparent, we published the criteria for appointing the panel online. This can be found at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-criteria-for-panel>. A copy was also placed in the Library of the House. The criteria were based on skills, expertise and due diligence and included the need for objectivity and professionalism. We were also explicit that panel members should have no direct links to key institutions or individuals reasonably likely to be covered by the inquiry.

We considered all nominations for membership of the panel, those who expressed interest in being on the panel and those who were nominated as part of the process to appoint a chairman. In consultation with Justice Goddard, I have decided to appoint four panel members, who have the range of skills and expertise required to take forward and lead the important work of the panel in supporting the chairman. The panel members chosen are those who were assessed as most strongly matching these criteria. A statement of assessment against the criteria for each panel member will be published, along with their conflict of interest declaration, on the inquiry website in due course.

I have consulted Justice Goddard and I am pleased to be able to confirm today, that the panel will consist of Drusilla Sharpling, Professor Alexis Jay, Ivor Frank and Malcolm Evans. Together, these individuals will represent a wide range of experience and expertise. Drusilla Sharpling is a qualified barrister with expertise in both policing and the Crown Prosecution Service; Professor Alexis Jay has expertise in social work and led the important work on the independent inquiry into child sexual exploitation in Rotherham; Ivor Frank has extensive experience in family and human rights law, and expertise in child protection matters; Malcolm Evans is Chairman of the United Nations Subcommittee for the Prevention of Torture and professor of public international law at the University of Bristol. Malcolm

also brings with him a Welsh perspective, which survivors have called for. In addition, the panel will be informed by a number of expert advisers in the fields of health, education, and a psychologist with expertise in this sensitive area. All panel members will be formally appointed subject to their conflict of interest declarations and the appropriate security checks.

I also said I would review the terms of reference for the inquiry in light of feedback from survivors. I have consulted with Justice Goddard and have agreed with her the final terms of reference which will also be placed in the House Library today and published on the inquiry website. The two most important changes are the removal of any cut-off date for the work of the inquiry and, reflecting the importance of survivors to the inquiry, the explicit statement that survivors will be able to bear witness to the inquiry and that support will be made available.

Survivors have been instrumental in the setting up of this statutory inquiry. Both Justice Goddard and I are clear that they must also have a strong voice in the work of the inquiry as it now moves forward. Justice Goddard will be writing to survivors and their representatives shortly to set out her intention to create a survivors and victims' consultative panel and to seek their views on how this will work and who should be on it. This panel will have a specific role and function within the inquiry.

I know that survivors were also keen that the inquiry extended beyond England and Wales. However, as child protection is a devolved matter, it is right that other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom look at the issues within their own geographical remit so that they can take the action which is right to address the specific issues uncovered. I have said before, I am clear that no institution or individual should be able to fall through the gaps because of geographical boundaries.

The terms of reference make clear that the inquiry will liaise with its counterparts elsewhere in the United Kingdom. To that end my officials have had initial discussions with the Scottish Government, who are in the process of setting up their own inquiry, the Hart inquiry in Northern Ireland and the Independent Jersey Care Inquiry and have agreed with them and with the child sexual abuse inquiry that joint protocols will be set up with each inquiry to ensure that information can be shared and lines of investigation can be followed across geographical boundaries.

The protocols will be published by the child sexual abuse inquiry in due course. Additionally, as I made clear when I addressed the House on the 4 February, the inquiry will have the full co-operation of Government and access to all relevant information.

I am confident that the new statutory inquiry, under the chairmanship of Justice Goddard, will challenge individuals and institutions without fear or favour and get to the truth. This will not be an easy task but I believe the inquiry now has the right leadership, individuals and powers to make this happen.

I wish Justice Goddard and the panel every success as they now move forward with this important work.

The inquiry's website can be found at: <https://childsexualabuseinquiry.independent.gov.uk>

[HCWS371]

Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (the Act) requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of her TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force (as of 28 February 2015)	1
TPMI notices in respect of British citizens (as of 28 February 2015)	0
TPMI notices extended (during the reporting period)	0
TPMI notices revoked (during the reporting period)	0
TPMI notices revived (during the reporting period)	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPMI notices (during the reporting period)	0
Applications to vary measures specified in TPMI notices refused (during the reporting period)	0

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. A TRG was held on 12 December 2014. The next TRG will take place in March.

The Court of Appeal has granted permission for an appeal brought by DD in the case of DD versus Secretary of State for the Home Department [2014] EWHC 3820 (Admin), a judgement in which the High Court dismissed a preliminary issue in DD's appeal against the revival of his TPIM notice. This preliminary issue related to DD's submission that the revival of the TPIM notice breached Article 3 ECHR. This judgment is available at: <http://www.bailii.org>. Both this appeal and the remainder of the original appeal will be heard in April 2015.

[HCWS384]

Testing Household Products on Animals

The Minister for Crime Prevention (Lynne Featherstone): On 18 July 2011, *Official Report*, column 84WS, I announced plans to implement the Government's commitment to end the testing of household products in animals using licensing powers provided by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Since that time, the Government have consulted on the impact of such a ban and we have undertaken to give consideration to the inclusion of ingredients of household products.

I can today announce the Government's intention to ban the testing of household products in animals with a qualified ban on the testing of ingredients which are primarily intended for use in household products. Where testing of ingredients is required for regulatory purposes, we will permit this but require retrospective notification. Where such testing is not required for regulatory purposes, we will require a prospective authorisation, specific to

the particular proposal. We will apply a robust harm-benefit analysis to any such applications which we expect to be few.

In order to minimise the regulatory burden of this policy on businesses, I intend to implement this ban through amending conditions on existing project licences. For the avoidance of any doubt, I intend to adopt the following definition for licensing purposes:

“Household products are those bought by the general public for use in the domestic home and garden. They include, but are not limited to, detergents, polishes and cleaning products, laundry products, household cleaners, air fresheners, toilet cleaners, descalants, deodorisers, adhesives, paints and varnishes, sealants, caulks and other decorating materials.

This definition does not apply to:

- Biocides, pesticides and plant protection products;
- Food contact materials, food and feeding stuffs, medical products and medical devices;
- Cosmetics (as they are subject to other restrictions on the use of animal testing);
- Products intended to be used in an industrial or institutional setting or by professionals; and
- ackaging or delivery systems e.g. pump sprays etc., unless these are inherent parts of the household product.”

I also intend to adopt the definition of an “ingredient” in accordance with article 3 of Regulation (EC 1907/2006) on registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals (REACH) as amended and article 2 of European Regulation (EC) No 1272/2008 on classification, labelling and packaging of substances and mixtures (CLP).

The policy will apply to any ingredient for which, at the time that testing in animals is carried out, more than 50% is intended or expected by the entity commissioning the testing to be used in a household product.

I intend to fully implement this ban from 1 October 2015. This will give those most affected time to adjust to the new notification system and authorisation process.

[HCWS385]

Undercover Policing

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mrs Theresa May): When I made my statement to the House on 6 March 2014, *Official Report*, column 1061, announcing the findings of the Stephen Lawrence independent review by Mark Ellison QC, I announced that there would be a judge-led statutory inquiry into undercover policing and the operation of the Special Demonstration Squad (SDS). I said that before an inquiry could be set up, it would need to wait for the conclusion of any criminal investigations into SDS officers and the conclusion of Mark Ellison’s further review into potential miscarriages of justice involving undercover police officers.

It has become apparent during the course of both the criminal investigations and Mr Ellison’s review that these are significantly larger pieces of work than were envisaged previously. Therefore, in light of the public interest in having a statutory inquiry start as soon as possible, I have decided to establish the inquiry while ensuring that the progress of existing work is not affected. The inquiry will be chaired by Lord Justice Pitchford, a highly experienced criminal judge of the Court of Appeal, and will be established under the Inquiries Act 2005.

My officials will consult Lord Justice Pitchford and interested parties to the inquiry over the coming months on setting the terms of reference, with a view to a further statement as soon as possible after Parliament resumes. The role of the inquiry will be to consider the deployment of police officers as covert human intelligence sources by the SDS, the National Public Order Intelligence Unit and by other police forces in England and Wales. The inquiry will review practices in the use of undercover policing, establishing justice for the families and victims and making recommendations for future operations and police practice.

Mr Ellison will be providing his report to my right hon. friend the Attorney-General at the end of March and will be published as soon as possible thereafter. The criminal investigations into SDS officers are ongoing. In addition, Stephen Taylor has submitted his review into the Home Office’s knowledge of the SDS to the Home Office permanent secretary and a copy has been made available today on gov.uk and placed in the Library of the House.

[HCWS381]

JUSTICE

Prison Service Pay Review Body (Annual Report)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Andrew Selous): The fourteenth report of the Prison Service Pay Review Body (PSPRB) (Cm 9022) has been laid before Parliament today. The report makes recommendations on the pay for governing governors and other operational managers, prison officers and related support grades in England and Wales in 2015-16. Copies are available in the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office.

I am grateful to the chair and members of the PSPRB for their hard work in producing these recommendations.

The recommendations for 2015-16 will be implemented in full. The cost of the award will be met from within the delegated budget allocation for the National Offender Management Service and we will continue to progress important pay reforms previously endorsed by HM Treasury and the PSPRB.

[HCWS400]

PRIME MINISTER

Off-street Parking (Machinery of Government Change)

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This written statement confirms that responsibility for off-street parking will transfer from the Department for Transport to the Department for Communities and Local Government. This includes schedule 4 of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 in respect of the recovery of unpaid parking charges. Responsibility for those aspects of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 and the Traffic Management Act 2004 which relate to off-street parking will also move to the Department for Communities and Local Government. This change is effective immediately.

[HCWS402]

Police and Crime Commissioner Elections (Machinery of Government Change)

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): This written statement confirms that policy responsibility for the conduct of elections in relation to Police and Crime Commissioners will transfer from the Home Office to the Cabinet Office. This change will be effective from 1 April 2015, though the Home Office will retain responsibility for the conduct of any Police and Crime Commissioner elections held before May 2016. The Home Office will retain all other responsibilities in relation to Police and Crime Commissioners.

[HCWS401]

Security, Intelligence and Law Enforcement Agencies and Intelligence Services Commissioner (Reports)

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): Today, I am pleased to draw the attention of both Houses to the publication of two reports relating to intelligence matters and the use of intrusive powers in the UK. While each report has a different origin and focus, they both support this Government's commitment to deliver greater transparency and stronger oversight of the work of the UK security and intelligence agencies, the police and other public bodies that use intrusive powers. Both reports make a significant contribution to the public and parliamentary debate on these issues, which will continue into the next Parliament.

First, I would like to address the report of the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament (the ISC) on its privacy and security inquiry, published today. The Government and the agencies co-operated fully with the ISC during this inquiry and gave it full access to material of the highest classification. Our commitment to transparency is reflected in the text of the report, which has only been redacted where absolutely necessary to protect our national security. The result is a substantive report that provides a comprehensive account of all the intrusive activities of the agencies and the relevant safeguards and oversight. The Government are grateful to the ISC for the thoroughness with which it conducted this important inquiry.

We will consider the ISC's findings and recommendations carefully. As a number of these are currently the subject of related reviews, including by the Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation, the Government's intention is to review all the recommendations and suggestions in a full and considered manner before making a substantive response. There is, however, one particular recommendation in the ISC's report that I wish to address now. The Intelligence Services Commissioner, the right hon. Sir Mark Waller, currently provides non-statutory oversight of the security and intelligence agencies' use of bulk personal datasets. Sir Mark has previously recommended that this be put on a statutory footing. The ISC also recommends this in its report. I can therefore announce today that I am issuing a direction to Sir Mark under section 59A of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA) to put this into effect. I have deposited a copy of this direction in the Libraries of both Houses.

This is the last report that the ISC will publish before the election and I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Committee members for their dedication in

carrying out their oversight duties during the last five years. The benefits of increasing the Committee's powers under the Justice and Security Act 2013 have been clearly reflected in the depth and rigour of its inquiries.

I have also laid before both Houses copies of the 2014 "Report of the Interception of Communications Commissioner", the right hon. Sir Anthony May, who is appointed by me to keep under review the compliance by public authorities with part 1 of RIPA.

Sir Anthony's report provides new detail on RIPA warrantry, including the total number of warrants in place under section 8(4) of RIPA at the end of the reporting period, and a breakdown of the statutory purpose for which all interception warrants were issued. These newly available figures demonstrate the Government's commitment to provide more information about the work of the security and intelligence agencies, and other public authorities that carry out interception.

I thank Sir Anthony for his continued rigorous, thorough and independent oversight, and for the contributions he and his office have made to the public debate surrounding the use of intrusive powers.

Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements> and the "Report of the Interception of Communications Commissioner" is available online at:

[http://www.iocco-uk.info/docs/IOCCO%20Report%20March%202015%20\(Web\).pdf](http://www.iocco-uk.info/docs/IOCCO%20Report%20March%202015%20(Web).pdf)

[HCWS386]

Senior Salaries Review Body

The Prime Minister (Mr David Cameron): The 37th report of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB) is being published today. This makes recommendations about the pay of the senior civil service (SCS), senior military officers, the judiciary, and police and crime commissioners. The SSRB has not made any recommendations on the pay of very senior managers in the NHS. Copies have been laid in the Vote Office, the Printed Paper Office and the Libraries of both Houses. I am grateful to the chairman and members of the review body for their work on this year's report.

While we are mindful of the need to ensure that we are able to recruit, retain and motivate staff with the right skills and experience, it is important that senior public servants continue to show leadership in the exercise of pay restraint.

Senior military officers

The Government have accepted the recommendation of a 1% increase to base military salaries for all 2 star officers and above with effect from 1 April 2015.

The Government have accepted the recommendation that there is no change to current pay arrangements for medical and dental officers.

Judiciary

The Government have accepted the review body's recommendation of a 1% increase to the salaries of the judiciary.

Police and crime commissioners

The Government have accepted the recommendation that the current rates of pay for police and crime commissioners (PCCs) should remain unchanged for 2015-16.

I am also grateful to the SSRB for their observations on PCC expenses and we will continue to work with the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners to ensure PCC expense arrangements are clear.

Senior civil service

The Government have accepted in full the pay review body's recommendation on a flexible framework for base pay awards that will enable Departments to target the resources available to meet their own business needs. The Government have also accepted the recommendation to continue to mandate a more structured approach to exit questionnaires so Departments are able to effectively capture reasons for leaving.

The Government have accepted in part the recommendation on raising minimum salaries. The Government accept the increase in minima for pay bands 2 and 3. They do not, however, accept the proposal to prescribe a £2,000 increase in the minimum salary for pay band 1 because it does not give Departments the flexibility they have asked for to enable them to target the resources available. Nevertheless, Departments will be encouraged to continue raising the pay band 1 minimum as much as possible so the award is targeted at those lowest in the range and to address overlaps with delegated grades.

The Government have also accepted in part the recommendation on the use of non-consolidated performance-related pay. The Government have accepted the recommendation that gives Departments some additional flexibility to convert up to 0.5% of the non-consolidated performance pay pot for targeted salary re-positioning. They do not however support the recommendation that would require Departments to spend all of their non-consolidated performance-related pay pot. Again this does not provide the flexibility that Departments have requested to meet their own business needs.

This package of proposals for 2015-16 strikes the right balance between necessary pay restraint and the need to recruit and retain people of the right calibre. It gives Departments flexibility to target pay increases within the 1% average award, enables them to reward outstanding performance and will help them to recruit and retain people in business critical roles.

Ministers will consider the pay review body's recommendations for raising the minima of the permanent secretary pay tiers taking account of the views of the Permanent Secretary Remuneration Committee as part of its consideration of the 2015-16 pay award for permanent secretaries.

Very senior NHS managers

The SSRB was not asked to make any recommendations on the pay of very senior managers in the NHS and they have not done so. I am grateful to them for their involvement in the pay of this important group of staff and for the helpful general comments they have made.

Other review body reports

Separate statements from the Secretaries of State for Justice, Health and Defence will also be laid today on the reports of the Prison Service Pay Review Body, the

Doctors' and Dentists' Review Body and the Armed Forces' Pay Review Body in respect of pay for the relevant work forces for 2015-16. The Government's response to those reports is consistent with the need for senior public servants to show leadership in the exercise of pay restraint.

[HCWS397]

TRANSPORT**Big Bike Revival**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Robert Goodwill): I am today announcing funding of £1 million to support the development of the Big Bike Revival—a programme of activities on the ground, designed to unlock cycling potential by encouraging people who do not currently cycle but would actively consider it, to start or return to cycling. The programme will be delivered by CTC: the national cycling charity.

In 2013, 42% of adults in Britain had access to a bicycle, yet 63% said they had not ridden a bicycle in the past year. Despite this, 37% of adults in Britain agree that many of the short journey—less than two miles—that they currently make by car could just as easily be made by cycling. The Big Bike Revival will aim to convert the high level of cycle ownership into increased cycle usage and replace short trips by car with trips by bike.

The programme comprises a nationwide programme of events in towns and cities, delivered in conjunction with bike recycle centres to present members of the public with an opportunity to:

- Fix a cycle so it can start to be used and learn how to maintain it
- Trade a cycle for one better suited to individual needs and donate surplus cycles
- Learn where best to cycle in their local area and discover local cycling activity
- Receive cycle training to increase confidence in cycling on the road

A pilot programme was held during half-term week in October 2014. This demonstrated significant health and economic benefits, with many of those attending the events committing to cycle more frequently and a number of respondents making a change to start commuting to work by bike.

CTC's delivery of the Big Bike Revival is scheduled to commence during mid May, with many of the events being held during the school half-term week.

[HCWS375]

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Mr Patrick McLoughlin): I will attend the first Transport Council under the Latvian presidency taking place in Brussels on Friday 13 March.

There are only two main agenda items for discussion. The first item on the agenda will be a policy debate on the market pillar of the fourth railway package. This will cover the proposal to amend directive 2012/34/EU establishing a single European railway area, as regards

the opening of the market for domestic passenger transport services by rail and the governance of the railway infrastructure. It will also cover the proposal to amend regulation (EC) No 1370/2007 concerning the opening of the market for domestic passenger transport services by rail. I welcome this opportunity to press for further liberalisation of the EU single market for rail through the market pillar of the fourth railway package.

The second item on the agenda will be a policy debate on the contribution to EU competitiveness, growth and jobs through transport policy developments, the challenges of attracting private investors to transport projects and the global competitiveness challenges that the EU transport sector is facing. I welcome the focus in the Commission President's investment plan on reforms to raise growth prospects across Europe and the emphasis on increasing private sector investment. Structural reforms to complete the single market and to improve the incentives for investment are essential for Europe's competitiveness and prosperity, and are a long-standing priority for Britain.

Under Any Other Business, the presidency will provide information on the forthcoming third ASEM Transport Ministers' meeting in Latvia and the outcome of the conference on remotely piloted aircraft systems in Riga on 5 and 6 March. The Commission will provide information on civil aviation flights over conflict zones, where the UK supports measures to ensure wider understanding of the risks of operating over and into certain areas. The Commission will also deliver a presentation on the energy union. Lastly, the French and German delegations will present views on the ongoing EU-Gulf Co-operation Council aviation dialogue and associated strategies on safeguards for fair competition. By facilitating business-to-business and people-to-people links, international air transport benefits our wider economy and we seek, therefore, to minimise barriers to market access such as unfair competition. With this in mind, the Government are always keen to engage with our international partners on strategies for addressing such matters.

[HCWS376]

Strategic Highways Company

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Mr John Hayes): I announce to the House that under powers in section 1 of the Infrastructure Act 2015 I have formally appointed—through appointment order SI 2015/376—Highways England to be the strategic highways company with effect from 1 April 2015. This marks a significant forward step in how the English strategic road network is constructed and managed, with committed funding, clear lines of accountability, and transparency in how road infrastructure is delivered.

We have created a separate Government arms-length body, accountable for what it does within a governance framework which makes clear what is expected from it. Government remain responsible for strategic roads and Ministers will continue to be accountable for ensuring that the network is managed responsibly, safeguarding value for public investment and meets the needs of road users and wider society, both today and for the future. We have put in place a robust system of governance that ensures we can effectively oversee management and delivery, and intervene to prevent or tackle any issues.

The licence under which Highways England will operate sets out the Secretary of State's statutory directions and guidance to Highways England. It makes clear, to both Highways England and the wider community of road users and stakeholders, what we expect Highways England to achieve and how it must behave in discharging its duties and in delivering our vision and plans for the network, set out in the road investment strategy.

We expect the company to engage with road users and collaborate with other organisations to develop shared solutions. It must take a lead in promoting and improving the role and performance of roads in respect of broader communal responsibilities, such as safety, the aesthetics of design and the environment, as well as driving forward progress on technology and innovation.

As part of implementing the provisions under part 1 of the Infrastructure Act 2015 I have also:

Laid the road investment strategy (RIS) comprising three parts: strategic vision, investment plan and performance specification, published in December 2014 as an Act Paper.

Published the licence which sets out statutory directions and guidance, to be formally issued to Highways England on its appointment, along with the framework document to be published shortly.

Published statutory guidance to the Highways monitor—part of which is jointly issued with HM Treasury—and published the memorandum of understanding between the Secretary of State and the Highways monitor in support of the guidance. Both will be issued to the monitor in line with Highways England's appointment.

Published the memorandum of understanding between the Secretary of State, Highways England and the watchdog, Transport Focus.

Copies of these documents have been made available in the Libraries of both Houses. Attachments can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>

[HCWS379]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Access to Work

The Minister for Disabled People (Mr Mark Harper): Access to Work plays a key part in building a disability confident Britain. In 2013-14 Access to Work spent £108 million to help 35,540 disabled people enter or remain in work, over 4,000 more than in 2012-13. I want to build on this by continuing to improve customer service, increase the numbers of disabled people helped, improve choice and control and reach out to under-represented groups such as those with hidden impairments including mental health conditions, learning disabilities and autism.

In December 2014, I announced operational improvements to the Access to Work scheme. The transformation of Access to Work operations is starting to bear fruit and I am pleased to announce that we are now meeting service standards.

This gives a platform for further reform. In 2015-16 we will start a process of offering personal budgets for those with ongoing awards for travel or support. This will give users more freedom over how they use their awards.

We also aim over time to transform the way disabled people interact with the service. A new project is underway to re-engineer Access to Work as a digital service, building on the email channels opened up before Christmas. We also intend to offer a video relay service option for BSL users later in 2015-16.

In 2013-14 the average Access to Work award was around £3,000, and half of users have awards below £1,000. However, 1% of users with awards over £35,000 per annum account for 15% of the budget. I want to ensure that Access to Work can help the most people it can in future. So as of October 2015, Access to Work will provide awards up to a limit set at one and half times average salary—a limit of £40,800 per person per year at October 2015. This will be uprated annually in line with the level of average salaries. I believe it is right that there is this explicit link to the labour market.

Anybody with an award higher than this level as of October 2015 will not be subject to that limit until April 2018. This is to help them and employers adjust to their new level of support. Specialist teams will work in partnership with these individuals and employers, for example advising on reasonable adjustments and greater use of technology. These individuals would also be invited to take advantage of a personal budget to help them manage their support in more tailored and efficient ways to meet their needs.

DWP have also been working closely with deaf Access to Work users and the Crown Commercial Service to develop a framework for translation services including British Sign Language. This will guarantee quality standards and set transparent rates from summer 2015. We will build on this by working with deaf people and stakeholder groups to undertake a market review of BSL interpretation provision to explore long term improvements in the market.

In this context, I can announce the removal of the currently suspended “30 hour guidance” from April 2015 which these wider reforms will render unnecessary.

Over 30% of Access to Work spending is on taxis for customers with mobility problems. This is a transformative service for customers and I want to ensure that improvements to customer service, reliability, value for money and accessibility standards for wider society can be driven by Government using their buying power to drive quality and performance. Starting early in 2015-16, we will look to pilot contracted services for customers across our largest towns and cities.

Self-employment is a flexible option for many disabled people. I am now able to announce that I have recently established a further specialist team to provide expert advice and support to disabled people who want to run their own successful businesses. Furthermore, to ensure disabled people have a clear understanding of how they can be supported to maintain their business and continue in self employment, from October 2015 eligibility will be based around the universal credit rules. These balance allowing a reasonable period for businesses to establish themselves, with ensuring that taxpayers money goes to support legitimate and viable businesses, offering Access to Work a more consistent and objective basis for awards.

I want Access to Work to continue to help more people with mental health conditions. The disability confident campaign is raising the profile of Access to

Work’s mental health support service and DWP is exploring how referrals to the mental health support service could be more straightforward. We have also highlighted the mental health support provided by Access to Work by changing the pre-employment eligibility letter to reassure employers of the help available. This help includes not just the mental health support service but mainstream Access to Work support such as communication support at interviews, help with travel and awareness training for colleagues to combat stigma.

Finally, as part of my commitment to improve transparency, to complement the detailed scheme guidance published following my last statement in December 2014, we will publish summaries of the guidance for customers, including in easy read and BSL formats, and also illustrate good practice to employers with case studies to help them in becoming more disability confident in supporting disabled employees early in 2015-16.

We have invested an extra £15 million in Access to Work since 2012. User numbers are rising steadily. I hope that these changes to Access to Work will help many more to join them in staying in and getting into work with help from the programme in future.

[HCWS372]

Remploy Employment Services

The Minister for Employment (Esther McVey): The commercial process for the exit of Remploy employment services as announced to the both Houses in July 2014 is now complete.

The Remploy board and DWP have agreed that Remploy employment services will be established as a new company, free from Government control in partnership with Remploy’s employees and Maximus.

The exit has been led and shaped by Remploy and has the full support of Remploy’s trade unions and their key stakeholders. Over the last few years Remploy employment services has gone from strength to strength in the support it provides to disabled people to find and remain in work. It is one of DWP’s key providers of specialist support for disabled people. Since 2010, Remploy employment services has supported over 100,000 disabled and disadvantaged people into work. This opportunity, based on a strong partnership, provides the freedom and flexibility the business needs to continue to grow and increase the support it already provides disabled people to find and remain in work.

Remploy’s employees will be a fundamental part of this new partnership with 30% of shares held in an employee benefit trust. Employees will positively influence the operation of the company through the board and through an employee council. This will enable employees to have more direct control and influence on the operation of the company, and for the first time give employees a significant ownership stake in the business which will help to increase the quality of the services and protect and expand the delivery of Remploy’s social mission.

Remploy’s national delivery of Work Choice and other departmental contracts and agreements will transfer into the new company as a part of this process.

Remploy, Maximus and the Department will now work together to establish the new company, which we expect to be fully operational during April. The priority

will be to transition the service smoothly and to deliver the best service possible for customers in partnership with Remploy. Current Remploy employment services employees and contracts will transfer to the new company.

The Department will also work with the current Remploy board to manage the remaining activities of Remploy Ltd as a non-trading company.

The Department will ensure that the Remploy pension scheme continues to be funded and that the accrued benefits of members are protected.

This is an historic moment that Remploy has been working towards with its staff and stakeholders and which we are pleased we have been able to deliver by working with them, which will enable the company to continue to help disabled people to find and stay in work for many years to come.

[HCWS373]

Industrial Injuries Advisory Council

The Minister for Disabled People (Mr Mark Harper):

I am pleased to inform the House that the triennial review of the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council (IIAC) as a non-departmental public body and a Scientific Advisory Committee has now been completed and its findings will be published later today. The reviewers recommended that IIAC remain, as an arm's length body sponsored by the Department for Work and Pensions. They concluded that it continues to meet the recognised principles of good corporate governance and of providing scientific advice to Government about the occupational nature of diseases in the context of the industrial injuries scheme. I will place a copy in the Library of the House and it is also available online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements>

[HCWS374]

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