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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

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House of Commons

Thursday 9 September 2010

The House met at half-past Ten o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Pitt Review

1. **Kate Hoey** (Vauxhall) (Lab): What recent progress has been made on implementation of the recommendations of the Pitt review. [14172]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): I am sure that the whole House would want me to record our condolences to the Prime Minister and to let him know that we are thinking of him at this time.

Good progress has been made since the publication of the Pitt review. We have started to implement the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 and published the national flood emergency framework, and we continue to work with local authorities to develop capacity.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. She will be aware of the consistently excellent work of firefighters in dealing with floods—indeed, I am sure she has praised it. The Pitt report was clear that to deal with the problems of training, equipment and resources, there would be a statutory responsibility. In fact, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and many Labour Members supported such a measure under the previous Administration. Will she give an assurance that during this Session of Parliament—in the next four or five years—that statutory requirement will be introduced, because it is crucial?

Mrs Spelman: I can tell the hon. Lady that we have of course read very carefully all the Pitt review recommendations, including that one. I should like to acknowledge the very important role that fire and rescue service authorities play in the face of any flooding incident. In fact, those authorities have not told us of a single case of their being constrained in their response by a lack of powers. The question of the need for a statutory responsibility will be tested in an exercise next year. The option of a statutory duty has certainly not been ruled out.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): Sir Michael Pitt himself, however, admitted that his advice with regard to building in flood-risk areas was compromised by the fact that the previous Government had a very high national house building target. Now that that target, and indeed regional targets, has been removed, is

it not time to revisit the planning guidance on building in flood risk areas, so that constituencies such as mine will be better protected in future than they were in the past?

Mrs Spelman: The Department for Communities and Local Government has started a review of the building regulations regime, and my Department will work with it to consider how that review can support Pitt recommendation 11, being mindful of the Government's aim to reduce the overall regulatory burden.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): In view of the fact that the Pitt report identifies the problem of responsibility, both if a flood happens and before that in the planning process, and that the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 addresses that, will the Secretary of State tell us what progress is being made on the implementation of the legislation in terms of the designated authorities for flooding, and what talks has she had with the Welsh Assembly Government on how that will affect cross-border areas?

Mrs Spelman: We have been making very good progress on that aspect of the Pitt review and will be talking to the Welsh Assembly Government in the next couple of months specifically on the Welsh dimension of the question. I am sure the hon. Lady will agree that it is important to raise capacity at the local authority level in response to flooding. That was a further Pitt recommendation. All those matters will be discussed with the relevant bodies in order to improve our resilience in the face of the threat of flooding.

Fish Quotas (Thanet)

2. **Laura Sandys** (South Thanet) (Con): What recent discussions she has had with fishermen in Thanet on their fisheries quotas. [14173]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): Numerous discussions with fishermen in the south-east in recent weeks, including in Thanet, have made me acutely aware of quota issues and the problems caused by the closure of key fisheries to the inshore fleet. The Marine Management Organisation has worked hard to secure additional quota to reopen fisheries and continues to do so. However, the current system is not sustainable. That is why the sustainable access to inshore fisheries project and common fisheries policy reform are key priorities.

Laura Sandys: Will the Minister thank the Department for the work it has done to support fisheries in the south-east, and will he outline his ambitions for the renegotiation of the CFP in 2012?

Richard Benyon: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's thanks to the officials in my Department, who have worked extremely hard, and to those in the MMO, who have worked tirelessly. However, fishermen in her area and many others up the east coast should be grateful to the MPs concerned, who have lobbied me very hard on those issues. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a three-phase approach to dealing with this problem. First, we want to keep fishermen in business, which

involves swapping quota where we can and working on a short-term basis so that they can continue to fish. Secondly, we need to look at the recommendations of the sustainable access to inshore fisheries project, which has come up with some really good suggestions on which we want to consult widely. Thirdly, however, the CFP is in desperate need of reform. The door is open to the kind of reforms that would be appreciated, I believe, on both sides of the House. I want to work with my hon. Friend and other Members who represent fisheries communities to ensure that we have a CFP that is fit for purpose for our times.

Farm Animal Welfare

3. **Chris Williamson** (Derby North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to promote farm animal welfare. [14174]

5. **Ian Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to promote farm animal welfare. [14176]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): The coalition Government are committed to achieving high standards of animal welfare and are working through the detail of several policies to ensure that we accomplish this.

Chris Williamson: Does the Minister's refusal to name a date for the abolition of beak trimming not demonstrate the Government's failure to prioritise animal welfare?

Mr Paice: That is complete nonsense. As the hon. Gentleman should know, the date is already enshrined in law. The question is whether we seek to change that. To suggest that I have not set a date is nonsense, because his Government set that date. But we are considering representations, as did my predecessor, about whether to change that date. One of the underlying factors, not just on this but throughout animal welfare, is the advice of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, which is the body set up to advise the Government, and I think the cross-party view is that it is a very worthy organisation. We take its views strongly into account as we consider this matter.

Ian Lucas: As a former Minister, I have seen photographs of the terrible consequences of some of the types of game bird farming that occur. Supported by the British Association for Shooting and Conservation and other animal welfare groups, the previous Government brought forward legislation to improve the position. Why is it that this Government are determined to reverse that legislation and cause unnecessary suffering to game birds?

Mr Paice: It is precisely because that was the advice of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, which his Government disregarded.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Further to the question asked by the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson), does my hon. Friend agree that, for those people concerned about the issue of beak trimming, the worst possible outcome from an animal welfare point of view would be that we end up with legislation that

resulted in exporting animal welfare concerns—and jobs—to other countries? That would surely be a far worse outcome.

Mr Paice: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The sad reality is that chickens will feather-peck and adopt cannibalism in any circumstances, including in large free-range facilities. The challenge with which we have to wrestle is whether or not debeaking is a bigger or lesser welfare issue than the consequences of not debeaking. The Government want to see an end to debeaking and we will achieve that, but we have to ensure that we do not make the situation worse in the process.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): As the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) hinted, we have some of the highest farm animal welfare standards in the world. Does the Minister agree that unnaturally increasing those would have two results? First, we would import food from places with far lower standards than we have here, and secondly, that would put perfectly good farmers in this country out of business.

Mr Paice: My hon. Friend is entirely right, and we have learned the lesson. I accept that it was a Conservative Government who banned stalls and tethers in the pig industry, and we saw over the following 10 years a halving of the domestic pig industry while we continued to import pigmeat produced under the very systems that we had banned. That is why, alongside our determination to raise animal welfare standards in this country, we must also try to raise them at least across Europe.

Circuses (Wild Animals)

4. **Katy Clark** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had on the use of wild animals in circuses. [14175]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): The Department is currently reviewing the summary of the responses received in response to the consultation held on that issue. Lord Henley has met representatives of the circus industry and animal welfare organisations to discuss this issue further. Following his meeting, he requested further information from the industry, which he has now received. He anticipates that the review will be completed shortly and a response to the consultation will be published later this autumn.

Katy Clark: The Minister will be aware that in the consultation 94% of respondents said they supported the ban on the use of wild animals in circuses, and the previous Government said they were minded to go ahead with that ban. There is great concern about the delay in this matter. I know that autumn in this place really means Christmas, so may I urge him to make a decision as soon as possible so that there is no more delay?

Mr Paice: As the House has returned in the first week of September, I am not sure that the hon. Lady is right to refer to Christmas. However, I will tell my noble Friend of her words. He is considering the results of the consultation and that further information, and I am

well aware of the response to the consultation and my predecessor's mindful remarks, to which she referred. However, other issues have to be addressed, not least that of the definition of a circus and how we distinguish that from other forms of performance, such as in films or theatre.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Does the Minister sincerely believe that exotic animals being forced to dance and do tricks is natural? Bearing in mind that very few animal circuses are now left, surely the best thing is to abolish them, which the last Government failed to do but had promised to do while in opposition.

Mr Paice: The direct answer is no, I do not think it is right for large animals, in particular, to be forced to perform acts for people's entertainment. I do not think that is right. However, the role of Government is to look at the whole picture. One issue that we have to address is the fact that, if we ban wild animals, we will ban not just elephants and big cats, but snakes and all sorts of things that might be present in a circus and which might be perfectly reasonable. A lot of issues have to be addressed, but my noble Friend is considering them and will make an announcement later.

Food Procurement (Public Sector)

6. **Julie Hilling** (Bolton West) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to encourage the procurement of food of British origin by the public sector. [14177]

17. **Mrs Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to encourage the procurement of food of British origin by the public sector. [14188]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): We are committed to ensuring that food procured by Government Departments, and eventually the whole public sector, meets British or equivalent standards of production wherever this can be achieved without increasing overall costs. I have written to ministerial colleagues asking them to look closely at how they can help us to meet this objective.

Julie Hilling: As Ministers agreed, British animal welfare standards are among the highest in the world, which may make products slightly more expensive. I understood that Government policy was to ensure procurement in the public sector of British-produced food wherever possible. I am concerned, therefore, about the response that it may be procured from other sources. Also, how will the Government measure whether food has come from British sources?

Mrs Spelman: I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are proceeding with the commitment that I have given and which was outlined in the coalition agreement. With respect to the gap, the Government also intend to develop Government buying standards for the public procurement of food, which means that Departments will have to buy food that meets minimum sustainability standards. We know that our rules, especially on animal welfare, reflect the importance that the nation attaches to this issue.

Mrs Glindon: The Secretary of State referred to the fact that she has asked the Cabinet to implement her policy on food procurement. Will she explain more about the practical policies that she will implement to ensure that this procurement goes ahead?

Mrs Spelman: Again, I can give the hon. Lady this assurance. I have just said that I have written to all Departments about the importance that the coalition attaches to encouraging the public sector to procure food to the highest possible standards, followed up by the development of Government buying standards for food. However, I would like to give her some encouragement regarding our progress. It is demonstrable that we can implement this policy without increasing overall costs. Nottingham city council is a good example. It procures 90% of its fresh food from the east midlands area while demonstrating that the average cost per meal is 30% lower than the national average. That fact is welcomed by the Secretary of State for Health.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): May I begin by complimenting the right hon. Lady on her choice of outfit? It is very DEFRA-esque—[*Interruption.*] Mr Speaker, there is surely room for manners in the House of Commons. Will she describe what obstacles she sees in the way of Departments and the rest of the public sector procuring British produce?

Mrs Spelman: First, I should like to thank the hon. Gentleman for his very nice compliment, which was received absolutely as it was intended. As much as anything, the obstacle might be a perception in the public sector that buying in food to British standards might cost more. The illustration from the health service that I gave to his hon. Friend the Member for North Tyneside (Mrs Glindon) demonstrates clearly that it is possible to procure to British standards—the highest standards—and save costs, but I will give yet another example that might help to change perceptions. Shropshire council sources local produce for school meals. It uses seasonal, local, organic ingredients and still made a saving of 11% in the first year of shifting to locally produced, British food made to high standards, particularly fruit and vegetables. Perception is an important point to address.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I assure the right hon. Lady that seeing British produce procured by the public sector is a shared objective. Will she therefore say how she intends to measure the success of her policy in increasing procurement, and how she will make this information available to the House?

Mrs Spelman: I recognise this as a shared objective, as the hon. Gentleman described it. He will know that DEFRA carefully records, by Department, the percentage of farm-assured food from all food supplied to the public sector. In writing to every Cabinet Minister about the issue, I have attached the league table of performance by Departments to provide an added incentive. We believe that the public sector should not spend taxpayers' money on food that is not equivalent to British standards of production, because it is unfair on our farming and food industries.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I was very reassured to hear the Secretary of State say that animal welfare standards were important, as well as the British origin of the food. If the application for an 8,000-strong dairy factory farm in Lincolnshire is approved, will she join me in urging a boycott of battery milk by the public sector, and does she support the World Society for the Protection of Animals' "Not in my cuppa" campaign?

Mrs Spelman: The hon. Lady is talking about welfare standards and examples of planning applications—well publicised in the press—for large-scale units which, to date, have not been accepted. Logically, however, it is not scale that is the determinant of welfare: there can be animal welfare problems at both small and large-scale units. It has everything to do with the quality of the husbandry.

Flood Defences

7. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of flood defences. [14178]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): The Environment Agency continually reviews the condition of its assets. Its target for 2011 is for 97% to be at or above target condition.

Miss McIntosh: The statement of principles agreed between the Government and the insurance industry is due to expire in 2013, yet many of the remaining issues, following the summer floods in 2007, are to do with the adequacy of insurance cover for homes and business properties. What assurance can the Government give the House that the statement of principles will meet the requirements of the insurance industry and that Government expenditure will remain at the level expected until 2013?

Richard Benyon: On the latter point, obviously I cannot prejudge the comprehensive spending review, which will be announced on 20 October. However, my hon. Friend will know, from the coalition document and our Department's structural reform plan, the priority that we are giving to such matters. Under her chairmanship, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs will look closely at the issue. I have met with the Association of British Insurers, and I believe that my hon. Friend is joining us next week—or in the near future—for a summit with the insurance industry to talk about such matters. I assure her that the statement of principles is an absolute priority, and 2013 is a date very much in our minds. We want to ensure continuity in the future, because of the uncertainty for the 5.2 million households at risk from flooding.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Miss McIntosh) on her elevation to the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee. I know that she will do sterling work. She and the Minister will know that, even with the massive investment in flood defences in recent years, including existing plans to protect another 200,000 homes by 2015, we will need to double investment over the next 25 years just to keep pace with climate change. In the short term, therefore, will the Minister at least maintain our existing commitment to protect more homes, year on year, over the next five years?

Richard Benyon: The hon. Gentleman knows the comprehensive spending review process well, and I cannot change what I have just said to my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right, however, and he knows the problem that we face. I am pleased that we are spending more this year than ever before, and I very much hope that that can continue. I am also pleased that the Environment Agency is ahead of the game in protecting 160,000 houses, against a target of 145,000. I have been looking at the flood implications of coastal erosion on the east coast, and I have seen what a massive problem we have there. I was enthused by some of the innovative local ideas for accessing more funding, and I hope that we can expand on them, not only in areas of coastal erosion but in regard to flood alleviation and resilience schemes elsewhere in the country.

Regulatory Burden

8. **George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): What areas she has identified where the regulatory burden on the agricultural industry can be reduced; and if she will make a statement. [14179]

9. **Julian Smith** (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): What areas she has identified where the regulatory burden on hill farmers can be reduced; and if she will make a statement. [14180]

13. **Sajid Javid** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What areas she has identified where the regulatory burden on the agricultural industry arising from EU legislation can be reduced; and if she will make a statement. [14184]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): We are very aware of the need to reduce burdens on farmers, to increase competitiveness and to trust businesses to maintain standards. The taskforce on farm regulation, which I appointed in July, will consider how to reduce regulatory burdens and deliver risk-based and integrated compliance and inspection. It will consider all regulation that bears on farmers, including hill farmers, and it has started a wide consultation to understand which issues cause farmers most concern.

George Freeman: Can the Minister give some reassurance to farmers in my Mid Norfolk constituency who are still struggling as a result of the non-payment, late payment or part payment of their single farm payments? This is having a serious impact on their cash flow, and it is often the result of slow interdepartmental communications on issues such as land transfer.

Mr Paice: As my hon. Friend knows, I made a statement to the House in July about the Rural Payments Agency, following the outrageous and unbelievable damnation in the report by David Lane on the agency's operations. I have taken the chair of the oversight board, and we have appointed an interim chief executive while we search for a new one who is able to make that organisation fit for purpose. It is our determination to ensure that farmers in Mid Norfolk and everywhere else are paid accurately and on time.

Julian Smith: Hill farmers are facing significant challenges caused by the previous Government's scrapping of the hill farm allowance, and by the bureaucracy involved in

its replacement. Will the Minister meet me to discuss specific cases in Skipton and Ripon some time in the near future?

Mr Paice: Of course I would be very happy to speak to my hon. Friend on this subject, and I appreciate the point that he is making. The upland entry level stewardship scheme is basically a very good scheme; I would not dissent from that—[*Interruption.*] I am not going to criticise the basis of the scheme, but my hon. Friend is right to say that some aspects of it are too bureaucratic and difficult to access, particularly when issues between landlords and tenants or issues of common land are involved. I am happy to try to address that.

Sajid Javid: Farmers in my constituency of Bromsgrove rightly abide by EU regulations, including those that are frankly unhelpful to the farming industry. The Minister might know that farmers in other EU countries often ignore those same regulations, and attract little or no sanction from the authorities in those countries. Will he reassure us that he is aware of this issue and that his Department is doing all it can to make it better?

Mr Paice: I am very much aware of the belief in many parts of the British farming industry that regulations are not applied elsewhere in Europe. I am going to be completely honest, as the House would expect, and say that I think some of those stories are slightly exaggerated. I have many friends and contacts in the farming industry elsewhere in Europe, and they complain just as vigorously about this. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend's fundamental point is absolutely right. When a regulation is passed by Europe, it should be implemented and enforced equally across the whole of the Community, if we believe in fair trade and a single market.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Does the Minister think that the Agricultural Wages Board constitutes a burden or protection for vulnerable workers?

Mr Paice: We have already announced our intention to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board, which has gone unchanged for the past 50-plus years. It is entirely inflexible and unable to face up to modern needs. For example, a farmer is not even allowed to pay a worker a salary under the Agricultural Wages Order, which is nonsensical. We now have the minimum wage legislation, and it is only right that we should bring agricultural legislation into line with the rest.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): As we have just heard, the Secretary of State announced in July the plan to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board, which sets terms and conditions in an industry where pay is low. That is a step that, as the House will recall, even Baroness Thatcher shied away from. Will the Minister try to explain why setting wage rates of between £5.95 an hour—which is only just above the minimum wage—and £8.88 an hour constitutes the burden of which he speaks? Where is the evidence for that?

Mr Paice: The issue is one of inflexibility, because of the wages orders implemented through the Agricultural Wages Board. The right hon. Gentleman has just made the point that the minimum wage for agriculture is 2p an hour more than the national minimum wage, so what is the point of having a whole superstructure of an Agricultural Wages Board for the sake of 2p an hour?

That question answers itself. The right hon. Gentleman talks about who is responsible for abolition, but he should remember that it was Labour policy to abolish the Agricultural Wages Board and the Government were forced to rescind it by the Warwick agreement when they were in hock to the Liberals—[*Interruption.*]—I mean the trade unions.

Hilary Benn: There we have it—we see the burden under which the Minister is having to labour! That was no justification at all, because as the Minister is well aware, grades 2 to 6 will not be covered by the minimum wage legislation, and what about overtime rates and standby and what about bereavement leave? Does the coalition have something against the Agricultural Wages Board providing an entitlement to bereavement leave for farm workers? When will the Minister admit that all this talk about flexibility and so forth is nothing more than a smokescreen for a shabby little plan to cut the wages of agricultural workers?

Mr Paice: That just demonstrates how behind the times the right hon. Gentleman really is. In today's modern economy, we must have flexibility. We do not have wages boards for other sectors. His Government never brought back any of those abolished by the previous Conservative Government. If this system is so wonderful, why did Labour not bring any of those back? The answer is that at least some of his colleagues recognised the need for that flexibility. The reality is that the industry should make its own decisions in negotiations with its workers in tandem with the advice of the National Farmers Union.

Martin Horwood (Cheltenham) (LD): As the Minister is in hock to the Liberals, he will be aware of our commitment to landscape and biodiversity, including hedgerows. In reviewing the regulatory burden, will he ensure that the taskforce considers the new report on hedgerows by the Campaign to Protect Rural England, which suggests that regulations have helped, that it is necessary and possible to simplify them and that we should enhance the protection of hedgerows in the countryside?

Mr Paice: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and I accept his comment. The point of deregulation and the role of the taskforce is to simplify the burden, not to lower standards. I cannot repeat that too many times. We have no intention of reducing the protection for hedgerows. I was as concerned as my hon. Friend about them, but if we look at the issue carefully, we will find that many of the hedgerows have been removed not by farmers—in fact, they have been planting a lot more in the last decade—but as a result of development and local government actions.

Mackerel Quota

10. **Tom Greatrex** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions she has had with the European Commission on mackerel quota. [14181]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): In addition to a conversation I had on a one-to-one basis with the European Commissioner Maria Damanaki, I wrote to her on 10 August about the north-east Atlantic mackerel fishery, in particular to express my

deep concerns about Iceland's and the Faroe Islands' total allowable catch for this species. The UK Government are working closely with the industry and the EU Commission to put pressure on Iceland and the Faroes to behave reasonably.

Tom Greatrex: I thank the Minister for that reply. I urge him to continue those efforts and to ensure that he interacts with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and other fishing organisations in Scotland. Although this is not an issue in my constituency, it is a matter of concern to people across Scotland when an industry of such historical importance—and local importance in the north-east of Scotland—is potentially being undermined by the activities of Iceland.

Richard Benyon: That is a very good point. I had a conversation yesterday with Richard Lochhead and other Ministers from the devolved Assembly. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are working very closely with them, as with the fisheries organisations, to deal with the unreasonable actions of the Iceland Government and the Faroes. If they go ahead with this unilaterally declared total allowable catch, they will put a sustainable stock in a very dangerous position. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am using every means I can to work with colleagues across the UK and with the Commission to make sure that this serious situation is dealt with. I agree that 90% of the relevant jobs are in the north-east of Scotland, which is why I am working closely with the Minister from the devolved Scottish Government on the issue.

Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): The Minister will know of my interest in fisheries. Will he confirm what discussions he plans to have with commercial fishermen in relation to any extension of special areas of conservation recently introduced, the introduction of marine-protected areas, and the introduction of no-take zones around our coast?

Mr Speaker: With particular reference to the mackerel quota, I remind the Minister.

Richard Benyon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Of course, it is important to consider mackerel in relation to marine areas of conservation. Therefore, in the context of that species, as well as others, I will have close contact with all the four areas around our coast—how am I doing?—that are responsible for bringing forward these plans. I understand that the matter is causing great concern among fishing communities, which must take part in such schemes—I know that they are doing so, but they must continue. I have visited some of the areas—I will get round to all four of them—to ensure that their concerns are raised and to help to iron out any problems.

Food Labelling

11. **Andrew Stephenson** (Pendle) (Con): What plans her Department has to amend the food labelling standards for which it is responsible; and if she will make a statement. [14182]

14. **Alun Cairns** (Vale of Glamorgan) (Con): What plans her Department has to amend the food labelling standards for which it is responsible; and if she will make a statement. [14185]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): The Government have made a commitment to clear and honest food labelling. Our food labelling standards work remains focused on protecting consumers and enabling them to make informed choices, as well as ensuring a level playing field to promote the competitiveness of our food industry.

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. Does she agree that it is important that consumers across the UK are able to see clear and honest food labelling, particularly in relation to the country of origin of meat and dairy products, so that they know where animals have been farmed?

Mrs Spelman: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. We are negotiating on the proposed EU food information regulation, to ensure clarity in food labelling for consumers, especially on country of origin. That will ensure that unprocessed meat can be labelled as British only if it comes from an animal born, reared and slaughtered in the UK. Processed foods labelled as being made here will also have to show the origin of their main ingredient if that is from outside the UK.

Alun Cairns: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer. Will she go further and advise us how far she will push in the negotiations for the nations and regions of the UK to be reflected in labelling?

Mrs Spelman: The negotiations have been ongoing for about three years, as the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) will confirm, but under the Belgian presidency it is hoped that a political agreement will be reached by the end of the year. The discussion is about country of origin labelling; regional identification is already permitted on labels and is an important part of the Government's strategy to encourage the recognition and protection of good-quality regionally produced foods, with which all of us as consumers would readily identify.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State therefore speak to her Conservative MEPs to find out why they do not support food labelling through the European Parliament?

Mrs Spelman: With respect, I believe that Conservative Members of the European Parliament did support honesty in labelling, and that has been a Conservative party commitment for as long as I can remember. The European Parliament is currently considering compulsory country of origin labelling, and we have not ruled out the option.

Non-departmental Public Bodies

15. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What further plans her Department has to reduce the number of non-departmental public bodies for which it is responsible. [14186]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): The Government are committed to making substantial reforms to public bodies to increase accountability and reduce costs. I

have been looking closely to ensure that we deliver our priorities in the most efficient and effective way, and to enhance the role of the big society. I announced reductions in the number of bodies before the recess and will make further announcements this autumn.

Andrew Bridgen: Given the overlap of responsibilities and roles between the Environment Agency and Natural England, does my right hon. Friend agree that there could be scope to merge the two bodies and that considerable savings and efficiencies could result?

Mrs Spelman: My hon. Friend will have to await the final announcements that will be made this autumn. However, we have already had constructive discussions with Natural England and the Environment Agency, which has been very helpful in our quest for savings that will not involve compromising the front line. Reducing duplication between those organisations will obviously be one way of achieving that.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Given the recent suggestion that the Government will scrap the Commission for Rural Communities, the Sustainable Development Commission and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, how on earth can Ministers come to the House and claim that this will be the greenest Government ever, and how will the functions performed by those bodies be taken over?

Mrs Spelman: If the hon. Lady examines our structural reform plan closely, she will see that we have incorporated the important issues of environmental protection and sustainable development in the Department's mainstream work. They are among its top three priorities.

The Commission for Rural Communities was established a long time ago. I am sure that the hon. Lady would acknowledge that there is a considerable depth of understanding of the issues of rural communities on this side of the House, and that DEFRA is the rural champion at the heart of Government.

Waste and Resources Action Programme

16. **Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con):** When she next expects to meet the chief executive of the Waste and Resources Action Programme to discuss its work. [14187]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): My noble Friend Lord Henley has met Liz Goodwin and other representatives of WRAP on several occasions, and they have a good working relationship.

Tony Baldry: WRAP—which, with great perspicacity, has based itself in Banbury—does good work in developing markets for recyclable materials, but do my ministerial colleagues not feel that it is time to change its governance rules to make it easier for it to lever in, and work in partnership with, the private sector, so that over time private investment and funding can replace public funding?

Richard Benyon: As my hon. Friend says, there is a great deal of opportunity for further funding for this whole area. I applaud WRAP's work in promoting the Courtauld commitment and other arrangements with

industry. The quick wins obviously involve larger companies such as Sainsbury's, which has come up with some very good ideas about food waste. We must now move on to the difficult stage of dealing with small and medium-sized companies, which will be a priority for the future.

Laying Hens

18. **Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab):** What recent representations she has received on beak-trimming of laying hens. [14189]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): DEFRA completed a consultation exercise in April on an amendment to the Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007, introduced by my predecessor, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), which would remove the total ban on beak-trimming of laying hens to allow routine trimming to be carried out by the infrared technique only. All comments are currently being considered, and a summary will be published on the DEFRA website.

Mr Hepburn: May I urge the Minister to ignore the protests of the United Kingdom poultry industry, which is driven solely by profit, listen instead to the humane voices of those poultry farmers who have never engaged in this barbaric practice, and implement a ban from January?

Mr Paice: There is nothing wrong with having profit as a motive. That is the way in which this country operates.

As I said earlier, we must ensure that we do not make the welfare situation worse. Very few poultry producers do not de-beak their poultry, because of poultry's natural inclination towards feather-pecking and cannibalism. The Government want to see an end to it, but we are determined not to make the situation worse in the short term. That is why we are considering the results of the consultation carefully.

Supermarkets (Food Sourcing)

20. **Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con):** What steps her Department plans to take to encourage local sourcing of food by supermarkets. [14191]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): In response to growing consumer demand for local food, retailers have adopted buying policies aimed at increasing the availability of regional and local food on their shelves. I welcome that, and recognise the need to provide consumers with information on the provenance of the food that they buy. Clearer origin labelling is therefore a key commitment in the Government's programme.

Mark Menzies: I thank the Minister for her answer, but if small food producers are to be able to grow and supply the big supermarkets they must be able to develop their business, and one factor that holds them back is regulation and bureaucracy. What steps is the Department taking to strip out regulation in order to make it easier for such producers to grow?

Mrs Spelman: I know that my hon. Friend has long experience of working in the food retail industry and has a keen understanding of this issue, and therefore I would encourage him to participate in the work of the regulation taskforce, and to make his submissions to its chairman in a timely fashion so that, as far as possible, the burden of regulation can be alleviated without undermining the original intention for which it was created.

Unsold Food

21. **Penny Mordaunt** (Portsmouth North) (Con): What recent estimate her Department has made of the retail value of food discarded because it is unsold or unused; and if she will make a statement. [14192]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): Studies by the Waste and Resources Action Programme estimate the cost of waste generated across the UK food and drink supply chain and by households at around £17 billion every year. It is estimated that the average household unnecessarily wastes around £480 of food per year. The waste policy review announced by the Secretary of State will look at policies surrounding food waste, to see what can be done to further reduce the amount that ends up in landfill.

Penny Mordaunt: Portsmouth is producing a recipe book focused on using leftover food in order to raise awareness of the issue, proceeds from which are donated to local charities. Will the Minister support such initiatives, and encourage his ministerial colleagues to donate recipes to the book?

Richard Benyon: I can already think of one recipe that I would be happy to donate; I will not share it with the House as Members on the Opposition Front Bench might be upset to know that it contains meat. My hon. Friend makes a serious point, however, and this builds on initiatives such as “Love food hate waste.” I pay tribute to Portsmouth for coming forward with these ideas and I will certainly be interested, as will my noble Friend Lord Henley, in finding other instances where that has been done in a local area.

Topical Questions

T1. [14197] **Julian Sturdy** (York Outer) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): My Department has responsibility for safeguarding the environment, supporting farmers and strengthening the green economy. In line with that, I am pleased to be able to tell the House that since the last topical questions my Department has started work on the natural environment White Paper, which will strengthen the UK’s position as we approach the summit on biodiversity in Nagoya next month. This will be the first White Paper of its kind for 20 years and it will play a vital role in helping us to deliver our pledge to be the greenest Government ever.

Julian Sturdy: The Yorkshire region has long been known for its expertise in agricultural matters, and given that part of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is already based in York I am keen to put forward a proposal to make York into a centre of excellence for agriculture matters, following the example of Montpellier in France. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me to discuss that exciting proposal?

Mrs Spelman: I will be very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who shows a commendable desire to do his best for his constituency and region. I have to inform him that DEFRA has all around the country a large number of outposts, which, during the recess, the ministerial team—including me; I went to Worcester and Bristol—made a great effort to visit. That diversification is part of our resilience.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Given that DEFRA is an economic Department with very big European responsibilities, is it not astonishing that the Secretary of State is not listed as being a member of either of the Cabinet committees responsible—the Europe and economic affairs committees—whereas the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government is a member of both and, moreover, appears to be making waste policy. Why has the Secretary of State allowed DEFRA’s influence to be downgraded in that way, and how can the Department be at the heart of the Government when she is not even on the main Cabinet committees?

Mrs Spelman: I am very happy to inform the right hon. Gentleman that I have attended every single one of the economic affairs Cabinet committees. The structure of the Cabinet committee is about to be changed, so there will be a sub-committee of the Departments that have the most dealings with Europe. DEFRA, with 80% of its business determined at a European level, is one of those.

T2. [14198] **Elizabeth Truss** (South West Norfolk) (Con): Could the Secretary of State outline plans to reduce the number of organisations carrying out farm visits and inspections, which in south-west Norfolk includes Natural England, the Environment Agency and the Rural Payments Agency, as that places both a burden on farmers and a cost on the Exchequer?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): I am happy to agree with my hon. Friend, who represents, as I do, some of the most fertile land in the country in south-west Norfolk. She is absolutely right about the problem of multiple inspections. One of the challenges I have laid down to the Macdonald inquiry is to come up with a risk-based system and to merge the different inspection arrangements. By doing so, we can bring this all together and start to trust farmers. Concentrating inspections on a risk-based system will enable us to address those who are likely to be abusing the arrangements while trusting the vast majority who will not.

T4. [14200] **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): if she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities. At the last International Whaling Commission meeting, a proposal that would have legitimised

commercial whaling for the first time in decades was rightly defeated. However, concerns were expressed about corruption and vote rigging prior to that meeting. Will the Government say what steps they are taking to eradicate those concerns?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): I met the secretary-general of the IWC in Agadir and raised those points clearly with him, as we will continue to do. I was as alarmed as he was by the articles in *The Sunday Times*, and I remain absolutely convinced that, if the IWC is to have credibility, it has to sort out its governance problems.

T3. [14199] **Mr Peter Bone** (Wellingborough) (Con): The EU Budget Commissioner wants to abolish the UK's rebate, for which Mrs Thatcher fought so hard, on the grounds that farm payments have fallen as a percentage of the overall budget. If that happens, it will cost the United Kingdom £5 billion a year. Does the Minister have any advice for the EU Commissioner?

Mrs Spelman: I have a very clear view for the EU Commissioner, which was articulated by the Chancellor this week: the rebate remains fully justified, given the distortions in the EU budget. This is a matter of fairness for us, as the UK has the lowest per capita receipts. As 43% of the EU budget is spent on agriculture, our quest is also to seek genuine and ambitious reform of the common agricultural policy that will deliver good value for farmers, taxpayers, consumers and the environment alike.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The coalition agreement stipulates that the Government will legislate to ban both the import and possession of illegal timber. The Secretary of State has recently made it clear that that commitment has been dropped in favour of the lesser European proposals. Has she discussed that with her coalition partners, and if so, with whom and when?

Mr Paice: We discuss these issues throughout the coalition regularly, so I cannot give a long list of "with whom and when." But it is perfectly correct that we believe that the EU due diligence regulation does fulfil the expectations and desires of the coalition on stopping the trade of illegally forested timber throughout the EU. Once formal agreement is reached in the next few weeks, we expect every country to adopt a very robust implementation process to ensure that it actually has teeth.

T5. [14201] **Tony Baldry** (Banbury) (Con): Up and down the country, local authorities are spending millions of pounds on introducing new waste incinerators. The authorities in Norfolk and Suffolk are spending £160 million each, whereas the authority in neighbouring Cambridgeshire is meeting its EU landfill directive obligations, using different technology, for just £41 million. Is the Minister confident and satisfied that incineration is appropriate technology for the 21st century and is giving good value for money?

Richard Benyon: That is certainly part of our waste review and it is also part of the Department for Communities and Local Government's review of the planning process, because that process must be at the heart of obtaining energy from waste. I hope that we

can give assurances that the key driver in all these areas will be sustainable development, and how we manage waste will be at the heart of that. Energy from waste is part of the mix, but it must always remain a less-favoured solution than recycling. These matters have to be resolved locally, but the Department can provide a clear driver and clear strategy.

Mr Eric Illsley (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that we could improve on the amount of material that we recycle, particularly glass and paper, if there were less contamination within the collection systems? Does he have any proposals to improve the myriad different collection systems used by local authorities throughout the country?

Richard Benyon: I have seen the waste system in place around the country described as "anarchic". Inevitably, local priorities will dictate how waste is managed, and rightly so; we do not want to prescribe from Whitehall how local authorities should prioritise areas of recycling. We set very high targets and we are determined to fulfil those. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that that precise matter will be part of the review, and that he, the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and others will be able to hold us to account on it.

T6. [14202] **Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): Although arable farmers in Romney Marsh in my constituency have had an excellent harvest, what is left of the dairy sector continues to struggle, particularly with high fuel and feed costs. What measures are being considered by the Minister's Department to support and sustain the UK dairy industry?

Mr Paice: I entirely follow my hon. Friend's concerns. The dairy industry has fallen back dramatically over the past few years, but I am delighted to say that in the past few months there has been a small upturn in production, which is good. It is quite clear that the industry has a long way to go in some quarters. What concerns me most is the huge range of prices being received by dairy producers—in the liquid retail trade, prices are very high but for those in the processed area of trade, they are very low. The role of Government is to help farming to become more competitive, and that is what we are determined to do.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Do the Government intend to extend their big society ethos by keeping the previous Labour Government's commitment to completing the English coastal path?

Richard Benyon: We have said that we will continue the cross-party agreement that we had during the progress of the Bill to develop the coastal path. We have identified four areas in which it is being proceeded with, one of which is close to the Olympic site in Weymouth. Inevitably, it is a 10-year proposal and £50 million has been put into the budget for that over those 10 years. We will see which priorities exist over that 10-year period.

T7. [14203] **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): D. A. Clough and Son in my constituency has 12,000 laying hens and employs 10 people. Will the Minister reassure those people that he will vigorously oppose any attempt made by other EU member states to weaken their

obligations under the laying hens directive, which would disadvantage British producers? Will he also consider measures to support British producers who are struggling to meet the costs of compliance?

Mr Paice: My hon. Friend puts her finger on an extremely important issue. The British egg industry has invested a very large sum of money in bringing its production systems in line with the obligations that will come in at the end of next year. It is a great tragedy that some other European countries appear not to have done that. We are delighted that the European Commission rejected the application for a derogation by Poland and we will be very robust in supporting the Commission against any other applications for a derogation. If the situation is maintained, we will press the Commission to ensure that there is protection for those farmers who have made that investment.

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the concerns that are being raised about scallop dredging and the devastating impact that it has had on certain parts of the marine environment, particularly in the Clyde. Is any consideration being given to banning such practices or placing restrictions on them?

Richard Benyon: The hon. Lady probably saw the “Panorama” programme that touched on that subject, which starkly showed some of the problems. However, there are many areas of the seabed where scallop dredging is a perfectly legitimate and sustainable activity and does little or no damage. It has to be managed, but when we ban scallop dredgers from certain areas we have to remember that displacement can cause further problems elsewhere. That is why the marine strategy is so important: we can now zone different parts of the seas for different activities for a legitimate and, where possible, sustainable industry such as the production of scallops.

T8. [14204] **Anne Marie Morris** (Newton Abbot) (Con): We have seen in recent weeks just how important the flooding issue is internationally. It is clearly, from what we have heard in the House this morning, an important national issue. In my constituency of Newton Abbot we have had some severe flooding incidents in 2004 and 2008. Teignmouth has been particularly badly affected and flood prevention works are taking place in Shaldon. Now would be exactly the right time for a green light to be given to the proposed plans for flood prevention work in Teignmouth. I would be grateful for the Minister’s assurance that he will give that very careful consideration.

Richard Benyon: My hon. Friend is right to raise concerns on behalf of the residents of the 413 properties in Teignmouth that are at risk of rapid tidal flooding. There is a procedure going on with the Environment Agency for a £4.7 million scheme, which is at an advanced stage of planning. I am happy to meet her. I understand that, if all proceeds well, construction can start in the winter of 2011.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State plan to invoke the Hague preference to favour the under-10 metre sector at this autumn’s Fisheries Council?

Richard Benyon: Not unless we have to, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that invocation of the Hague preference will be done in full consultation with partners from all devolved Assemblies. It was done last year to support fishermen in the north-east of England and I recognise how important that was for them. I recognise also the concerns expressed by those in Scotland about the way it was done and I want to consult very openly on that.

Roger Williams (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Farmers are very keen to face up to the challenge of producing more food while impacting less on the environment and delivering the public goods of biodiversity, landscape conservation, water management and carbon sequestration, but they need a lead from the Department. When can farmers look forward to having that lead so that they can carry out those vital works?

Mrs Spelman: I thank my honourable ally for that question. I refer him to the No. 1 priority in the Department’s structural reform plan which is precisely to support the British food and farming sectors to produce food in a sustainable way that also protects the environment.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Further to the response that the Secretary of State gave me earlier, does she believe that keeping cows indoors in cubicles for more than 10 months of the year when they are in milk, milking them three times a day instead of the usual two and their having an average lifespan of five years, as opposed to the natural lifespan of 20 years, is compatible with good animal welfare standards?

Mr Paice: I suggest that the hon. Lady should learn a little about dairy farming. In the natural world a calf suckles its mother many times a day, so milking three times a day instead of twice is hardly a welfare problem.

Of course I recognise that there are concerns about that issue—that is why DEFRA has commissioned a three-year study by the university of Edinburgh into housing cattle all year round. That report is due next year and obviously we will study it carefully.

T9. [14206] **George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I am sure that the Minister will agree that our agricultural and food research sector is a vital platform for both sustainable production and unlocking huge new markets around the world. Will the Department comment on the recent Taylor review and the excellent recommendations it has made?

Mrs Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, which allows me to place on the record our very grateful thanks to Lord Taylor, whose experience of working in the horticultural industry has been invaluable in the preparation of the report. It was commissioned while my party was in opposition, was not officially commissioned by the Government and therefore cannot be published as a Government report. However, my Department’s response will be published officially and shortly.

Business of the House

11.33 am

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): The business for the week commencing 13 September will include:

MONDAY 13 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill.

TUESDAY 14 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Equitable Life (Payments) Bill, followed by motion relating to the House of Commons Commission.

WEDNESDAY 15 SEPTEMBER—Motion to approve Ways and Means resolutions on which a Finance Bill will be introduced, followed by remaining stages of the Identity Documents Bill.

THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER—General debate on the strategic defence and security review and future of the UK's armed forces. The subject for this debate was nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

The provisional business for the week commencing 11 October will include:

MONDAY 11 OCTOBER—Second Reading of the Finance (No. 2) Bill.

TUESDAY 12 OCTOBER—Proceedings on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill (Day 1).

WEDNESDAY 13 OCTOBER—Remaining stages of the Superannuation Bill, followed by, the Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration.

THURSDAY 14 OCTOBER—Business nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

The provisional business for the week commencing 18 October will include:

MONDAY 18 OCTOBER—Proceedings on the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill (Day 2).

Colleagues will also wish to know that subject to the progress of business, the House will rise for the Christmas recess on Tuesday 21 December 2010 and return on Monday 10 January 2011.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 16 September will be:

THURSDAY 16 SEPTEMBER—A debate on the international year of biodiversity.

I am sure that the whole House will wish to join me in sending our condolences to the Prime Minister on the recent death of his father.

Ms Winterton: I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. On behalf of Her Majesty's Opposition, I, too, offer our sincere condolences to the Prime Minister and his family at this very sad time.

As the Leader of the House knows, a number of Ministers made announcements during the recess that should properly have been made in the House, and they have since had to be rather dragged here to explain what they have been up to. We know that the Secretary of State for Education likes quite a few goes at getting his figures right, not least when he is announcing cancelled school building projects, but the Opposition are incredulous

that after all the hype and kerfuffle the figures he finally released for free schools and academies were only 16 and 32. Can the Leader of the House tell us whether he has been asked to find time for a statement—maybe two or three statements—so that the Secretary of State for Education can confirm that he has not got into another muddle and that the figures he has come up with are indeed accurate?

Given the speech made by the Deputy Prime Minister this morning, presumably in response to the BBC reporting of the effects of the cuts on the regions, is the Leader of the House expecting a statement from the Deputy Prime Minister so that he can confirm that under the Labour Government £1.5 billion per year was to be made available to the regions through the regional development agencies, whereas under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government the regional growth fund is £1 billion over two years? In anyone's language this is not extra support for the regions, it is a massive cut, and the Deputy Prime Minister should admit that to the House.

With regard to the allocation of time for the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, can the Leader of the House tell us whether he thinks there will be adequate time to put right the abject failure of the Deputy Prime Minister to explain why public inquiries into parliamentary constituency changes are to be abolished? It was fairly clear on Monday that the Deputy Prime Minister has employed the services of the Tory grandee, "Sir Gerry Mander", as his special adviser, but surely even he must realise that removing the right of local people to have a say in constituency boundaries is not only wrong in principle, but will also lead to endless expensive judicial reviews in the courts.

We now have clear advice from the Clerk of the House that the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill is similarly ill thought-out and will also end up being challenged in the courts. Those two Bills are prime examples of the betrayal of the promise of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government to have pre-legislative scrutiny wherever possible. Worse than that, they are in the first case anti-democratic and in the second case unworkable. The only thing the Leader of the House should do is withdraw those Bills, go back to the drawing board and come back with legislation that respects our democracy and respects Parliament. I urge him to do so.

Sir George Young: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she said at the beginning of her remarks. I know the Prime Minister will be reassured by what the whole House has said.

On statements, the code that the right hon. Lady refers to says that while the House is sitting statements of major changes in policy should first be made to the House. We propose to adhere to that policy. It does not apply, of course, when the House is not sitting, when the business of government continues. We also went out of our way to bring before Parliament as many statements as we could before the House adjourned for the summer recess. Unlike the previous Government we have brought the House back in September so that we are held properly to account and we do not have the very long recesses she enjoyed when she was a Minister.

On academies, I should hope that the right hon. Lady would congratulate the Government on the swift progress that the Secretary of State for Education has made in getting the Academies Bill through the House and

[Sir George Young]

academies up and running. More than 200 schools will become academies this year, and that compares with the four years that it took to open the first 30 academies and the five years that it took to open 15 city technology colleges. More than 200 schools are in the pipeline to become academies, so, far from decrying the slow progress she should welcome the swift, ambitious progress that this Government have made to bring higher standards of education to the nation's children.

On regional development, I hope that the right hon. Lady heard what the mayor of Middlesbrough said on the "Today" programme. He made it absolutely clear that over the past 15 years his city had become over-dependent on public expenditure, and he was determined to rebalance the city's economy. He was not asking for huge sums of Government money; he recognised that it was up to himself and the citizens of Middlesbrough to rebuild the economy so that it was less dependent on public sector expenditure. On top of the £1 billion growth fund, there are the incentives, through the national insurance rebates, for new businesses to relocate to those areas that benefit from the scheme.

On the programme motion, I am astounded that the right hon. Lady says that seven days—seven days!—on the Floor of the House for the boundaries Bill is not adequate. We had one day on the alternative vote under the previous Government; we are giving seven days on AV and boundaries. I am absolutely convinced that, in the five days on Report and the two days on remaining stages, she will have ample time to press the Government on the issues that she raised, such as the timetable for inquiries.

Finally, I welcome the fact that the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee is looking at the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill, and I, like the right hon. Lady, have seen the evidence that the Clerk of the House gave to the Committee. I assume that the Committee, later on in its inquiry, will invite Ministers also to give evidence, so that they can respond. There will be an opportunity on Monday, when we have the Bill's Second Reading, for Ministers to respond to the points that have been made, and I just remind the right hon. Lady that Professor Robert Hazell said:

"A related question is whether there could be recourse to the courts to enforce the requirements of a fixed term law. The probability is that they would consider the issue to be non-justiciable; an obligation to be enforced in the political but not the legal sphere."

This may disappoint the right hon. Lady, but the Government have no intention whatever of withdrawing either Bill. We believe that they are in the long-term interest of the country, and we will get them through both Houses as soon as we can.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. There is important Back-Bench business to follow and real pressure on time, so I issue an appeal, beyond the ordinary appeal, for brevity if we are to maximise the number of contributors. A fine example of that brevity is to be provided, first, by Mr Edward Leigh.

Mr Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Traditionally, Conservative Governments have never programmed constitutional measures, and, as my right hon. Friend

the Leader of the House has made clear, there was savage programming during the previous Parliament. He has allowed seven days, but can he give an assurance that the Government will use their best endeavours to ensure that all the most important points are covered, and in particular that there is time to debate and vote on thresholds?

Sir George Young: Having allocated seven days for consideration of the Bill, I very much hope that the House will use that time intelligently. It would of course be open to the Government, if that were the wish of the House, to ensure that we reached certain matters by including programme motions. We are reluctant to do that at this stage. We believe that the House will use the seven days intelligently and to best advantage. If there is any sign of mischief and any determined efforts to slow down progress, we will of course have to think again.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): The Leader of the House was uncharacteristically dismissive of the concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Ms Winterton) about the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill, which we will debate on Monday. Does he genuinely, when he is in his more reflective mode, not think that there is a very strong case for the pre-legislative scrutiny of a measure that, at the very least, is controversial and, at worst, might end up placing the fate of any given Parliament in the hands of the judiciary? Surely that cannot be right.

Sir George Young: I very much hope that against the background of the timetable that I have outlined, the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee will have time to complete its inquiry and report to the House on the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill. I welcome the fact that it is conducting this inquiry, and I am sure that it will inform our debate. I am committed to draft legislation. However, I hope that the right hon. Gentleman understands that at the beginning of a new Parliament, with a new Government, it is not possible, if one is to make progress, to put everything in draft, particularly when commitments have been made to do certain things by a certain time. Those political imperatives sometimes override the ambition that both he and I have to subject all Bills to draft scrutiny.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): During the recess, BBC South East reported on bogus charity collectors operating in my constituency. Given the growing, serious and organised nature of this crime, which deprives charities of millions of pounds a year, may I draw the Leader of House's attention to early-day motion 689?

[*That this House condemns the activities of fraudulent charity clothing bag collectors who abuse the goodwill of those who donate clothes for good causes; recognises that this organised crime is becoming a nationwide issue; expresses concern that these activities undermine the valuable work of genuine charities, depriving them of millions of pounds worth of donations per annum; and calls on the Government to ensure that local police authorities tackle the criminal gangs responsible and facilitate the strict enforcement of the House to House Collection Act 1939 and punishment of those found in breach of the Act.*]

Will the Leader of the House consider allocating parliamentary time for an urgent debate on this issue?

Sir George Young: I commend my hon. Friend on her initiative in tabling this EDM and drawing to the wider public attention the activities of criminal gangs who are not only defrauding legitimate charities of income but casting a question mark over the authenticity of genuine collections because of the bogus ones. The Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee will have heard her plea for parliamentary time. In the meantime, I hope that the police and local authorities' trading standards officers will give this activity the attention it deserves.

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): Further to the announcement of the next slot of Back-Bench business on 14 October, is the Leader of the House aware that, for the first time as a Backbench Business Committee, we will be taking representations from Back Benchers directly and in public on Wednesday 15 September—next Wednesday—at 5 pm? May I take this opportunity to urge all Members to make direct representations to the Committee so that we can determine what topic is most suitable for debate on that day?

Sir George Young: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady, who is acting as a lightning conductor for the many bids that I get to find time for debates. I welcome this initiative. I hope that she can write to hon. Members as well as making that statement in the House. I congratulate her on the innovative way in which she is chairing her Committee and broadening to a wider public the discussion about what issues should be debated.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Although the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill seeks to determine the length of future Parliaments, will the Leader of the House please confirm that if the Bill is passed the ensuing Act will have no special status and could in fact be repealed by a future Parliament?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. No Parliament can bind its successor, and it would be open to any new Parliament to repeal legislation that had been passed by this one.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): In view of the impact of spending cuts on boroughs like mine, which was mentioned on the wireless today arising from a survey which had been undertaken—[*Laughter.*] There is nothing amusing about imposing spending cuts on those with the lowest incomes and the impact that it is having not only in my borough but throughout the west midlands. Would it not be right to have a debate as quickly as possible on this subject? Once again, a Tory Government are attacking the very people with the lowest incomes. It is disgraceful, and the spending cuts should certainly be reconsidered.

Sir George Young: Of course I understand the strong feelings that the hon. Gentleman expresses. The Government are determined to protect the most vulnerable from the difficult decisions that we are going to have to take—decisions made necessary by the activities of a Government whom he supported.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): Mrs Ashtiani is still languishing, four years on, in a jail in Iran. She has endured 99 lashes. Will the Leader of the House give us time for a debate to discuss her plight in the wake of the excellent motion in the European Parliament,

which was carried 668 to nil in support of Mrs Ashtiani? Can we have a debate to discuss her plight and human rights in Iran more generally?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman draws a very serious issue to the House's attention. He may have seen the Foreign Secretary's statement, which made it absolutely clear that we deplore the actions of the Iranian Government in proposing to execute that lady. I hope that there may be time, through either the Backbench Business Committee, questions or the activity of the Foreign Affairs Committee, to add weight to the representations that have already been made, and I know that everybody in the House hopes that the life of that lady may be spared.

Mr Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): The Leader of the House will be aware of the continuing problems that parents with care have in obtaining child maintenance from some absent parents who are self-employed or company directors and are able to reduce their income artificially. May we have a debate on what more can be done to tackle that problem, and particularly on what changes are necessary to the application and determination procedure in the Child Support (Variations) Regulations 2000?

Sir George Young: I think every hon. Member hears cases at their advice bureau in which an absent parent is accused of under-declaring their income, and if they are self-employed it is very difficult for the Child Support Agency or its successor organisation to verify that. That results in real hardship for the parent with the children. One possible way forward is that the new Select Committee on Work and Pensions may wish to revisit the subject. Alternatively, if the Backbench Business Committee receives sufficient representations, it may wish to find time for a debate. The subject for 14 October has not yet been allocated. I agree entirely that the issue needs to be addressed, because it comes up in all our advice bureaux.

Mark Lancaster (Milton Keynes North) (Con): May we have a debate on houses in multiple occupation? Three years ago, in a debate in Westminster Hall, I expressed my concern about the potential for fire in such properties, and sadly last weekend my worst fears were realised when a mother and her three-year-old daughter burned to death in my constituency. From 1 October, the Government intend to give local authorities greater latitude in granting such properties. Can the Leader of the House reassure me and the House that, when that is done, there will be no compromise on safety?

Sir George Young: I was very sorry to hear of the loss of life in Milton Keynes over the weekend. There will be housing legislation, which may provide an opportunity to revisit the issue. In the meantime, as a former Housing Minister, I would say that we do not want to do anything that makes life in HMOs more dangerous.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I, too, listened this morning to the BBC's announcement of the findings of its study carried out by Experian, on my digital radio. I was extremely concerned about the impact of those findings and should like to add weight to the request for the Leader of the House to make time for an extremely important and urgent debate on the issue, because the study showed

[Catherine McKinnell]

clearly that the Government's programme of cuts will have a disparate impact on regions such as my own, the north-east.

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Lady's strong feelings about her constituency. The best response I can give is that there will be a statement on 20 October on the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, and I imagine that there will be a debate on it. That will provide the right opportunity for her to share her concerns with the House and for the Government to respond to them, when we have the facts before us on exactly which programmes are being maintained and which are being reduced.

Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend see what can be done to have a debate to discuss the serious problems of doctors' hours and of the training programmes for nurses, teachers and many others, which are clearly not satisfactory?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the issue. He may have seen a series of articles in *The Times* that have vividly illustrated the problems that face us. We are well aware of the concern about the effect on postgraduate medical training of implementing the European working time directive, and in the coalition agreement, the Government are committed to limiting the application of the EWTG in the UK. Negotiations will start early next year, and the Department of Health and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills will adopt a robust negotiating position.

Jim Sheridan (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): May we have a debate on what is now known as the Cyprus problem? The Prime Minister met the Turkish authorities recently and spoke warmly about their ambition to join the European Union, but he forgot to mention Turkey's illegal occupation of northern Cyprus. A debate would provide an ideal opportunity to remind both our own Government and the Turkish Government of their responsibilities should they wish to join the EU.

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point. I do not know whether he will have an opportunity to raise it at Foreign Office questions, but I am sure that the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee will have heard his bid for a debate on that serious issue.

Duncan Hames (Chippenham) (LD): Many new Members have entered the House since the climate change talks in Copenhagen. When may we have a debate on proposals for the Mexico conference later this year, so that the Government's negotiations can be informed by Members at an early stage?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman makes a really serious point and an important bid. If he is not doing anything on Wednesday at 5 o'clock, he might like to present himself to the Committee of the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel) and repeat his eloquent plea for a debate well in time before that conference takes place.

Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Throughout the general election campaign, the Deputy Prime Minister campaigned against the irresponsibly swift and deep public spending cuts that his Government are now pursuing. In June, he said that he had changed his mind as the result of a conversation with the Governor of the Bank of England after the general election, but during the recess it transpired in a BBC documentary that he had in fact changed his mind before the general election. May we have a statement from the Deputy Prime Minister to explain why he did not think the electorate were entitled to know his change of position before the general election?

Sir George Young: I reject the hon. Gentleman's allegation that the Deputy Prime Minister misled anybody in any way during the election campaign. I have heard the Deputy Prime Minister explain that the events in Greece, for example, changed his perception of the right thing to do for the UK economy. In any case, he appears regularly at the Dispatch Box and I am sure he would be only too anxious to answer the hon. Gentleman's question.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): Will the Leader of the House consider a fuller debate on covert surveillance, following my early-day motion 697?

[That this House is concerned by the moral hazard involved in covert surveillance by local councils; regrets that this was enabled and encouraged by the previous Labour Government's Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000; notes that freedom of information requests by the organisation Big Brother Watch have revealed that in the last two years alone, local councils have carried out over 8,500 separate covert surveillance operations under this legislation, which is equal to over 11 new surveillance operations every day; further notes that the previous Labour Government encouraged this through deliberate policy, and thereby created a culture of surveillance, where an individual's right to privacy was significantly eroded; and therefore welcomes the new Government as it stands firm in restoring Britain's ancient freedoms and civil liberties.]

Research by Big Brother Watch has shown that local councils have authorised more than 8,500 covert surveillance operations in the past two years, using the previous Government's legislation. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the House is to debate surveillance, we should discuss the major and real threats to our civil liberties?

Sir George Young: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that. It is important that surveillance powers are used proportionately and for the purposes for which they were designed. The Government are committed to reviewing counter-terrorism and security powers, and later in the Session there will be a so-called freedom Bill, which will provide a proper opportunity to examine how local authorities are using those powers and, if necessary, curtail them.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): I am sure the whole House will share my concern about the plans of the Rev. Terry Jones of the Dove World outreach centre in Florida to organise a public burning of the Koran on Saturday. Might we expect a Government statement along the lines of that of the US Government, condemning that action?

Sir George Young: I think the man is a stupid bigot.

Mr Speaker: An admirably pithy reply from the Leader of the House, for which we are grateful.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): I cycled into Parliament this morning only to be greeted by the sight of yet another protester who had breached security and remains, as we speak, on the scaffolding on the side of the building. I then approached the police who were standing underneath and asked why an arrest had not been made. They gave that ubiquitous British justification for inertia—health and safety. I then offered to go up myself and make a citizen's arrest, and was told to move on or I would be arrested. It is a strange day indeed in Parliament when an MP is threatened with arrest while a protestor sits on our roof having breached security. May we have a statement on the security priorities for this House?

Sir George Young: I commend my hon. Friend for his robust response to the constabulary. Had he been arrested, all sorts of issues might have been raised if he was going about his parliamentary duties. I very much regret that there has been another breach of security in the Palace. I understand that the police are doing what they can to remove the placards and protestors, but obviously they want to do so without injury if they can.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Might time be found for a debate, in either Government or Back-Bench time, to raise awareness among all our constituents of the housing benefit reductions, and especially the change coming in next October? Although it might sound like a complex change to move from setting the rate at the 50th percentile of regional rent to the 30th, nearly 6,000 of my constituents will have a sudden cut in their housing benefit, with massive implications for homelessness and disruption.

Sir George Young: As a former Housing Minister, I am of course concerned at what the hon. Gentleman says. The fact is that in 2004-05, expenditure on housing benefit was £10 billion. If no action were taken, that would go up to £20 billion within 10 years. That is simply unsustainable, as is the fact that people can claim and are claiming £100,000 a year in housing benefit. At the moment, working families, through their taxes, pay the housing benefit of families who live in better-quality accommodation. That is also unsustainable, which is why we are introducing proposals to restrain the increase in housing benefit, but there will be discretionary payments and transitional arrangements. There will be an opportunity to debate the matter at greater length when legislation is before the House.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend update the House on the situation in Parliament square? Apart from the protester on the pavement, when will the rest of the square be cleared of demonstrators and when will it be open to the public?

Sir George Young: I agree with my hon. Friend that the current position is unsatisfactory. Although the protesters have been moved from the square, they are now encamped on the pavement, which is unacceptable and unsustainable. I accept the right to protest, but we cannot have permanent encampments on the pavement. Legislation will be introduced following discussions

with Westminster city council and the Metropolitan police in order to put that right. I hope that the legislation introduced by this Government succeeds where that introduced by the previous Government manifestly failed.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): When do the Government intend to proceed with their ridiculous proposal to give away or privatise the whole of Royal Mail? Will he indicate to the House that no statement will be made by any Minister outside the House on such a decision until such time as the House has been informed?

Sir George Young: There will be proposals for legislation on Royal Mail. I cannot give a specific guarantee on exactly when those will be made, but of course, I will seek to do what I can to ensure that the House is sitting when that happens.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): My hon. Friend is aware that one of the biggest infrastructure projects in this country—the Hinkley Point nuclear power station—is about to begin in my constituency. However, there is an anomaly in planning legislation, namely the Government's ability to help us on planning gain for local communities. We are on phase 2 of the discussions at the moment, and my worry is that unless that is sorted out, when every major infrastructure in this country goes before the Infrastructure Planning Commission, local communities will say, "We don't want this project because of the anomaly in getting money for the local area."

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend raises an important but rather technical point about the IPC, which I think we are going to abolish. I should like to raise the issue that he mentioned with the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and urge the latter to give a swift response.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Ms Winterton), we need an urgent debate on Building Schools for the Future. The problem has been rumbling on for three months, and I have seven cancelled projects in my constituency. This is not a party political issue because it affects those on both sides of the House. I suspect that the Leader of the House, who has always demonstrated a lot of faith in this place, also wants a debate.

Sir George Young: To some extent, the future of that programme is tied up with the comprehensive spending review, but the Select Committee on Education is holding an investigation into BSF. That might be the right vehicle by which the hon. Gentleman can pursue his interest.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There is concern on both sides of the House about human trafficking. Women are trafficked into our country, forced into prostitution and kept like slaves by pimps. It is therefore astonishing and distressing that the Government have refused to opt in to a European directive to combat that horrendous crime. Will the Leader of the House therefore grant a debate on that modern form of slavery?

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Lady's concern, but I think I am right in saying that the Home Secretary responded to exactly that point just a few days ago. She said that what really mattered was the

[*Sir George Young*]

legislation in this country rather than automatically following what the EU has prescribed. She gave a robust response and made it absolutely clear that that activity is unacceptable, and that we will do all we can to stop it.

Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): I am pleased with the appointment of the new trade Minister, Mr Green, and hope that he will focus on exports to the middle east, where there are huge opportunities for British firms. However, may we have a debate specifically on how Parliament, Members of Parliament and the Government can help small and medium-sized businesses to export?

Sir George Young: I, too, welcome the appointment of the new trade Minister. I am not sure whether the Government can find time for a debate, but my hon. Friend has had remarkable success—if I may say so—in his bids for debates in Westminster Hall, and he might like to try his luck again on that one.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary on the future of the BBC World Service, and in particular on the future of the BBC Russian Service? It has not been above criticism in the past, but if it were to disappear completely, we would never get the frequencies back for broadcasts.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and the World Service is respected throughout the world. I will certainly pass his concerns on to the Foreign Secretary. The issue may well not be resolved until the CSR is finalised.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House agree that the House urgently needs to debate the balance of trade in relation to the process industry in the north-east? Also, given that the BBC today reported that areas such as Middlesbrough, Redcar and Stockton are the least resilient to the Government's potential cuts, is it not paramount that we debate the process industry in, and exports from, that area, particularly in relation to the Government's plan for a reduction of regional aid?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman has, like others, touched on the CSR. We did not want to make those reductions; we inherited the need to implement them. I support his idea of a debate on export opportunities for industries in the north-east. Perhaps the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, can add that to her list. However, if we debate the CSR, the hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to make his points on Government policies on those matters.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Leader of the House might be aware of the immense distress caused to the family of the victims of the Jeremy Bamber murders by the recent media interview he gave, which was allowed by the Ministry of Justice. May we have a debate in Government time on the impact of prisoners and mass murderers such as Bamber, who are serving whole-life tariffs and life imprisonment, being granted access to the media, so that victims of such crimes can be protected?

Sir George Young: It cannot be right that those who have been sentenced to imprisonment for serious crimes such as murder should then from prison be allowed to cause distress to the relatives of their victims. I will certainly raise the case to which my hon. Friend refers with the Justice Secretary and ask him to write to her.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): While the Leader of the House is talking to the Justice Secretary, will he ask whether he can make an early statement on the Government's policy on continuing the previous Administration's effort to divert vulnerable women and girls from custody? So far, we have heard warm words from Justice Ministers, but absolutely no detail on their plans. That silence is beginning to cause concern, so I would be grateful for an early statement.

Sir George Young: I hope that the hon. Lady shares her concerns the next time the Ministry of Justice ministerial team come before the House—that seems to be the right vehicle—but certainly there is no question of this Government resiling from the initiatives to which she refers.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): I understand that the appointment of the head of the Office for Budget Responsibility is to be approved by the Treasury Committee. Do the Government plan to allow any other important Government appointments to be approved by other Select Committees?

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend asks a good question. Under the previous Government, a whole range of public appointments were made subject to the appropriate Select Committee validating or commenting on them—an extra tranche of names was added towards the end of the previous Parliament. We will certainly keep that under review. We are anxious that Select Committees have a role to play in key public appointments.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate or statement on the answering of written parliamentary questions? In July, I tabled a number of named day questions to the Department for Education, but they were not answered before the recess. I returned to Parliament after the recess expecting all of them to be answered on 6 September, but not all were. I would appreciate his help in getting them answered. We know the difficulties that that Department has at the moment, but answering written questions, which gives MPs the information we need to hold the Government to account, is essential.

Sir George Young: I apologise if there has been any discourtesy to the hon. Gentleman because his questions have not been answered promptly, and I will pursue the issue later today with my colleagues.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Over the summer I met the representatives of several businesses in east Yorkshire and north Lincolnshire who, having survived Labour's recession, are now in a difficult position in relation to their banks and obtaining loans. One particular allegation put to me by those businesses was that banks were refusing to entertain full applications so that their refusal rates, which are published, were not affected. The lending requests were being refused at the

pre-application stage. May we have an urgent debate on that matter so that businesses in my area can be assured that the Government are on their side?

Sir George Young: In advance of any debate that we may have on that issue, I wish to draw my hon. Friend's remarks to the attention of both the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills to see whether those matters can be addressed in the dialogue that they have with the banks. I know that other hon. Members have had the same experience that he has just recounted.

Joan Walley (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Given the Leader of the House's reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Tom Blenkinsop) about the regional development fund, the importance of the comprehensive spending review and the BBC's report today about the biggest cuts since the second world war, is it not the case that we need a debate about how we can protect the most needy and those parts of the country that are at most risk, given the north-south divide? Stoke-on-Trent, for example, was named in the BBC's report.

Sir George Young: The north-south divide that the hon. Lady mentions was inherited, and we seek to address it. I do not know whether she listened later on her radio—as opposed to her wireless—to the robust response from the Deputy Prime Minister, in which he outlined the action that the Government are taking to narrow the north-south divide and ensure that growth is encouraged in those areas that suffered under Labour.

John Robertson (Glasgow North West) (Lab): I wonder whether the Leader of the House would consider having a debate on aircraft carriers before the spending review is completed, so that we can ensure that the workers who live in my constituency—and the thousands of people who would suffer the knock-on effects of any reduction—can make their feelings known before the cuts are announced.

Sir George Young: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern on behalf of his constituents. He will know that there is a strategic defence and security review taking place in parallel with the comprehensive spending review, and I fear that he will have to await the outcome of the processes before he learns of the Government's decisions.

Diana R. Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I was pleased to hear the comments by the Leader of the House about ministerial statements. However, on 29 August, the BBC reported—and the Department of Health confirmed—that the Secretary of State intended to scrap NHS Direct. That resulted in a petition of 14,000 people opposing that move. It now appears this morning that the Secretary of State for Health has said that he never intended to scrap NHS Direct. Will the Leader of the House reiterate to his colleagues how

important it is to make clear statements to the House of Commons when Parliament is sitting, not in the middle of the summer recess.

Sir George Young: The hon. Lady had an opportunity on Tuesday to take this matter up with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. He is continuing the pilots initiated by the last Government to transfer NHS Direct to 111. NHS Direct is not being abolished: the organisation will support the new regime. On her plea for Ministers to make accurate statements to the House, no one is more strongly in support of that than I.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): May I congratulate the Leader of the House on his excellent decision to table a debate on the year of international biodiversity in accordance with the suggestion that I made to him before the recess? I offer him another suggestion, which is that he takes more seriously the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), because the devastating impact of the cuts in housing benefit on constituencies up and down the country is something that this House needs to discuss fully in Government time as a matter of urgency.

Sir George Young: As I hope I said to the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie), legislation will be needed to make the changes to housing benefit, so there will be ample time for the House to debate those issues.

Mr Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill will lead to a 25% reduction in Welsh representation in this House. In the light of that, will the Leader of the House support the request made by the shadow Secretary of State for Wales for a special meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee to consider the implications of the Bill for Wales?

Sir George Young: I would have thought that that was exactly the sort of issue that could be raised as the Bill goes through the House. Wales will be in exactly the same position as the rest of the country, and I cannot see what is wrong with that.

Thomas Docherty (Dunfermline and West Fife) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware of the strength of feeling on both sides of the House that we need a swift and fair solution to the issue of compensation for the nuclear test ban veterans. Will he ensure that when the Secretary of State for Defence has decided the compensation package, he will make a full statement in the House so that hon. Members can make comments and question him?

Sir George Young: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue about compensation. I cannot give a categorical guarantee of an oral statement, but I will do what I can to ensure that the House is fully informed and has an opportunity to hold Ministers to account for their decisions.

Points of Order

12.15 pm

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. A few moments ago, in response to my question about the Royal Mail, the Leader of the House said that he would seek to ensure that the House was sitting when the statement on the decision was made. Do you agree with me that that is a cop out? Should not statements on matters as important as the future of the Royal Mail be made first of all to this House?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): That is not a point of order, but the hon. Gentleman has put his point on the record. Mr Speaker has also made it clear that he expects all statements to be made first in the House. We are all well aware of that.

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am sure that you will be aware of the concern expressed during business questions about the Fixed-Term Parliaments Bill, especially in view of the comments made by the Clerk of the House that it might result in the issue being debated in the courts rather than in Parliament. The Leader of the House said that we would have a lot of time to discuss the Bill, but I am slightly concerned that the Order Paper shows that proceedings in Committee of the whole House will be completed in two hours. I am sure that that must be a printing error, but it would be helpful if he could confirm that.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I am sure that the Leader of the House will be able to clarify that point.

Sir George Young: It is indeed two days. Two hours would not be acceptable.

Privilege

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Before I call the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) to move the motion, I remind the House that it concerns the narrow issue of whether the matter should be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. It is not a general debate on the issues and I would be grateful if hon. Members could bear that in mind. Otherwise I will have to remind them. The rules governing this debate are set out on pages 167-8 of “Erskine May”.

12.18 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move,

That the matter of hacking of honourable and right honourable Members’ mobile phones be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

The vast majority of those who had their phones hacked were not MPs, but of necessity this motion deals solely with the hacking of MPs’ phones. That is not because we are in any sense more important than anyone else—it is a scandal that the royal princes, footballers, actors and, in many cases, ordinary members of the public had their phone messages intercepted and interfered with. While I passionately believe in the freedom of the press, and agree that investigative journalism is an important and proud tradition in this country, illegal hacking, suborning police officers and obtaining information by illegal means do not enhance our democracy. In fact, they undermine it.

This motion is exclusively about this House because I contend that it is a contempt of Parliament and a severe breach of parliamentary privilege to intercept the mobile phone messages of elected Members, to tap their phones, to bug their conversations, to intercept their emails or to seek to do so.

There are those who would want to play this down. People have said to me, “After all, what’s the fuss about a few phone messages?” I ask hon. Members what the last phone message was that they had left on their answer phone. It might have been a sappy, sentimental message from their wife or partner, but it might have been something far more significant. It might have been a Minister ringing about a piece of legislation—in parliamentary language, a proceeding in Parliament. It might have been the Home Secretary or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland ringing about a highly sensitive matter and leaving a message. Or it might have been a constituent ringing their elected Member of Parliament, leaving a message and asking them to return a call about something that was highly confidential to them.

The House has rightly been very angry in the past when it has been felt that the right of an MP to speak without let, hindrance or interception, which stems in essence from the Bill of Rights 1689, has been violated. It took action on several occasions in the 18th century, on many occasions in the 19th century and on more than 15 occasions in the 20th century. It is for that reason that we have a secure doctrine—the Wilson doctrine—that MPs will not be bugged by the security services, and I am sure that were there any information that MPs had been bugged by the security services, many hon. Members would be standing on their feet to condemn it.

The reason this reference is necessary now is simple. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee, which is admirably chaired by the hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale)—he should probably be the right hon. Member for Maldon, and for all I know he might be the right hon. Member—produced an excellent report on the wider issue. Since then, however, there has been new information. First, several MPs, including myself, have contacted the Met and have discovered that we were the subjects of Glenn Mulcaire's investigations. In the words of the Metropolitan police, we were persons of interest to Mr Mulcaire. I am sorry to say that in very few, if any, of those cases have the police pursued any lines of investigation.

Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman on bringing this debate forward and on seeking to have the matter referred to the Standards and Privileges Committee. Is he aware that the Information Commissioner published a report, "What Price Privacy Now?", in December 2006, in which he unveiled the solid evidence that illegal information had been supplied to 305 named journalists working for a variety of newspapers, and does he agree that, if the Press Complaints Commission had any gumption or mettle, and was capable of investigating this sort of issue, we would not need to refer this matter to the Select Committee? Indeed, the Information Commissioner said that "the Press Complaints Commission (and its associated Code of Practice Committee of Editors) should take a much stronger line to tackle any involvement by the press in the illegal trade in personal information".

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman is right. If hon. Members have not had an opportunity to read the Information Commissioner's report, I urge them to do so. It is quite astounding. It lists the number of transactions positively identified: the *Daily Mail*, 952; the *Sunday People*, 802; the *Daily Mirror*, 681; *The Mail on Sunday*, 266; the *News of the World*, 182; and so on. It is an absolutely devastating report, and my concern is that the PCC has done nothing, and hardly anyone else has done anything. It is time that the House took responsibility for what areas we can.

The House has rightly been angered about this issue. The Culture, Media and Sport Committee produced a report, but there is more information. I suspect that, so far, we have seen only the tip of the iceberg in relation to right hon. and hon. Members, and that the hacking extended not just to Liberal Democrat and Labour MPs but to a large number of Conservative Members. I urge every right hon. and hon. Member who has any suspicion that they might have been a person of interest to Mr Mulcaire, which probably includes the vast majority of us, to write to the Met asking whether they were included, because Assistant Commissioner Yates made it clear the other day, in evidence to another Select Committee, that he has not been notifying Members. We have to do the work ourselves.

Ian Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Standards and Privileges Committee should look in particular at why the police did not approach Members named in the information they had in order to acquire more evidence from those Members, who were unaware—and still are unaware, in many cases—that their names were on the list? Is that not a hugely important issue that the Committee should investigate?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is right. If somebody went to the police and alleged that somebody was stalking them, and the police visited the stalker's house and found not only photographs of, and personal details about, the person who made the allegation, but photographs of another 20 people, I presume and hope that the police would go to those other 20 people and inform them that their personal situation had been compromised and that they had been the subjects of that person's activities. The police should have engaged in precisely the same duty of care towards not just right hon. and hon. Members, but any member of the public who had been the subject of Mr Mulcaire's attention.

There is a second piece of new information. Two former members of staff at the *News of the World* have said that the hacking was far more extensive than so far revealed. Indeed, today, Paul McMullan, a former features executive and member of the *News of the World's* investigations team, has said that he personally commissioned several hundred illegal acts, and that the use of illegal techniques at the newspaper was absolutely no secret.

Thirdly, although it has been stated that the case was an isolated bad apple, the Information Commissioner, as the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Nicholas Soames) has mentioned, has suggested that the unlawful trade in confidential personal information is extensive across the media, citing more than 1,000 transactions positively identified by a large number of newspapers. Looking through the list, it seems that the only newspaper that is not included is the *Rhonda Leader*.

Why refer the matter to the Standards and Privileges Committee? First, because it is the senior Committee of the House. Secondly, because, by referring it to the Committee, it will have the support and full authority of the whole House—nobody can gainsay it. When the matter of the arrest of the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) was referred to a specially created committee of privileges, that committee resolved that such an instance should be referred not to a special committee, but to the Standards and Privileges Committee.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD) *indicated assent*.

Chris Bryant: I see that the right hon. and learned Gentleman who chaired that committee is nodding his assent.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I welcome the Speaker's decision, in the best traditions of the House, to allow this debate, so that all Members of the House can defend the rights of all Members to carry out their duties without having their phones hacked into. Does my hon. Friend share my hope that there will be full co-operation from Downing street, not least because the lesson of Watergate is that the cover-up is worse than the crime?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is right. One of the reasons for referring the matter to the Standards and Privileges Committee is that it carries the authority of the whole House, and I hope that that would mean that every right hon. and hon. Member, including those at Downing street, would want to co-operate.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young) *indicated assent*.

Chris Bryant: I see the Leader of the House nodding his assent. I am sure that it would be true.

I urge the Committee to use all the powers at its disposal, including the power to summon any person it wishes and to require them to attend, because some people refused to attend the previous inquiry held by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. If necessary, it should issue warrants to require witnesses to attend, and if they still refuse, it should use the offices of the Serjeant at Arms. Likewise, it should be free to use its power to require a witness to answer a question under pain of admonishment by the House. We should not accept it when witnesses simply refuse to give a straight answer to a straight question. That should not be standard practice, which it is becoming. The House should become far more carnivorous.

Given that some of the issues we are dealing with are matters of privacy, and we would not want to invade the privacy of those who have already had their phones hacked, the Committee should feel free to take some of its evidence in private if necessary. It should not shy away from recommending motions to the House enforcing its decisions, if it feels it appropriate to do so. Those decisions could include barring a person or persons from the precinct of Parliament, withdrawing a pass from any pass holder or a group of pass holders, or calling somebody to the Bar of the House for admonishment by the House.

It is for the Committee to decide precisely how it conducts its inquiry. Indeed, it should be free to decide the timing of its inquiry and report, how best it interacts with other Select Committees and, importantly, how best it avoids conflicting with any ongoing police investigation. I hope that there is an ongoing police investigation, because from what I have heard so far from the police, I have no confidence that there is a full police investigation into every avenue, searching for evidence. I would particularly abhor the fact that the police seem to have developed a new theology, whereby it is for the victim to discover and provide the evidence, rather than for the police to engage in an investigation to find it.

I suggest that the Committee might look at the following areas. How many MPs, including Ministers, Opposition spokespeople and Back Benchers of all parties, were the subject of investigation by Glenn Mulcaire—or, in the police's words, a "person of interest" to Mr Mulcaire? Did they include serving Government Members or people who are now in senior Government positions? Was the hacking limited to the *News of the World* or did it include other newspapers? Were the security services notified of the hacking of Ministers' and others' phones? Are there any further security measures that this House should take to protect Members' correspondence? Did the Met fully perform its duty of care towards the House by contacting all Members whose names and phone numbers were included in the material secured when it raided Mr Mulcaire's offices?

Have any witnesses who have already given evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on the matter lied to the House? Should the interception or attempted interception of right hon. and hon. Members' phone messages or e-mails be considered an explicit breach of privilege? Should the House adopt a new resolution defining privilege in the modern era to include modern technology? Should the law be changed to

strengthen further the provisions against the hacking of the phones of MPs and members of the public? What action should be taken by the House against those who have lied to it, breached its privilege or shown contempt to it?

I hope that Members in all parts of the House will support the motion. This issue is not about one man or the one hon. Member whose case has already been to court. It is, however, about what kind of investigative journalism we want in this country—searching, yes; critical, caustic, aggressive and cynical, maybe; but not illegal. It is about whether this House will be supine when its Members' phones are hacked, or whether it will take action when the democratic rights of MPs to do their job without illegal let, hindrance or interception has been traduced. We have taken action before as a House; we should take action today.

12.33 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir George Young): The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) has proposed that the matter of the hacking of right hon. and hon. Members' mobile phones be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges. Mr Speaker decided under the procedure in "Erskine May" that such a motion should take precedence at today's sitting.

The motion is narrow in its terms, and it is quite right that an allegation that the House's privileges have been breached should be resolved without any unnecessary delay. Only the House, through the Standards and Privileges Committee, can resolve the issue. In the past, as the hon. Gentleman has just said, such matters have been referred to an ad hoc Committee, but in my view it is right that this matter be referred to the Standards and Privileges Committee, which has the powers to consider it.

I take this opportunity to congratulate the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron) on his election as Chairman of that Committee. I know that he and his Committee will do their best to determine the issue, navigating carefully among the other inquiries that may be under way at the same time, including a possible further investigation by the Metropolitan police. The decision on referring the motion is a matter for the will of this House, but the Government will of course support that referral.

12.34 pm

Ms Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): We on the Opposition Front Bench support the motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and welcome the support of the Leader of the House. As my hon. Friend has made clear, this is an extremely serious issue, and we need to know whether there has been a contempt of Parliament and a breach of parliamentary privilege. I also congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron) on his chairmanship of the Standards and Privileges Committee, and support the Leader of the House in wishing him well in navigating his way among the various investigations. We look forward to the result of the Committee's inquiry.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. This is an important issue and there are many with concerns, in all parts of the House, but before I call the next speaker, may I remind hon. Members that there is a debate to follow? A little brevity would help.

12.35 pm

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am mindful of your instruction that this is a narrow debate about referring the matter to the Standards and Privileges Committee, Mr Deputy Speaker, but it might help if I clarified one or two aspects regarding the two examinations of the matter that have been carried out by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

We first looked at the issue in 2007. It is important to distinguish between two different episodes, both of which potentially affect hon. Members. The first episode was the arrest and conviction of Glenn Mulcaire and Clive Goodman, specifically for phone hacking. The second was Operation Motorman, carried out by the police, which identified a private investigator who had been employed by a large number of journalists from many different newspapers, usually to undertake what is called blagging rather than hacking.

While hacking is an offence under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000, blagging is a breach of the Data Protection Act 1998. Both are criminal offences, but in the second case, there is a public interest defence. No journalists were ever prosecuted in the Motorman case, so we do not know whether a public interest defence might have been used. However, the sheer number of blags or attempts to seek information in breach of the 1998 Act led us to believe that what was happening was, in large part, fishing by journalists and did not involve the pursuit of specific public interest matters. We revisited the matter in July 2009, after the publication of a story in *The Guardian* providing new evidence that led us to question the evidence that we had received in the first inquiry that Clive Goodman was the only journalist who had any knowledge of, or involvement in, phone hacking at the *News of the World*.

As I have suggested, there is evidence from both inquiries that hon. Members were affected. Specifically in relation to the first episode, the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) was named in the indictment of Mr Mulcaire as one of those who had suffered from hacking. When it came to Motorman, there were literally thousands of names. We know, for instance, that Peter Kilfoyle was one of them, although he did not know that until it was subsequently uncovered. In both cases there was concern that the victims were not informed, either by the police in relation to Clive Goodman and Glenn Mulcaire, or by the Information Commissioner in relation to Motorman.

As the House knows, the Select Committee took considerable evidence from a number of journalists—principally from the *News of the World* in relation to Clive Goodman, but from other newspapers too concerning Operation Motorman. At that time—it is important to remember that we are talking about events from some time ago—we found that there appeared to be a culture across Fleet street in which such practices were routine, and that law breaking was taking place in many news rooms. We were also assured that things had changed. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) was a little unfair to suggest that the Press Complaints

Commission did nothing. I have been critical of the Press Complaints Commission in the past, but it certainly did do something: it made it absolutely plain that such practices were unacceptable and required editors to tighten their rules, and we received assurances that such practices had stopped.

We now know that there is one journalist under investigation by the *News of the World* potentially for hacking, but it was the *News of the World* who acted on that and then notified the Press Complaints Commission that it was doing so. I very much hope that the events that we are discussing today relate to some time ago and that such practices have ceased right across Fleet street.

I understand the frustration felt by hon. Members during our inquiry—indeed, I shared it. We did make use of some of the powers that the hon. Member for Rhondda referred to, particularly in obtaining documents that various witnesses were, at first, unwilling to provide. We certainly had some arguments over which witnesses would give evidence. For example, we were unable to get evidence from either Clive Goodman or Glenn Mulcaire—or, indeed from Mr Ross Hall, who was in Peru at the time, although I understand that he has now returned to this country.

I recognise that new evidence might well have emerged. Some of the information that has entered the public domain in the past few days certainly appears to contradict some of the evidence that we received. The Standards and Privileges Committee has slightly more powers available to it than the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and I in no way oppose the motion. I agree with the hon. Member for Rhondda that this is an extremely serious matter, and it is not just about MPs. The illegal obtaining of information about any individual is to be deplored. I therefore strongly welcome the moves that have taken place to ensure that it does not continue.

I have one small concern, although I am not in any way accusing the hon. Member for Rhondda. This issue is mired in politics, and the Standards and Privileges Committee needs to be very careful to ensure that it is not used as a vehicle for political ends. I am sure that that will not be the case under its new Chairman, whom I congratulate on his election.

12.41 pm

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Anyone can have their phone tapped by the newspapers, and they do. The House does not forget them as we debate the narrow issue of the abuse of MPs' privilege. So that Members can decide on the merits of the motion, I should tell them that, since the urgent question on Monday, one MP has told me that their phone company has confirmed that they have been the victim of blagging. The police have been informed. Another MP was so worried that, on the advice of his lawyers, he sent his mobile PDA device to forensic technicians, who confirmed that it was almost certainly hacked. I know of at least three former senior Ministers who have not yet gone public with their serious concerns that their phones were hacked. The evidence of endemic abuse is growing by the day.

This morning, I talked to the lawyer Charlotte Harris, who informed me that she had been in contact with former News International reporter Sean Hoare, as

[Mr Tom Watson]

part of her inquiries for clients who are the victims of phone hacking. He stands by his statements, and he will help the police. He also knows of others who were involved.

Something very dark lurks in the evidence files of the Mulcaire case, and dark and mysterious forces are keeping it that way. If the Standards and Privileges Committee is to get to the truth, I recommend that it interview the Culture, Media and Sport Committee refuseniks—the people associated with News International who flatly rejected our invitations to give evidence to our inquiry. They include Greg Miskiw, a former assistant news editor, who said that he was too ill to attend, and was not pursued. They also include Glenn Mulcaire. We were told through an intermediary that he would not give evidence, and he was not pursued. Clive Goodman was also asked to give evidence, but he said that he was unavailable. He was not pursued. The chief executive of News International, Rebekah Brooks was pursued on three separate occasions before we gave up.

Alan Keen (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I think it was before my hon. Friend was a member of the Select Committee that we got a very direct answer from the then Rebekah Wade, who was a senior executive of News International in this country. She was asked whether it paid the police for information, and her answer was yes. Does my hon. Friend think that that issue should be part of this inquiry?

Mr Watson: I think it should, and I will come to that point in a moment.

Andy Hayman, as head of the Met police's special operations unit, was in charge of the Mulcaire inquiry. If the Committee wants to get to the bottom of which MPs were on the target list, and of who was told and who was not, News International's Andy Hayman is their man. I strongly recommend that the Committee ask him to appear.

We can delegate power but not responsibility. I doubt that Rupert Murdoch knows about these incidents, but he is responsible for appointing to positions of great power people who should know about them. For that reason, he too should explain his actions to the Committee. It is he who appointed Rebekah Brooks as chief executive of News International. He first appointed her, and he then appointed Andy Coulson as editor of the *News of the World*.

This morning, we have seen a strong argument for an inquiry made by former reporter Paul McMullan, who has become the seventh named *News of the World* employee to admit that they either knew about or took part in phone hacking. When Rebekah Brooks was editor, McMullan says:

"They were just doing what was expected of them. People were obsessed with getting celebs' phone numbers...Everyone was surprised that Clive Goodman was the only one who went down."

If Members want justification for supporting the motion, they need look no further than Rupert Murdoch's Rebekah Brooks, who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Alan Keen) said, admitted to Parliament that she paid police officers in the Met for stories. The Select Committee found that, "As far as we are aware, this practice is illegal for both parties, and

there is no public interest defence that a jury could legitimately take into account." When Rupert Murdoch appointed Rebekah Brooks, he did so with that knowledge.

There is one more tiny little shame that we all share. The truth is that, in this House we are all, in our own way, scared of the Rebekah Brookses of this world. If we fear agreeing this motion, let us think about this: it is almost laughable that we sit here in Parliament, the central institution of our sacred democracy—among us are some of the most powerful people in the land—yet we are scared of the power that Rebekah Brooks wields without a jot of responsibility or accountability. The barons of the media, with their red-topped assassins, are the biggest beasts in the modern jungle. They have no predators; they are untouchable. They laugh at the law; they sneer at Parliament. They have the power to hurt us, and they do, with gusto and precision, with joy and criminality. Prime Ministers quail before them, and that is how they like it. That, indeed, has become how they insist upon it, and we are powerless in the face of them. We are afraid. If we oppose this motion, it is to our shame.

That is the tawdry secret that dare not speak its name. The most powerful people in the land—Prime Ministers, Ministers, and MPs of every party—are guilty in their own way of perpetuating a media culture that allows the character of the decent to be traduced out of casual malice, for money, for spite, for sport or for any reason that the media like. If we reject the motion, we will be guilty of letting that happen. We allow it because we allow narrow party advantage to dominate our thinking, above the long-term health of our democracy.

And yet, I sense that we are at the beginning of the endgame. Things will get better because, in many senses, they cannot get worse. The little guys, the reporters on the ground who joined a newspaper to seek the truth, have ended up working in a living hell. If we want to, we in this House have the power to change that. We can make a start by getting to the bottom of the phone hacking scandal. Whatever lies in those Mulcaire files is key, and the Standards and Privileges Committee can start the process by establishing the facts. This is not the time to rehearse the questions that must be answered, but no one who believes in the law, truth or democracy can doubt that they desperately urgently need to be asked.

12.49 pm

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to say a few words and grateful to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and to Mr Speaker for providing it. Perhaps not surprisingly, I entirely support the motion. I am on record from 2006 right up to the last election as speaking about the importance of this matter. I want to speak briefly today and to say to the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron) that, if the motion is passed, I would be happy to assist him and his Committee on Standards and Privileges further.

I am—I think—the only Member who has been asked to give evidence and has given it, as part of the evidence that secured the conviction of Mr Glenn Mulcaire. I was approached in 2006 and willingly agreed to do that. In reference to the comments of the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), I inquired who

else had had their phone hacked and who else had been approached to give evidence. I was told that there were others, but that not everybody was willing to give evidence.

I have absolutely no doubt that some people were not willing to give evidence because they were afraid. They were afraid of going into the public domain to take on people working either directly or indirectly for one of our land's major newspapers. I have been in this place and in public life long enough not to be afraid any more, and I have also been through the mill before, which means that I probably have nothing much more to be afraid about. For me, it was not a problem, but it clearly was for others. I hope that they—colleagues here and in the other place—will now again be invited to give evidence to the Standards and Privileges Committee, if it takes on the job. They might now be willing to speak to that Committee, either in public or private, though they were not willing to go public in the courts at the time.

My second point is that we are not talking about an isolated person or people at an isolated time in respect of an isolated newspaper. To the best of my knowledge, I was a subject not just of that particular fishing expedition, but also of a different fishing expedition by a different newspaper owned by different people. Another linked activity—it was very common—was buying phone records illegally from phone companies so that activities could be traced and inquiries made. These are linked issues: there is a whole sea of illegal and undesirable activity going on here.

Another issue, to which the hon. Member for Rhondda rightly referred, goes even wider. We can defend and speak up for ourselves here because we have privilege. It is right that we use the processes of the House, but one reason why I support this matter being referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges is so that the privileges of our families, our friends, our colleagues and our constituents can also be respected. The people living on the estate behind my house do not have the same access to the media as I do. When they leave a message or when a member of my family or a colleague leaves a message, they might not have the opportunity to go public about any difficulties, yet they are potentially equally affected and harmed. For them, it is equally insidious, dangerous and unacceptable. This is an issue for us in our representative capacity on behalf of our constituents as much as it is for us as MPs with parliamentary privileges.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As a new MP, I hope not to have attracted the attention of Mr Mulcaire, but equally, as a new MP with a background in communications, I am very aware that the business of MPs and this House will depend increasingly on electronic means of communication throughout the country. The hon. Gentleman speaks of our representative role, which I strongly agree with, but we should also consider the future—both for the House and the country at large. By investigating what happened in the past, we not only look at the past, but safeguard the future for both.

Simon Hughes: The hon. Lady is quite right. In common with my right hon. and hon. Friends, I have seen great changes to the use of electronic media for communication during my time in Parliament. I hope

that the hon. Lady's expertise will be made available to the Standards and Privileges Committee if it requests it.

I want briefly to discuss two other issues. First, it is easy to misrepresent and thus tell untruths on the basis of misunderstood messages and information. To lighten the mood for a moment, I had a message on my phone the other day from a woman who sounded as if she was of a certain age and who said, "Darling, I really need to speak to you urgently. If we do not meet today, our marriage might be at an end." I thought that that message was unlikely to be aimed at me! She clearly had not read the press enough! Not knowing who she was, I nevertheless phoned her back and said, "Madam, I do not know who you are and you might not know who I am, but I think that the message you left was not intended for me. You ought to think about who it was intended for before it is too late." The serious point is that messages left were clearly misinterpreted to lead people to conclude that they were about one thing when they were not really about that at all. There is scope for terrible abuse if we do not rein in this activity completely.

Finally, this is without doubt a job for the Standards and Privileges Committee, but I hope that that will not mean that others who have a responsibility do not do their jobs, too. The Metropolitan Police Authority has a job—to hold the Metropolitan police to account.

John Robertson (Glasgow North West) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way.

Simon Hughes: I would rather not, as I want to be brief.

The Justice Committee might well want to ask Law Officers about whether the Crown Prosecution Service did its job properly. Of course there is a case for only specimen counts to be investigated and put forward in a court case, but I share the view of the hon. Member for Rhondda that people on the list as prospective targets should have been informed, even if their phones had not been hacked at the time.

We also have a wider responsibility, which I hope we can deal with more fully on another occasion. The power of the media—broadcast, televised and written—is an issue for this country. My right hon. and hon. Friends have been brave enough to set up a commission into the banks, but I hope they will also set up a commission into broadcasting and the media, because the Press Complaints Commission has not done a robust job. The public are not adequately protected from the press. I am someone who, like the hon. Member for Rhondda, will defend the freedom of the press to the end, but there is a big difference between the freedom of the press and abuse by the press. This is abuse and illegality. It has to end, and we must be robust about it.

12.57 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the eloquent speech of the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes). On Tuesday this week, the Home Affairs Select Committee took evidence from Assistant Commissioner Yates, and we raised the concerns that had been expressed on Monday by my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). We also considered the excellent report fashioned by the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport.

[Keith Vaz]

Clearly, the speeches delivered here today—some have been most eloquent, especially that of my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson)—relate to incidents concerning the *News of the World*. Assistant Commissioner Yates told us that he has to continue with his investigations, which are operational matters. However, in the exchanges during the giving of his evidence, it was clear that members of the Committee were concerned about the state of the law relating to unauthorised hacking and tapping of mobile communications. That is why on Tuesday the Committee established an inquiry into the law, into the extent to which the police are able to police that law, and into the way in which the police inform people that they have been victims of that crime.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This may be slightly outside the Home Affairs Committee remit, but will the right hon. Gentleman and his Committee want to look at the ease with which it is possible to hack into phones and ask what the industry is doing about it? Secondly, although this may also be slightly outside the remit, will his Select Committee look at the Press Complaints Commission and perhaps make some recommendations about how to beef up that organisation so that it really does the effective job that it should be doing?

Keith Vaz: The second issue is really a matter for the Culture, Media and Sport Committee to look into; it is well outside the home affairs remit. However, our Committee certainly will contact the mobile phone companies to look at how they are able to deal with the issue of phone tapping and hacking.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keith Vaz: I will not give way, as I intend to be brief.

To be clear, the Committee's decision was unanimous. I see four members of it in their places on both sides of the House. The inquiry was suggested by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert), a Liberal Democrat Member, and it is limited to looking at the issue of mobile communication.

I fully support the motion before the House. I have spoken briefly with the Chairman of the Standards and Privileges Committee, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr Barron) on his appointment to that role. We would not want to duplicate the work of that Committee. We will share with him any information that we have, but we would not want to trample on the rights of the senior Committee of the House to deal with the privileges of Members. I fully support the motion.

1 pm

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), to whom I offered my support previously, and I welcome Mr Speaker's decision to allow the motion to be debated.

The issue about the distinction between the Government and Parliament has not been so strong in the past. My view is that the Government are right that the Metropolitan police's operational decisions rest with it. However,

Parliament still has a role, and the purpose of Parliament's privileges is to protect our constituents. If we do not stand up for our constituents by using our bite rather than just our bark, we cannot protect our constituents. Only yesterday, I was contacted by a whistleblower, who explained to me evidence of corrupt practices in family proceedings. Obviously, I will bring that issue to the House in more detail later, when I have more evidence. Had that person been concerned that the communication would have been tapped, all sorts of problems would have been caused. Some people have been so worried about their communications being tapped that they have wanted to see me in person in a place where they could not be overheard. If our constituents are to have confidence that they can communicate with us about parliamentary proceedings, we need to protect their rights.

Andrew France is a constituent of mine. He was threatened that his daughter would be taken into care if he spoke to me about his case. Luckily, his case has come to an end, so he can talk to me. However, Parliament should take action to deal with such issues. The law on these matters is interesting: there are many different international examples, of which I have many details if any hon. Member wishes to see them. Under article 47 of the German constitution, there is a protection for members of the Bundestag from having to give details of information that they have received. It is so important that people are able to provide information in private about proceedings in Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): The debate is a narrow one. As much as the hon. Gentleman is tempted to do so, we cannot range all around the world. He must keep to the subject.

John Hemming: Around the world, there are good examples of why we must pass the motion in order to protect our constituents. I support the motion.

1.2 pm

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The issue, which I hope the House will refer to the Standards and Privileges Committee, is about not just crimes committed several years ago but about cover-ups that, to all appearances, are still going on today. I was a member of the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport that looked into the affair previously. I drafted many of the conclusions of its report. We tried to penetrate the veil of secrecy over the affair, but we generally met with a wall of silence, with evasion and with collective amnesia. In trying to complete a much larger report before the election, we also had limited practical powers of compulsion. That issue relates to the modernisation of the House, which, if the resolution is passed today, I hope that the Standards and Privileges Committee will also consider. The powers of Select Committees need to be strengthened, and we need look no further than the United States Congress for good examples of how to do that.

Before the House votes, I want to deal with a couple of matters in the report, as well as two matters that keep being repeated, including in the past few days, on which the House might appreciate some clarity. First, regarding the police, the former Assistant Commissioner Andy Hayman has repeatedly told the news that as far as the

Met was concerned, it left no stone unturned and interviewed everyone who was relevant at the time. I am afraid that that is simply not true. The police interviewed only Mr Mulcaire and Mr Goodman, despite evidence in their hands that implicated others in the activity, which has clearly affected the confidence with which MPs can go about their business. Mr Mulcaire and Mr Goodman also maintained their right to silence, before entering a guilty plea, so no cross-examination was made. Our report was highly critical of the extent of the police investigation. Frankly, had Mr Hayman been in charge of the Watergate inquiry, President Nixon would have safely served a full term. His line is one that his successor, Assistant Commissioner John Yates, is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain, as new people emerge out of the woodwork, day in, day out, in the press.

Our report was very critical of the evasive display by Mr Yates in giving evidence for the police, and I hope that if the motion is passed, the Standards and Privileges Committee will not allow the police to get away with such evasiveness. As the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Simon Hughes) has pointed out, nor is the Crown Prosecution Service blameless in the affair. When we asked it to justify how the investigation and prosecution had been carried out previously, it repeated verbatim, to a great extent, the police statements, which were highly misleading.

Secondly, I want to address the claim that our Committee—this has been repeated in the news in the past few days, often for libel balance—found no evidence that the then editor of the *News of the World*, Andy Coulson, knew about the hacking. That has been taken to mean that we effectively cleared Mr Coulson of knowing what his staff and Mr Mulcaire were up to. Nothing could be further from the truth—this is not a political point but a matter of fact. Frankly, we were incredulous that such a hands-on editor would not have had the slightest inkling about what his staff and private investigators employed by the paper were up to. That activity has clearly interfered with the activities of Members of Parliament. Faced with Mr Coulson's denial, however, we simply could go no further. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) has said, others simply declined to be interviewed. To the list that he has had, I would add Mr Neville Thurlbeck, the chief reporter of the *News of the World*, who offered only to give evidence in private, which we considered unsatisfactory. Would compulsion have been productive? No, because it would have delayed the publication of a report. That is also an issue for the Standards and Privileges Committee to consider. Another reporter who was implicated was on a round-the-world trip at the time.

Mr Adrian Sanders (Torbay) (LD): Some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raises rather reinforce the view that there might be a justification not just for a Standards and Privileges Committee inquiry but a full judicial inquiry, especially to consider the police's non-use of powers, which is in itself an abuse of power.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not debating a judicial inquiry.

Paul Farrelly: I will refer to the police and other inquiries, which will no doubt go on in parallel, in a few moments, if I may.

Only now are more people coming out of the woodwork to naysay what Mr Coulson told us. Clearly, that is a matter that the Committee on Standards and Privileges will want to look into in order to get to the bottom of it.

Finally, I want to touch on two loose ends from our report, of which the Standards and Privileges Committee might find it useful to be advised. First, the whole affair was reactivated by the case of Gordon Taylor, the chief executive of the Professional Footballers Association, whose phone was hacked by Mr Mulcaire. The *News of the World* was in pursuit of sex stories in football. It sent its chief reporter, Mr Thurlbeck, to knock on Mr Taylor's door, on a Saturday afternoon, in the north of England, presumably with the intention of publishing the next day. However, after Mr Taylor's lawyers denied the story that he was having an affair and made legal threats, the story was spiked personally by Mr Coulson, as we established. We followed the trail as far as a conversation he had with his legal manager, Tom Crone, before spiking it. All Mr Coulson told us was that he had not read a story. We were unable to fathom details of the discussions that he had with Mr Crone before spiking it because, he said, he was unable to remember them. We thought it would be highly unusual for an editor to accept a denial at face value. From my experience in journalism, an editor would be expected to ask, "How can we stand this story up?" The answer, we thought, would inevitably involve some discussions of the source of the story. We suspected, although we could not prove it, that the story was spiked in part, at least, because any libel suit would have exposed the phone hacking that was going on.

In case it is of help to the Standards and Privileges Committee, let me say that Mr Crone is also a very interesting character, who is legendary at the *News of the World*. On two occasions he misled our Select Committee. He denied admitting a pay-off to Mr Clive Goodman after he got out of jail. He also misled our Committee on the identity of the junior reporter who was involved in transcribing phone-hacked messages.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot rehearse the work of the Committee by providing it with evidence. We have to stick to the subject of the debate.

Paul Farrelly: I am about to end my speech, Mr Deputy Speaker. However, as Mr Crone is a key player, I urge the Committee to interview him as well.

What is happening is unacceptable. It is unacceptable that the police have not fully notified people whose telephone PINs were retrieved during the investigation, and who clearly include many Members of Parliament; it is unacceptable for the police to say that there are just "a handful of victims", given that the number is growing by the day; and it is unacceptable for the police to say that they conducted a full and rigorous inquiry. They did not, the *News of the World* did not, and the Press Complaints Commission did not. It is time that the position was rectified, and a referral of the issue to the Committee on Standards and Privileges will go a long way towards doing that.

1.10 pm

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on enabling us to debate this issue. I also congratulate the hon.

[*Nadine Dorries*]

Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) on an excellent speech. I felt that he stepped into the realms of poetic licence when he described journalism as “a living hell”, but I thought that almost everything else he said was absolutely accurate.

I support the motion for a number of reasons, not least the fact that it is possibly our fault—the fault of the House—that the media were allowed to reach a point of arrogance whereby, in pursuit of a sensational headline in order to sell newspapers, they believed that they were above the law, could flout the law, and could adopt the unlawful procedures that have been adopted in this instance. I imagine that that does not apply only to the *News of the World*. The *News of the World* has been caught out, but how do we know that every newspaper is not acting in the same way? How do we know that our phones are not being hacked into at this moment by other newspapers?

I think that referral to the Committee is important because—I would hope—the Committee would then make a number of recommendations, including the recommendation that the media should no longer be allowed to be self-regulating through the Press Complaints Commission. It is because they have been self-regulating and we have been emasculated as politicians, afraid to say anything that condemns them, that the present situation has been allowed to arise.

Freedom of speech and the ability to hold a private conversation is the right of everyone in the land, and it has been paid for with human life. It is being paid for with human life today. Although it is almost surreal that we are discussing this matter, that is why we must discuss it, that is why the matter must be referred to the Committee, and that is why there must be a serious review followed by recommendations. Only a review and recommendations will prevent this situation from arising again, and, perhaps, curtail the actions of the media and change the way in which they behave.

Given that I must stick to the terms of reference in the motion and confine my remarks to the inquiry if I am not to be told off by you, Mr Deputy Speaker, let me merely repeat that I support the motion and congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered.

That the matter of hacking of honourable and right honourable Members' mobile phones be referred to the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

Backbench Business

[3RD ALLOTTED DAY]

UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Owing to the huge number of Members who wish to contribute, speaking time will be restricted to eight minutes. I should also inform the House that I have selected amendment (a), in the name of the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

1.14 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House supports the continued deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan.

It is a great honour to move the motion, which was tabled by the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Natascha Engel), my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), the hon. Member for Blaydon (Mr Anderson) and me. It was selected by the Backbench Business Committee for its first full-day debate.

The Committee chose Afghanistan as the subject of this historic debate for two reasons. First, when the country is at war, there can be no issue of greater importance. The putting at risk of the lives of our brave service men and women in a foreign land needs to be the concern of Parliament, and that alone would have been reason enough to select the subject of Afghanistan. As I have said, however, there is a second reason. Parliament has not previously had a chance to debate the war in Afghanistan on a substantive motion, and the Committee felt that there should be a debate in which the views of Parliament could be heard and the House could, if it wished, divide. It is encouraging that so many Members wish to speak, and that three amendments have been tabled by Back-Bench Members of four political parties.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is right to describe this as an important issue, and of course it is right that the House should debate it, but does it not concern him that only once before in the long history of this Parliament has there been a substantive vote on the question of going to war—in 2003, on the question of going to war in Iraq? Is there not a real danger that a vote against the war, or even a vote with a more or less equal result, could have a devastating effect on the morale of our troops on the ground?

Mr Bone: I am not here today to express my personal view on the war. With respect to my hon. Friend, I think that his was very much a debating point, and I therefore will not respond to it.

At Prime Minister's Question Time yesterday, no one in the House could have failed to have been moved as the Deputy Prime Minister read out the names of 12 servicemen who had recently lost their lives because of the war in Afghanistan. I know that the whole House is united in its support for the young men and women of our armed forces. They are talented, professional and courageous; they are, quite simply, a credit to our country.

1.17 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) for introducing a motion that is so important to our nation. I assure the House that the armed forces will be watching our debate extremely carefully. Some of what is said will be very important, and, as was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray), some of it may have an effect on morale.

Last week I had the sad duty and honour of attending the funeral of Lieutenant John Sanderson, a young officer in the battalion that I had the privilege to command. Twelve members of my old battalion have died on the tour that it is currently undertaking, and there is approximately a month to go. Seventy more have been injured.

Roughly 300 people in a battalion go out and seek to engage the enemy. Members can imagine the percentage of casualties that is expected in my old battalion—the 1st Battalion, The Mercian Regiment, once known as The Cheshire Regiment—and how awful that is for their families. There have been 334 deaths in Afghanistan, and probably six times as many people have been injured.

After John's funeral I spoke to many officers, not only officers from my regiment but, for example, six Royal Marines. When I asked them what they really felt about the war, the first thing that they said to me was "Make our sacrifice worth it. Do not let us suffer as we have, and then walk away and leave it"—rather, in a way, as we left Basra.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): I, like every other Member of the House, pay tribute both to the British soldiers who have died in Afghanistan and those who have been seriously injured, to whom we wish the very best. However, turning to a point the hon. Gentleman made a few moments ago, will he recognise that in debates in the House it is the duty and obligation of every Member to speak their mind, and that therefore in this debate it should not be felt that if we are critical, which some of us may well be—I certainly will be, if I am called to speak—that is in any way a betrayal of our British troops? We must speak frankly in this House.

Bob Stewart: Forgive me, I did not mean to imply the contrary. I accept what the hon. Gentleman says; it is quite right.

The officers and soldiers to whom I talked were firm that they do not want us not to support them; I shall return to that point. They also do not like the idea of a timeline; they are not very happy about that. Also, of course, they want to be given the resources to be able to do the job we have set them.

Interestingly, the troops also questioned some of the strategic and tactical decisions that their superiors had passed on to them. I wondered what they meant, and I looked back into that. When we went in in 2002, we went in "light", as we call it: we went in with air power and special forces. We then thought we had done the job and left it to President Karzai. In 2003, we realised that things had gone wrong and we started going back in, and by 2006 John Reid was making hopeful statements in the House. He was acting on military advice in saying that he hoped that the 4,000-odd people being put into Helmand would not have to fire a shot in anger.

Mr Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Following on from the previous intervention, does my hon. Friend agree that although our troops do not want Members of Parliament to doubt ultimate victory or how to control the Taliban, we should question whether the tactics are always right, because there might be other ways of doing things? President Reagan bombed Libya, for instance, which shows that we do not necessarily have to have troops on the ground. Do the troops accept that point?

Bob Stewart: Most certainly they do, and I accept that it is our job to question everything. The problem is that we have made some fundamental mistakes. I am not blaming anyone, but we made mistakes in 2006 when we dissipated our forces so they were in platoon houses and were not within the envelope. That meant that they could not have protection from artillery, and we had to use air power instead. The air power protecting them knocked out houses around them and killed local people, turning the people against our forces. In 2007 and 2008 we had gone back to counter-insurgency tactics—taking, holding, building—and our gallant troops went in to take, but they could not hold. They had to withdraw. Perhaps Members remember those pictures of helicopters flying with men strapped aboard to try to bring troops back. We could not hold the ground. Also, of course, our enemy came in and put devices on the ground that caused real problems, and they continue to do so to this day.

We now have a situation in which there is an increase in the number of soldiers on the ground, principally from the United States, and the principles of counter-insurgency are, in fact, beginning to work. They are protecting the people, and the key is whether the Afghan people feel protected and safe and can live a decent life.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bob Stewart: I am going to keep going, because I do not have much time left.

We all know that we have a real problem in Afghanistan. We have a military aim, which is probably relatively simple: to make sure that Afghanistan never threatens us again. We also have a political aim, which is, fundamentally, that we want Afghanistan to have a decent lifestyle and to take its part in the international community, and also that we do not want to allow groups such as the Taliban to return to the country, and thereby threaten us. The job our troops are doing is very difficult; I am clear about that.

I want to conclude by talking briefly about what we can do. The fact of the matter is our soldiers require our support. I accept the point that they have a problem with understanding the nuances of people saying, "We support our troops, but we don't support the war." When we talk to them, they say, "Come off it, we're out here doing a mission; support us! Don't just say, 'We support you.' We don't quite get that." One of them said to me, "Are you smoking dope?" [*Interruption.*] I was not, actually; I never have smoked dope, and if I had, I would have been chucked out of the Army. Another one said to me about the strategic situation and the tactical decisions made, "Isn't it strange, Bob, that in this country we penalise our soldiers for

[Bob Stewart]

losing a rifle more than we penalise our generals for losing a war?" We have not made some decisions very well thus far.

There is now great optimism that we will be able to reach the endgame, and get to a situation where our troops can come home and feel that John Sanderson and 333 other young men—and one woman, I think—have given their lives for something worth while. That is terribly important. I pay great tribute to what our armed forces are doing, of course, and I want them all to come home soon—as soon as possible, and before 2014 if that is achievable—but the only way they can come home quickly is if we get it right, give them what they require and understand that we are fighting a war. Let us imagine what would have happened if there had been reductions in the defence budget when we were at war in 1940. I know that our country has a big economic problem, but we have to make sure that those people who are running huge risks on our behalf are given everything they require and our support. I therefore ask the House to support the motion.

1.27 pm

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Can we make something clear? The last speaker seemed to equate al-Qaeda with the Taliban. The Taliban have never threatened us, but al-Qaeda certainly has. If we want to understand Taliban thinking, we should note what was expressed recently by a commander. He said that war is dreadful and horrid:

"It creates nothing but widows and disruption. But jihad is different. It is our moral obligation to resist you foreigners. One year, a hundred years, a million years, ten million years—it is not important. We will never stop fighting. At Judgement Day, Allah will not ask, 'What did you do for your country?' He will ask, 'Did you fight for your religion?'"

That shows the precise nature of the conflict, and it is not a conflict that can be won.

Sir Robert Smith (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (LD): The hon. Gentleman should reflect on the Taliban's relationship with the events of 9/11. While they did not directly threaten us, they provided the wherewithal and the facilities for al-Qaeda to threaten us, and they did not do anything to try to rectify the situation when they had the opportunity to do so.

Paul Flynn: The situation now is that the Taliban are not in power because of al-Qaeda, as the Taliban well know. The Taliban already control at least half the country, and al-Qaeda has not been allowed in. There is no problem here; this is a false argument. We have created this myth that, somehow, if we pull out, al-Qaeda will have an area in which to operate. It already has Pakistan in which to operate, and Somalia and Yemen.

I take the point about how our soldiers will perceive what is said in the House, however. I, like most Members, have had the torment of trying to say to constituents who have lost loved ones that they died in a cause that was just and honourable. It is no reflection on the quality and bravery of our troops to say that this war has been, certainly since 2006, a grave error. There were people in this House and in the military—one military person resigned over this—who said in 2006 that our

going into Helmand then was stirring up a hornet's nest. At that point only two British soldiers had died in combat, but now the figure is 334 and the rate is accelerating; the 200th soldier to die, who came from Gwent, died last August. The bloodiest year so far for British troops in Afghanistan was 2009, but if things continue as they are, 2010 will be far worse. The rate at which British soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan is now four times that of our United States counterparts.

The whole operation is continuing and there is no possible outcome that will be just and honourable. Both Governments have been in denial. We have heard optimism, and nothing but, year after year and in debate after debate, when they have told us that we have turned the corner. The Deputy Prime Minister used the same expression the other day, saying that things are going well now and we just have to hang on. We have turned so many corners that we have been around the block half a dozen times in Afghanistan, but we are still in hell and the situation is still getting worse. We believe in the possibility that the Afghan national army can take over, but it is mainly drug addicted and it routinely oppresses its own people. In one incident, 300 members of the Afghan army were guarding a convoy when they were attacked by seven members of the Taliban and they fled, with their commander saying, "Why should they sacrifice their lives and kill fellow Afghans in order to defend a corrupt leader from a different clan and to promote the policies of a foreign country?" Indeed, one is entitled to ask that.

The Afghan police service routinely extorts money from its own citizens. When the police went into the village of Penkala, the local elders came forward and said, "Last time they came here, they practised bacha bazi on our young boys." That refers to the routine ritual sexual exploitation of young boys. They also said, "The Taliban were here before. They were wicked people, but they were people of principle." The Afghan police are a criminal police service. Many of them are not paid, so they are expected to get their money in this way.

Angus Robertson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in addition to all those problems, massive challenges are affecting the Afghan Government and Afghan authorities at a national level? Those organisations are the ones that we are supposed to be supporting. A financial scandal is currently engulfing Afghanistan, and it involves the elites around President Karzai. Is the hon. Gentleman content that our brave young servicemen and women are dying in support of those elites?

Paul Flynn: No, I am certainly not, and the hon. Gentleman is right in what he says. Minister after Minister has said, "We are going to tackle corruption; the corruption is impossible and we must do something about it." When we ask them what we must do, nobody has the slightest idea. What we are doing, and what we are trying to do, is fight corruption with our sort of ethical corruption; we have taken corruption and bribery and put it on an industrial scale. The Americans are moving in with pallets piled high with bubble-wrapped stacks of \$100 bills; our way of working in Afghanistan is based on our own variety of corruption.

Afghanistan is a country where there is not going to be a happy ending. We are never going to get the tribal groups to work together and we are not going to get the

warlords to behave reasonably. These warlords have committed atrocities and they now have their members sitting in the Afghan Parliament. We went in with this idea that there was a simple solution, possibly a military one, but we know that that is not possible.

On the question raised by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), may I say that although we praise the bravery of the troops and weep for their sacrifices, especially in respect of those who receive little attention—those who have been maimed in battle and will suffer the wounds for the rest of their lives—that is no excuse for saying that as so many have been killed, more should be killed to justify those deaths? Those deaths were avoidable and the fact that this House did not oppose the expedition into Helmand province in 2006 is responsible for them; this is not down to anybody else. We should have said at that time that it was not plausible to suggest that we can go into Helmand—that is so for the very reasons that the Afghans say. They are fighting us because we are the ferengi: we are foreigners. Every generation of Afghans has fought against foreigners.

In 2001, a member of the Russian Duma slapped me on the back and said, “Oh, you Brits have succeeded in capturing Afghanistan, very clever. We did it in six days and we were there for 10 years. We spent billions and billions of roubles, we killed 1 million Afghans and we lost 16,000 of our soldiers. When we ran out, there were 300,000 mujaheddin in the hills ready to take over, just waiting their turn. It will happen to you.” It has happened throughout history; no army has gone into Afghanistan, conquered it and occupied it. The task is impossible.

Mr Julian Brazier (Canterbury) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Flynn: No, I cannot, because I have given way twice.

If we want evidence that the Government are in denial, we should recall the attempt to stop the reading of the names at Prime Minister’s Question Time, when the House is well attended and the media attention is on us. This was shifted and the names were read twice, once on a Monday and once on a Thursday. When the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary visited Afghanistan to demonstrate our strength, they proved our weakness. When they came back to the Dispatch Box and gave their reports to the House, they did not mention the only important thing that happened on their mission, which was that they were unable to fulfil their engagements. They were supposed to visit three sites, but they were unable to visit the principal one because of the strength of the Taliban. However, to admit that, and thus to tell the truth at the Dispatch Box about the fact that their trip exposed our vulnerability and our inability to guarantee the safety of our Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, would have been to admit that the situation is getting worse by the day. This has been going on for a long time, and to pretend otherwise is nonsense.

There is a welcome sense within this House—I am not making any point about a date on which to withdraw—that we know that we are going to withdraw. An exit strategy is in place and that changes the mindset. Nobody will talk any longer about continuing for 30 years, or about conquering the Taliban or the people of Afghanistan. The people of Afghanistan know that we are getting out. The Parliaments in Holland and Canada debated

this issue—they had the opportunity to do so and to vote on it before we did—and they decided to bring their troops out. The opinion of our nation is the same: 70% of the country wants to see the troops home by Christmas. That cannot happen, but we need to get them home in a way that is going to guarantee as much peace as possible for the Afghans in the future. We have to choose whether we have a Dien Bien Phu exit or a Saigon exit—that was an exit prompted by the disgust of the population at the body bags coming home. Such an exit would be carried out in panic and would leave the Afghans at the greatest possible peril. We may be able to reach some agreement with these various groups. They are not saints and it will be very difficult to get any stable set-up, but that must happen and we know that we are going to do it in the near future—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

1.39 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I start by declaring my interest as a member of the reserve forces. I commend the Government for their attempts to clarify the mission in Afghanistan. It is very important to articulate the geopolitical significance of this conflict if it is to command the support of the general public. I genuinely regret that the previous Administration signally failed to do that. Had they done so, the acceptance of what we are trying to achieve in Afghanistan now would be far more general. I support the motion, and I believe that the men and women of our armed forces will expect us to do so in this House today.

It is worth bearing in mind that the price of our involvement in Helmand and Kandahar is paid by the men and women of our armed forces. I am pleased to note that their welfare is mentioned in the three amendments tabled to the motion today. I want to talk a little about the duty that we owe them—a duty summed up at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom as the military covenant. The military covenant is a somewhat elegant turn of phrase written into British Army doctrine by a now retired senior officer who was no doubt sweating away in the Ministry of Defence in 2001—that is, the old Ministry of Defence, before the previous Administration turned it into a princely palace for mandarins at great public expense.

We must go back a bit to understand the provenance of the covenant. The first expression of the duty that the state owed to those who fought on its behalf is the Act for the Necessary Relief of Soldiers and Mariners. It was drawn up in 1601, following what were described as

“Her Majesty’s just and honourable defensive wars”,

just as today’s interest in the covenant has been encouraged by Iraq and Afghanistan.

The 1601 reference to “defensive wars” is important. Most of the conflicts in which this country has been engaged have been defensive, involving society at large and not just an expeditionary military. Although we can debate the mission in Iraq and Afghanistan—I supported the latter, incidentally, but opposed the former—the conflicts of the 21st century have been discretionary as opposed to the total war of the sort marked this week in the 70th anniversary of the blitz and the battle of Britain, which involved defensive warfare writ large.

[Dr Andrew Murrison]

What implication does participation in discretionary warfare have for our duty under the military covenant? The public are quite clear. Citizens have shown themselves perfectly capable of separating their strong support for the men and women of our armed forces, as has already been mentioned, from their ambivalence, at best, about the mission in Afghanistan. That support must be reflected formally by Government, in my opinion. I would argue that the Government owe a special duty to those who have served in discretionary warfare, because such conflicts cut to the quick of what it is to serve in the military. It is a commitment without limitation and, in the absence of an existential threat of the sort marked this week in the capital and by the RAF, it may be emulated but not matched by any other group in society.

I argued two years ago, at the time that we set up the military covenant commission under Frederick Forsyth, that there are three identifiable parties to the military covenant: the men and women of our armed forces, the Government and the people. However, there might be a fourth: the chain of command. Its attitudes are informed by, but distinct from, the political leadership. The command has been crucial in tackling ingrained attitudes towards, for example, mental health. It has driven TRiM—trauma risk management—pioneered in Iraq and Afghanistan by the Royal Marines, but at other times in our history, the contribution of the top brass, like that of the Government and the people, to the well-being of the rank and file has been less obvious.

It is also necessary to consider within any fourth pillar the attitudes of officials. One wonders about the mindset of a senior civil servant who is prepared to commit to paper his observation that injured soldiers with “a significant media profile” would “require careful handling” in the context of a perfectly proper attempt by the MOD to ensure that our armed forces are fit for purpose.

My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary is quite right to insist that our need to optimise the fighting fitness of our units does not compromise our duty to those who have sacrificed much in the service of their country.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I very much agree that we need to appreciate the contribution of our armed forces. In view of what the hon. Gentleman has said, does he now regret some of the comments that were made in the early years of the decade commencing in 2000 about the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine in Birmingham? Members who are now sitting on the Government Benches made political capital out of the exceptionally good medical services provided to our armed forces. Will he pay tribute to the Birmingham hospital now?

Dr Murrison: I will certainly pay tribute to the men and women of our Defence Medical Services, that is for sure. One thing I would say about the previous Government is that they promised a great deal to the Defence Medical Services, but in Selly Oak they failed to deliver what was necessary in a timely fashion. I am pleased that now, belatedly, we have seen the opening of the new hospital in Birmingham—precisely what the DMS was led to expect to believe that it was getting from the outset.

On a perhaps more light-hearted note, I am bound to observe that our greatest naval hero managed to command the fleet decisively on 21 October 1805 without the benefit of an arm and a leg—I am doing the man a disservice, I mean an arm and an eye; I am supposed to be speaking at a Trafalgar night dinner next month, and I had better get that right. The man was chronically sick for most of his career. I point that out simply as a cautionary note and to say in all candour that it is perfectly possible to be disabled and yet to participate in active service.

Equally, well-meaning commanding officers who offer reassurances at the bedsides of casualties with appalling injuries that will always be with them need to be very careful about promising them that they will always have a place in the battalion—to use the usual turn of phrase—when it is clearly not necessarily in the interests of that person, who might otherwise be retrained, I hope with a quality package, for life in civilian street, which might ultimately be more fulfilling and rewarding. Our language is very important.

We owe it to the injured to ensure that through the evolving Army recovery capability and personnel recovery centres and through a revamped medical boarding procedure that we balance our paramount need for fighting forces that are fit with the obligation to do what is right by those who have paid a heavy price for their service.

Mr Brazier: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and he is making a truly excellent speech. As a footnote to it, may I ask him to agree that it is very unfortunate that as a result of changes 10 years ago, which were made with good intent but were, in my view, wholly mistaken, this is the first time ever in our country's history that the costs of dealing with the aftermath of war are borne by the defence budget?

Dr Murrison: That is a point that my hon. Friend has made before and he makes his views known in a very powerful way. I am sure that there is much truth in what he has to say and of course the blame must lie with the previous Administration and how they managed the defence budget in this country.

The charity Combat Stress received 1,257 new referrals in 2009, an increase in two thirds since 2004. It is important to put that in the context of the generally positive mental and physical legacy left by service in the armed forces. I would strongly avoid the hysterical language used by some elements of the media, and I suggest that saying that we face a “mental health time-bomb” is unfair and not supported by the evidence. However, we have a significant problem and since it has been caused directly by military service we have an obligation under any interpretation of the military covenant to go the extra mile in sorting it out.

The Prime Minister, when he was Leader of the Opposition, and my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary hosted a mental health summit in the Commons in June last year and have ordered a review that I lead into how we can do more to promote the health of the service community. It is clear that we must do far more to be proactive in discovering in servicemen and women the mental health problems that they might be suffering—not just post traumatic stress disorder, I hasten to add. We must offer the means for casualties to accept help in a way that is amenable to them.

Four hundred years after Elizabeth I signed off the first expression of the state's duty to its fighting men after her defensive wars, this Government, mindful of the sacrifices made in a very different theatre, intend to give it statutory definition. I support them in that aim and believe that it should command the approbation of all quarters of the House.

1.48 pm

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this debate, which is both timely and necessary. I agree with other hon. Members who believe that it is time in this century for Parliament to have a more explicit and direct vote on important military matters. Apart from anything else, in terms of public support, it is important that we have a clear expression of the will of the House of Commons on these matters so that there can be no ambiguity once today's motion is, I hope, carried.

Mr Gray: I absolutely agree. It is terribly important that this House should send a strong message of support for our troops. However, does the hon. Gentleman not see a real danger that if we were to have such a vote on every occasion there is at least the possibility that the vote would be evenly split or that even a no vote would be the result, which would have terrible consequences for the war?

Mike Gapes: I do not argue that we should have a vote every week or month, but from time to time it is important that Parliament makes it clear that the Executive, when it deploys our forces, has the continuing support of the nation. It is our job to speak for the nation and it is very important in a democracy that Parliament is the voice of the nation and that we do not just leave things to the Executive.

Last year, the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs published a major report on Afghanistan and Pakistan. It concluded that there could be no question of the international community abandoning Afghanistan and that there was a need to convey publicly that the international community intends to outlast the insurgency and to remain in Afghanistan until the Afghan authorities are able to take control of their own security. That must be a primary objective. Yesterday, the current Committee decided to mount a new inquiry into Afghanistan and Pakistan over the coming months.

I am concerned that, since the previous Committee's recommendations of last year, there has been a significant change in the positions of both the United States Administration under President Obama and the new Conservative-Liberal Democrat Government who were elected in May. We now have an arbitrary deadline, set by the Obama Administration, to begin withdrawal of military forces from July 2011, and an even more firm statement about a complete withdrawal of British forces from 2014-15, which was confirmed by the Foreign Secretary when he answered questions at yesterday's Select Committee sitting.

I think it is extremely unwise to have arbitrary target deadlines. Many commentators have pointed out that the process should be conditions-based and should not involve just setting artificial deadlines. One reason why that approach is so difficult and dangerous is in the signals it sends to the Afghan people. In a recent opinion poll, only 6% of Afghans said that they would

support the return of the Taliban, whereas 90% said that they would prefer the present, dysfunctional, corrupt and in many ways useless Government to the thought of the Taliban returning. The ability of Afghans publicly to associate themselves with the international forces or even the Karzai Government at this time is greatly undermined by the thought that within a year, 18 months or perhaps four years, that international community support will go and they will be faced with the potential return of the Taliban. We face a real crisis here. There is a conflict between the military objectives of nation building and counter-insurgency, which require many years—perhaps a generation—to be successful, and a political agenda driven by the body bags and casualties and the simplistic solutions that are touted by various people.

What we are dealing with in Afghanistan is not just about Afghanistan. It is also about Pakistan—a country of 170 million people which has nuclear weapons, unresolved border disputes and potential conflict with India. Pashtun people who live on both sides of the Durand line can move backwards and forwards, and the border is impossible to police. If there is a collapse of any form of central Government and we return to an overt civil war, as opposed to the incipient civil war that still goes on in Afghanistan, without international support for the Afghan Government we could be faced with a situation not simply of the Taliban's return but of a complete failed state—not just Afghanistan but Pakistan.

Rory Stewart (Penrith and The Border) (Con): How exactly would the collapse of Afghanistan affect Pakistan? Why is the hon. Gentleman so confident that a failed state in Afghanistan would have calamitous effects for Pakistan?

Mike Gapes: When the Foreign Affairs Committee visited Pakistan last year, we were in Islamabad when the Pakistani Taliban got to within 80 miles of Islamabad. At that point, the Pakistani Government got out of denial and started a very difficult process of taking on the insurgents from the FATA, or federally administered tribal areas, and other areas. They pushed up the Pakistani Taliban towards the Afghan border. There is an area on that border, on both sides, where the insurgents can regroup, hide and get training. If the Pakistani state is faced with a failure by us or the Afghan forces to press on the other side, there will be an easy way for the insurgents to work on both sides of that border without having sustained pressure from both sides. That is a fundamental dilemma for the Pakistani Government and I do not think that we appreciate quite how many Pakistanis have died in recent years and the great sacrifice that Pakistani people have made because of terrorism, because of outrages within their society such as those in Islamabad, Karachi and other parts of Pakistan, and because of the potential threat to the state imposed by Islamist radicalism and extremism.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Mike Gapes: No, I cannot take any more interventions; I have to conclude my remarks.

I am conscious that we are dealing with a very difficult issue. There is a global struggle within Islam between a whole spectrum of points of view. There is conflict between Sunnis and Shias and there is conflict

[Mike Gapes]

within Sunni Islam. That conflict is being fought out within Pakistan and Afghanistan at the moment. It is sometimes attractive for people to think that we can somehow step back, be neutral and avoid being involved in all this because it is nothing to do with us. Some people have a tendency to think that, but more than 1 million British citizens have family connections with that region—with Pakistan. Islam is part of our European culture and our modern world. Given the globalisation of economics and politics, we cannot be neutral in this struggle. We all have to try to assist the moderates and internationalists in this process, and to combat jihadism wherever it is. That does not mean that we must always fight it militarily: we must also fight it intelligently and politically.

It might well be that because of the deadlines set by our Government and the US Administration, because of the lack of wider international support and because of the growing public fear that we have been in this for so long that we have to get out quickly, we will have to accept a very difficult and messy compromise in Afghanistan that will involve some kind of return of Taliban influence or Taliban groups in at least part of the country. However, let us not forget that the wider struggle will still require us to be involved in supporting the democrats, the internationalists and the anti-jihadists in Pakistani society as well as those in Afghanistan. For that reason, I support the motion.

1.59 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dr Liam Fox): It has been fashionable in some quarters to say that the House of Commons is increasingly irrelevant in our national life, and that the Executive have become too powerful. Indeed, in recent times the Executive have become too powerful, reaching a zenith in parts of the Blair Administration when the House of Commons was reduced to Downing street in Parliament.

Today marks a very welcome departure. I congratulate all those involved in this wise enterprise. It is high time that Members of the House of Commons, not just the Government and not just the Opposition, have the ability to determine what we discuss in the Chamber.

No subject could be more important than Afghanistan. The hardest thing that a Defence Secretary, or indeed a Prime Minister, has to do is to write to the bereaved families of those killed in action, yet sad though that task is, none of us can fully understand the pain of loss endured by the families themselves. I therefore add my condolences to those of Members on both sides of the House who have paid tribute to the heroic members of our armed forces who have sacrificed themselves for our national security. I pay tribute to Dr Karen Woo, whose courage and dedication mirror that of many civilians who are doing what they can to help in one of the most dangerous parts of the world. We should remember at all times the contribution that they make to trying to create a better world.

What is said in this House matters, particularly in relation to Afghanistan. When we debate that subject here we need to be aware of who is listening: first, the British public; secondly, our armed forces; thirdly, our allies and partners; and fourthly, our opponents and

enemies, the disparate insurgency in Afghanistan—the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Each of those audiences is important in different ways. That means not that we are restricted in any way as to what we can say in the House of Commons, but that we should carefully weigh up how we may be interpreted.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman think that the commitment to leave in five years, which he has backed, will be welcomed by the Taliban or seen as a negative?

Dr Fox: If the hon. Gentleman will allow me to, I shall come to withdrawal and the long-term implications in due course.

Our military resilience is, in part, dependent on the support of our people—it always has been. The British public need to know that there are clear reasons for being in Afghanistan and that we have clear aims and the right strategy. They need to know why we cannot bring our troops home immediately, as many people want, what we are achieving, and what success will look like. Let me tackle those points first.

Saturday marks the ninth anniversary of the al-Qaeda atrocities that killed almost 3,000 innocent people, including 66 British citizens, in Manhattan. The horror of watching those scenes replayed on television does not diminish with time. The carnage did not discriminate nationality, colour or creed. It changed the lives of thousands of families and it changed the way political leaders saw the world. If we want our people, civilian and military, to be willing to pay the price of success, they need to understand the cost of failure—9/11 is what failure looks like. It is what trans-national terrorism looks like, and what it will look like again if we fail to confront it.

Our clear aim in Afghanistan is to prevent Afghan territory from again being used by al-Qaeda as a base from which to plan attacks on the United Kingdom and our allies. Our engagement in Afghanistan is first and foremost about national security. It is not the only place where we are confronting violent extremists, but it is crucial in that battle. The presence of ISAF—the international security assistance force—prevents al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime from returning while we train Afghan security forces to take over the task for themselves.

We do not seek a perfect Afghanistan, but one able to maintain its own security and prevent the return of al-Qaeda. That aim also requires working with Pakistan to enhance the Pakistanis' ability to tackle the threat from their side of the border. In Afghanistan, success means, first, continuing to reverse the momentum of the Taliban-led insurgency. Our second aim is to contain and reduce the threat from the insurgency to a level that allows the Afghan Government to manage it themselves. Our third aim is creating a system of national security and governance that is stable and capable enough for the Afghan Government to provide internal security on an enduring basis. That is why we are supporting more effective Afghan governance at every level, and building up the capability of the Afghan national security forces as rapidly as is feasible.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD) *rose—*

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Dr Fox: I shall give way to both Members, but given the nature of the debate I then intend to make progress.

Bob Russell: This debate is taking place as troops from 16 Air Assault Brigade, Colchester garrison, prepare for their fourth deployment to Afghanistan. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is not just a military operation? Although we clearly support the military operation, there are two other sides of the triangle—politics and economics.

Dr Fox: I completely agree that although the military element is absolutely essential it cannot be the only element in our approach to Afghanistan. I shall come to that point a little later.

John Woodcock: Members on both sides of the House will support the Secretary of State in what he has just said. Does he accept that his Government must be more focused in communicating the mission? *[Interruption.]* That is not to say that the previous Administration got it right either—I am not suggesting that for a moment—but the ability of the Government and all Members of the House to communicate what the mission is about is paramount in our responsibility to our armed forces in Afghanistan.

Dr Fox: I completely agree. In fact, that issue is discussed even more widely—not just in the United Kingdom but throughout the coalition. One of the issues we discussed at the recent defence ministerial summit was how to improve strategic communication and how to maintain the resilience of our operation by maintaining the support of our publics, recognising that one of the problems is that the Taliban do not have to maintain the democratic support of anybody at all. Communication is a strength but also a potential weakness and it is correct that the right strategic narrative is essential in maintaining support and resilience.

We need to be clear about where successes are occurring, and part of that communication is telling people about successes. Less than six months ago, Afghan national army strength stood at about 107,000 trained soldiers, with a target of reaching 134,000 by October 2010. The Afghan Government met that target two months early. The Afghan national police force has grown to more than 115,000. I am the first to admit that challenges remain with its capability, but notable successes have been achieved, even over the past few weeks, such as the interdiction of bombers in Logar province just last week. Good things are happening, and we must not allow ourselves to believe that there is a non-stop tale of failure, as some would like to portray the situation.

In Helmand, the Afghan national army and police, working side by side, with minimal ISAF support, led on the planning and conduct of Operation Omid Do, which has extended security into former insurgent safe havens in northern Nahr-e Saraj. Increasingly, ISAF patrols operate jointly with the ANA as partnering is rolled out. Of course, there are risks associated with partnering and we are trying to reduce them to a minimum, but partnering is the quickest, most effective, and so the safest, way to build a capable Afghan national security force—the key to bringing our forces home.

Failure would not only risk the return of civil war in Afghanistan, which would create a security vacuum; we would also risk the destabilisation of Pakistan with

significant regional consequences, as the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) correctly pointed out. The second reason why we must not fail is that it would be a shot in the arm to jihadists everywhere, re-energising violent, radical and extreme Islamism. It would send the signal that we did not have the moral resolve and political fortitude to see through what we ourselves have described as a national security imperative. Premature withdrawal of the international coalition would also damage the credibility of NATO—the cornerstone of the defence of the west for more than half a century. Our resolve would be called into question, our cohesion weakened, and the alliance undermined. Our influence over the region and our contribution to wider stability would be severely diminished.

Angus Robertson: Will the Secretary of State confirm that the central policy for the intervention in Afghanistan is still based on support for Afghan institutions and their ability to govern in Afghanistan? If so, why has he not mentioned what is happening at present, which is the wholesale collapse of that country's financial system around a coterie associated with the President of Afghanistan we are supposed to be supporting? Why has he not mentioned that so far?

Dr Fox: I shall come to a number of issues about the wider political element, but as the hon. Gentleman has raised it, I will say that the prime reason for being in Afghanistan is our national security: to ensure that the territory is not used again as a base for training and attacks by terrorists, the likes of which we saw on 9/11. It is to ensure that we degrade the threat, so that the Afghan security forces are able to deal with it themselves, without having to refer to the international community.

The second audience listening today is our armed forces and the wider defence community. They need to know that they have our support, not just for who they are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) said, but for what they are doing and for the sacrifices that they are making. They need to know also that the ISAF coalition is providing all that they need to succeed in their mission. Our armed forces know that there is no such thing as a risk-free war, a casualty-free war or a fatality-free war. They accept that. They are professional people and volunteers every one. That is what makes them truly special. They want our support, not our sympathy. They want to be victors not victims.

In July, the Government agreed to a request from ISAF to deploy temporarily about 300 additional troops from the theatre reserve battalion in order to supplement the UK force of more than 9,500 troops and ensure that the progress being made in Operation Moshtarak was consolidated and exploited. The TRB will enable the redeployment of US forces in Sangin and of UK forces to central Helmand.

On 2 August, two additional RAF Tornado GR4s arrived in Kandahar, again in response to a request from the commander of ISAF for an increase in air support. Those aircraft joined the eight Tornados that have already been provided in order to support the multinational pool, not just our forces, and they have boosted the available flying hours by 25%, or an extra 130 flying hours per month. We announced extra funding for base protection and close-combat equipment and

[Dr Fox]

more counter-IED funding. All that will enable UK forces to consolidate the hold in central Helmand as the force there thickens, and to partner the Afghan security forces more effectively. It demonstrates our commitment to the coalition and to the ISAF strategy for Afghanistan.

The third audience who will be listening today are our allies and partners. They should be assured of Britain's commitment to the shared strategy, and of our determination to play our part in protecting not only our national security but that of our international partners. There are now more international forces in Afghanistan than ever, and that is allowing real progress on governance and development. However, just as a more secure Afghanistan will not come about without military means, it will not come about by military means alone, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Bob Russell) said.

At the Kabul conference in July, the international community supported the Afghan Government's vision of progress on security, governance, economic growth, the rule of law, human rights, countering corruption and reconciliation. There is a very long way to go on many of those fronts, and the Afghan Government themselves must understand that they need to make progress on many of them in order to take advantage of the improved security situation that the international coalition is bringing.

That political track, which runs alongside training the Afghan army and the military surge, is vital. In order to progress it, an Afghan high peace council will oversee a process towards a political settlement for all the Afghan people, underpinned by the \$150 million peace and reintegration trust fund.

On 18 September, just a couple of weeks away, Afghanistan will hold its first parliamentary elections since the 1960s to be run entirely by Afghans themselves. The elections will not be perfect, and none of us should expect them to be, but they represent progress. Progress is being made on security and governance. It is hard and it is slow and it is very variable, but it is real, and as Afghan sovereignty grows, so the nature of ISAF's operations and the role of our forces will evolve.

What is clear to me, what was clear to the previous Government and what must be clear to our allies in ISAF is that, as responsibility for security is transferred to the Afghans, any draw-down in force levels must be done coherently by the alliance. It must be done by an international coalition, not by individual nations. The issue is about phasing out, not walking out.

We also need to strengthen the training mission even further. Some countries might have political or constitutional problems with sending combat troops. We are not happy about that, and we never have been, but we understand it. However, there is absolutely no reason why any NATO country cannot do more to help train the Afghan national security force; it is a measure of our commitment and resolve as an alliance.

The fourth audience listening to our debate today will be our opponents and enemies: insurgent groups, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and the violent extremists who support them. Some have claimed that, by talking of our determination to succeed within the time scale set

out in the counter-insurgency strategy, we give succour to our opponents. That is not the case, and let me explain why.

Over the past few years the strategic position of the insurgency has begun to crumble. Pakistan is taking the threat seriously, and the safe haven that used to exist in that country is gradually being squeezed by the Pakistani security forces. Pakistan, too, is making substantial and significant sacrifices, among its civilian population and its military, as they hunt down al-Qaeda and violent extremists in their own country. We would do well to recognise that sacrifice.

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab) *rose*—

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab) *rose*—

Dr Fox: I give way, for the last time, to the hon. Lady.

Yasmin Qureshi: The right hon. Gentleman touched on Pakistan and the sacrifices that Pakistanis have made, but in these debates about Afghanistan nobody ever mentions the role that India plays and nobody deals with the issue of border controls. The Secretary of State will know that Afghanistan, Pakistan and Kashmir are linked. People in Pakistan—even in parts of Rajasthan such as Quetta, which has substantial links with Afghanistan—believe that the Indian forces play a considerable part in causing problems. I was in Pakistan at the weekend—in Quetta on Saturday, the day after the explosion there. I asked one of the drivers, “What do you think is happening here?” He said that the Indian intelligence agencies are involved, so I ask that, in the debate about Afghanistan, Pakistan and all the troubles that have been occurring, the role of India and its intelligence services also be considered.

Dr Fox: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I do not agree with her detailed analysis, but it is important to recognise that Afghanistan must be regarded in a regional context. All the nations involved in Afghanistan must bring to bear as positive an influence as possible on the regional questions that will help to determine a better dynamic than perhaps has been brought in the past. That will involve a large number of regional players, but in this case it is quite wrong to point the finger at India, as the hon. Lady has.

I apologise for not giving way to the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Ainsworth: The Secretary of State knows that I agree with many things that he is saying, but I have one concern—well, more than one, but this is a particular concern—about one issue that he raises. He just said that he does not accept that, by talking about our determination to achieve certain conditions, we give succour to our enemies. But that is not what has been said. What has been said, in terms, by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister is that, irrespective of conditions, combat will end in 2015.

General Petraeus has tried to say that all those decisions must be conditions-based, and I went to a meeting the other day with the Secretary of State's Parliamentary Private Secretary, at which he tried to say that we should think of those things in the way that General Petraeus has portrayed them. But that is not what the Defence Secretary's own Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have said. They have been absolutely

clear—and that is what concerns our armed forces, as the Secretary of State's hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes) said. Will the Secretary of State clarify the position? Is it as black and white as the Deputy Prime Minister and the Prime Minister have said it is?

Dr Fox: The Prime Minister made it very clear that, although we might have an extended role in Afghanistan, in training and further involvement in improving the quality of the Afghan national forces, the United Kingdom does not see that it should have a combat role beyond 2015. That is not entirely new. General McChrystal, before General Petraeus, made it very clear that it was part of the counter-insurgency strategy to ensure that the Afghan national security forces were able to maintain their own security by 2014; that was always part of our wider aim. Of course there will be continuing capability elements inside the Afghan national security forces which need to be dealt with, and we will have to be there in a mentoring and a training role for some considerable time. On top of that, the wider elements of reconstruction and governance in Afghanistan will require the non-governmental organisations and the wider international community to be there for a long time.

We are talking about one of the most difficult countries in the world in which to operate and in which to bring these things forward. However, it is quite clear that we cannot have an indefinite combat role, and that is what the Prime Minister has made clear.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Fox: I have taken several long interventions, and I am aware that this is the House's debate, not the Government's.

Paul Flynn: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. This is a new procedure. It is a special privilege to have Back-Bench business today, and we are rightly confined to speeches of eight minutes. What is the limit on Front-Bench speeches?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Front-Bench speakers have been notified of how many people wish to take part in this debate, and it is clearly up to them if they want to take interventions. The Secretary of State has pointed out that he has taken a number, some of which were rather lengthy.

Dr Fox: It is very rare, Mr Deputy Speaker, to be criticised by Back Benchers for taking up more time on the Front Bench.

The Taliban have lost significant ground in their southern heartland. They failed to prevent the presidential elections which took place last year, and they will fail to prevent the coming parliamentary elections too. They are incapable of stopping the expansion of the Afghan national security forces. We have been targeting their bomb-making networks, and their leadership and command structure. Their senior leadership is isolated, their training is deficient and supplies are limited. Their individual instances of tactical success have not reversed this deteriorating strategic position. It is clear that the insurgency cannot defeat ISAF; nor can the Taliban achieve their goal of once again wresting control of the country—neither we nor the Afghans will let them.

Sir Menzies Campbell (North East Fife) (LD) *rose*—

Dr Fox: I give way, for absolutely the last time, to my right hon. and learned Friend.

Sir Menzies Campbell: I think that there are many in the House who want to hear the Secretary of State and welcome the opportunity to do so. Indeed, I think we should be grateful to him for his generosity in giving way.

I want to take the Secretary of State back to the terms of withdrawal. The shadow Defence Secretary rightly referred to what General Petraeus has been saying recently, but there is another dimension—the decision of President Barack Obama, who is on record as saying that he intends to start withdrawing troops by June or July of next year. That decision, of course, is not unrelated to President Obama's prospects for re-election: it is directly related to the electoral cycle. If President Obama fulfils his pledge, how does the Secretary of State think that that will be consistent with the outline of the British Government's position which he has just given the House?

Dr Fox: The American Administration have made it very clear that they are talking about the beginning of draw-down from its very highest level some time next year. That will coincide with the period when the Afghan national army is greater in number than the ISAF forces, so there is an element of logic to that position. However, President Obama has also made it clear that it was important to send a signal to the Afghan Government that they needed to have an idea of a time scale within which they would begin to develop the skills that they will need to be able to take over control and governance of their own country. Indeed, many believe that since the President embarked on that approach there has been a renewed sense of urgency in Kabul about exactly how the security forces were to be trained and the rate at which that occurred.

I believe that the Taliban's only realistic hope is that international resolve to continue the war will collapse before the Afghan Government themselves are effective enough to stand on their own. The message that we need to send from the House today is that that hope of the Taliban is an empty one. The steady development of the Afghan national security forces underpins the strategic collapse of the insurgent position. It is said by some that the Taliban have time on their side—that they just have to wait us out. To an extent, the opposite is true. Their window of opportunity to defeat ISAF before the establishment of increasingly credible and effective Afghan security forces has shrunk, is shrinking further, and will shrink further.

Our message to the Afghan people is a clear one, and it needs to be communicated by our deeds as well as our words. We are neither colonisers nor occupiers. We are there under a UN mandate. We are there as a coalition of 47 countries from across the globe. We are not in Afghanistan to create a carbon copy of a western democracy, and we are not there to convert the people to western ways. We seek the government of Afghanistan by the Afghans, for the Afghans. We insist only that it does not pose a threat to our security, our interests or our allies.

[Dr Fox]

When it comes to the defence and security of our country, we are at our strongest when we speak with one voice—when we are clear about what we are seeking to achieve and have the support of this House, and the public, for that endeavour. I hope that today's enterprise takes us one step closer to that.

2.25 pm

Mr Bob Ainsworth (Coventry North East) (Lab): I want to begin by joining the Defence Secretary in paying tribute to those soldiers who have lost their lives in Afghanistan since the House last met. Every day our troops in Afghanistan put their lives on the line to protect our national security, and we must never forget that. I also join him in the comments that he made about Dr Karen Woo.

As we have heard in the debate so far, many Members have different views on our presence in Afghanistan, but I hope that one thing we all agree on is the excellence of our armed forces and our duty to support them and to recognise their courage. We are in Afghanistan as part of a NATO mission under a UN mandate to protect our security because that country, under Taliban rule, became the safe haven for al-Qaeda terrorism. The Government can count on our continued support for a comprehensive strategy in Afghanistan that brings together military, political and development efforts. That is the only way to achieve success and enable the Afghans to take control of their own security.

The hon. Member for Gainsborough (Mr Leigh) said, before he left the Chamber, "Why don't we just do what we did in Libya?" Well, as I understand it, they sent a bomber in to try to kill the leader in Libya, Colonel Gaddafi. What tent or cave do we bomb in Afghanistan? It is ridiculous to suggest that that kind of strategy would bring success in Afghanistan. The only way forward, in my view, in the view of the coalition, in the view of the commander and in the view of the all the troops to whom I have spoken, is a patient counter-insurgency operation to protect the people and deny the ability of the insurgency to take control of the country.

I congratulate our forces on having reorganised the Helmand operations, assisted with the inflow of the US marine corps, and reconfigured the operational areas in Helmand to get the maximum benefit from the new force densities now available. As part of that force rebalancing we have given over areas such as Musa Qala, and as the Defence Secretary has just clarified further, we now plan to do the same in Sangin, where we have tragically suffered many losses. We will soon have a concentrated area of responsibility in central Helmand valley, where we will be well placed to progress. The Defence Secretary was absolutely right to resist those who wanted to move to Kandahar and sacrifice the knowledge that we have gained at such a high price in Helmand.

There are now about 30,000 ISAF forces in Helmand province alone. It is, and always was, a coalition effort. However, with respect to our many allies, since 2006 Britain has provided forces that no one other than the United States was capable of fielding in that most difficult province. We have done so after taking military advice, and retired soldiers who wish to claim that we, the previous Labour Government, did not fully resource

the mission, should reflect on that. They should also remember that we doubled the number of helicopters available, delivered hundreds of new vehicles and took tough decisions about cutting other military capabilities to provide more counter-improvised explosive device equipment. That meant that as the Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Jock Stirrup, has said, our troops were fighting with equipment that was

"frankly the best that they've ever

Mr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman has outlined what the Labour Government did, but will he also congratulate the current Government, who have decided to double the operational allowance and maximise rest and recuperation periods for those deployed? Does he believe that servicemen and their families will welcome that?

Mr Ainsworth: Yes, and I congratulate the Government on that. However, I would say to the hon. Gentleman that the changes were introduced at the same time as a freeze in service pay.

I have a couple more questions to ask the Secretary of State about things that I hope the Government will do in a timely manner. I do not know whether he is going to respond to the debate, because I know he has to leave the Chamber.

Force densities are not the only thing that we will need to succeed. We need the right equipment, and I wish to ask two specific questions about that. Last December I made some changes to the defence budget, partly to address some of the pressures ahead of the strategic defence and security review and partly to prioritise equipment for Afghanistan. That included an order for 22 Chinook helicopters. Why have the new Government not gone ahead with that order? The Secretary of State, the very man who continually criticised our record on helicopters, seems now to be allowing delay in that order, and I should like to ask him why. Equally, in the summer of 2009 I made it my business to intervene to put maximum speed and effort behind the development of a light protected patrol vehicle. Why have the Government not yet placed that order?

As we have discussed, the Deputy Prime Minister has said definitively:

"By 2015 there will not be any British combat troops in Afghanistan".

Yet in a debate that I attended earlier this week the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), the Defence Secretary's Parliamentary Private Secretary, said that we should think of that announcement in the same terms as General Petraeus's clarification of the US position. He said that there were a lot of conditions, and that there would still be special forces there. I absolutely agree with the Defence Secretary that we must be as clear as we can with all the sets of people involved in such an important matter as our intervention in Afghanistan, but the situation is currently not clear.

There appear to have been definitive statements from both the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister that irrespective of what happens, the combat mission will end in 2015. The Secretary of State knows that that is causing angst both within and outwith our armed forces. He did his best today to finesse that argument, but too many intelligent people who follow the record carefully know that there is a problem. Unless there are

conditions-based timelines rather than an arbitrary finish date, the success of the mission is not helped. He need only read this morning's edition of *The Daily Telegraph* to see the confusion that can occur, with people believing that Sherard Cowper-Coles's departure indicates that the Government no longer have comprehensive determination to pursue the mission in Afghanistan.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the shadow Secretary of State accept that the reason why both President Obama and our Prime Minister seem intent on setting deadlines is the high level of casualties being incurred? Does he accept that if they did not set a deadline and continued with the current strategy, we could end up having that high level of casualties for perhaps another 20 or 30 years? Will he consider the fact that given a choice between taking too many casualties for a very long period or, perhaps, very few casualties through precipitate withdrawal, we ought to go for an intermediate strategy that has no deadline but does not incur the same number of casualties? That is the basis of the amendment that I shall move later, which I hope the right hon. Gentleman might consider encouraging his party to support.

Mr Ainsworth: I know the hon. Gentleman's views and that he has tabled an amendment to the motion. He has spoken on this issue previously, and he has given a lot of thought to it, but the reason he gave is not the one of the reasons given publicly for the strategies that are being pursued. Perhaps we need a debate in this country on whether we are sufficiently steely or enduring to pursue prolonged counter-insurgency conflicts, but that is not the reason for the Government's strategy. If it is, let the Government encourage such a debate and let us have it in the House. However, what he says is not what the Government are saying. He has added yet more complexity to the reasons for what the Deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister are saying.

Derek Twigg: Perhaps there is some clever strategy to say to Karzai, "You've got to get your act together. We're getting out in five years so get it sorted," but I would find that quite bizarre given the nature of Afghanistan politics and Karzai. However, there is another question. If we are 100% committed because Afghanistan is so important to our national security, why are we imposing a five-year deadline? I cannot find an historical precedent for that.

Mr Ainsworth: I have heard lots of reasons given for that, and we just heard another from the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). There is a genuine need to put pressure on the Afghan Government to make the necessary improvements in governance and security force capability—that is perfectly legitimate, as the Defence Secretary says—but we will not do that by giving succour to the enemy, as General Sir Mike Jackson said we may well be doing. The Government need to get to grips with that.

Mr David Hamilton (Midlothian) (Lab): Is it not also the case that not going ahead with the helicopter order allows speculation to continue to grow that we are not in Afghanistan for the long haul?

Mr Ainsworth: That most certainly has the potential to encourage speculation. People will speculate that the helicopters have not been ordered—they will not arrive

until 2012—because they will not be needed. That adds to the Government's difficulties with their message on Afghanistan. Conservative Members condemned our policy and said there was a lack of foresight before they election, but they are now delaying decisions to order helicopters. They said one thing in opposition and say another thing in government, but they must expect to be held to account.

Sir Menzies Campbell: Is not the outcome of the defence review another element that will influence people's perception of the Government's intentions? I know no more than anyone else, but if, for example, there were to be a reduction in the number of infantry battalions, irrespective of our intentions, people will perceive that our capability for a longer period in Afghanistan is materially affected.

Mr Ainsworth: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, we will have the opportunity to discuss the defence review and the future of our armed forces next Thursday, but there are some real concerns. Those who in opposition complained about the number of helicopters are now delaying a decision on helicopter numbers now that they are in government. Those same people also said in opposition that we should have three extra battalions in the Army, but they now appear to be saying that we can take 5,000 or 10,000 heads out of the Army. That is a debate that we will have next week. I want our troops to come home as soon as possible, and I want pressure for progress to be put on to the Afghan Government, but that must not be done at the price of giving comfort to the Taliban.

This week reports emerged—and they have been alluded to already today—that injured war heroes from Afghanistan and Iraq may be forced out of the Army. The Defence Secretary tried to suggest that this was a Labour policy, but it was not. Nobody injured would have faced compulsory discharge. That was made clear by General Richards and my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the then Veterans Minister, when they announced the Army recovery capability policy earlier this year. I hope that the Minister will tell us today whether the Government intend to force injured soldiers out of the Army. Those who have made these heavy sacrifices for us deserve our gratitude: they do not deserve to be treated in this way.

We have always said that the Government have our full support as they proceed to take difficult decisions in the best interests of our mission in Afghanistan and our troops who are doing a fantastic job. But the Government cannot expect to get away with false criticism, mixed messages and empty promises any longer. We have a duty to hold them to account.

2.40 pm

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth). Unfashionably, perhaps, and on a personal rather than a party-political level, I always greatly enjoyed our exchanges when I was chairman of the all-party group on the armed forces and he was Secretary of State. He was a member of a useless Government, but he was a first-class Secretary of State, as his speech today testifies.

[Mr James Gray]

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave us a tour de force explanation of why we are in Afghanistan and why it is so important that we should remain there. It was an important speech that will be listened to and read carefully by the four audiences that he correctly delineated. We are being watched in our debate today in a similar way to which that famous debate in the Oxford Union in 1933 on the motion

“That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country”

was watched by Nazi Germany. It is therefore important that we should be careful about what we say and do in this Chamber.

I hope to remain in order if I touch not so much on why we are in Afghanistan and whether we should remain there, but on the way in which we consider whether we should do so. I strongly support the new Backbench Business Committee, and it is superb that it is addressing the imbalance between Parliament and the Executive. I also broadly support the conclusions of the Public Administration Committee before the election that going to war—or, as in this case, remaining in a theatre of war—should be a matter for substantive debate in this Chamber. But there are real dangers inherent in that approach. It is interesting to note that in the long history of this Parliament there has been only one vote thus far on the substantive question of whether to go to war. For the second world war, the Falklands war, the first Gulf war and so on, the decision was made on a motion for the Adjournment. The only substantive vote that we have ever had on going to war was in 2003 and the war against Iraq. Many of us who were opposed to that war and believed it to be probably illegal do not necessarily believe that a vote in this House to support the war somehow justified it.

We also have to think about the consequences of a yes vote in the Lobby this evening and what that would mean for morale on the ground in Afghanistan. Or let us imagine a narrow result, with the House divided more or less 50:50. What message would that send to the four audiences mentioned by my right hon. Friend? It is unlikely to happen, but let us imagine that some other Parliament voted no in such circumstances. It might happen that a good war that should be waged would be voted down for political reasons. Such votes can have very serious consequences.

I do not wish to caricature what people have said about the war in Afghanistan, but I suggest that two broad arguments have been advanced in the debate this afternoon. The first is—and it is also my view—that if we were not in Afghanistan we would give succour to al-Qaeda, with consequences for security here at home and throughout the region. It is important that we are there doing what we do for that reason. The other broad argument, which has already been passionately advanced and no doubt will be repeated later, is that it is a waste of time being there. After all, the argument goes, we lost three Afghan wars, the Russians could not win there, there is no known enemy and we do not even know who the Taliban are. The entire thing is therefore a waste of time and every one of the 333 soldiers we have lost gave their lives needlessly. I think that that argument is wrong, but people have advanced it.

However, neither argument is entirely correct—in fact, we do not actually know; these are enormously complicated and difficult matters. Although I accept that there are people in the Chamber who know about these things in great detail, I hope I speak as a relatively average Back-Bench Member who has followed these matters closely for a number of years when I say that I do not know in detail whether what we are doing in Afghanistan is right, wrong or indifferent. I should not set myself up as some kind of guru who knows those things. There are occasions when the House should say that there are people who know about these things, and that we do not. That has been the principle behind the Royal prerogative that the Executive has always used to go to war.

There are consequences if we do not accept that argument. The first and most important is that we politicise warfare, which would send out very serious messages to our men and women on the front line. The second argument is more complex but more worrying: were a Secretary of State to come to the House to persuade us of a particularly controversial or difficult war—possibly in a narrowly divided House—he would have to explain to us the full intelligence lying behind his reasons for being in a theatre of war or going into one. He would have to lay out details of intelligence, and I am not certain that it is right that we should know about that. On Iraq, for example, the then Prime Minister had Privy Council terms discussions with the Leader of the Opposition and other Ministers. That was correct, but I am not certain, as a Back-Bench Member, that I should be told every minute detail of the military intelligence available to us.

Rory Stewart: Will my hon. Friend please tell us how the public are supposed to control a war or generals except through the House?

Mr Gray: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Of course, the House is answerable to the public for what it does, and of course at a general election it is right that the Prime Minister should go to the public and say, “Here’s what I’ve done during the last Parliament.” That applies to a wide variety of decisions that are not subject to a vote in this place. The second world war, the Falklands war and the first gulf war were all conducted without a vote in this place, but the Prime Minister and the Government were none the less answerable to the public. Simply to say that having a vote here is the only way we can be answerable to the public is simplistic and not correct.

There is also a concern about what the consequences would be for the Backbench Business Committee of different outcomes of tonight’s debate. Suppose for a moment there were to be a no vote—it is very unlikely—and the House voted not to leave our troops in Afghanistan. What would then happen? Would the Government say, “Very well, the House of Commons has voted against staying in Afghanistan, so tomorrow we will order an immediate withdrawal.” I doubt that would be the case—indeed, I hope that would not be the case—and if it is not the case, what is the purpose of voting no? Does that not in itself undermine the force of the Backbench Business Committee? However, if the answer tonight is yes, does that mean we are staying in Afghanistan indefinitely? Does it mean that we support what the

Government have said about withdrawing in 2015? What is the force, the importance, the wisdom of the vote we will take this evening?

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): As the person who tabled an amendment—and I would have liked to move it—calling for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, I should say that had the House voted for it tonight, it would have sent out an incredibly strong signal that we recognise that our presence in Afghanistan is not making us safer. Even our own security forces raise questions about whether our presence in Afghanistan is making this country safer. A vote tonight would be a wake-up call to look at a different strategy in Afghanistan.

Mr Gray: Of course, the hon. Lady is right. It would send out a strong signal, a wake-up call and all the other things she said. I just wonder whether formal Divisions and motions of this kind in the House are designed to send out signals and messages in the way she described. If the House votes that we do not wish to be in Afghanistan, surely it is right that the Prime Minister should be instructed to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. How could it be that the majority of Members, who are answerable to the electorate, could say, “We have decided to withdraw from Afghanistan,” but the Defence Secretary and Prime Minister then say, “Well, despite what you said, we do not intend to withdraw”?

There is an extra complication, which is this. Let us imagine that the House were to vote for withdrawal and that there were to be an election in a year or two. What would bind the following Government, who might be of a different party from the current one? The strength of Backbench Business Committee motions, which I strongly support, is undermined by having a vote on something that is impossible for the Government then to carry out. That is something that the Committee perhaps ought to consider.

I very much hope that we will vote overwhelmingly in support of what our troops in Afghanistan are doing, which I strongly support personally. Every single bereaved family whose eyes I look into down the High street in Wootton Bassett, once or twice a week, would not understand it unless we sent out an enormously strong message that we firmly support what those lost soldiers have done in Afghanistan. If we do not do that, we will also be sending a message to the Taliban—the enemy—that we in this place do not support our troops on the ground. I would therefore prefer there to be no Division. I would like to return to the old tradition in this place, which is that the message to our troops on the ground is that this House unanimously supports them. I will be supporting the motion this evening—I will be in the Aye Lobby, as I hope 95% of Members will be. Even better would be to have no Division, but to send a unanimous message to our troops on the ground.

2.51 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Like other right hon. and hon. Members, I have taken great offence over the past week at comments by Lieutenant-Colonel Michael Manning of US Marine battalion command in Afghanistan. He claimed the British did not pursue the Taliban and said, “We’ll go after them,” implying that our troops had stayed safely hidden in their bases. Not content with traducing the bravery and commitment of

our British soldiers, Colonel Manning went on to criticise British reconstruction efforts by the Department for International Development. That is dangerous talk at a time when the British public are wearied by the mounting death toll, mounting financial costs and the perceived lack of progress in the war. I therefore welcome today’s debate, because it is time to put the record straight. It is time to take stock of why we are still in Afghanistan nine years later, and to look at what has gone wrong, how we move forward and what we need to get right before we can leave.

We need to remember that in the beginning it was US finances that helped Pakistan to create the Taliban, along with other Islamic fundamentalist groups, which were developed as a tool to fight against India in Kashmir and the Russians in Afghanistan. It was the Taliban who welcomed and supported al-Qaeda. When war was declared in Afghanistan, the US continued to fund the Pakistan military, which in turn continued to fund the Taliban, providing a safe haven for both them and al-Qaeda. America has been fighting a war against al-Qaeda. Destroying al-Qaeda has been its priority, not freeing and reconstructing Afghanistan. Pakistan’s military has been fighting an ongoing war against India, using its fundamentalist forces to maintain instability in Kashmir and using the Taliban to ensure a pliable neighbour, not a democratically independent Afghanistan.

The Bush regime made the Defence Department, not the State Department, responsible for the major decisions made in Afghanistan, including in reconstruction. The failure, right from the start, to put in the great amounts of money, effort and commitment needed to reconstruct a strong central state in Afghanistan was a major factor in allowing the Taliban to regroup. Too many decisions were based on hunting for al-Qaeda, rather than on reconstructing and improving ordinary people’s lives, and rebuilding the state. That, followed by the change of military and financial focus to Iraq, allowed the Taliban to regroup, occupy the south and build the heroin trade, ready for the new offensive.

When British troops moved into southern Afghanistan, they encountered problems because there had been virtually no US intelligence or satellite monitoring in the south. The Taliban had been allowed to grow, to develop their drugs trade, and to use that trade to fund their insurgency. We are still there because Afghanistan has been a proxy setting for other wars. Money poured into the hands of war lords and their militias, not into building a viable state, into focusing on reconstruction, or into building a police and justice system and an independent army. British troops have also been fighting against the loss of moral authority of western forces following the US promotion of torture, rendition, disappearance and secret jails, all of which have aided the growth of Islamic extremism.

We sent troops into Afghanistan to fight terrorism and a vicious fundamentalist regime, and we have ended up fighting terrorism funded by drugs. This brings me to a grave concern about the future direction of the war. Admiral Mike Mullen, the chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, has said that we must apply our learning in Colombia to places such as Pakistan and Afghanistan. That is not the path to take. I spent a week in Colombia taking evidence from people whose family members had been assassinated by the state. I saw how the military in Colombia had been used to “disappear”

[Mrs Madeleine Moon]

people in an attempt to create an impression that the drugs lords were being tackled. We do not want to go down that route in Afghanistan. We do not want to find mass graves that have been created by the Afghan army in the fight against drugs. To avoid going down that route, we must not hand power over to paramilitaries or to local defence forces in our desire to leave Afghanistan. It is the Afghan national army and the Afghan national police force that must take on those roles.

Reconstruction and redevelopment must be better organised and targeted. Aid must be controlled by the Department for International Development, by civilian groups and by non-governmental organisations. The military must be there to provide the security, but it is the civil society that must build the civil structure of the future Afghanistan.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Moon: No, I do not have enough time.

Cornel West has said that

“peace is the presence of justice”.

The absence of justice has become one of the primary recruiting tools for the Taliban. That is why I believe that building an effective police and justice system is essential for the future Afghanistan. An article in September’s *Prospect* magazine states:

“The repression of women and the assault on certain freedoms was a small price to pay”

if the rise of the Taliban stopped the wholesale rape and slaughter in Afghanistan. I do not see a world in which women have their noses cut off for running away from violent and abusive husbands, in which they are denied education and the right to medical help, and in which they are stoned to death for alleged infidelity as a “small price to pay”.

We need to be in Afghanistan to build and create a better society, and we must be aware that to fail would be to risk instability throughout the region. Our troops will be fighting wars for many years to come if we do not stay and fight until the end.

2.59 pm

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): When we went to war in the autumn of 2001, unlike with Iraq, there was no serious disagreement over why UK troops were being sent to Afghanistan in the first place, but nine years later, after nearly a decade of allied military operations, there have been changes of President, changes of Prime Minister and changes of Governments. The emotional commitment of the international community to what we are doing in Afghanistan has undoubtedly diminished. Our stated purpose in being there has evolved not once or twice, but several times. We are now less interested in al-Qaeda’s presence in Afghanistan than its presence in Pakistan.

For all those changes, we seem to have returned to the use of the word “war”—I have used it myself—but I am beginning to wonder whether it might be a mistake. It amounts, I think, to an over-simplification of why we are in Afghanistan. Although it allows us to ratchet up in people’s minds why we have sent our troops into harm’s way and quite how serious it all is, it over-simplifies

by implying that there is something to be won or lost and by suggesting that there is something clear-cut going on, with a high degree of finality to it. We have thus created a series of expectations, which history suggests are completely impossible to meet.

I believe that our presence in Afghanistan should be seen as part of a wider global security mission in the middle east region as a whole, and that we should begin to explain it in those terms. The stability mission already exists in different places and in different forms—whether it be in the middle east peace plan, the sanctions against Iraq or the international aid given to Pakistan after recent disasters—and the public broadly understand these priorities. They also accept why we should give our priority to them. They accept that the stability of each of the individual nation states, of their people and of their rights and needs, is absolutely crucial to the world. People understand why, if these people and nations are stable, secure, free and prosperous, it makes it less likely that we will face another 9/11.

I believe that it is now our task as a Parliament to link together the different jigsaw pieces, to explain why they all connect to each other and to include Afghanistan. Only by linking those pieces together will the public see that we have a choice as to whether the picture being formed is either broadly encouraging or deeply worrying.

Defence and security are policy areas that people consume, just as much as they consume transport, education and health spending. However, this policy area becomes important only when things begin to go wrong, so things have to be explained to the public much more carefully than other issues that the public consume. For politicians to provide the explanation or give the narrative on the conflict will not be persuasive in a context where the public perceive—although I do not—Prime Minister Tony Blair as having lied over the war in Iraq. Politicians are not persuasive against that background. In the light of the allegations and counter-allegations over Iraq, and of the disastrous lack of post-war planning in Iraq, which we now all recognise, the people have lost their faith in the need for conflict and in our ability as politicians to demand it. I believe, however, that the conflict in Afghanistan is much more important and much more difficult than the conflict in Iraq ever was.

I do not think that there is a fatigue among the public for war as such. I could be wrong, but in my view, if the public believe that we have a strategy likely to succeed, they will support it. At the moment, I do not believe that that has been demonstrated, which is why they are losing their appetite for this war. There is also a deep mistrust of the politicians who preach it to them.

Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): My right hon. Friend may know that in Wycombe, Afghanistan is an issue of exquisite sensitivity. Many of my constituents hail from Pakistan and Kashmir. I really admire his nuanced and wise speech, but does he agree that it is vital to address various sections of the public to explain that this conflict is actually in the interests of Pakistan and of the Afghan people, and not just in our own interests?

Mr Arbuthnot: I entirely agree. We must take not just our own public with us but the public of those countries where we are based and where we desperately need to help them. My hon. Friend’s constituency work will do a great deal to help in that regard.

I agreed with the shadow Secretary of State for Defence that the answer to the mistrust for politicians is not to set an end date to our commitment in Afghanistan. When the Prime Minister made his comment, I said that if our priority is to leave, it makes it harder to succeed, whereas if our priority is to succeed, it makes it easier to leave. Of course, we do not want to be in Afghanistan for a moment longer than necessary, and of course the Afghans want us to leave as soon as the job is done and success is achieved. However, they do not want us to leave before that point is reached. The problem is that we do not know now when that will be.

Commitments made now to leave merely fuel the loss of appetite and the mistrust of which I talked earlier. The media are acutely aware of that loss of appetite and that mistrust, and that feeds into the hearts and minds of our military personnel, who do their job brilliantly. However, if their mums and dads find that the man on the street cannot explain to them in simple terms why they are doing their job, they are bound to feel unease, especially when they suffer casualties. We must give them a developed justification, and we must not be afraid of complexity, of nuance—I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Steve Baker) for his comments—or of truths that might appear difficult. Sometimes conflict is popular, and sometimes it is not. Sometimes it is both popular and unpopular, especially when seen in hindsight. However, the man in the street must be able to reduce the argument for a conflict to perhaps a single sentence.

If the middle east peace plan fails, if Iran obtains a nuclear bomb, if Pakistan's infrastructure is not rebuilt after the recent floods, its education system not invested in and its nuclear weapons not protected, and if Afghanistan is some sort of grand linking corridor between the three countries, becoming a vacuum that is a trigger for nuclear war, the potential consequences are catastrophic. We do not face any of those fears being realised individually yet; we face them being realised simultaneously. The result could be shattering. We must act now, in simultaneous regions, to prevent that end point ever being reached. We cannot afford to pick and choose which interests should be prioritised; we must see them all as a wider narrative of global security, and we must see them through. The public are well able to take that narrative and to understand that case, and we should not be afraid of making it.

3.8 pm

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): In view of what I am about to say, let me repeat what I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart): I pay tribute to the British soldiers who have served, to those who have died and, unfortunately, to the many who will die in the course of the next 12 months and longer. It is to be hoped that the spending cuts will involve no reduction whatever when it comes to looking after and giving every possible medical help to those who are seriously injured, when they return to Britain.

For some time, I have taken the view, which I have expressed on the Floor of the House, that our military role in Afghanistan should be coming to a close. Let us look at the period of time involved. British troops went into Afghanistan before the main NATO force, in November 2001. Our military intervention there has lasted nearly nine years, one third longer than the second world war and twice as long as the first.

Of course, no Member on either side of the House disputes the sheer brutality of the Taliban rule. No one disputes the Taliban's contempt for those who do not share their views, their contempt for women, and their denial of education to people simply because they are female. All that is horrifying. We also know, only too well, about the public executions—the hangings that took place. We should, however, bear in mind what has been said by the Secretary of State for Defence, to some extent today but in particular when he took over the job last May. He said then that Britain was

“not in Afghanistan for the sake of the education policy”

in what he described as

“a broken 13th-century country”.

It was, he said, “our global interests” that must not be “threatened”.

It should be made clear to those who say that to leave Afghanistan would be to leave it to the mercy of the Taliban, that we are not there to provide an alternative Government, to the extent of pursuing different policies. I concede with no hesitation that the presence of British forces and, of course, our allies in Afghanistan has made a difference that has been welcome in many ways. More women go to school, and other clearly desirable policies are being pursued. We must understand, however, that—as the Defence Secretary has made abundantly clear—we are not in the country for that reason.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that if we walk out of Afghanistan now, we will leave it to those very people, the Taliban? Does he want a bloodbath for the people we would leave there?

Mr Winnick: Obviously no one in the House wants a bloodbath. As for whether Afghanistan would be left to the Taliban if we went, we just do not know, but it should be borne in mind that at no stage did the Taliban have unanimous support as such. Before our military intervention, there was already constant military engagement against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Winnick: Not for the moment. I want to make some progress.

Members on both sides of the House have said that there is no question of an outright military victory. Those, such as the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who have more or less suggested that we should stay in Afghanistan indefinitely, must ask themselves, “How long?”

It has already been admitted that a military victory is not going to happen. General David Richards, chief of the British Army and, as we all know, soon to be Chief of the Defence Staff, said only three months ago that it was his personal belief that talking to the Taliban should happen pretty soon. That has happened in other counter-insurgency campaigns, he said. There is no doubt about it: the chief of the British Army has conceded that military victory, in the sense of the victories in the first and second world wars, is not going to happen. It is not on the agenda. At some stage, talks will take place; the question for the House is when.

Rehman Chishti *rose*—

Mr Winnick: I know that the hon. Gentleman is very eager to intervene, but I am limited by time.

Those who take a different point of view from those of us who are very critical should accept that General Richards knows what he is talking about. No Minister, and indeed none of my Front-Bench colleagues, has challenged what General Richards said. No Front Bencher on either side has said that he was talking nonsense.

Mrs Moon: It should be recognised that our troops are not there to impose education and new human rights standards on Afghanistan. Afghanistan has a constitution, which it put in place, guaranteeing women access to education and personal rights. Our troops are there to support the Afghanistan constitution and the legitimate Government of Afghanistan.

Mr Winnick: My hon. Friend does not answer the point I was making, however: how long will we be there for, bearing in mind that we have already been there for almost nine years?

In order for us to wage such a war, it is necessary to have strong public support in the United Kingdom. Everyone rightly pays tribute to the troops—as I have done—but every expression of public opinion clearly shows that support in Britain for the military engagement in Afghanistan is slipping, and slipping fast. I want to make it clear, as I have on previous occasions, that my views are not influenced by opinion polls. If I felt strongly that we should continue in Afghanistan for a long period but that was a minority opinion, I would not change my view. No Member of Parliament should debate or vote on issues on the basis of opinion polls, but we should recognise that among the British public at large there is decreasing support for our engagement in Afghanistan, and I believe it will decrease still more. That is because the question arises—constituents have asked me this on numerous occasions—of how much longer we are going to be there for, for what purpose and how many more people will die there in what many people, including me, believe is an unwinnable war.

I do not accept the argument that has often been put that we either fight in Afghanistan or we fight on the streets of Britain. That argument was put by my party colleagues when we were in government and they no doubt still hold to it, and it is certainly the Conservative Front-Bench view as well, supported by many Back-Bench Tory colleagues. If we were to win in Afghanistan—if the Taliban were to be defeated—does anyone really believe that our security in our country would be so improved that we would not find it necessary to continue to take the measures we currently take to protect our country and people? The international terrorist network does not necessarily need Afghanistan. It was welcomed in the country in the past, and that was very much to its advantage, but I do not accept for one moment that if it did not have Afghanistan, the terrorist threat to Britain would be that much less.

I also want to refer to a report published this week by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. It is not a controversial body, and as far as I know it is not a particularly left-wing body. It argues, however, that the basis of NATO military policy in Afghanistan is simply

wrong. Apart from other factors, it believes that our involvement—NATO's involvement—fuels the insurgency rather than undermines it.

I do not accept that we can have victory in Afghanistan. When have foreign forces ever succeeded in that country? I take the view that, however desirable some of the policies carried out in Afghanistan arising from military intervention have been seen in that country bearing in mind what the Taliban did, NATO forces are looked upon by many people in Afghanistan who are far removed from the Taliban as foreign forces—as infidel forces, and certainly not Islamic in any way whatever. I find it difficult to believe that they look upon NATO forces as firm allies, rather than as intruders in their country.

I conclude simply by expressing the hope that, regardless of whether there is a vote today, we come to the view that we have been in Afghanistan long enough. The time has surely come for us to agree that our military engagement in that country should soon come to an end.

3.19 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I beg to move amendment (a), at end add—

'provided that a more realistic military strategy is adopted designed to fulfil the United Kingdom's long-term interests in the region at lesser cost in life, limb and financial resources.'

It is a privilege to have the opportunity to move the first Back-Bench amendment to a motion selected for debate in this House by Back Benchers themselves. I have a friend who is engaged to a corporal in the Army. He is a medic who has been on two tours of Afghanistan, the second of which he volunteered for before he had to go. As a medic, he is one of a small number of people who go out on every patrol because something horrible may happen to one of their comrades. He understands the importance of that vital role and so decided to stay on for two weeks longer than necessary at the end of his second tour, to avoid there being no proper handover to the medics who would succeed him.

In the second of those two extra weeks that he voluntarily undertook, on the second tour for which he also volunteered, he was blown up. He was in a new Husky armoured vehicle, so he and his entire crew survived. It is typical of his spirit that the picture of him grinning in front of the absolutely devastated vehicle now adorns the laptop of his fiancée, my friend. Had he been blown up a week earlier, he would have been in a Vector armoured vehicle and he and all his comrades would be dead. So, in this case, it is one up for the former Government and for the armed forces, but it is not one up for the strategy that we have been pursuing.

Over past months, I have made various inquiries about where casualties are primarily incurred, because the question of deadlines is related to casualties more than to anything else. The previous and present Governments have made no secret of the fact that the overwhelming majority of casualties are incurred on predictable patrols by uniformed military targets, which is what our armed forces have become under the current strategy.

For the sake of clarity—it is important that people following this debate should understand this, given what we are told about the audiences who will listen to,

see and read what we say today—may I spell out the difference between my amendment and the original motion? The motion is very simple and it states:

“That this House supports the continued deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan.”

Those who think that the mission should be open-ended should therefore vote for the motion. If they think that the troops should come home straight away and that the whole thing is a lost cause, misguided and counter-productive, as some have argued today, they should vote against the motion. However, if Members think, as I do, that the mission is justified and important, but that it is not being pursued in the right way, they should consider voting for my amendment.

The reason for that was made clear when my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Arbuthnot), the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, so typically put his finger on the heart of the matter. As he said, it is true that if the public believe we have a strategy that will succeed, they will support the mission. Why is public support for the mission draining away? It is because the public are not satisfied with the strategy. That is why I propose adding the words of the amendment to the end of the motion.

Sir Robert Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman think that the coalition’s move to much more of a political engagement to try to move things forward is the right way to proceed in order to bring the troops home in the long run? Does he think that we need to find a political solution on the ground, and that it is not so much the military strategy that has had to be refocused but the political context of that strategy?

Dr Lewis: The answer to that is yes and no: yes in the sense that all counter-insurgencies end, eventually, with a negotiated political outcome, which is what the hon. Gentleman is saying; and no in the sense that now is not the time to negotiate. There has been a lack of strategic consistency in the advice given to Governments. The hon. Member for Walsall North (Mr Winnick) referred approvingly to General Richards’ recent statement that we ought to negotiate with the Taliban. What he did not state was the Taliban’s response to that, as relayed through the BBC, which has some quite good contacts with the Taliban in a purely professional way. It was that they saw no reason to negotiate because they were winning anyway and deadlines had been set for withdrawal.

The strange thing is that this is the same general—he is a talented and charming man and I have had a number of conversations with him over the years—who said a few months ago when appointed head of the Army that we would need to be in Afghanistan for 30 to 40 years and that there was no question of our withdrawing. Now, because we are getting political messages from the White House and from Downing street that the Governments—or at least the leaders of the Governments—of the United States and the United Kingdom are not prepared to go on indefinitely, we are being told, “Oh yes, well perhaps we could get out in four years after all,” and, “Oh yes, let’s talk to the Taliban.”

Mr Winnick: If the general has changed his view in such a substantial way, I welcome it. In my view, he has seen the light. If he was wrong on the subject of talking,

as the hon. Gentleman is suggesting, why was he not contradicted by Defence Ministers at the time or by those who are now Ministers?

Dr Lewis: That is, of course, the reason for my amendment. I am saying that all the Governments are signed up to an unrealistic strategy which ought to be changed. The reality is that General Richards was not really wrong in what he said previously and he is not really wrong when he says that we ought to be talking to the enemy. It is a question of timing. The truth of the matter is that General Petraeus is absolutely right to pursue such a counter-insurgency strategy, provided that we have all the time in the world and that we are prepared to take the casualties that are being inflicted on us by irregular forces. If we are not prepared to take those casualties, we will have to adopt a more realistic strategy, because otherwise we will withdraw arbitrarily and, on our withdrawal, the likelihood of the Afghan Government’s being able to sustain themselves is open to doubt.

What should we be thinking about in terms of our policy? There are those who believe that it should be possible to fight using special forces alone, and they have a particular point, which is as follows. I have been concerned at the artificial distinction drawn between counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, as if insurgents and terrorists were two different things. Terrorism is not an ideology but a tactic. Sometimes insurgents use it and sometimes they use other methods.

In Afghanistan at first, the insurgents were using much more open methods—mass attacks and ones that enabled us effectively to take their armed forces on and to defeat them in fairly open conflict. Gradually, they learned the lesson from Iraq and adopted a different strategy. They started to use terrorism tactics that enabled them to pick off our servicemen and women one by one in an attritional method of campaigning which uniformed armed forces are unable to counter effectively. That is why the answer to such fighting is the deployment of special forces who can meet it appropriately; but that in itself is not enough. If we put pressure on one side by saying, “We are going to withdraw in a few years’ time, President Karzai, so you had better get your act together”, but we want to negotiate with the other side and to get a settlement, we have to put pressure on them too.

That is why I say that we ought to be doing something that I have mentioned in the House before: we ought to be using the time that has been bought by the surge to build up a strategic or sovereign base and bridgehead area, so that when the time comes at which we say, “We are going to withdraw from being thinly spread over the entire country”, rather than quitting completely we withdraw into an impregnable base.

Time does not permit me to take this issue further, but I say simply to hon. Members on both sides of the House that there is nothing dishonourable in fighting for a better strategy for our troops—it is not sending a signal that we are not supporting the troops. To support the troops when they are being led by a faulty strategy is not to support the troops at all. I will be pressing my amendment and I urge Members to vote for it to show that we support the cause and the campaign but we know that the strategy needs to be modified.

3.30 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am delighted that we are at last having a debate on the situation in Afghanistan and the deployment of British troops there. It does not reflect well on Parliament, our parliamentary structures or our democracy that the vote at 6 o'clock will be the first substantive vote by Members of Parliament on whether British troops ought to be deployed in Afghanistan. It does not do much for the role of Parliament that there has been insufficient scrutiny of this endeavour other than the quite correct memorials that have been read out to those soldiers who have tragically lost their lives in this conflict.

In preparation for this debate, I had a look at *Hansard* from 2001. During the relevant 2001 debate, the then Secretary of State for Defence, Geoffrey Hoon, said that he would set out the aims of the mission. He said:

"We aim to do everything possible to eliminate the threat posed by international terrorism, to deter states from supporting, harbouring, or acting complicitly with international terrorist groups, to reintegrate Afghanistan as a responsible member of the international community and to end its self-imposed isolation."—[*Official Report*, 1 November 2001; Vol. 373, c. 1014.]

He went on to say that other aims included capturing Osama bin Laden and Mullah Omar. Well, the campaign has not been particularly successful on either the latter two aims or the earlier part.

At the end of that debate, the then Member for Linlithgow, Tam Dalyell, asked for a vote on a procedural motion and 13 Members voted against the proposal. There were four tellers, all of whom were against—one of them was my hon. and good Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who was, bizarrely, a teller for the other side—to ensure that a vote was recorded in the House on that occasion. It does not look good if a country and a democracy is so determined to go to war but those who are prosecuting the war do not want a vote in the House on the matter. I hope that those who support the war tonight will put up tellers to ensure that those of us who do not support either the amendment moved by the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) or the substantive question are able to record our votes against it on behalf, we believe, of large numbers of people in our constituencies and in the wider country.

The war came about after 9/11, which was obviously appalling, awful and wrong. Whichever way one looks at 9/11, there was nothing right about it—it was dreadful—but was it right, sensible or intelligent of the then President Bush to respond by leading us into a war in Afghanistan that has now lasted for almost twice as long as the second world war or the first world war? We are moving into the 10th year of the conflict in Afghanistan, and although President Obama talks about coming out within two or three years, I have a feeling that if the military is allowed to have its way we will still be there in five years' time or perhaps for even longer than that. The strategy does not seem to involve anything other than continuing the occupation of that country.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): We have been told many times that one reason why we are in Afghanistan is to make us feel safer here and to protect us in our communities. Do we mix with different people from Opposition and Government Front Benchers? Does my hon. Friend get many people in his constituency coming

up to him and saying, "Thank goodness we are in Afghanistan because we feel so much safer from terrorism now"? I do not.

Jeremy Corbyn: I live in and represent an inner-city area, and I have to say in all honesty that not one person in my community—not once, on any occasion—has come up to me and said that. Indeed, there is a sense of grievance among the Muslim community in Britain, partly because of this war but partly because of the substantial amounts of anti-terror legislation that have been a product of the war. They feel much less secure than they did in the past and much more isolated from the rest of the community. We should bear it in mind that foreign policy is not conducted in isolation and its effects are not felt in isolation.

Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we were to withdraw, his constituents might then approach him to say that they felt nervous because they did not have protection from terrorism?

Jeremy Corbyn: Everybody wants protection from terrorism. Everybody wants protection from insecurity. My point is that our presence—the presence of British troops—in Afghanistan, and formerly in Iraq, has not made the streets of this country safer. The anti-terror legislation is often seen as intrusive. We should use the criminal law against people who commit criminal acts, rather than promoting large amounts of special legislation.

The effects of the war have been serious in many ways. We have seen the detention of—in some cases, completely innocent—civilians at Bagram air base; extraordinary rendition flights; Guantanamo bay, and the resulting legal minefield; and, as I have already said, the anti-terror laws in our country.

The growth of the Taliban and of particular organisations in Afghanistan is a product of the cold war. We have only to look at the record of what went on after the Soviet Union went in to support the then Afghan Government. The US supported the Mujahedeen, which morphed into the Taliban. They were trained by the US and the CIA. We are still paying the price for the cold war. Indeed, the bin Laden family enjoyed quite a close relationship with the Bush family for some time. The battles are not hermetically sealed.

Rehman Chishti: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: I shall not give way, as I have only two minutes left for my speech.

Afghanistan is a country of desperate poverty. Drug production has gone up. Corruption has got worse. Deals have been done by the British forces and others with warlords and corrupt elements. We have spent billions and billions of pounds in Afghanistan, but poverty levels are worse than ever. I have met asylum seekers from Afghanistan who have travelled to the UK overland by a series of trucks. They have entered illegally to try to find a place of safety. They are not particularly pro-Taliban or particularly pro-anybody; they simply want to survive and they see the US and Britain as an occupying force in their country.

Recent opinion polls show that only 7% of the British public think we are winning the war in Afghanistan and that 72% want the troops to come out. The public are fed up with the losses and fed up with the costs. They

feel that we should do something different. Many people believe that some of the reasons for going into Afghanistan were strategic, and they may have been. I am interested in those ideas. The US has developed bases all over former Soviet central Asia. The war has clearly already spread into Pakistan and is in danger of spreading to other countries too. There are undeveloped and largely unexplored mineral resources in Afghanistan, and one wonders what the long-term intentions are for them.

We are spending money on forces, security services and agencies to try to maintain our presence in Afghanistan. It is time we rethought our whole foreign policy strategy and started to look to a world where we work within international law rather than by occupation. We should recognise the failure of the whole mission in Afghanistan. It has done us harm. It has harmed our country and our lives, and brought death to a lot of wholly innocent people in Afghanistan. Is it not time to rethink, to come out and start a different, more peaceful strategy in the world?

3.39 pm

Rory Stewart (Penrith and The Border) (Con): I find this a very powerful, very troubling and very worrying motion. It states:

“That this House supports the continued deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan.”

If one were to remove the word “continued”, there is nobody in this House who would oppose the motion. Every Member, day by day, feels more admiration for what our soldiers achieve, more respect for the sacrifices that they have made and more pride in what they represent for our country. But the danger of the motion is that it is black and white: it sets up an opposition between the terms “increase” and “withdraw”, and between “engagement” and “isolation”. It creates a world in which people are tempted to say, either, “Afghanistan is the most important country in the world, the central, existential threat,” or, “It doesn’t matter at all.”

There are two central questions. How much does Afghanistan matter? And what can we do about it? We have heard Members from both sides of the House make eloquent arguments about the significance and importance of Afghanistan, and it matters in five main ways. They should not be trivialised, because Afghanistan does, in a sense, matter.

First, Afghanistan matters in terms of counter-terrorism and 9/11. It was the place from which the 9/11 attacks were planned. Secondly, Afghanistan matters enormously in terms of narcotics. It produces the majority of the world’s heroin. Thirdly, Afghanistan matters for us and our credibility. For nine years we have pinned our reputation and that of our allies to this adventure. Fourthly, as people have said, Afghanistan matters to Pakistan. There is an extent to which Afghanistan will have an influence on that state, which, as we have heard, is nuclear-armed, unstable and has jihadist elements. Finally, Afghanistan matters to its own people. Nobody in the Chamber wants the Taliban to take over, and nobody is in any doubt that they represent a brutal, horrendous and cruel form of government—utterly discredited from 1996 to 2001.

Paul Flynn: With the help of my hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), I have just checked the record for 2001, when I intervened on

the then Minister and said that there was no chance of reducing the flow of heroin from Afghanistan, which then stood at 90% of the world’s production. The current figure is still 90%. What improvement has there been?

Rory Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his intervention, because it leads beautifully on to the second part of my speech. What can we do about the problem? Neither he, I, nor anyone in the Chamber doubts that there is a problem, but what can we do?

The answer has been gone over again and again, and General McChrystal has an answer in his report. What have we done? Broadly speaking, over the past nine years we have had successes in health, education, counter-terrorism, rural development and urban regeneration. We have had a series of other things, which we like to describe as challenges—in counter-narcotics, as the hon. Gentleman said, in counter-insurgency when fighting the Taliban, in the rule of law, in governance, in anti-corruption and in state building. And we have come to the conclusion that we have a talisman, a way of dealing with Afghanistan and a new solution, which is in that report and is called counter-insurgency warfare strategy.

We must wish the surge all our best. We have embarked on it and are committed to it, and that is where we are going. So let us hope that it works—however, there is a very real reason to believe that it may not, within the time frame that General McChrystal anticipated or predicted. In other words, when at the end of this year General Petraeus reviews the strategy, and when in the middle of next year President Obama begins the draw-down of troops, it is unlikely that we will have achieved McChrystal’s two main conditions: sufficient pain inflicted on the Taliban for them to wish to go to the negotiating table; and, on the other hand, the creation of a stable, effective and legitimate state.

It is not the place of this House to talk about why those things are not possible, and we do not have time to talk about why we did not succeed. The central element is nothing to do with the British or American troops; it is to do with the Afghan Government. General McChrystal has said from the beginning that the only way we will win in Afghanistan is with a stable, effective, legitimate Afghan state. Without that, we are not going to win, and such a state is not emerging. Does that mean we can do nothing in that country? No—we can do an enormous amount, but we cannot crush the Taliban and create a stable, effective, legitimate Afghan state.

Jonathan Edwards: Is not another way forward to create a new constitution for Afghanistan that decentralises power to the ethnic groups in different regions instead of centralising power in the hands of one President who is very corrupt?

Rory Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. Of course, Afghans must be allowed to do their own politics, and whether they have a decentralised or a centralised state or recognise ethnic boundaries is up to them. Our role is to accept the limits of our power and accept that there are things we cannot do. There are things we can do, but they have nothing to do with troop surges or counter-insurgency. We must find a moment—this is why the 2015 deadline is absolutely correct—at which we say about the current strategy, “Enough, no more. We’ve done enough.”

[Rory Stewart]

What then will we do after 2015? I suggest that with the end of UK combat operations in Afghanistan, we concentrate on three things: continuing limited counter-terrorism operations; continuing to support development projects, probably in the centre and the north of the country; and continuing to try to ensure a political solution, or, to put it another way, to decrease the likelihood of a civil war and increase the likelihood of a political solution by gaining leverage over the Taliban.

Is this as scary as we believe? Is this really the nightmare we have conjured? No. The Taliban are unlikely to be able to take over Afghanistan, because this is not the mid-1990s. This is not groundhog day—we are not repeating 1996. In 1996, when the Taliban came swarming into Kabul, mujaheddin were shelling each other in the centre of the city, the Afghan people were appalled by years of corrupt, abusive government, and the Taliban were untested—and there were no foreign troops on the ground.

Today we are in a completely different situation. The Taliban are discredited from the time when they were in government. There is much more coherence between the central and northern groups. There is very little likelihood of the Taliban being able to present a conventional threat. If they try to roll artillery or tanks up the main streets, as they did then, we can deal with that. That does not mean that they are not going to increase their presence in the south and east of the country—they almost certainly will. But even if they do, it is extremely unlikely that they will invite back al-Qaeda in the way that they did in 2001. From their point of view, that was their No. 1 mistake. If they had not invited in al-Qaeda, they would still be in power. Even if they do invite back al-Qaeda, it is something that we can manage. We have the willpower, the technology and the public support to deal with it in a way that we did not in the 1990s.

Derek Twigg: The hon. Gentleman seems to be suggesting—I have heard this in a number of spheres—that we abandon the south-west and south-east of the country and that the Taliban will move back, but they will not be as bad as they were last time. I do not know what evidence he, or those who are pursuing this strategy, have for that. He will recall that the Taliban started off in a very localised way in Kandahar and then moved up the country, and never once has there been peace throughout the country. I do not see how we can have trust in that situation starting again.

Rory Stewart: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am not suggesting that the Taliban are nice people. These threats, and the fears and worries that we have, are very real. The Taliban are horrendous people. Terrorist threats from Afghanistan are genuine, as are the threats to Pakistan, to our credibility and to the Afghan people. However, the point is that “ought” implies “can”. We do not have a moral obligation to do what we cannot do. After nine years, we have failed to demonstrate that the Afghan Government can take over control. Our troops can fight all they want, and they do it very well, but when we withdraw, the Afghan Government will not be robust enough to take over. We therefore need to accept that rather than what I, and the hon. Gentleman,

would like, which is being able to guarantee the Taliban’s disappearance, we need to contain and manage the situation.

What does this mean for UK foreign policy? It means beginning a new approach where we recognise—this is the central point that we would all agree on—that we have other priorities in the world. Afghanistan is not the be-all and end-all. We cannot bet all our money and all our troops on this one place. Pakistan matters more in terms of terrorism, Egypt matters more in terms of regional stability, and sub-Saharan Africa matters more in terms of poverty, and that is before we get on to Iran, North Korea or China. The lesson that we should take, and the reason why the 2015 deadline is correct, is that we should recognise the limits of our knowledge, power and legitimacy. And understand that although we cannot do as much as we pretend, we can do much more than we fear. The only wisdom is the wisdom of humility.

3.50 pm

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): I am very pleased to be able to follow the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), who speaks with considerable authority and knowledge on these matters. I believe that he has served out in Afghanistan and lived there for quite a while. Nevertheless, I am still not entirely sure that I follow the logic of what he said. Perhaps I shall return to that a little later.

Like many other Members, I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on selecting this debate. It is the first such all-day debate that we have had, and it is most important. When I say that unfortunately I cannot support the motion, I mean no disrespect to the Committee. I am not sure how the motion came to be drafted, but I cannot see how Members can support so open-ended and black-and-white a motion stating that the House “supports the continued deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan.”

There is no mention of a limited period, even though the Prime Minister himself has said—quite rightly, in my opinion—that it is inconceivable that we shall still be in a combat role by 2015. The Foreign Secretary agreed with that at the last Foreign Office questions, having made it absolutely clear that counter-insurgencies invariably end in a political settlement, which means talks. I shall come back to that in a moment. The Defence Secretary also agreed today, although he gave a mixed message. On the one hand he said that he wanted the troops to return as victors—a singularly ill-chosen word, since that is clearly not what will happen—and, on the other, he said that he knew there had to be a political solution.

If Members do not find themselves able to support the motion, as I cannot, that leaves us with the amendments. I congratulate the hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) on tabling his amendment and having it selected, but when he explained the nature of his alternative strategy I had doubts about whether an impregnable, sovereign strategic base with an enormous number of troops could be established and function in the role that he envisages. He has not had time to develop his argument today, nor have I had the occasion to talk to him further about it. However, his amendment is somewhat difficult to vote for, even though I would like to be able to do so given that it states what I believe is essential, which is

that the current strategy is not working. While it is now said that we have learned to deal better with IEDs, the insurgents have switched their tactics and are now killing more and more successfully with sniper bullets.

Dr Julian Lewis: On a purely procedural matter, there is nothing in the wording of my amendment that commits hon. Members to backing any particular solution. I have given my own interpretation, but as long as the hon. Gentleman agrees with the wording of the amendment, there is no reason why he, and I hope other hon. Members, should not vote for it.

Mr Robinson: The hon. Gentleman is now at his most persuasive and irresistible best, and I will give the matter further thought during and after my speech.

As for the other amendments, while I agree with much in amendment (c), tabled by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), it is inadequate in that it implies a cut-and-rush approach of getting out willy-nilly as soon as we can. I do not think that is on, or that the country would want to see us scuttle away. I believe that the only approach is the one that I outlined in an early-day motion that I circulated to most Members, which I hope will find support throughout the House. It arose from the message that came from the Taliban in August, which was the subject of a front-page article in *The Guardian*. It stated that the Taliban were open to negotiations and discussions about civilian deaths. That is a major problem for the allied forces and is central to the counter-insurgency strategy that was mentioned earlier, but it would not necessarily lead immediately to talks about how we could reach a political settlement involving the Taliban. I do not think that any other exit strategy makes sense. Unpleasant though it is to many, and although we may not get everything we need from talks with the Taliban, the sooner we begin them, the sooner we have a chance of achieving what the hon. Member for New Forest East and I want, which is a reduction in the unnecessary and awful killings that are taking place, including of civilians in front of their own troops. They are bound to continue if we pursue the current strategy under the terms under which our forces are operating.

We cannot simply cut and run, so I do not support the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion, but I will do my very best to meet the request of the hon. Member for New Forest East. I certainly cannot vote for the motion, which is defective and unacceptable because it does not give a time scale. Much though we may dislike time scales, Ministers are always asked, "How long will it last?" and they cannot dodge that and leave things open-ended. Time goes very quickly. If we are not up against a deadline, in no time at all, we could find that there is mission creep and that the conflict expands. Before we know what has happened, we have built the conflict up to being about the defence of the whole western way of life.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that his logic is the same as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart)? Effectively, that logic is to abstain on the basis that the proposed amendments do not accurately reflect what we hope for, which is the timed withdrawal that the coalition Government propose?

Mr Robinson: The coalition Government are realistic on the matter—I have privately congratulated the Defence Secretary on his realism—but he was today conscious that, if they were listening, people will take comfort if they think they have the prospect of winning the war against ISAF in Afghanistan. He therefore painted a more rosy picture than the situation on the ground would properly allow him, and sent a more hard-line message to the Taliban than necessary.

I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). It is now accepted throughout the House that there is no military victory to be won for either side in Afghanistan. The only prospect we have is of a few years—or many years, if we are not careful—of futile conflict that will get us nowhere. I am not saying that we should stop, which is where I disagree fundamentally with the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion in whose name amendment (c) stands. I cannot see the negotiations or discussions with the Taliban getting anywhere unless we remain in Afghanistan at our current strength and sustain our attack on them.

Indeed, from the early-day motion that I tabled, it was clear that the information, such as we have, is that we have a firm offer from the Taliban. The offer is not endorsed by the quetta shura—the central council in Pakistan—but comes from local commanders. Let us also bear in mind that 80% of the casualties occur within 10 miles. In other words, the fighting and deaths are very localised. We do not face an al-Qaeda insurgency campaign directed from outside; it is a local campaign.

The offer of talks, which appears to be serious, has emanated not from the top council leadership, which should encourage us to respond to it, yet as far as I can see, we are ignoring it. I entirely accept that the Government will say, "We can't tell you what's going on," but the Americans say that they see no prospect of talks going anywhere. Panetta says that the time to talk is when the Americans have increased the pressure so that the Taliban believe that they are losing, but I take issue with the hon. Member for New Forest East on that, because that approach would mean that there will never be a right time for talks. Either we are winning, and therefore we do not need talks, or doing badly, when talks would mean weakness. If we were doing better, we might think that if we did a bit more, we might win. There is never a right time. What we have learned from previous insurgencies of this kind, and much larger ones, is that the earlier we get talks going and see what we can get, the better people understand why we are fighting, and the better the chance of a solution.

Dr Julian Lewis: The correct time is when there is a stalemate, not when one side or the other thinks it is winning.

Mr Robinson: I agree, but it is difficult to send troops to fight in a stalemate. Even Mr Robert Gates, the US Defence Secretary, has said that he hates signing troop deployment orders when he is sending troops to fight in a stalemate. I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but who knows what a stalemate is anyway.

The message that we have to send tonight is that although we would love to see an ISAF victory, we do not believe that that is possible, and that the only way forward is discussions with the Taliban, realistic, hard and unpleasant though those would be. The sooner we

[Mr Robinson]

get into such discussions, the sooner the level of casualties will fall, and the sooner we would be able to bring the troops home. We clearly cannot bring them home before then.

4 pm

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I cautioned against our initial deployment in Afghanistan and I have been critical of policy since, so I speak in this debate as a sceptic about our mission generally. There can be no doubt in the Chamber that the preparations for our mission in Afghanistan defied all the lessons of history. We fundamentally underestimated the task at hand and we under-resourced it accordingly. We have been playing catch-up ever since. Having served as a platoon commander in South Armagh during the 1980s, I have no doubt that our troops in Afghanistan suffered from equipment shortages, including helicopters, and from low troop density levels. History will prove that to be the case.

Part of the problem with our involvement in Afghanistan is that we have had a series of over-optimistic assessments, and people have rightly become cynical about what Ministers say at the Dispatch Box. All those assessments have proved to be false dawns. It is incumbent on leadership to assess the situation realistically, and we have failed to do that in the past—but that is the past, so what of the future? I congratulate the coalition Government in that we now at least have a more realistic assessment of the situation, but I still think that it is too optimistic.

The Prime Minister said on 21 June that we had to succeed militarily, economically and politically, but that is not the case. Militarily, we are as far from winning against the Taliban as we ever were. Recent reports suggest that the Taliban has expanded into even more territory. Our involvement ignores the lessons of history on counter-insurgency campaigns. For example, in Malaya and other successful counter-insurgency campaigns, we had control of the borders, a credible Government, the support of the majority of the people and a large number of troops relative to the local population. None of those conditions exist in Afghanistan, but we continue to believe that somehow we will win.

Paul Flynn: A further example of the optimism expressed by Government was in the Defence Secretary's contribution, when he mentioned how well things were going with our allies. However, he could not bring himself to acknowledge that Canada and Holland, which both made great contributions in blood and treasure to this war, have decided to pull out.

Mr Baron: I agree, and it reveals a wider problem of differences over strategy.

The second aspect mentioned by the Prime Minister was the economy, but there is scant evidence that progress has been made in that area. The economy is not in a good state. The trouble surrounding the Kabul bank is one illustration of that, and another is the fact that the some 9 million unemployed people in Afghanistan can earn in two months working for the Taliban what it would take them a whole year to earn if they earned the average national wage.

Politically, the situation is even worse. The Kabul Government of President Karzai is completely discredited. The elections were marked by fraud and violence. He is now trying to extend his term of office and local people are increasingly fed up with the high civilian casualty rate, partly caused by aerial bombardments. All that plays into the hands of the Taliban. The US Department of Defence, in its latest report to Congress, made the point that the most powerful weapon that the Taliban have is their propaganda machine. They ruthlessly exploit rising discontent. Kabul is depicted as a puppet Government and the west as an occupying force trying to impose its will. We in the west must better understand this point. High civilian casualty rates exponentially increase hostility. That might not force Afghans actively to support the Taliban, but it will certainly stop them opposing anyone who wants to kill those who have killed their loved ones.

It is interesting to note, looking around the globe and back in history, that communism has survived the longest in those countries that have engaged militarily with the west. One thinks of Cuba, North Korea, China and Vietnam. We are not winning the hearts and minds of local people because we cannot—we are an occupying force killing their brethren.

Perhaps the most worrying aspect of our involvement in Afghanistan is that our mission has suffered from a lack of clarity of purpose. We have had mixed messages. As recently as last year, the then Prime Minister said that we were in Afghanistan to keep the streets of London safe from terrorism, but almost in the next breath he threatened President Karzai with withdrawal should he not clean up his act. Those statements do not stand well next to each other. Even today, there is not that much more clarity.

If we are in Afghanistan to protect the streets of London and of our allies from terrorism, why are we setting a deadline and timetable? It simply does not make sense. Surely, if the mission is as important as is stated, our withdrawal should be dictated by the achievement of the objective, not arbitrary time lines. The Foreign Secretary has confirmed to me in this place and in Committee that we will be withdrawing in 2015 regardless of whether we have achieved our objectives. That simply does not stand up.

At some point, the solution will have to involve an understanding with the Taliban and the tribal warlords. It will have to reflect the reality on the ground and involve a loosely federated state in which power is devolved to the provinces. That does not prevent a small but mobile force of special forces from being on hand to disrupt al-Qaeda activities should it return, but the war, as currently constituted, cannot succeed.

The inconsistency of our strategy perhaps reveals that our presence in Afghanistan is as much about Pakistan as about Afghanistan. However, given the stated objectives and the diminished presence of al-Qaeda, we need to reassess the situation, enter into talks that make for an orderly withdrawal and move on.

I am afraid that, as an ex-soldier, I do not buy the line that by withdrawing, in an orderly fashion, we are somehow letting down our troops and wasting their sacrifice. Our troops have done everything we have asked of them, and we can all be proud of their achievements, but by and large they are a stoic bunch and believe that it is incumbent on the leadership to assess realistically a situation, because by doing so we

stand more chance of achieving our objective and perhaps saving lives. Needless effort and sacrifice will be saved over the longer term. We cannot win this war as it is currently constituted, and a leadership that acknowledges that will save lives.

Perhaps this debate will encourage us to rethink fundamentally our foreign policy more generally. For the sake of mankind, I hope that the days are coming to an end when military intervention is seen often as a first option. Military action should always be the last recourse. It is ironic that we went to war in Iraq and even the ex-M15 chief now agrees that it increased the terrorist threat in this county, and yet we are now involved in another war to try to counter that terrorist threat. I will therefore be voting against the motion.

4.9 pm

Katy Clark (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I commend the Backbench Business Committee on choosing the motion. If the Committee had existed in 2001, perhaps there would have been an opportunity for a proper vote in the House before troops were deployed. I only hope that we are never again faced with having to consider whether to enter another armed conflict. However, I would also hope that if the Government were not willing to provide us with the opportunity to vote in such a situation, the Backbench Business Committee would have the courage to create the space for a debate and a vote on such issues.

There was a vote in 2001 on a technicality, and as has been said, 13 Labour MPs voted to make a protest, with a number of Tellers involved too. I was not an MP at that time, but I was involved outside this place in campaigns to try to stop the war, and I marched against it. They were small campaigns; there were not many hundreds of thousands of people on the streets at that time. It is probably fair to say that most of the British public were supportive of the intervention in 2001. That stands in stark contrast to the position in 2003, when, along with a far greater number of Members voting against the war in Iraq—139 Labour MPs broke the Whip and voted against the intervention—there were also massive protests and demonstrations. In terms of public support, therefore, the situation that we are debating today is very different from the situation in relation to Iraq.

However, it is also fair to say that most people in 2001 would not have believed that we would still be in Afghanistan nine years later. Most of the British public accepted the version of events that was put to them. At the time, the war was said to be about capturing the terrorists—al-Qaeda and, in particular, bin Laden. The tabloid press focused very much on that, but within a few weeks bin Laden's name was no longer being bandied around as what the war was all about. One reason why I was extremely concerned at the time about the proposed intervention was the lack of clarity about war aims. That lack of clarity has only intensified over the years, and a number of Members talked about the different war aims that have been claimed at different times over the past nine years.

In 2001, the human rights of women were given in Labour party circles as a reason why women in the party should support the intervention. That was done to pull at the heartstrings of people who were perhaps not sure whether we should pursue the intervention.

There are many of us who very much feel for the women and girls in Afghanistan. We had severe concerns about human rights prior to 2001, and we have had them since then, not just for women and girls, but for all in the community. We thought that that was something maybe worth fighting for, if it were possible to achieve something meaningful in Afghanistan for the long term.

Although I am in no way trying to underplay any achievements that have been made or the fact that girls have had access to education as a result of the west's intervention, these are not achievements that it will be possible to sustain; indeed, they are not being universally applied throughout the country. We need only read the press in this country to learn about some of the human rights abuses and the terrible situations that women in Afghanistan face—my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) touched on those—or about how women who are accused of infidelity or who refuse to co-operate with the men in their families are treated. Many of those abuses are happening legally in Afghanistan because, for cultural reasons, values that we would regard as acceptable are not necessarily those which that society signs up to.

My concern is that those values are not going to change, irrespective of what happens to the motion today and of whether western forces stay in Afghanistan for many years, or withdraw immediately or over a short period. It is not in our power to change the value system in that country, and a forced, military intervention is perhaps the least best way of winning hearts and minds.

I did not support the intervention in Afghanistan at the time, not only because the war claims were unclear but because of the history of the region. Even my poor knowledge of the history of Afghanistan told me that occupying country after occupying country had had difficulty in achieving their war aims there over the decades and even the centuries. The cynic in me therefore found it difficult to believe that we could achieve a different outcome. My major reason for not supporting the intervention, however, was that I suspected that it would simply become a recruiting sergeant for the fundamentalists and the terrorists, and I fear that that is what has happened. British Muslims who have become involved in terrorist activity or hold fundamentalist beliefs say that those involved in terrorist activity in Iraq and other parts of the world cite what the west is doing in Afghanistan as a reason for adhering to those values and beliefs.

The position now is very different from the one in 2001, in that the British public are now war weary, as many hon. Members have pointed out. Opinion polls suggest that most of the British public want us to leave Afghanistan sooner rather than later. The most recent poll shows that 30% want immediate withdrawal, and that 42% want withdrawal soon. I suspect that everyone wants withdrawal as soon as possible. After nine years, I do not believe that any military strategy that might be pursued over the coming months and years is going to help us to achieve our aim of addressing problems such as the drugs trade and terrorism and the issue of human rights.

I want to put on record that it is a shame that the amendment in the name of—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Nigel Evans): Order.

4.18 pm

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I am most grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I must begin by declaring my interest as a member of the reserve forces that served on Operation Herrick 9 in Afghanistan.

I have long held the view that our forces' roles in Afghanistan is crucial not only to the development and security of the area of conflict but to our own security at home and in the wider world. I acknowledge that some have started to question just how big a threat we face within our own communities, and whether our troops and their families are paying the ultimate price to keep us safe from a diminishing threat, but there is no doubt in my mind that without the brave, hard work of our servicemen and women, the level of the threat we face would be much worse. Tony Blair, speaking in Afghanistan in 2006, said:

"Here in this extraordinary piece of desert is where the future of the world's security in the early 21st century is going to be played out".

He was absolutely right.

Once again, let us remind ourselves why we are there. As the Secretary of State said earlier, we are two days away from the anniversary of 9/11, which was an attack on our freedoms and our way of life. The ISAF mission in Afghanistan is a matter of national and world security. We must always remember that we went into this conflict following the attacks of 11 September 2001, and cemented that commitment following the terrorist attacks in London. We are there because we cannot allow Afghanistan once again to become the safe haven for terrorism that it once was. We are there to protect the citizens of the United Kingdom and the people of Afghanistan from the insurgents who would do them harm. Should the Afghan mission fail, it could well result in an emboldened al-Qaeda taking control of Pakistan, which, as we know, is a nuclear state.

We are creating a way forward for Afghanistan as a united country to choose its own path away from the tyranny and struggles of the past. This ultimate objective must be realised, which can be done only with the continuing role of the UK armed forces and our allies. The only way we can exit the conflict, knowing that we have completed our mission, is by stabilising the Afghan Government and by extending their authority and influence so that they are able to continue reconstruction, govern effectively and take responsibility for the country's own security. When and only when we reach that stage should we fully withdraw all UK personnel, in the knowledge that we have served our duty to the citizens of Britain.

UK troops have played a crucial role since first deployment. Our armed forces are integral to the success and completion of this mission. To remove them from theatre now or in the very near future would jeopardise the future security of all NATO member states. Of course, none of us wishes to see a single UK serviceman or woman in Afghanistan a day longer than needed, but it is right that we continue to mentor the Afghan army and Afghan national police to train them to a level at which they can secure the country for a long-lasting peace. I recognise that the ultimate solution will be political, but it is the work carried out, day by day, by British and US personnel with our allies that will pave the way to security in the region.

Although we wait for the publication of the strategic defence and security review in due course, I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate and thank the coalition Government for what they have done thus far to improve the working conditions and safety of UK forces in Afghanistan. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has promised to do everything he can to ensure that, whatever our troops are asked to do, they are properly equipped to maximise success and minimise the risk to themselves. The Government are honouring that commitment, which I believe will allow us to fulfil our ultimate role in Afghanistan.

The Government are to be congratulated on providing £189 million from the Treasury reserve to ensure that our troops are properly equipped, on the changes they announced to the rest and recuperation policy, and on their work to restore the military covenant, which the last Administration sadly failed to uphold. They should also be congratulated, of course, on doubling the operational allowance in theatre.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I am intrigued to hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying. Will he explain how it squares with the decision we took to produce more helicopters and light protected vehicles and the fact that the Labour Government did not freeze armed forces pay? How will that freezing and the outrageous attack being perpetrated against armed forces pensions help to sustain morale in Afghanistan?

Jack Lopresti: All I will say is that when I was in Afghanistan, we never had enough men on the ground or enough helicopters available; people were dying because the Government did not provide what was necessary in respect of helicopters and personnel.

As I said in my maiden speech, Britain relies heavily on the contribution made by the reserves to our armed forces. They continue to provide a strategic reserve for UK defence and, particularly in recent years, have played a vital part in the UK's ability to mount and sustain operations. The reservists make up around 9% of the British forces in Afghanistan and are fully integrated into the regular units, working at high levels of responsibility and often in the most demanding situations. In fact, it is impossible in theatre to tell the volunteer reservists from the regulars. I believe that the reservists will continue to play a fundamental part in the future role of UK forces in Afghanistan and I urge the Government to continue to support them in whatever way necessary.

I must highlight the fact that most, if not all, the reserve forces in Afghanistan have volunteered to be deployed. This means a break from normal civilian life and family life and an interruption to their professional life—in most cases, for up to a year. It has to be said—I speak from personal experience here—that it is much harder for the reservists to readjust after deployment than the regular forces, because we have the added factor of trying to get ourselves back into civilian life without the kind of support that the full-time regular soldier would get. It can make us feel very isolated.

It is my sincerest belief that the only way to end this conflict, and to prevent future conflicts in the region for generations to come, is to commit our forces to the completion of our objective—to create a stable, prosperous and free Afghanistan. Only with the continuing commitment of UK forces on the ground will we create the kind of stability in Afghanistan that we need for the safety of our families and our communities back home.

4.24 pm

Mr Michael Meacher (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): First, I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on its choice of this subject, which I am sure is widely welcomed and has led to a constructive and thoughtful debate.

On the subject of Afghanistan, we need to be honest: the situation is grim. Everyone recognises that the military prowess and determination of British forces, in conditions as difficult and arduous as will be found anywhere, have been of a high order, of which the nation can be proud. However, that cannot be allowed to blind us to the realities on the ground. The British casualty rate—334 soldiers killed to date—is now twice as high, proportionately, as the US rate, and as high, proportionately, as that endured by the Soviet forces in the 1980s. All the arguments for staying put are falling away. Some have been mentioned again today, including by the Defence Secretary, who told us that we are fighting in Afghanistan to protect the streets of London. That idea, I submit, is believed by almost nobody. Virtually all terrorist acts in the UK are home-grown and have mostly occurred precisely because of the occupation of countries by foreign troops. We are told—after nine years—that we need more time to get Afghan forces to the point at which they can adequately secure the country. Nobody on the ground believes that that will happen in less than several decades, if then.

We are told that President Karzai must be given time scales to root out corruption. Is there any evidence that he either can do so or has the slightest intention of doing so? We are told that the Petraeus doctrine in Iraq of winning over—perhaps one should say bribing—so-called moderate insurgents must be given time to work, but Afghanistan is completely different from Iraq: the exceedingly belligerent and conservative Pashtun Taliban will never play along with any such collaboration. Those are the unquestioned facts.

On the question of rationale, which was also mentioned, including by the Chair of the Defence Committee, it is significant that the ostensible rationale for NATO's presence keeps on changing. First, the rationale was going after al-Qaeda post 9/11; then it was the endless war on terror; then it was nation building and female emancipation. The harsh and unpleasant fact is that the situation can only now be resolved by a deal between the Taliban, the Pakistanis and the corrupt clan around Karzai—as inauspicious a brew, I admit, as one could possibly find, but that is what politics and war are often about, and the arguments for such engagement are compelling.

Some people might deride talking to the Taliban, or even regard it as traitorous, but if the aim is not just an acceptable solution for NATO but to help Afghans to end 30 years of civil war, which surely should be our objective, there must be a process of intra-Afghan dialogue, backed by regional agreements on non-interference and co-operation with Afghanistan's neighbours, as well as Security Council guarantees. Of course, it will be said that the Taliban have said that they will engage in no negotiations until all foreign forces leave—that is quite normal and no surprise; it always happens when secret contacts begin. Indeed, contacts have already begun between Karzai's intermediaries and Mullah Omar's people. In addition, it is reported that representatives of the Hekmatyar group, who are powerful Taliban

allies, have already visited Kabul, and that Pakistan is also pressing Karzai to talk to the important Haqqani faction.

What is the US approach, on which everything hinges? At the moment, the US line is to support engagement, but to insist that it must be Afghan-led. That sounds very democratic, but it is a cop-out. The Afghanistan Army and Administration are nowhere near being in a position to take the lead, and it is a fantasy to pretend otherwise. The reality remains that the United States is overwhelmingly the major player. So how do we proceed? The United Nations was the convening power for the talks that led to the 1988 agreement for Soviet withdrawal, and I think that today it probably provides the best forum for Afghanistan's regional neighbours. Its special representative in Kabul recently started convening ambassadors on a regular basis, which I consider very hopeful.

The slowly gathering mood music about negotiations is, however, complicated by concerns about underlying United States objectives in Afghanistan. The US has deployed 19 military bases in Afghanistan and central Asian countries since the war began in October 2001. Those bases operate autonomously from the territories around them. They are networked by airlifts, and obtain supplies from outside Afghanistan by air. I think it reasonable to assume that the US will not give up that arrangement in the foreseeable future. Indeed, General James Jones, Obama's top national security adviser, said exactly that a few months ago.

So where does that leave us? The Prime Minister talks of leaving Afghanistan in 2015, but I suggest that in view of the harsh realities—the loss of British life, and the loss of support from British public opinion—he should bring that date forward by at least three years. He should come out publicly in favour of the US opening contacts with the Taliban. That is not a desirable course, but it is a necessary component in the Afghanistan equation. The Prime Minister need not, of course, give what would no doubt be seen as an ultimatum by saying, either publicly or privately, that if the US rejects a policy of negotiation the UK will leave unilaterally, but if within a year the US strategy has not shifted towards talks with the Taliban, he should make our position clear. He should make it clear that the UK has consistently argued that the best way to leave Afghanistan with dignity, as we want, is to broker a power-sharing Government that includes the Taliban.

If the US will not accept that position, we cannot continue indefinitely with an unwinnable war or a refusal to consider peace talks. I believe that, at that point, we shall be left with no alternative but to withdraw our troops.

4.32 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): We have had a very interesting debate. Members of all parties have spoken with a great deal of conviction and insight based on their own experiences, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart).

I cannot speak from personal experience of having visited Afghanistan or served with our troops, but many of my constituents are serving there. Before I make some general remarks about the conflict itself, let me

[Damian Collins]

pay tribute to the Royal Gurkha Rifles, who are based at Shorncliffe barracks in my constituency and are currently on a tour of duty in Afghanistan from which they are due to return in November. They have made a number of tours, and the current one may not be their last. Like most regiments, they have sustained casualties, not least in the attack within the British base at Nahri Sarraj in July which led to the deaths of three servicemen and injuries to four further Gurkhas.

Shortly after that attack I visited Cheriton primary school in my constituency, where a number of Gurkha families send their children. Many of their fathers were on duty in Afghanistan at the time of my visit. In the school library is a memorial wall explaining the conflict, on which the children are invited to post their own comments. There is even a school mascot, and the children regularly receive photographs of it from Gurkhas serving in Helmand.

Anyone who has direct access to the families of servicemen, or even lives alongside them, will be aware of the strain that is placed on them, especially when they are in an active zone and casualties are being sustained there. I make that comment for a simple reason: after nine years of conflict we have a series of obligations in addition to the strategic imperative behind the conflict in Afghanistan. We have an obligation to those who have served, and particularly to those who have lost family members in Afghanistan.

I also believe that, after nine years, we have obligations to the Afghan people. What those obligations are has been discussed in the debate. We obviously have an obligation to ourselves and to protect our security, but I believe that after nine years we also have an obligation to those who have benefited from the slightly more liberal regime they live under now than the earlier Taliban regime, in particular women who are in education and work and men who have enlisted in the Afghan police or army. What recriminations and reprisals might they experience as, effectively, “collaborators” with the new regime should that country collapse back into chaos? I am not saying that we can stay in Afghanistan indefinitely—we cannot, of course—but I believe that we have obligations to the people of Afghanistan and that that should be part of our thinking too.

Sun Tzu said that wars are lost in the temples of the rulers before they are ever fought. That is an interesting observation in respect of the war in Afghanistan and our debate today. There has been criticism that the west has almost accepted defeat—that we are in the process of merely managing retreat to some end point when we are ultimately defeated and we leave. The Taliban take comfort from that criticism. I do not believe that that criticism is true at all, but I believe others seek to draw that conclusion from the debates and exchanges we have.

There is a political war to be won, just as there is a military campaign to be executed. The heart of that political war must be that we have the resolution and desire to give our armed forces the support they need to complete the strategy we have set out for them and that we are determined to see that through—that even though there are very difficult periods in the conflict we are not weakened in our desire to pursue that strategy.

In respect of the operations in Afghanistan, there is a temptation to believe that, because we have been there for nine years, we are continuing to pursue the same strategy in the same way, and that not much has changed and we are now hoping that something different will come along simply because we have been there for a long time, but in fact the nature of the conflict has changed dramatically. The troop surge has changed it too, and I urge Members to show some patience so that we give General Petraeus and leaders in Afghanistan the chance to see the current stage of the strategy through.

The situation has changed since 2008, when there were, perhaps, 30,000 American servicemen in Afghanistan and a much smaller number of international troops. We now have more than 130,000 or 140,000 men there, and an ever-growing Afghan police and armed forces presence as well. We must take that into consideration.

There is often too little talk in the British media—and perhaps in some of our exchanges in Parliament too—of what the counter-insurgency operations are doing and the successes they are achieving. There was an article in *The Times* a couple of weeks ago, written by an officer who had served in Sangin, looking at what the British have achieved there. That town was a Taliban hot spot, but the officer writes that now 150 small businesses are thriving, and there is a regular weekly market and a sense of normality and life returning. We should be proud of the work our troops have done in Sangin to make that possible. The article also talked about the importance of our men undertaking foot patrols so that they are on a level with the Afghan people and are seen to take risks with them, instead of hiding behind barracks.

On the question raised earlier in the debate about a potential change in strategy, I do not claim to be a military expert but I do have a theory. If we retreated to barracks or safe points in camps, would that give us much of an ability to engage with the Afghan people and to be an effective counter-insurgent or peaceful operative in the country?

I am interested to read and hear news about what successes there have been since the launch of Operation Moshtarak, particularly in respect of the Americans going into Marjah. We are not operating alone; we are part of an international force and strategy. The success of that strategy is part of our success too, therefore. There have been reports in the American media that the US Marines can now go into Marjah, a town that was once a centre of Taliban control and so dangerous that ISAF troops were told not even to fly over it. They may not have total control of that town or the surrounding area, but they are exerting considerable influence. Again, we are looking here at the time scale. It is believed that it might take up to 18 months or so for Marjah to be secured. There is some evidence to suggest that the difficult, complex and uncertain work of counter-insurgency is, with the greater resources being put behind that strategy, starting to bear some fruit. We must exercise a degree of patience in allowing that to happen.

We cannot cut and run from Afghanistan. I do not believe that any Member of any party has truly advocated that today. We have obligations to the Afghan people and to the situation in Afghanistan to see through our strategic objectives—not to create Hampshire in Helmand, as some people have written and said, as we will never achieve that, but to create a country where the Afghans

can, in time, take over security operations and the governance of their own country. There may well be a need for considerable reform in how the Afghan Government work, and for them to build up their own trust with their own people. We can play a role in that: we cannot do all of that for Afghanistan, but we have set our course and I believe that we should stick by our strategy, and that now is not the time to be considering a withdrawal.

4.40 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I start by echoing others in saying how much of a privilege it is to speak in this historic debate. As you know, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is an important tradition of this House that the names of the brave troops who have been killed in Afghanistan are read out at the beginning of each week's Prime Minister's Question Time. Yesterday, that roll call seemed to go on for a very long time, and after it the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"Each of those men was an heroic, selfless individual who has given his life for the safety of us and the British people."—[*Official Report*, 8 September 2010; Vol. 515, c. 313.]

Each of those men was heroic and selfless, and our troops are doing an extraordinary job with great courage, but we need to nail the myth that their presence in Afghanistan is making the British people safer. We are constantly being told that our troops are fighting in Afghanistan to keep us safer in this country—the Minister said so earlier in this debate—yet even our security services suggest that the war on terrorism is making this country less safe, not more safe. We also know that the terror plots against Britain were hatched not in Afghanistan, but in Pakistan and in Britain itself.

The Afghan war was put to the British people on a simple premise: that it was an act of self-defence in response to 9/11. The objective was supposed to be to capture and kill Osama bin Laden and prevent al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a base from which to launch further attacks. That rationale now seems a distant memory; al-Qaeda has been dispersed effectively around the world—over the border into Pakistan and further afield into Somalia, Yemen and elsewhere. So if our motive is really tracking down al-Qaeda, we are looking in the wrong place.

An alternative explanation given is that we are in Afghanistan to bring human rights to that country. Although some improvements were made between 2001 and 2005, the situation is, again, drastically deteriorating and for many Afghans, especially those outside Kabul, the improvements were only ever slight, or they were non-existent. Vicious warlords in rural areas can be just as bent on enforcing sharia law as the Taliban. According to Malalai Joya, the outspoken woman MP who was expelled from the Afghan Parliament, the Government of Hamid Karzai are

"full of warlords and extremists who are brothers in creed of the Taliban."

That is notably true of the judiciary, which she said is "dominated by fundamentalists." This is the President whose authority our troops are dying to defend but who passes the so-called "marital rape" law, which gives a husband the right to withdraw basic maintenance for his wife if she refuses to obey his sexual demands.

On Afghanistan it seems that we are struck by a peculiar kind of amnesia; there is so much that we have forgotten. As Dan Plesch of the Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy has said, there is no sense that we sought to crush and dominate that country throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. We appear to have no memory of that, but the Afghans do. There is no sense either that the sentiment expressed time and time again by advocates of war—that to pull out now would be a betrayal of those who have given their lives so far—is exactly the same as was said about Vietnam. Yet it is clear that the real betrayal is to be sending more people to die in a war that cannot be won.

We might remember the last time a mighty superpower tried to subdue Afghanistan. The Soviet Union invaded in 1979, and within a few years its soldiers were losing their limbs or lives to landmines—the improvised explosive devices of their day—and the same kinds of angry complaints were made about a shortage of helicopters. As the journalist Jonathan Freedland has said, whatever other reactions we should have to the fate of the US-led coalition in Afghanistan—horror, grief or despair—surprise should certainly not be one of them.

It is not unpatriotic to seek to recognise that there is no military solution to the crisis in Afghanistan and to bring our troops home safely. Almost everyone agrees that sooner or later a negotiation will have to take place. My amendment says that what we should be doing is negotiating now—let us make it sooner. It will not be clean; it will be messy, as others have said. But let us make it sooner and stop the bloodshed sooner.

We should do so because the collective amnesia from which we seem to suffer at the moment has an enormous human cost. The evidence of escalating violence and increasing insecurity in Afghanistan was reinforced by the WikiLeaks circulation back in July of huge amounts of official communications and reports about the US war on the ground. Those leaked war logs reveal that coalition forces have tried to cover up the fact that they have killed hundreds of civilians in unreported incidents. As they increasingly use deadly reaper drones to hunt and kill Taliban targets by remote control from a base in Nevada, civilian deaths rise still further.

As of last month, more than 330 British personnel or MOD civilians have died while serving in Afghanistan and several thousand more have been injured. More than 1,000 US troops have died. What of the Afghan casualties? As we know, no official count is kept, but the estimate is that there are many, many thousands. As the military forces increasingly use those deadly reaper drones, those civilian deaths rise still further. ISAF's own confidential report of August 2009 concedes that its military strategy is causing what it calls "unnecessary collateral damage". Leaders publicly say that their attacks are proportionate, yet US Lieutenant-Colonel David Kilcullen has said that the US aerial attacks on the Afghan-Pakistan border have killed 14 al-Qaeda leaders at the expense of 700 civilian lives.

Alongside the US and British military in Afghanistan is a "shadow army" of private military and security companies, operating largely outside legal or democratic control. A recent article in *Le Monde diplomatique* asked, in characteristic diplomatic language:

"How can efforts to put down an insurgency be effective or credible when the countries contributing to the intervention force... use mercenaries whose motivation is not necessarily the restoration of peace?"

[Caroline Lucas]

That is put very diplomatically, but one British contractor is quoted as saying, rather more bluntly, that for his firm, the more the security situation deteriorates, the better it is for business.

All that might not be so horrific if the lives of ordinary Afghans were significantly improving and the country was developing, but although on some indicators there has been some improvement—such as access to education, for example—overall the situation is bleak. Indeed, by some indicators, Afghans are getting poorer—child malnutrition, for example, has risen in many places, which is an effect of the chronic hunger that now affects more than 7 million people. Despite that, the US has spent 20 times as much on military operations as on development in Afghanistan while Britain has spent 10 times as much. The UN Security Council notes that 25 as many Afghans die every year from under-nutrition and poverty as from violence.

Finally, there is not just a human cost but a financial cost, too. This is an unwinnable war that is costing us more than £7 million a day. If the Chancellor is looking for places to make cuts, he should start right here and bring the troops home. The financial cost to Afghanistan is huge, too. The Afghan Government spend a massive 30% of their budget on the security sector. That money would be much better spent on development in Afghanistan.

4.47 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for giving me the chance to speak in this very important debate. I pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for setting it up in the first place.

The opportunity is given to me to pay tribute to 3 Commando Brigade, which is based in my constituency; to 29 Commando, which is based at the royal citadel—where the guns point in towards the city rather than out towards the sea for a series of reasons—to the Royal Marines, which are based at Stonehouse; and to the Royal Navy at Devonport. They have either served, are about to serve or are serving in Afghanistan.

I shall not try to pretend that I am an expert on military complexities or on what the strategy should be—or, for that matter, that I have a fantastically brilliant knowledge of Afghanistan; that is for others and we have heard a number of hon. Members who have been able to demonstrate that this afternoon. However, I am reminded that every week, without exception, I see in my local newspaper, hear on my local radio station or see on our local television that the sons and daughters of Plymouth are out there campaigning and trying to ensure that Britain—and the world—is a much safer place.

Last year I attended 29 Commando's welcome home parade in Plymouth city centre and it included my hon. Friend the Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), who had served for a year on deployment with 29 Commando. The whole city turned out to support those young men and women who have seen action. There is a real belief that the city and people's families, who are waiting with enormous anticipation to find out what will happen in the strategic defence and security review, strongly feel that they are in the front line of the conflict. I am aware that many people in

Britain are very critical of the current campaign and believe that it is unacceptable for our troops to remain in Afghanistan for an infinite amount of time. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence have made it quite clear that our troops should come home within the next five years, but if that is to happen it is utterly vital not only that we come out in an orderly manner but that we leave a positive legacy in that very troubled country.

There is a general perception that, as with Iraq, when we went into the war—I was a supporter of doing so and I still am; I believe that our activities there are right—we did not have an exit strategy. That is something that we need to look at. I believe that we must make sure that, when we leave that country, it has been economically and politically improved in a big way. We must continue to help to rebuild the Afghan economy. Despite the immense amount of money put forward in international aid, and the country's wonderful natural resources of natural gas, petrol, coal, marble and gold, Afghanistan remains very much a rural economy that is dependent on growing poppies. Most villagers have few economic options. Moneylenders will provide loans on relatively good terms for opium production. The estimated annual profit from poppy cultivation for a single farmer is between 1,000 and 2,000 lakhs, compared with the 20 lakhs that they can get from producing wheat. Farmers are willing to risk dealing with organised crime and criminals for a chance at prosperity. That is why many farmers refuse to switch back to growing wheat, which is an enormous shame.

The heroin is exported to British towns and cities such as Plymouth and continues to fuel crime on our streets. When Labour first came to power in 1997, the then Prime Minister was quite right to say that he would be tough on crime and on the causes of crime, but why did Labour Governments not put the eradication of the poppy crop at the centre of their strategy? I suspect that there were a number of relevant issues, but it would be helpful to know why. I therefore encourage my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Defence and for International Development to put that campaign against drugs firmly at the top of the agenda.

In short, we must learn a great deal from the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. If we embark on a military expedition, we must make sure that we have an exit strategy that will leave that country economically and politically much more viable. Use of military force just buys us time to put together diplomatic and political solutions and it should never be seen as the means to the end. If we take on board those lessons and the sacrifices and injuries of our gallant servicemen and women, we will not have wasted our time, and troops from places such as Plymouth who have put in so much effort will not have given their lives in vain.

4.54 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to have this debate, and to the Members who have contributed to it. The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), who is not in his place, and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn) set the tone from both sides of the argument in a way that has enabled a thorough debate. Without patronising anyone, let me say that a large number of the new

Members who came to the House after the last election have added a great deal to the debate, particularly the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) with his expertise.

At the start of the debate, there was an emphasis on recognising the audiences who will be listening and the importance of not having an impact on the morale of troops. I take that caution carefully, although those arguments have been used in every debate about every recent war, even during the first world war when people were arguing about the tragedies of the trenches. I interpret my duty in the House as to ensure that we never put our troops in harm's way unnecessarily or irresponsibly, so I encourage their withdrawal from Afghanistan as rapidly as possible so that they no longer face the risks that they have faced there. Like other Members, I find it heart-rending to hear the names read out at Prime Minister's Question Time, because I think that, tragically, our troops are dying unnecessarily. The best way that we can serve them is to secure their withdrawal.

I was in the Chamber when the decision was made to send in the troops. There was no sense of jingoism; there was serious concern, but the then Secretary of State for Defence expressed the hope that not a shot would be fired. That hope has not been realised, and with 330 dead it is a tragedy that we have allowed the conflict to go on for so long.

In our last debate on Afghanistan, I was one of the few Members who urged that negotiation with the Taliban should be commenced. Subsequently, I was roundly abused in the media and, as often happens to Members, received correspondence and e-mails calling me a traitor and saying that I lacked courage or conviction—all the usual things. However, it is interesting that debate has moved on. There have been some expressions of victory during today's debate, but they have not been the same as in the past. There is much more serious and sophisticated discussion about how we can withdraw. The debate today demonstrates that part of the withdrawal process needs to start quickly and with a negotiated settlement.

Some years ago, we debated a proposal for a Ministry for peace, following which we set up the all-party group on conflict issues. I am one of its joint chairs; the others are from other parties. The group brought us into contact with a wide range of international organisations and experts in promoting and securing peace. I refer Members to an excellent report produced recently by the Afghanistan Study Group in America. It is entitled "A New Way Forward: Rethinking US Strategy in Afghanistan." The study group includes a range of specialists—ex-military, intelligence experts, regional specialists and people involved in conflict resolution in the past across the world. The report reflects many of the statements that have been made by Members today, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Mr Ainsworth), the hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Mr Meacher).

The report includes sober analysis of the need for us to enter direct dialogue with participants in the conflict. As many Members have done today, it analyses the war in Afghanistan, describing it not as a struggle between the Karzai Government and an insurgent Taliban movement allied with international terrorists seeking to

overthrow the Government, but as a civil war about power-sharing. The lines of contention are partly ethnic, chiefly but not exclusively between Pashtuns, who dominate the south, and other ethnic groups such as the Tajiks and Uzbeks who are more prevalent in the north. The conflict is partly rural versus urban, and of course partly sectarian. As many Members have said, it is also influenced by surrounding nations with a desire to promote their own interests—Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia and others. As others have emphasised, the conflict is interpreted by many in Afghanistan as having elements of resistance to what is seen as a military occupation.

The key issue that has arisen from the debate is how we can further discussions about resolving the distribution of power in Afghanistan among the various factions and between central Government and the provinces. That is a critical crossroads. The proposals in the report emphasise, first, power-sharing, political inclusion and the start of a dialogue among all parties to enable such inclusion, including a fast-track peace process. Secondly, they suggest downsizing and, eventually, ending military operations in southern Afghanistan and reducing the military footprint immediately.

The issue is about focusing security efforts, as some have said today, on al-Qaeda and domestic security, encouraging economic development and engaging regional and global stakeholders. We and the Government have a critical role to play in that process, and the study group's blueprint is a good one for our debate about how we go forward. However, there is a sense of urgency, because I do not believe that there is any potential for military victory. Indeed, I believe that, if we go further, the cost in human lives could even escalate.

That is why I take up the point made my right hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton. Who do we go to now? In what forum can we find an arbitration model and arbitration partners? We have to go back to the United Nations for an open discussion about the process and where we are now, because where we are now is certainly not in a successful position, and it can only deteriorate from hereon in. Given that there is an unstable Government, allegations of corruption and conflicts between central Government and the regions, we are behoved to involve the UN, but, if a peacekeeping force is offered, those who were involved in the invasion certainly cannot participate in it.

We are now entering a critical period, and I urge Members to study the report by the US study group. It provides a way forward to secure peace and protect the interests of this country in the long term, in combating terrorism, combating drugs and securing the region itself for the long-term future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Seven speakers have indicated that they wish to speak, so, if each of you could bear that in mind and, perhaps, cut your speeches a little shorter, that would be very helpful and everybody will get in.

5.2 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you very much, indeed. The last time that you allowed me to speak was at my maiden speech,

[Richard Drax]

so I am very grateful to be called again. It is a huge privilege to talk about this war, which in my view has not been debated in the House since it started in 2001.

I begin by uttering my unequivocal support for our armed forces. Still recognised throughout the globe as the finest fighting men and women in existence, they are the gold standard for many other countries. Our forces' training, organisation and skills are widely admired and emulated, and their service to date in Afghanistan and in other conflicts has been nothing less than exemplary. All of us can take lessons from their courage, dedication and selflessness.

We have heard again and again this afternoon that the war started in 2001, and we have borne a heavy cost: 334 dead and more than 1,500 wounded in action, many with horrific injuries. In Dorset, where I come from, I have been associated with our largest county regiment, The Rifles, for some years. They alone have sustained losses of 54 men, with more than 200 seriously injured. A commanding officer whom I met before the election, and who had served in Afghanistan, told me that he thought the war was justified. He told me that the hardest job that I would have, were I to be elected, would be to convince the public of that same point. How right he was. More and more constituents tell me that they have doubts about the war.

Committing our armed forces to battle is, let us face it, our gravest duty in this House. It is we who send them to war, and it is we, ultimately, who bring them home, so this debate is a great chance to challenge our responsibilities, which means that we have to ask the crucial questions that we have asked this afternoon. Should we be there, can we win, and can we afford it?

First, should we be there? Yes, I have no doubt about that, and the Secretary of State eloquently explained to us all why we should be. In addition, there is no doubt in my mind that our international responsibilities are important. It is no good whingeing on the sidelines in years to come if we abdicate our responsibilities now. We cannot expect others to guard our interests or police world trouble spots on our behalf. The Afghan war is an international conflict in the sense that terrorism knows no boundaries. The grim anniversary of 9/11 this coming Saturday underlines that point, which I would like to underline. Terrorism, in my view, is here to stay for the foreseeable future in one shape or another. We cannot beat it, but we can tackle and, one hopes, contain it. That is why we will need a lot of courage in this House to defend our realm. Contrary to the many press reports, serving soldiers I have spoken to—and I have spoken to many—say they are making huge progress. In the end, how far that progress can be sustained probably comes down to money. If that is the case, as I suspect it is, then we as a Government must continue to underwrite our hard-won freedoms—they do not come cheap.

Can we win? History says that we cannot, in the strict military sense. The fate of earlier attempts—from Alexander the Great, as we have heard, to Russia—provides stark warnings to those who would take on this rugged, proud and tribal nation. Traditions, both religious and cultural, are deeply rooted and resist outside interference. But the cold fact is that we are there now. So what do we do? If we pull out, Afghanistan could go back to the

dark ages under the Taliban. If we stay, we incur huge costs in blood and treasure. I agree with the Secretary of State that we should maintain a presence for the longer term in mentoring and training roles to allow a political solution to take root and grow. It would be a bleak day if we pulled out altogether and this huge sacrifice were for nothing.

Lastly, can we afford it? Clearly, we cannot. We have inherited from the Labour Government a £38 billion liability in defence spending, with more to come. To me, this is the heart of the matter. Can we afford, and do we want, a fully equipped manned expeditionary force capable of conducting significant military operations in places such as Afghanistan, or do we retreat into our shell and have something like a gendarmerie? That is the big question we have to face as a nation. My view, emphatically, is that we need the former. We should never, ever put a price on our freedom. The armed forces are already cut to the bone, and I would push for the defence review to exclude the defence budget, at the very least.

Our armed services have been built up over hundreds of years. It takes but a minute—the slash of a red pen—and they have gone, taking years to reassemble. Are we, as a Conservative-led Government during a war, going to place our young men and women on the front line one minute and give them a redundancy note the next? These are tough questions, but ones that are relevant to this debate, not least in relation to our troops' morale. That is why I believe that the defence budget should be protected.

I recently met the mother of a dead soldier. She asked me, "Do you think the deaths of my son and his comrades are worth while? When a mother looks you in the eye and asks you a question like that, by heavens does it concentrate the mind, and it really brings home the huge responsibility that we have in this House. Should this House ever decide to send our troops to war again, and I am fortunate enough to be an MP in it, I will bear that question in mind.

I support the motion for continued deployment of UK troops in Afghanistan, with the proviso that a long-term strategy is announced and is clear. I caution the Government against setting time lines for withdrawing the majority of our troops for fear of providing succour to our enemy and promising something that maybe we cannot deliver.

5.9 pm

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): I am grateful for this debate in Back-Bench time, and I shall be brief. To follow on from the comments of the hon. Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax), there is only one thing worse than setting a firm date for withdrawal, which is to set one and then pretend not to have done so, ending up with the worst of both worlds. That is where we are at the moment.

My first observation is personal and constituency-based. When I go back to my constituency, I see helicopters coming in from Birmingham International airport to land at Queen Elizabeth hospital, bringing back severely injured soldiers, so I take no lessons from anyone on what the public's perception is. It is that we are engaged in a good fight, but that the Government could have done a better job of explaining why we are there. The

troops certainly do not want to be seen as victims. They say, “We are a professional force and we want to have our job recognised.”

I wish to mention three matters that have been forgotten in today’s debate. The first is our role in the world. The United Kingdom is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council and a nuclear force, and we have a record of intervention. Intervention has had a bit of a bad name recently, but I have not heard anybody saying that we should not have gone into Kosovo, which we did without a UN mandate and succeeded, and nobody has challenged what happened in Sierra Leone. We do intervene, and that is why we have an Army—we have a role to play in the world. We can debate what that role should be, but we should not lose sight of the fact that we have an international responsibility, with which come certain commitments.

Secondly, people keeping talking as though this were our war with Afghanistan. I remind everybody that we are there at the invitation of the Afghan Government. We are there not to conquer Afghanistan but as part of an international effort represented by ISAF. It is an out-of-territory NATO operation. If we cannot collectively make it work, it will affect not just Britain and Afghanistan but the future of NATO and how we see our collective responsibility. That seems to have been completely forgotten.

Thirdly, we must consider what is success. I have heard a number of definitions, and I wish to draw attention to a report recently published by the Henry Jackson Society, “Succeeding in Afghanistan”. I declare an interest: I am a trustee of the society. The report reminds us that there is good news out there, but also asks how good things can get in Afghanistan.

People have drawn analogies between Afghanistan and Germany in 1945, but that is completely off the wall. When we were dealing with the enemy in Germany in 1945, it was a functioning nation state that had completely lost its way for a brief period in its history, so it was a question of restoring structures. In Afghanistan, the structures were never there in the first place, so the governance structures and election process will not be as we would have them here in the west. If we can start to deal with corruption and intimidation and set up functioning civil structures, that will be success.

Rory Stewart: But how exactly can we deal with corruption and civil structures? We have been trying for eight and a half years and made no progress. We all agree that it is important, but we have proved that we lack the capacity to do it. There is no point in saying that it would be a good thing to do unless we have a plan.

Ms Stuart: It is an extremely valid observation to say that we had some plans that did not work. However, when the aid organisations went in and we started reconstruction in Helmand, when Hugh Powell was our special representative, we started to pull together security, structures and military rebuilding. It will not be perfect, and in the end Afghans themselves will have to deal with the situation, but having gone to Afghanistan, and being a member of the permanent five, we have a responsibility to ourselves and a collective responsibility to NATO and ISAF.

We need to start talking about the successes and start learning from them, and stop talking the situation down. In the debate this evening, we have heard a lot

about all that has gone wrong, but nobody has focused on what has gone right. I can see hon. Members raising their eyebrows at that, but on balance, we have heard more about the former than the latter. I keep coming back to the fact that the operation is not a UK operation but a collective, NATO, ISAF operation, and a lot of other countries could step up to the plate a little more than they do before we beat ourselves up. Collectively, we must get to a position in which we have structures that can be held accountable in Afghanistan. If anyone thinks that having a date by which we withdraw is the way forward, they are deeply misguided. There is an aspiration to withdraw honourably, leaving a good structure in Afghanistan, but the minute we set the date, we might as well leave immediately.

5.15 pm

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): There are considerable military interests in my constituency, so I feel compelled to offer my perspective in this crucial debate. However, I have no military experience—many hon. Members who have spoken have such experience—so it is with some humility that I offer my opinions on the decisions that impact on so many brave men and women who are deployed in Afghanistan. I pay tribute to my constituent, Major Josh Bowman, who was shot in his bed in Afghanistan just before the recess, and to the other 133 soldiers who have given their lives in the service of their country in Afghanistan. We owe them so much.

I do not want to offer a critique of the history of Government decision making over the past nine years—the current Government must deal with the inherited legacy of the British deployment in Afghanistan—but during that time, the situation on the ground in provinces such as Helmand has evolved, with fighting of such intensity that we have been forced, as a nation, to take stock on several occasions.

The debate is another opportunity for the House to reflect on what, as a nation, we seek to achieve in Afghanistan. By what measure will we gauge our success? What will success look like? Does it mean free and democratic elections and the removal of corruption? How do we measure the extent to which we have succeeded? Perhaps success means a well-trained and effective army and police force, new roads, more schools and improved women’s rights. Where does the list end, and what is realistic?

For me, the critical issue is how realistic our list of objectives for the next five years is. I am concerned that the objectives are, at the moment, too vague, sometimes too ambitious, and difficult to stick to given the moving political context and uncertainties on the ground. Furthermore, the timetable for the removal of combat troops by 2015 might be the Government’s fixed policy position, but the critical question is what we can achieve by then. I am greatly concerned that indicating that date so clearly and unambiguously—admittedly, the date is a response to the increasing sense that installing full democracy in Afghanistan in a generation is unrealistic—may be taken by the Taliban as a lack of our commitment, intent or political will.

When John Reid, the former Defence Secretary, said that he hoped that no shot would be fired, few understood the full implications of committing ourselves to engagement in Afghanistan. Others in the House have described Afghanistan as a “broken 13th-century country”. I will

[John Glen]

not comment on the accuracy of that description, but it is clear that its culture, values and political maturity are different to any other theatre to which our troops could be deployed.

The solution that we offer must be comprehensive. We must take not only a strategic, joined-up approach, but one that views the challenges as international. Our approach will require unity of effort across the coalition, and across borders and myriad Government Departments and agencies, and we must consider everything from financial investment from the International Monetary Fund at one end of the scale, to providing teacher training at the other. To be most effective, the solution requires diplomats and generals, economists and policemen, engineers and teachers, as well as trainers. Defeating the Taliban in the conventional sense—on the battlefield—may satisfy our desire for a measure of success, but it does not secure the defeat of terror per se, especially not in the long term, unless accompanied by a more complex engagement with and investment in Afghan society. We would be wise to remember that for many in Afghanistan NATO forces were not invited, and therefore the kind of war that we think we are fighting is not the same as that seen by the Taliban or many people on the ground in Afghanistan. While we fight against those who harbour terrorists, they consider themselves to be engaged in a war against uninvited foreigners. We fight to defeat al-Qaeda: they fight for local tribal pre-eminence. NATO fights to eradicate the Taliban: they fight for independence. While that may be inconvenient to our world view, unless we acknowledge the different perceptions that exist and engage with them—and change the emphasis of our objectives—we will not achieve what we set out to achieve.

Our mission has to be one that focuses as much on smart, soft power as it does on military effect. What that means in reality is that our focus has to be on coaching, mentoring, training and building up capacity, not only in the military but in all aspects of government in Afghanistan. In recognising that our armed forces are operating within a country whose culture, values and faith system are so different to our own, we need to state explicitly what our objectives are, how we propose to achieve them and on what basis we will grade our progress. We have a job—even a moral duty—to leave the country in a better position than we found it. That will not be easy, and we need to be clear and honest about the success that we can realistically achieve.

While I agree that some form of timetable is useful, our strategic plans for Afghanistan must not be driven by an artificial political timetable. They must be driven by a rational and honest view of what we wish to achieve, recognising that our deployment will be more focused on state building than success in combat. Just because we are now realising the immense implications of playing the role of a catalyst for the rapid maturing of the democratic infrastructure, we cannot throw our hands up in the air and say that all troops must come home now. What would that say to the Afghan people? It would say, “We did our best by military force to deal with the forces of terror, but because of the time it would take to help you develop a stable country, we will leave you with a vacuum and you will have to deal with the consequences of stirred-up ethnic and tribal tensions

and the prevailing insecurity that that brings.” That is not credible, honourable or right. Consequently, there is a requirement for our armed forces to remain in Afghanistan to deliver a realistic prospect of a reasonably secure Afghan state, but we need a pragmatic path to that end point.

5.23 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): Given the time, and the fact that the wind-up speeches need to begin, I will be brief—[*Interruption.*] If there are no wind-up speeches in this debate, I do not need to be quite so brief.

I add my tribute to those that have been paid by right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House to our splendid servicemen and women for all that they do, and to their families, who support them so much. I also pay tribute to our reservists who have the difficult job of serving alongside the regular armed forces and then also have to fit back into life as civilians. I am very proud to have such a large Territorial Army based in Truro in my constituency, and of the contribution that it makes.

I am very concerned that the welfare of our men and women who are currently serving and who are leaving the armed forces should be taken into consideration in this debate. Over the summer, a study by King's college London found that 4% of British armed forces personnel suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, while 20% have symptoms of common mental disorders. Research involving 10,000 soldiers showed that 13% were misusing alcohol, but that those who had served in Iraq and Afghanistan were 22% more likely to abuse alcohol than those who had not. The Secretary of State for Defence has indicated his concerns about the scale of mental health illnesses among service personnel and his belief that developments in medical science mean that more could be done to prevent the most vulnerable from falling through the net. I strongly agree with him.

About 180,000 troops are thought to have been deployed in the two conflicts since 2001, and the long-term impact of experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan on those who return to civilian life is not known. Over the summer recess, I had the opportunity of observing the work of the charity Talking2Minds, which was established by Bob Paxman, a former Special Air Service officer. All those working for the charity are people who have suffered from combat stress and are focused on working for people suffering from it. It provides a four-day residential programme and has developed a unique talking therapy, and because its consultants have personal experience, they have an improved understanding of what guests are going through and can create a strong rapport with them.

One of my constituents, Martin Webster, a corporal in the Light Infantry for 12 years, organised a programme in Cornwall that helped 13 former servicemen suffering from combat stress. One of those people was Jamie Watson, a constituent of mine who joined the programme with his girlfriend. At the start of the programme, I listened to the experiences of those involved and to how they had been let down by the current arrangements for the care of servicemen and women who develop mental health problems while serving. At the end of the programme, I saw for myself the effectiveness of the therapy. It is vital that the effectiveness of innovative programmes

such as this are evaluated, so that they can be considered alongside the current range of therapies made available to service personnel to support those suffering from combat stress.

It is essential that all the armed forces take a more proactive approach to the prevention and management of the mental health of serving personnel, and I look forward to reading the forthcoming report by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) and his recommendations for improving these services. It is vital that over time the stigma of discussing problems with coming to terms with experiences in conflict is overcome. However well motivated and trained our armed servicemen and women are, what we ask them to do is immensely demanding.

There needs to be more effective mental health awareness training throughout the armed services and opportunities for service personnel to have access to a range of effective services that are delivered by former service people who understand the unique environment of the armed services. Jamie Watson, 26, who honourably served his country for 10 years in the Army, described his experience to me:

“As a front line soldier, I was highly trained in...war fighting, counter terrorism and situations of armed conflict, but the objectives in the conflicts since 2003 have been so varied that the serving soldiers’ role has been constantly changing according to the missions’ objectives and...in...Afghanistan the roles changed from war fighting to peace keeping to counter terrorism to riot control and back to peace keeping. I believe this has had a massive impact on not only the rise of combat PTSD but the complexity of this condition also.”

During my discussions with Jamie and other veterans of recent and past conflicts, another key issue—a recurrent theme—in tackling combat stress emerged, and that was the need for the better management of the transition period when serving personnel re-enter society as civilians. As Jamie says:

“I think that by taking a soldier out of their serving unit at the right time during their final year, while they are still well motivated soldiers and putting them with a training regiment where a course can be constructed and developed to start a process of reintegration, education and re-training would reduce many problems including mental health problems such as PTSD.”

Like Jamie and the other soldiers whom I have met, I believe that with the support of the new Government we can finally start the process of putting in place a system that works and give our servicemen and women, and veterans, the support that they really need and deserve.

5.30 pm

Simon Reeve (Dewsbury) (Con): I support the continued deployment of our armed forces in Afghanistan, but I meet people who do not. That is because no one took the time to explain the reasons at the time of deployment—or, indeed, for years afterwards.

We went into Afghanistan because there were people there who wanted to kill us. They wanted to kill our families—indeed, they wanted to kill our way of life—and the Government of that country were not interested in stopping them doing it. We went in because, although we are an island race, we do not live in a bunker and we are vulnerable to terror. We went in because the poisonous propaganda emanating from the training camps of Afghanistan was absolutely toxic. Indeed, it is so pervasive that it has seeped into the minds of young people as far

away from Afghanistan as here in the UK, including in my constituency, resulting in a young man bringing a suicide bomb to London.

For many, the deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan was also the end of a regime of brutality and terror that blighted the lives of ordinary, decent Afghan people, and we should be proud of that. Those young Afghans who travel to join the Afghan national army and go into combat alongside British soldiers do so because they remember the terror that defined the regime introduced by the Taliban in those areas of Afghanistan that they occupied—the same areas where the al-Qaeda training camps thrived.

Because it has not been explained properly, people make comparisons between our deployment and that of the Russians, but we are not there to conquer the Afghan people. We are not there to impose a regime. Afghan nationals did not form up and fight alongside the Russians, as they come to train and fight with NATO and British forces.

Rehman Chishti: Does my hon. Friend agree that we cannot make the mistake that was made in 1989, when the international community left Afghanistan, creating a vacuum for al-Qaeda and the Taliban? We have to stay in Afghanistan to finish the end-job, which means creating institutions and stability by working with the Afghan army and police force.

Simon Reeve: I do agree with that, but I shall come to that point in a moment, if I may.

It is the Taliban who seek to occupy Afghanistan, not the British Army. Another myth that causes some to doubt the role of our forces is based on the suggestion that the Taliban will simply play the long game—“You have the watches, we have the time.” However, that is to ignore completely the Afghan national army. I am privileged, in that I have been able to spend a considerable amount of time with the private soldiers, NCOs, warrant officers and junior officers who have been on the front line in Afghanistan. Indeed, some whom I was privileged to spend time with are there today. What they described, in a matter-of-fact, “job done” way, is brave to the point of being almost beyond contemplation.

Significantly, those troops speak well of the Afghan national army, whose courage is not an issue. In fact, the task of our training teams and our soldiers is to instil a sense of discipline to temper their courage and to instil an understanding that there is no shame in something other than a full-frontal assault. Often, ANA recruits learn quite literally on the job. They arrive with a rifle and no training. That means that they are wholly inexperienced on day one, but as all their training is gained in combat conditions, they fast become battle hardened. They will increasingly step forward as NATO forces withdraw. They are determined to protect their country and ensure that it does not fall back into a world of imposed brutality.

In addition, we remain in Afghanistan because in the summer of last year, the Taliban were less than 80 miles from Pakistan’s nuclear weapons. Pakistan has attracted criticism for its role in relation to the NATO operation in Afghanistan, but in fact more than 3,000 members of the Pakistani armed forces have been killed fighting the Taliban. Those in the Swat valley who are currently the victims of floods were terrified to leave their homes last

[Simon Reeve]

year as the invading Taliban sought to impose a culture of terror. We did not enter Afghanistan to help Pakistan, but the reality is that Pakistan cannot be allowed to fail.

In my experience, people accept these reasons for our presence in Afghanistan, especially now that individual soldiers have the kit that they need. It is an appalling state of affairs that that was ever an issue. Whatever the state of our finances, it must never be an issue again. All the discussions about defence spending are designed to ensure that the troops on the front line have boots and bullets, and no one should lose sight of that. The kit is now there, and the young men I speak to are convinced that they are doing a worthwhile job.

The motion supports the continued deployment of our armed forces in Afghanistan, and we should also not fall shy of remembering that our presence represents a statement of commitment to those who have turned away from Taliban and al-Qaeda extremism and reached out, albeit tentatively, to the west. We have a coherent and sensible strategy, and we are training the Afghan national army to do what every country requires of its armed forces—namely, to protect the perimeter and ensure the safety of those who live within its borders. In doing that, it will ensure that there will be no room for those who would export death to us and ours. Until the ANA can take on that task, however, our troops should remain there.

5.37 pm

Christopher Pincher (Tamworth) (Con): I do not think that I am to be the night watchman in this debate, but I shall be as brief as I can. I shall not recapitulate the messages that have already been given. That might be a relief to hon. Members, but it might not inspire them to do the same.

I am not an expert in these matters. I have never worn a uniform. I am acutely conscious that there are experts in the House, and that Members on both sides of the House have worn a uniform. I am also conscious, however, that whether or not we have worn a uniform, all of us here are responsible for either ordering or consenting to send young men and women into harm's way, and that is why I want to speak in the debate. I was struck by what the Secretary of State said about there being four audiences for our debate today. I believe that there is also a fifth audience: the British public. My hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) and for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) also touched on that point.

There have been many casualties in the war—Afghan civilians and British soldiers have been killed and maimed—but a casualty that we cannot afford is the loss of the consent of the British public for this war. We need to ensure that they are on our side, and on the side of the troops as they go about their business. I do not feel that we have been as successful as we might have been in reassuring the British public, and I would like to give the House some examples of what we can do to get them on to our side.

First, we need to ensure that our troops have the right kit and the right support. I visited some friends in Gloucestershire during the recess. They are a military family, and their son is currently serving in Afghanistan. His father was in the Army for 20 years, during all of

which time his wife followed him all round the world. They are not peace campaigners, they are not sitting out there in the peace village, but they are concerned about what is happening in Afghanistan and about our troops. Why? Because their son has big feet, and for that reason, the Army was unable to equip him with the right sized desert boots before he deployed. If we cannot put the boots on the feet of the men who are going out to fight, it is understandable that the public, the servicemen and their families will be concerned about our commitment to their welfare and our determination to see the struggle through. I am therefore pleased that the Secretary of State has announced £189 million of further spend on equipment and some £67 million to be spent on countering improvised explosive devices. I hope that that will help to turn around the perception among some servicemen and their families that they have not had the right kit.

It is also important to show the public that the war is being won and success is being had. In a speech of a day or two ago, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood)—he is not in his place now, but has spoken very eloquently on this subject—said that when he was in Lashkar Gar over the recess, he visited an ice factory. Now that might be a very mundane thing to do—we all visit factories in our constituencies and probably visited many of them during the recess—but it is quite striking to have an ice factory in Helmand, where just a few years ago there was combat, and now infrastructure is being built, jobs created and services provided. We have to show—we have to get the journalists not just at the front line, but at what is happening behind it—that we are improving the situation on the ground and moving towards a tipping point where the Afghan national army, the police force and the Afghan Government will be able to look after themselves so that we can begin to withdraw. We have to tell the story of that success to the British public, so that they know what our strategy is for withdrawal.

The third important element to get across is the need to tell the story of the price of failure, which has been touched on already by other hon. Members. If we fail to see this struggle through in Afghanistan and the country unravels, that will seriously undermine the situation in nuclear-armed Pakistan. We do not want to see jihadists going around saying, “We’ve beaten the west in Afghanistan; we can beat them everywhere”. We need to ensure that the public understand that if Afghanistan unravels, it will not be the end of the matter, as there will be other Afghanists. The futile price that our servicemen and women will have paid in Afghanistan will be paid again and again in other places.

We have been there for nine years. It has been a long time. Mistakes have been made, but that is the past, so let us leave that where it is and look now to the future. We have a new Government in Britain and a new commander, General Petraeus, in Afghanistan, who has a new strategy. I therefore think that there is an opportunity to re-engage with the British public and show them that there is a way forward. We can then bring them fully back on side. I trust that that is what our Government will now seek to do.

5.42 pm

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I had not originally intended to take part in the debate, but Members will recognise that I have been

here at different stages of it. Given that a few minutes are left, I would like to make a couple of points. I should say that I am not one who speaks regularly on military or defence matters and that I recognise the incredible range of expertise, passion and informed comment from many hon. Members today. I have certainly learned a lot from it.

I rise mainly to put my own position on the record and to reflect the difficulty—it has already been mentioned, and many Members will face it—of the choice before us when it comes to the vote. I am certainly not someone who wants to see our troops leave overnight or tomorrow; nor do I want to detract from the incredible courage and commitment of our forces in Afghanistan, many of whom I have met over the years in various contexts. Equally, however, I am unhappy at the position whereby opposing the motion could be interpreted as being unsupportive of our forces, while supporting this wholly unqualified motion could be used in the years to come to justify the claim that full unqualified support was given to our Afghanistan strategy.

John Hemming (Birmingham, Yardley) (LD): As someone who intends to oppose the motion, I do not view doing so as meaning that I am not supportive of the troops. Rather, it is not supportive of the continued deployment of the troops. I am very supportive of the troops and have no doubt about their ability to win any military conflicts, but I believe that the strategy that they have been given is likely to fail on a political and economic basis. I shall vote against the motion, but I do not see it as demonstrating a lack of support for the troops.

Mark Lazarowicz: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I shall explain my position, which I am sure is also the position of many others who may oppose the motion.

We have been in Afghanistan for nine years, and given the development of the war and conflict there, it is worth bearing in mind that back in 2001 only a small number of Members had any idea of an intention to commit ourselves to action in Afghanistan 10, 15 or 20 years hence. The wish of the British people is also to see an early end to our involvement in Afghanistan. Therefore, I want to put on record my full support and recognition of the heroism of our troops and forces over the years, and my wish not to see a hasty withdrawal from Afghanistan that does not allow some transition. However, I cannot support a motion that is unqualified in its support for continued deployment, and for that reason I will vote against it.

5.46 pm

Natascha Engel (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to wind up the debate, which is the third tabled by the Backbench Business Committee on behalf of Back Benchers. Excellent contributions have been made on both sides of the House, and division in the debate has been not on party lines but across the House. A range of experience has been reflected and some impassioned contributions made.

It was important that the Backbench Business Committee chose as its third debate the topic of Afghanistan. We heard repeatedly today that the House, rather than the Government or the Opposition, has not had an opportunity to put on record its view on Afghanistan and our

continued presence there. The number of Members who not only contributed but sat here listening, on a Thursday afternoon, throughout a general debate on a quite general topic, has been phenomenal. Over halfway through the debate, 50 to 70 Members were still in the Chamber, which is unusual for a debate of any nature, and is testament to the importance attributed to the subject of Afghanistan by the Backbench Business Committee and Back Benchers.

Several Members mentioned the issue of the motion itself. It was important to the Committee to choose a motion that was votable and general. The wording—the inclusion of the word “continued” came up again and again—was deliberately wide and open, to encourage as many Members to take part in the debate, and to mention as many issues, as possible. In future, I hope that Members will table amendments to such motions that pick up some of the nuances and represent individual Members’ views.

John Hemming: Perhaps such suggestions should be put to the Backbench Business Committee so that, in deciding what motion should be tabled, it can be advised by Members of the House on what the best phraseology might be. The Committee, of which I am a member, considered the issue prior to the recess, when perhaps the motion appeared to be a reflection of Government policy.

Natascha Engel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, and he is right. Next Wednesday, the Committee will take its first public representation session to hear the subjects that Back Benchers want debated.

The Backbench Business Committee, on behalf of Back Benchers, has provided the opportunity for Back Benchers to debate the topic of Afghanistan, and now it is down to the House to decide.

Question put, That the amendment be made:

The House divided: Ayes 5, Noes 311.

Division No. 59]

[5.50 pm

AYES

Hemming, John
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Lewis, Dr Julian
Turner, Mr Andrew

Watson, Mr Tom

Tellers for the Ayes:
Alison Seaback and
Jane Ellison

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Ainsworth, Mr Bob
Aldous, Peter
Alexander, Heidi
Allen, Mr Graham
Amess, Mr David
Andrew, Stuart
Arbuthnot, Mr James
Bacon, Mr Richard
Bain, Mr William
Baker, Norman
Baker, Steve
Baldry, Tony
Baldwin, Harriett
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto

Bellingham, Mr Henry
Benyon, Richard
Berry, Jake
Bingham, Andrew
Binley, Mr Brian
Birtwistle, Gordon
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Blunt, Mr Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bottomley, Peter
Brady, Mr Graham
Brake, Tom
Bray, Angie
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Mr Steve
Brokenshire, James

Brooke, Annette	Glen, John	Lucas, Caroline	Selous, Andrew
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas	Goodman, Helen	Luff, Peter	Sharma, Alok
Bruce, Fiona	Gove, rh Michael	Lumley, Karen	Shelbrooke, Alec
Bruce, rh Malcolm	Gray, Mr James	Macleod, Mary	Shepherd, Mr Richard
Buckland, Mr Robert	Grayling, rh Chris	Main, Mrs Anne	Simmonds, Mark
Burley, Mr Aidan	Green, Damian	May, rh Mrs Theresa	Simpson, Mr Keith
Burns, Conor	Green, Kate	Maynard, Paul	Skidmore, Chris
Burns, Mr Simon	Greening, Justine	McCartney, Jason	Skinner, Mr Dennis
Burrowes, Mr David	Grieve, rh Mr Dominic	McCartney, Karl	Smith, Henry
Burstow, Mr Paul	Griffiths, Andrew	McDonnell, John	Smith, Julian
Burt, Alistair	Gummer, Ben	McIntosh, Miss Anne	Smith, Sir Robert
Byles, Dan	Gyimah, Mr Sam	McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick	Soames, Nicholas
Cairns, Alun	Hague, rh Mr William	McPartland, Stephen	Soubry, Anna
Campbell, rh Sir Menzies	Hames, Duncan	McVey, Esther	Spellar, rh Mr John
Carmichael, Mr Alistair	Hammond, Stephen	Meale, Mr Alan	Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
Carmichael, Neil	Hancock, Matthew	Menzies, Mark	Stanley, rh Sir John
Carswell, Mr Douglas	Hands, Greg	Metcalfe, Stephen	Stephenson, Andrew
Chishti, Rehman	Harper, Mr Mark	Miller, Maria	Stevenson, John
Clark, rh Greg	Harrington, Richard	Mills, Nigel	Stewart, Bob
Clark, Katy	Harris, Rebecca	Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Stewart, Iain
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth	Hart, Simon	Moon, Mrs Madeleine	Stride, Mel
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Hayes, Mr John	Mordaunt, Penny	Stuart, Ms Gisela
Coffey, Dr Thérèse	Healey, rh John	Morgan, Nicky	Stunell, Andrew
Collins, Damian	Heath, Mr David	Morris, Anne Marie	Sturdy, Julian
Colvile, Oliver	Heaton-Harris, Chris	Morris, David	Swayne, Mr Desmond
Corbyn, Jeremy	Henderson, Gordon	Morris, James	Swire, Mr Hugo
Crabb, Stephen	Herbert, rh Nick	Mosley, Stephen	Syms, Mr Robert
Crouch, Tracey	Hoban, Mr Mark	Mowat, David	Teather, Sarah
Cryer, John	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Mulholland, Greg	Tomlinson, Justin
Davies, David T. C. (Monmouth)	Hoey, Kate	Munt, Tessa	Truss, Elizabeth
Davis, rh Mr David	Hollingbery, George	Murray, Sheryll	Turner, Karl
de Bois, Nick	Holloway, Mr Adam	Murrison, Dr Andrew	Twigg, Derek
Dorrell, rh Mr Stephen	Hopkins, Kelvin	Neill, Robert	Uppal, Paul
Dorries, Nadine	Hopkins, Kris	Newton, Sarah	Vara, Mr Shailesh
Dowd, Jim	Horwood, Martin	Nokes, Caroline	Vaz, rh Keith
Doyle-Price, Jackie	Hosie, Stewart	Nuttall, Mr David	Vickers, Martin
Drax, Richard	Howarth, rh Mr George	O'Brien, Mr Stephen	Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Duddridge, James	Howell, John	Offord, Mr Matthew	Walker, Mr Charles
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain	Hughes, Simon	Ollerenshaw, Eric	Walker, Mr Robin
Dunne, Mr Philip	Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy	Osborne, rh Mr George	Wallace, Mr Ben
Edwards, Jonathan	Hurd, Mr Nick	Ottaway, Richard	Ward, Mr David
Efford, Clive	Jackson, Mr Stewart	Paice, Mr James	Watkinson, Angela
Ellis, Michael	Javid, Sajid	Patel, Priti	Weatherley, Mike
Ellwood, Mr Tobias	Jenkin, Mr Bernard	Paterson, rh Mr Owen	Webb, Steve
Elphicke, Charlie	Johnson, Gareth	Penning, Mike	Weir, Mr Mike
Engel, Natascha	Johnson, Joseph	Percy, Andrew	Wharton, James
Eustice, George	Jones, Andrew	Perkins, Toby	Wheeler, Heather
Evans, Graham	Jones, Mr David	Perry, Claire	White, Chris
Evans, Jonathan	Jones, Mr Kevan	Phillips, Stephen	Whittingdale, Mr John
Fabricant, Michael	Kawczynski, Daniel	Pickles, rh Mr Eric	Wicks, rh Malcolm
Fallon, Michael	Kelly, Chris	Pincher, Christopher	Wiggin, Bill
Farrelly, Paul	Kennedy, rh Mr Charles	Poulter, Dr Daniel	Willett, rh Mr David
Featherstone, Lynne	Kirby, Simon	Pound, Stephen	Williams, Mr Mark
Field, Mr Mark	Kwarteng, Kwasi	Pritchard, Mark	Williams, Roger
Fitzpatrick, Jim	Laing, Mrs Eleanor	Raab, Mr Dominic	Williams, Stephen
Flynn, Paul	Lancaster, Mark	Randall, rh Mr John	Williamson, Gavin
Fox, rh Dr Liam	Latham, Pauline	Reckless, Mark	Wilson, Mr Rob
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Laws, rh Mr David	Rees-Mogg, Jacob	Winnick, Mr David
Freeman, George	Lazarowicz, Mark	Reevell, Simon	Wishart, Pete
Freer, Mike	Leadsom, Andrea	Reid, Mr Alan	Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Fullbrook, Lorraine	Lee, Jessica	Robathan, Mr Andrew	Woodcock, John
Fuller, Richard	Lefroy, Jeremy	Robertson, Angus	Wright, Jeremy
Gale, Mr Roger	Leslie, Charlotte	Robertson, Mr Laurence	Yeo, Mr Tim
Gapes, Mike	Letwin, rh Mr Oliver	Rosindell, Andrew	Zahawi, Nadhim
Gardiner, Barry	Lewis, Brandon	Rudd, Amber	
Garnier, Mr Edward	Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian	Russell, Bob	Tellers for the Noes:
Garnier, Mark	Lidington, Mr David	Rutley, David	Mark Hunter and
Gauke, Mr David	Lilley, rh Mr Peter	Sandys, Laura	Mr Robert Goodwill
George, Andrew	Lloyd, Stephen		
Gibb, Mr Nick	Lopresti, Jack		
Gilbert, Stephen	Lord, Jonathan		
	Loughton, Tim		

Question accordingly negated.

Main Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 310, Noes 14.

Division No. 60]

[6.4 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
 Afriyie, Adam
 Ainsworth, rh Mr Bob
 Aldous, Peter
 Alexander, Heidi
 Allen, Mr Graham
 Amess, Mr David
 Andrew, Stuart
 Arbutnot, rh Mr James
 Bacon, Mr Richard
 Bagshawe, Ms Louise
 Bain, Mr William
 Baker, Norman
 Baker, Steve
 Baldry, Tony
 Baldwin, Harriett
 Barclay, Stephen
 Barker, Gregory
 Bebb, Guto
 Bellingham, Mr Henry
 Benyon, Richard
 Berry, Jake
 Bingham, Andrew
 Binley, Mr Brian
 Birtwistle, Gordon
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackwood, Nicola
 Blunt, Mr Crispin
 Boles, Nick
 Bone, Mr Peter
 Bottomley, Peter
 Brady, Mr Graham
 Brake, Tom
 Bray, Angie
 Brazier, Mr Julian
 Bridgen, Andrew
 Brine, Mr Steve
 Brokenshire, James
 Brooke, Annette
 Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
 Bruce, Fiona
 Bruce, rh Malcolm
 Buckland, Mr Robert
 Burley, Mr Aidan
 Burns, Conor
 Burns, Mr Simon
 Burrowes, Mr David
 Burstow, Mr Paul
 Burt, Alistair
 Byles, Dan
 Cairns, Alun
 Campbell, rh Sir Menzies
 Carmichael, Mr Alistair
 Carmichael, Neil
 Carswell, Mr Douglas
 Chishti, Rehman
 Chope, Mr Christopher
 Clark, rh Greg
 Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
 Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
 Coffey, Dr Thérèse
 Collins, Damian
 Colvile, Oliver
 Cox, Mr Geoffrey
 Crabb, Stephen

Crouch, Tracey
 Davies, David T. C. (Monmouth)
 Davis, rh Mr David
 de Bois, Nick
 Dorrell, rh Mr Stephen
 Dorries, Nadine
 Dowd, Jim
 Doyle-Price, Jackie
 Drax, Richard
 Duddridge, James
 Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
 Dunne, Mr Philip
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Michael
 Ellison, Jane
 Ellwood, Mr Tobias
 Elphicke, Charlie
 Engel, Natascha
 Eustice, George
 Evans, Graham
 Evans, Jonathan
 Fabricant, Michael
 Fallon, Michael
 Farrelly, Paul
 Featherstone, Lynne
 Field, Mr Mark
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
 Fox, rh Dr Liam
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 Freer, Mike
 Fullbrook, Lorraine
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, Mr Roger
 Gapes, Mike
 Gardiner, Barry
 Garnier, Mr Edward
 Garnier, Mark
 Gauke, Mr David
 George, Andrew
 Gibb, Mr Nick
 Gilbert, Stephen
 Gillan, rh Mrs Cheryl
 Glen, John
 Gove, rh Michael
 Gray, Mr James
 Grayling, rh Chris
 Green, Damian
 Green, Kate
 Greening, Justine
 Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
 Griffiths, Andrew
 Gummer, Ben
 Gyimah, Mr Sam
 Hague, rh Mr William
 Hames, Duncan
 Hammond, rh Mr Philip
 Hammond, Stephen
 Hancock, Matthew
 Hands, Greg
 Harper, Mr Mark
 Harrington, Richard
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hart, Simon

Hayes, Mr John
 Healey, rh John
 Heath, Mr David
 Heaton-Harris, Chris
 Henderson, Gordon
 Hendry, Charles
 Herbert, rh Nick
 Hoban, Mr Mark
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hollingbery, George
 Hollobone, Mr Philip
 Holloway, Mr Adam
 Hopkins, Kris
 Horwood, Martin
 Howarth, rh Mr George
 Howell, John
 Hughes, Simon
 Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
 Hurd, Mr Nick
 Jackson, Mr Stewart
 Javid, Sajid
 Jenkin, Mr Bernard
 Johnson, Gareth
 Johnson, Joseph
 Jones, Andrew
 Jones, Mr David
 Jones, Mr Kevan
 Kawczynski, Daniel
 Keen, Alan
 Kelly, Chris
 Kennedy, rh Mr Charles
 Kirby, Simon
 Kwarteng, Kwasi
 Laing, Mrs Eleanor
 Lancaster, Mark
 Latham, Pauline
 Laws, rh Mr David
 Leadsom, Andrea
 Lee, Jessica
 Lee, Dr Phillip
 Lefroy, Jeremy
 Leigh, Mr Edward
 Leslie, Charlotte
 Letwin, rh Mr Oliver
 Lewis, Brandon
 Lewis, Dr Julian
 Liddell-Grainger, Mr Iain
 Lidington, Mr David
 Lilley, rh Mr Peter
 Lloyd, Stephen
 Lopresti, Jack
 Lord, Jonathan
 Loughton, Tim
 Luff, Peter
 Lumley, Karen
 Macleod, Mary
 Main, Mrs Anne
 Maude, rh Mr Francis
 May, rh Mrs Theresa
 Maynard, Paul
 McCartney, Jason
 McCartney, Karl
 McIntosh, Miss Anne
 McLoughlin, rh Mr Patrick
 McPartland, Stephen
 McVey, Esther
 Meale, Mr Alan
 Menzies, Mark
 Metcalfe, Stephen
 Miller, Maria
 Mills, Nigel

Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Moon, Mrs Madeleine
 Mordaunt, Penny
 Morgan, Nicky
 Morris, Anne Marie
 Morris, David
 Morris, James
 Mosley, Stephen
 Mowat, David
 Mulholland, Greg
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Sheryll
 Murrison, Dr Andrew
 Neill, Robert
 Newmark, Mr Brooks
 Newton, Sarah
 Nokes, Caroline
 Nuttall, Mr David
 O'Brien, Mr Stephen
 Offord, Mr Matthew
 Ollerenshaw, Eric
 Osborne, rh Mr George
 Ottaway, Richard
 Paice, Mr James
 Patel, Priti
 Paterson, rh Mr Owen
 Penning, Mike
 Percy, Andrew
 Perkins, Toby
 Perry, Claire
 Phillips, Stephen
 Pickles, rh Mr Eric
 Pincher, Christopher
 Poulter, Dr Daniel
 Pound, Stephen
 Pritchard, Mark
 Raab, Mr Dominic
 Randall, rh Mr John
 Reckless, Mark
 Rees-Mogg, Jacob
 Reeve, Simon
 Reid, Mr Alan
 Robathan, Mr Andrew
 Robertson, Mr Laurence
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rudd, Amber
 Russell, Bob
 Rutley, David
 Sandys, Laura
 Seabeck, Alison
 Selous, Andrew
 Sharma, Alok
 Shelbrooke, Alec
 Simmonds, Mark
 Simpson, Mr Keith
 Skidmore, Chris
 Smith, Henry
 Smith, Julian
 Smith, Sir Robert
 Soames, Nicholas
 Soubry, Anna
 Spellar, rh Mr John
 Spelman, rh Mrs Caroline
 Stanley, rh Sir John
 Stephenson, Andrew
 Stevenson, John
 Stewart, Bob
 Stewart, Iain
 Stride, Mel
 Stuart, Ms Gisela

Stunell, Andrew
 Sturdy, Julian
 Swayne, Mr Desmond
 Swire, Mr Hugo
 Syms, Mr Robert
 Teather, Sarah
 Timms, Mr Stephen
 Tomlinson, Justin
 Tredinnick, David
 Truss, Elizabeth
 Turner, Mr Andrew
 Twigg, Derek
 Uppal, Paul
 Vara, Mr Shailesh
 Vickers, Martin
 Villiers, Mr Mrs Theresa
 Walker, Mr Charles
 Walker, Mr Robin
 Wallace, Mr Ben
 Ward, Mr David
 Watkinson, Angela
 Watson, Mr Tom

Weatherley, Mike
 Webb, Steve
 Wharton, James
 Wheeler, Heather
 White, Chris
 Whittingdale, Mr
 John
 Wiggin, Bill
 Willetts, Mr David
 Williams, Roger
 Williams, Stephen
 Williamson, Gavin
 Wilson, Mr Rob
 Wollaston, Dr Sarah
 Woodcock, John
 Wright, Mr Iain
 Wright, Jeremy
 Yeo, Mr Tim
 Zahawi, Nadhim

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Hunter and
Mr Robert Goodwill

NOES

Baron, Mr John
 Clark, Katy
 Corbyn, Jeremy
 Cryer, John
 Edwards, Jonathan
 Hoey, Kate
 Hopkins, Kelvin
 Huppert, Dr Julian
 Lazarowicz, Mark

Lucas, Caroline
 McDonnell, John
 Skinner, Mr Dennis
 Turner, Karl
 Winnick, Mr David

Tellers for the Noes:
John Hemming and
Paul Flynn

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House supports the continued deployment of UK armed forces in Afghanistan.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if you have been asked by the Chancellor of the Exchequer or any other Treasury Minister if they could give a statement to the House. I saw the Chancellor talking to you a few minutes ago and I was hoping that he was seeking your permission to give a statement. Within the last 10 minutes the BBC has run a story from the Chancellor of the Exchequer that there would be additional public spending cuts of £4 billion. If that announcement could be made to the BBC, do you agree, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it should have been made to the House first? Frankly, I do not recall that figure appearing anywhere in the coalition agreement.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): As the hon. Gentleman will know, the business of the House is not a matter for the Chair. I have not been notified of any additional business. The Speaker has made it clear that any additional announcements by the Government should be made to the House first. I am sure that Members on the Treasury Bench have heard the hon. Gentleman's point, and if there is anything in that point of order I am sure they will bring forward the necessary proposals.

Mr Geoffrey Robinson (Coventry North West) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I seek through you to put it on the record that although I was present during both Divisions I did not go through the formal process of voting in both Lobbies, but would like it on the record that I abstained on both the main motion and the amendment?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is not really a point of order, but the hon. Gentleman has put it on the record. I hope this will not set a precedent—that every Member who decides not to vote either way raises it as a point of order.

Secondary Schooling (Sevenoaks)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Jeremy Wright.)

6.18 pm

Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of secondary schooling in Sevenoaks. Parents in the northern part of my constituency have a choice of existing secondary schools in Swanley and Hextable. They can choose the Leigh technology academy and the new Longfield academy, and they also have access to the Wilmington and Dartford grammar schools further north. I am sure that all those schools are looking forward to the package of reforms that is coming from the Department for Education, giving head teachers and their governors more freedom to decide for themselves about the education they deliver.

So I shall focus on Sevenoaks itself. It is particularly appropriate to do so in the week that the new Knole academy opens its doors. There is always something exciting about the launch of a new educational venture and the promise that it holds for a whole new generation of pupils, and I know that the Minister will want to join me in wishing the new academy well under the leadership of its principal, Mary Boyle. It is also right to pay tribute to the enormous personal contribution of the lead sponsor, Gordon Phillips, and to the commitment and hard work of Mike Bolton and his team from Sevenoaks school, the co-sponsors, as well as to the support from Kent county council.

The Knole academy replaces two single-sex schools, the Bradbourne school for girls and the Wildernesse school for boys, and their replacement has involved much discussion and consultation over the past couple of years, not least with parents who, initially of course, supported single-sex schooling. One of the major reasons why those parents were in the end won over to the concept of a new academy, however, was the promise of a new building.

The Bradbourne site was already inadequate, even for the girls' school that was sited there; it became too small. The Wildernesse site consists of a series of buildings, some of which are more than 60 years old. In fact, the school opened its doors 60 years ago this very month, and its buildings are certainly well past their fit date and need renewing.

Operating the new academy, which is supposed and aims to coalesce two previous schools, is much more difficult on two separate sites that are well over a mile apart. Operating on two sites adds considerably to the costs and management issues and involves the duplication of a whole range of functions that simply would be unnecessary if the school were on a single site. While the site is still split into two halves, it is also difficult for the new management team, educationally I suspect, to build quickly the new ethos and purpose that they seek for a single, all-ability, co-educational school.

The new building was originally promised for 2012, and I must press my hon. Friend the Minister on how much longer it will be delayed. We must bear in mind that the academy has already been delayed, with its launch being about a year later than originally envisaged. That is nothing to do with my hon. Friend; it is down to the long delay in getting Ministers in the previous Government to sign the revenue funding agreement.

What will give parents real confidence is a commitment by this Government to the principle of a new building and some indication of the likely timetable. I have pressed the matter several times with the Secretary of State, and as my hon. Friend the Minister knows I have written on the subject to his colleague Lord Hill. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that parents are now entitled to a firmer indication of when a new building will be started, and when they are likely to be able to move to a single site.

I want to raise one adjacent issue. Despite the arrival of the new, all-ability academy, a significant number of children in Sevenoaks will continue to choose the grammar school route that the selective system in Kent offers. It is right that they continue to have that choice, which has, in recent years, become more restricted owing to the pressure on grammar school places across west Kent. We face an increasing birth rate and the development of some significant new housing. It cannot be right for children in Sevenoaks who succeed in passing the 11-plus then to be allocated grammar school places as far away as Folkestone or Ashford—or indeed, allocated places at non-selective schools, or told to continue to fight for a grammar school place through the tortuous process of waiting lists and appeals. That is especially unfair when so many places—more than 300—are given by Kent schools to out-of-county applicants.

These are currently matters for the adjudicator, who is considering a number of appeals to the existing admissions schemes, and I would not expect the Minister to comment in any detail on that. I am sure, though, that he would sympathise with my view that grammar schools that recruit some numbers from outside the county, as they are entitled to do, need to remember that they are Kent schools paid for and supported by Kent council tax payers and supported by parents who have chosen to live under a selective system.

My main purpose tonight is to mark the launch of the new Knole academy, to wish it well as the first new secondary school in Sevenoaks for a generation, and to ask the Government, in the shape of the Minister of State, to make the commitment to the new building that is desperately needed if the academy is to be a success.

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My hon. Friend has made a very powerful case for funding for the new Knole academy. He will be aware that the secondary schools in Sevenoaks, including Knole academy, are a major source of secondary education for my constituents in Edenbridge, which sadly lost its secondary school some years ago. I want to say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I support most warmly and strongly the case that my hon. Friend has made for the funding of Knole academy, which will be of great benefit not only to his constituents in Sevenoaks but to my constituents in the Edenbridge area.

Michael Fallon: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. He reminds me that the new academy expects to draw pupils from a wider area than my constituency—indeed, from right across west Kent, as Bradbourne school for girls did before it was merged into the academy.

The point I am making—I will not labour it further—is that for the academy to be a success in the short, medium and longer term, it needs to be established in modern, fit-for-purpose buildings on a single site rather

[Michael Fallon]

than spread across the two sites of the two previous schools. With that, I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will be able to give me some comfort.

6.28 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Mr Nick Gibb): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Michael Fallon) on securing the debate. As a former Education Minister, he has a passion for raising standards in our schools and ensuring that good schools have the autonomy and professional freedoms to deliver high-quality education. He was himself instrumental in the reforms that led to local management of schools: a seminal educational reform that has resulted in huge benefits to schools—I hesitate to say this—over the past 20 years. It is the coalition Government's ambition to raise academic standards in our schools, particularly for children from poorer backgrounds. Education is the main route to social mobility, and closing the attainment gap between those from the wealthiest and poorest backgrounds is a key objective of this Government.

The Academies Act 2010 will enable us to expand the academies programme, and 100 new academies have opened over the past two weeks. It will also enable primary and special schools to become academies and enjoy the freedoms that that status brings. My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the Knole academy, which is one of the new academies that has opened this week. We are currently examining the national curriculum, with a view to restoring it to its original purpose—a core entitlement built around subject disciplines—and we are empowering parents, teachers and other educational institutions to establish free schools so that parents have a genuine choice for their children.

School buildings need continuing investment, of course, but it is vital that future spending represents the best possible value for the taxpayer. Building Schools for the Future was a flagship programme of the previous Government, set up for the purpose of rebuilding or refurbishing every secondary school in the country by 2023. Indeed, some impressive new buildings have been built, and it must be true that a good working environment can only help academic achievement and improve behaviour. However, the BSF programme was not the most cost-effective way to deliver new school buildings. Rebuilding a school under BSF was three times more expensive than constructing a commercial building and twice as expensive as building a school in Ireland.

During the five years of the BSF programme, out of 3,500 secondary schools just 211 benefited and only 112 were completely rebuilt. The budget rose from £45 billion to £55 billion for a variety of reasons, and the time scale of the programme from 10 years to 18 years. Of the £250 million spent before building began, £60 million was spent on consultants or advisory fees. In effect, BSF became hugely bureaucratic, with process within process and cost upon cost, and it represented poor value for money.

Nobody comes into politics to cut public spending, but the Government are faced with a £156 billion deficit, the largest among the G20 countries. It is our responsibility, difficult though it may be, to sort out the mess that we have inherited. Failure to do so, as my hon. Friend

knows, would put our economic recovery in jeopardy. Although we have announced that the BSF programme will end, that does not mean the end of capital spending on schools.

I know that my hon. Friend is a tireless advocate for educational excellence in his constituency, and that he has invested a great deal of energy in the future funding of the Knole academy. As he said, the academy, which opened this month, was formed by the merger of the Bradbourne school and the Wildernesse school. It is sponsored by Gordon Phillips, chairman of the Glen Care Group, and co-sponsored by Sevenoaks school and Kent county council. It specialises in languages, and everyone is optimistic that it will increase opportunities for young people in the Sevenoaks area. I add my thanks to those of my hon. Friend to all those who have put in so much work to deliver the opening of the academy on time this September.

As my hon. Friend said, the academy is based in the existing premises of Bradbourne and Wildernesse, which means that it is currently operating on a split site. I know from experience in my own constituency that that is far from a satisfactory arrangement, with teachers and pupils having to travel between the two sites. In my constituency there is far less than a mile between the two sites, and I know how inconvenient that is. If the distance is as far as a mile in the Sevenoaks case, it must be hugely inconvenient and time-consuming.

As my hon. Friend said, the proposed new school building would be based on just one of the sites, the Wildernesse site, and it was hoped that it would be ready by 2012-13. I share his belief in the importance of high-quality school buildings, because although it is undoubtedly true that a school's primary assets are its teaching and support staff and its educational ethos, it is equally true that it is vital to give children and teachers a well-maintained working environment.

The natural depredations of the climate, and the wear and tear suffered by any building that is used by hundreds of people on a daily basis, mean constant investment in our school infrastructure, so I am extremely sympathetic to my hon. Friend, and indeed to all hon. Members who have schools in their constituencies that are in need of rebuilding or repair, but the inefficiency of the BSF structure and the parlous state of the public finances meant that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State had no choice but to suspend the programme and announce an urgent review of schools capital spending.

In determining which projects would go ahead and which would cease, the Government developed a single set of criteria and applied it nationally. Projects that would continue would be those that were part of their area's initial BSF schemes and that had reached financial close; the so-called sample projects that were part of their area's initial BSF schemes where financial close had not been reached but where a preferred bidder had been appointed at close of dialogue; and some planned school projects in addition to a local authority's initial scheme that had outline business cases approved before 1 January.

As part of the BSF announcement, the planned new build for the Knole academy was put on hold pending completion of the capital review. The Knole project was in the feasibility stage at the time that it was paused, and an outline business case had not at that point been approved. As my hon. Friend knows, capital builds

were put on hold for five academies in Kent other than the Knole academy. However, capital was allocated for two: the Isle of Sheppey academy and the Skinners' academy.

The Secretary of State announced a complete review of how capital will be allocated and spent in improving the fabric of school buildings. The review, which is now under way and led by Sebastian James, will look at how best to meet parental demand, make design and procurement cost-effective and efficient, and overhaul the allocation and targeting of capital. Over the next few months, officials will work with all 75 projects that are for decision after the spending review to discuss their capital needs. Those discussions will focus on the most appropriate and cost-effective way to deliver the sponsors' educational vision. In the case of the Knole Academy, that will include a site visit involving partnerships for schools, the Department for Education and the Young People's Learning Agency, as well as Kent county council and the academy trust.

We hope to be able to make final decisions on capital allocations towards the latter part of this year. I assure my hon. Friend that the Department will continue to make capital allocations on the basis of need, and in particular on the basis of the level of a building's dilapidation and deprivation, and that his representations today and in recent weeks will be taken seriously by the capital review team. However, as I am sure he understands, I am unable to make any commitments today or until the review has completed its work.

In conclusion, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's energy and tireless work in promoting the case for the rebuilding of the Knole academy. He makes a compelling case on behalf of his constituents, which I have taken

on board. I hope that in some measure he will be reassured by my promise that all future decisions on capital spending will be made in a transparent, straightforward and above all fair way, which puts the needs of children and parents first. In today's economic climate, we have a duty to ensure that we continue to invest where investment is needed, to get the best possible value for taxpayers' money, and to achieve a right balance between spending and other means of school improvement.

Change will be delivered by spending decisions alone. It will be delivered by creating a system that places more trust in the professionals working within it. The Government believe that head teachers should have more control over how money is spent, that teachers should have more autonomy over how they teach their students, and that parents should have a real choice on which school they send their child to. Future spending must support those aims and ensure that money is directed at those who need it most.

Question put and agreed to.

6.39 pm

House adjourned.

CORRECTION

Official Report, 8 September 2010: in Division No. 57, at column 426, remove Dr Thérèse Coffey from the Ayes and insert Ann Coffey.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 9 September 2010

[MR PHILIP DAVIES *in the Chair*]

Controls on Legal Highs

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.—(Mr Shailesh Vara.)

2.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Brokenshire): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies, in your first debate in Westminster Hall. I congratulate you on your appointment to the Panel of Chairs. I wish you all success in that position and in chairing many more debates in the weeks and months ahead.

In securing the debate today, I wish to address the issue of so-called legal highs, which are new psychoactive synthetic substances. The coalition Government will not lose sight of the harms caused by all drug use. Within our objective of making society a safer place for young people, we need to be responsive to such new threats and new harms. Over the past 18 months or so, there has been a proliferation of so-called legal highs, which are often drugs with a similar molecular structure to a controlled drug, but they have been deliberately altered by unscrupulous manufacturers to subvert our laws by producing an entirely new compound which, although the pharmacological effects may be similar to or greater than the controlled drug, are not already controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971.

Those selling these potentially harmful drugs advertise them as legal and safe, often under purposely enticing brand names such as Fast Lane, Silver Bullet and many others, including Ivory Wave, to which I will refer later. They often label them as “not for human consumption” or “research chemicals”, or describe them as pond cleaner, plant food or bath salts, with the aim of circumventing medicines legislation—a purely insidious ruse. Another alarming feature is the way in which legal highs are advertised and sold over the internet, creating a more connected global marketplace, thus increasing the ways in which it is possible to buy drugs, which can be accessed by people of all ages.

A further layer of complexity is highlighted by the research from test purchases referred to in the latest report on naphyrone by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Although people who sell legal highs often brand them as legal, test purchases demonstrate that they may contain any number of illegal substances, especially cathinones, legal stimulants or other active and inactive constituents. Simply because a drug is marketed as legal does not mean that it is safe or, indeed, that it is legal.

There is no starker reminder of the problem than the UK’s experience with mephedrone, which was rapidly established in the UK and was eventually brought under the control of the Misuse of Drugs Act with cross-party agreement in the final days of the last Parliament.

The hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) is here this afternoon, and I know that he was involved in work to secure that position.

I want to discuss first the harms of such drugs, because that is at the root of our concerns and responsibilities. It is becoming increasingly clear that those substances are far from harmless and can have similar health risks to drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy and amphetamines. The ACMD—our independent expert advisers—has provided full assessments of harms on a range of substances that could be described as the first generation of legal highs: gamma-butyrolactone or GBL; synthetic cannabinoids; benzylpiperazine or BZP; and related piperazines and cathinones, including mephedrone and naphyrone. It is clear that some of those substances are so novel that there is little research into the short, medium and long-term risks that they pose.

What we can conclude from the ACMD’s reports to date is that those drugs—in some cases, more properly described as chemicals—are far from safe. By way of example, the harms associated with mephedrone identified by the ACMD include anxiety and paranoid states, and the risk of over-stimulating the heart and nervous system to cause fits and delusions as well as the risk of dependency. The recently published 2010 annual report by the national programme on substance abuse deaths advises that mephedrone has been detected in a total of 38 deaths in the UK, and was the sole direct cause of death in at least two of them. In a further two cases, mephedrone was implicated but there were also underlying health issues. Mephedrone has been implicated in two cases of death by hanging and was a contributory factor in another two deaths by natural causes. A remaining 29 cases await the completion of inquiries by the coroner or the procurator fiscal. It should be emphasised that the risks associated with the substances are increased if they are used with alcohol or other drugs.

For the reasons I have set out, action to address the health risks arising from the use of legal highs, including new ones coming on to the market, is a priority for the coalition Government. We need to reduce the supply of, and the demand for, new substances. Our response must be wide-ranging, encompassing prevention, education, treatment and enforcement, and at its core is our legislative response. As with all drugs, enforcement action must be taken at home—at local and at national levels—at our borders and abroad, to create a hostile environment for those selling legal highs on the internet and in so-called “head shops”.

In many ways, policing legal highs presents particular challenges for law enforcement, but I am encouraged that with joint working across law enforcement we are beginning to gain a better understanding and application of the full range of tools and powers available. We are working closely with the Association of Chief Police Officers and other agencies to develop a comprehensive and robust approach to tackle the mis-selling of illicit substances as legal highs, by taking local, targeted action. ACPO guidance has been updated and is available to all police forces in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

My Department has also called on local trading standards teams, through local authority chief executives, to work in partnership with the police to deal with the sale of legal highs, taking full account of the latest evidence that something branded as legal is not necessarily

[James Brokenshire]

so, and to make appropriate referrals to the police and otherwise apply their responsibility for enforcing offences under the Consumer Protection from Unfair Trading Regulations 2008. Trading standards and the police, in a number of locations, are working closely with a range of partners, including drug treatment agencies, schools and youth services, to gather intelligence and to tackle sales from head shops and the internet.

In Norfolk, for example, all retailers believed to be selling legal highs have been visited by local trading standards officers. In Suffolk, following effective action by the police and trading standards, all known retailers have now agreed not to stock or to supply legal highs. We should also remember that it is illegal to sell, supply or advertise legal highs for human consumption under medicines legislation. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency will take appropriate measures to control and enforce medicines law.

The UK Border Agency has undertaken effective enforcement action against criminal gangs that traffic such drugs across our borders, by seizing and destroying shipments of illegal drugs and of legal highs that have been subject to an import ban under the open general import licence. The Serious Organised Crime Agency has actively developed approaches to identify importers, distributors and sellers of legal highs. That includes activity in conjunction with law enforcement partners and in parallel with work conducted by Europol and by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction to gather intelligence on suppliers of legal high substances on the internet. Productive discussions have taken place with the competent authorities within source countries, mindful of their internal laws and regulations.

Along with referrals for enforcement action where appropriate, SOCA has also taken action to disrupt such activity by using preventive tools, such as the removal of websites, either in tandem with more traditional activity or independently. As part of a wider initiative to disrupt criminal activity, SOCA has closed 113 websites that offered mephedrone or naphyrone for sale after the respective bans.

Those trafficking banned substances face a substantial term of imprisonment—up to a maximum of 14 years—and, where they have profited from any illegal trade, the courts have the power to seize their property and other assets under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002. We are also strengthening our forensic capability to identify new illicit drugs and emerging legal highs by creating a virtual reference library of characterised chemical standards. Working with forensics providers, the library will allow new evidential methods to be used to enable the police and UKBA to enforce the law. We are introducing technology at the borders to support UKBA in identifying any new drugs imported into the UK. That work will feed directly into our early warning capabilities.

Enforcement action of that kind is effective. We continue to monitor the impact of the recent bans on mephedrone and naphyrone, but indications are that they have curtailed availability, with law enforcement agencies able to take swift action to seize drugs and, to some degree, with retailers self-regulating themselves. Since the bans were introduced, UKBA has made a number of detections. It has stopped more than 128 kg

of chemicals that it suspects to be mephedrone from entering the UK, and has seized more than 125 kg of naphyrone. Early indications from the police and forensics providers suggest that there has been a sizeable number of seizures of mephedrone since the ban in April this year. I hope to see the anecdotal information translated into national statistics in due course.

Prevention of drug use is an absolutely important element of the coalition Government's approach to drugs. Young people need to be empowered to make the right decisions, and we all have a role to play in helping them to do that by changing attitudes towards any drug use. Young people need to be aware of the dangers of substances, including emerging legal highs. Parents must take a certain amount of responsibility for this. We know that young people listen to and trust their parents on such issues, and that parents can be hugely influential.

We also need to ensure that we get the balance right between communicating information accurately to the media and young people to deter use, and avoiding inadvertently raising interest in experimenting with new substances as they emerge. Interest in mephedrone and searches to buy it online increased with media coverage. In June, I wrote to the organisers of music festivals to make them aware of that, and asked them to review the measures that they put in place to ensure that their festivals are as safe an environment as possible.

Since 2005, the FRANK service has been offering a universally accessible service for anyone wanting help, information or advice on drug issues. The service, which is available by phone, on the web or by e-mail, can put people in touch with local services in their area and send out free information materials. FRANK also provides partners such as schools, youth services, charities and local services with an effective means of engaging with young people through the distribution of leaflets and classroom packs to deliver drugs education.

Later this month, we will launch a campaign to raise students' awareness of the dangers of so-called legal highs and the risks associated with the use of such substances. We have established a partnership with the National Union of Students to deliver the campaign, which will launch during the freshers period to coincide with the new university year and the run-up to Christmas. Our work will seek to educate students on health risks associated with the use of legal highs and inform them of the possible illegalities of using such substances. As part of that campaign activity, I will write to university vice-chancellors to make them aware of the issue.

The FRANK service will be a key vehicle for communicating those messages. It provides up-to-date information on legal highs to young people, parents and carers via its website, helpline and text service. FRANK's key messages on legal highs emphasise, first, that just because a drug is legal to possess, it does not mean that it is safe, and, secondly, that it is likely that drugs sold as a legal high may contain one or more substances that it is illegal to possess.

Previously, head teachers and authorised school staff had the statutory power to search without consent only those who were suspected of carrying a knife or other weapon. On 7 July, the Minister of State, Department for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr Gibb), announced that, as of 1 September—very recently, at the start of the term—that authority would be extended to include

legal highs and several other articles. Our drug laws need to change more quickly to protect the public, and to combat the unscrupulous manufacturers and suppliers who seek to make huge profits at the cost of the health of the public, especially young people. The coalition Government have made it a priority to introduce a system of temporary bans as such substances emerge, as set out in the coalition agreement.

The underlying purpose of the temporary banning power is to enable us to legislate quickly, while at the same time providing the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs with the time and space that it needs to formulate its full advice. The power is subject to parliamentary scrutiny, and while it targets supply, it does not criminalise young people unnecessarily, particularly when the true nature of the substance may still be in question.

I want to make it clear that the temporary banning power is a key and necessary tool in our legislative response to this changing landscape, but our preferred approach to drug control will remain the one which the advisory council and the Government have adopted for the past 40 years: a full assessment by the council before any controls are invoked by Parliament. I also wish to endorse and, as advice leads us, continue to adopt the use of generic definitions in our drug legislation to capture not only the substance encountered in the UK but its related compounds.

The Government intend to amend the UK-wide Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 in this first Session of Parliament. The power will have the following features: orders placing a drug under temporary control will be subject to a 12-month time period or earlier revocation if, for example, the drug becomes subject to permanent control in that time; it will be applied to trafficking offences including possession with intent to supply, offer to supply, supply, importation, exportation and production; it will apply class B current maximum penalties and/or an unlimited fine on indictment and six months and/or a £5,000 fine on summary conviction; and it will subject an order for temporary classification to the negative resolution procedure, and retain the affirmative resolution procedure with Privy Council Order in Council for permanent control.

I wish to highlight three features. First, the possession offence ordinarily prescribed for illegal drugs under the 1971 Act will not apply. A possession offence would send the strongest message, but our focus is on targeting importers and suppliers to curb availability, not to criminalise users, especially young people, while the full nature of the substance is mostly uncertain. However, we will ensure that law enforcement officers have the power to seize and retain a drug under temporary classification.

Secondly, as with drugs brought under permanent control, the role of scientific advice is both integral and necessary to ensure that any temporary ban is invoked on a necessary and proportionate basis. The advice that the advisory council has provided is key to the effectiveness to date of the UK's legislative response, and it has enabled the UK to lead the world in responding to such challenges. It is proposed that the council discharge this role under temporary banning power in line with its statutory position to provide expert independent advice, including on a drug's likely psychoactive properties, as well as an indication of likely harmfulness, and

legitimate use, for which we would have to consider the impact of control, as we do for drugs subject to permanent control.

We are working closely with the advisory council to develop a protocol under which we would work under a temporary banning power. The council and the Government also need to oversee the development of a more systematic approach to providing early warning of new substances. Thirdly, it is my intention to apply the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 to drugs that are subject to a temporary control order, so we will seize property and other assets from those who are caught peddling such drugs out of pure greed, recklessly or deliberately disregarding the harm that they cause. Pursuant to our wider communications response, a clear and consistent narrative around the temporary class will support the proposed new power, to ensure that it is not less effective than the current system of control, and that users do not continue to use a drug subject to temporary classification with impunity.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Can the Minister clarify one aspect of the temporary ban? If the advisory council subsequently finds that the drug is not in fact dangerous in any shape or form, what will happen to anyone who might have been prosecuted for supply?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. In circumstances in which legislation subsequently changes, the criminal sanction still stands. That is why we have focused on the supply and public harm issues, rather than creating a possession offence.

If the ACMD were subsequently to determine that a drug under the temporary classification was not to move into a permanent classification, and someone had been convicted after an offence had been identified and a prosecution secured, that offence would still stand. That underlines the need for the protocol with the ACMD, which I have mentioned, allowing us to seek advice from it on the use of the temporary ban in the first place. That may be done on a more fast-track basis, but certain tenets need to be applied to that process, because the intention in using the temporary ban is not, as I have said, to circumvent the existing system but to use it.

Issues to do with mephedrone and other legal highs have highlighted the potential need to act quickly, from a public harm perspective, and that is the focus of our intent.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister not agree that it would be strange if subsequent medical advice changed our understanding of a drug, and we had to say to a group of people who had deliberately circumvented the law—and not on the basis that they thought that there was a moral right to obtain this harmless drug—“Actually, it's fine, you can get compensation for whatever penalties we imposed on you”?

James Brokenshire: The relevant point here concerning legal highs is that the ACMD flagged up to the Government its concern about mephedrone, pointing out that there was a problem it needed to do further work on to reach a final conclusion. It was so concerned that it was

[James Brokenshire]

almost advising the Government to take preventive steps. Through this mechanism we want to be able to act, from a public harm and a warning perspective, to ensure that those issues are dealt with swiftly and quickly. In other words, we want to try to reduce the risk of harm occurring. That is the emphasis and intention behind the temporary banning power, and it is consistent with the approach taken in other legislation: that if the law is subsequently changed, pre-existing offences that may have been incurred still subsist.

I should like to mention Ivory Wave, which is causing a number of hon. Members significant concern and has been mentioned in the press and the media. I want to deal with certain reports associating the use of the so-called legal high-branded product Ivory Wave with a number of localised accident and emergency presentations in the last few weeks. Health alerts have been issued by the chief medical officers for England and Wales and Scotland, and the FRANK service was updated to highlight the risks that we are presently aware of that are associated with Ivory Wave. We are actively monitoring the situation. My Department has received early information from the Scottish Crime and Drugs Enforcement Agency that the latest Ivory Wave products associated with the admissions in Lothian may contain a non-controlled amphetamine-type stimulant, Desoxypipradrol, or 2-DPMP. Confirmation from forensic providers and details of other sampling is awaited.

In Edinburgh, Lothian and Borders police, in partnership with the City of Edinburgh public health authorities, have visited a number of “head” shops, which has led to the removal of Ivory Wave products from sale. Hampshire police have also conducted a joint operation with trading standards, raiding two head shops on the Isle of Wight, resulting in the seizure of large quantities of legal highs and the arrest of two individuals for suspected supply of controlled drugs. In light of that information, earlier this week I spoke to the chair of ACMD, Professor Les Iversen, and asked the council to keep a close interest in developments here and provide advice as necessary. I have instructed my officials to share with the ACMD information that we have and provide regular updates.

There were previous indications that the so-called legal high Ivory Wave had contained certain controlled drugs. Different supplies of Ivory Wave using that brand name contain different drugs, some of which may already be controlled drugs, hence our seeking further information on the forensics and the nature of the drugs seized under that branding.

We are dealing with this emerging and dynamic problem of legal highs, including BZP, synthetic cannabinoids, mephedrone and the latest so-called legal high. Although effective legislation is integral to our response to protect the public—particularly the health of our young people—from the harms of the drugs, there is no easy fix. We are working closely with the ACMD out of a shared concern about these new psychoactive substances. As well as advice on individual drugs, our response will also be informed by the advisory council’s thematic work on legal highs. That response must be wide-ranging, encompassing all the strands that will reduce both demand and supply. But let me say clearly to anyone tempted to try a legal high that just because something is advertised as legal does not mean it is safe—and it may not even be legal.

2.56 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome this debate and many of the steps that the new Government are taking, which follow the previous Administration’s effective and determined approach to tackling this difficult problem. I am glad to have the chance to speak in this debate, because there is a problem with the way we discuss so-called legal highs. Perhaps we need to find a better way of branding such drugs, which cause a great deal of harm to individuals and communities.

A number of issues that the Minister mentioned were also big issues in Barrow. I want briefly to mention a number of matters. First, he made an interesting point about the responsibility of traders to act in a way that minimises the harm to which young people can be subjected. I am glad that he gave an example of traders acting responsibly. However, I have to say that in Barrow, my personal experience prior to the election was not the same: local shops refused to cease stocking mephedrone before the temporary ban was put in place. Such an example calls into question whether the new powers that the Minister is suggesting, which are welcome, will go far enough in the important interim period that he rightly identified—in which a drug becomes controversial and notorious and the process to put a temporary ban in place is started, and during which sales can increase.

The point made about the legality of so-called legal high drugs before they are in the public domain is apposite. We knew from personal experience—I should say that that this is not my personal experience—in Barrow of a substance called Shake ‘n’ Vac: a repackaging of mephedrone, which received a lot of attention during the mephedrone debate. That substance was sold in quantities of 1 gram for £15, purportedly as carpet cleaner, with the words, “Not for human consumption” written on it. It was laughable to suggest that the traders in question might believe that it was carpet cleaner, and it was clear that they did not. Is there not a way of immediately enforcing current law if it is sufficient to stop such products being mis-sold? If that is not possible under the current law, should it not be tightened? Could there not be a power to place an immediate suspension on suspicious substances, even before a temporary ban? If that power were used wrongly, traders could seek financial recompense, but in cases that seem as clear-cut as those experienced in my area, the chances of success would be slight.

Tom Brake: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but does he foresee difficulties if someone sells Shake ‘n’ Vac—the real thing that goes into vacuum cleaners—and advertises it at £15 a gram? They would be selling a product at a super-inflated price.

John Woodcock: I take the theoretical point, but I am not sure whether, in the real world, one would come remotely close to such circumstances. Frankly, if my proposal catches some rogue traders who are prepared to dupe people, we could probably live with that. The level of damage that is being perpetrated and the risks to which young people are being exposed mean that we must make decisions that fall within the bounds of common sense, and I believe that they would be readily accepted. I am interested to hear more about what the Government can do.

My final point concerns agreement on how important it is to clamp down on this malicious and immoral practice. Can the Minister guarantee that, given the severe budget constraints on the police and the whole of Government, this work will not suffer in the months and years ahead?

3.2 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome you to the debate, Mr Davies. This is the first debate in which you have been in the Chair, and the first in which I have participated under your chairmanship. I thank the Minister for initiating the debate. The problem of legal highs activates communities, and that was certainly my experience when a shop in my constituency, suitably called Your High, opened round the corner from a primary school and down the road from a secondary school. I am pleased that it has since shut, but it generated a lot of concern in the community, so it is right that we are debating the matter here.

I was interested and pleased to hear the Minister refer to Ivory Wave, which is the current so-called legal high, and I agree with the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) that we should find another phrase. Perhaps “soon-to-be illegal highs” might be appropriate. I was interested to hear the Minister refer to mephedrone but not miaow-miaow. I understand from my street adviser, Grant Sibley, that only politicians and journalists refer to miaow-miaow, and that mephedrone is the appropriate word.

This debate is focused on legal highs, but hon. Members will be aware that a wider drugs consultation is under way that looks at that issue, for which the closing date is 30 September. I hope that it will be possible for us, not now, but over the coming months and years, to have a more open and frank discussion about tackling drugs. All hon. Members here today know that the subject is difficult for politicians to address, because sometimes the most effective solutions as suggested by the evidence may not be politically acceptable, but we must address the problem in an evidence-based way. When people such as the former president of the Royal College of Physicians says that a blanket ban is not necessarily the most effective way of tackling the drugs issue, we must consider that and assess the implications, if any, for Government policy. We must find a way of creating space in which it is safe for politicians to debate these matters and to rely on what evidence-based solutions might recommend.

I was intrigued, interested and pleased that the Government are considering the approach to drugs adopted by the Portuguese and Spanish Governments. I see the hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell) smiling, and I am sure that he will refer to Liberal Democrats being soft on drugs—that is a standard Labour phrase—but the fact is that Spain and Portugal have adopted a different approach towards personal possession. It is interesting that the all-party consensus in those countries about what might have been expected to be the consequences of such an approach did not transpire when that policy was implemented. I am not advocating that policy, but I am advocating that we should be allowed to debate it, analyse it and come to our own conclusions without being buffeted around by some of the media.

I shall focus more narrowly on legal highs. I agree that we need a new name, and perhaps the Minister will provide us with a definition of a legal high, if we are to continue to use that phrase. He rightly identified the need to educate people on the dangers associated with so-called legal highs, and it is clear, regrettably, that whatever is being done at the moment is not sufficient. As and when a legal high is found to be a toxic substance and becomes illegal, the producers simply move on to another product, a hybrid product, or simply rename the product. Unfortunately, people then go out and buy it. It is strange, but I suspect that some of the people who buy such products examine the list of ingredients for E numbers in products bought from supermarkets. They may avoid such products, but be happy to buy something with zero knowledge of what may be in it. It may contain herbal or chemical ingredients that may be toxic and are probably illegal, yet they buy it. Whatever we are doing educationally, it is not having the impact that it should. I agree that parents have a role to play, but in some families the matter is not discussed, so there is also a role for schools, which should perhaps include other drugs such as alcohol and be more proactive in addressing that concern.

I shall focus specifically on legal highs. The briefing that was prepared for this debate refers to the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, but there is also the Medicines Act 1968. The Medicines Act can be used when something is said to have a physiological effect or a potentially harmful effect on the body, and we might be able to use it as well as, or instead of, the Misuse of Drugs Act to deal with some of these products. If so, will the Minister tell us whether there would be any advantages to doing that and what they might be?

I have some further specific questions. The Minister has responded on the issue of the temporary ban, and I understand his point. If we have a temporary ban—my colleagues and I support such a move—there is a very small possibility that a substance that is subject to such a ban will subsequently be found to be totally harmless. A person might be prosecuted and possibly found guilty and sent to prison, but we might subsequently find that the reason for doing that no longer exists. As the Minister said, it is essential that the ACMD’s protocol is clear and sufficiently robust. None of us would want a temporary ban to be imposed, only for the substance subsequently to turn out to be a perfectly harmless herbal product. We need to be confident that the protocol stands up.

John Woodcock: These people know what the law is when it is put in place, but they choose to break it. By the hon. Gentleman’s logic, if the advisory council came back at some point and said that cocaine was not actually that harmful after all, everyone who had been convicted of cocaine possession or distribution would be told, “It’s okay. You can come out.” Is that what he is suggesting?

Tom Brake: Fortunately, I am 101% certain that no one will come back and say that cocaine is harmless—if anything is certain in a drugs debate, it is that. All that I ask the hon. Gentleman to accept is that someone might think, perhaps quite rightly, that there is evidence that a herbal product is harmful, with the result that a temporary ban is imposed, but the product might

[Tom Brake]

subsequently prove not to be harmful. That is all that I am flagging up as an issue. All that I am saying is that we must make sure that the protocol is tough and ensures that such things do not happen.

Once the temporary ban has been imposed, what time scale would the Minister expect the advisory council to use in implementing the protocol? Would there be a maximum time frame in which a response would be required? Furthermore, will the advisory council have to take into account a balance-of-probabilities consideration at any point when determining whether something is harmful? Any clarity that the Minister could give us on that would be gratefully received.

The final issue that I want to mention is the impact of khat. The Home Office online report highlighted the concerns about khat. I do not know whether it referred to medical problems, but, interestingly, the most commonly cited social problems related more to

“tensions arising in response to a family member spending time and money”

on the product, than to any other consideration. Apparently, the link between the use of this particular herbal stimulant and offending was minimal. I would like to hear whether the Minister has more up-to-date information on the issue and whether the Department is considering it. I have certainly been lobbied by a local councillor who has concerns about the use of khat in their area. Will the Minister tell us, although perhaps not now, what progress is being made on the issue?

To conclude, we need to respond to legal, or soon-to-be illegal, highs, and I was happy to support the previous Government when they introduced the mephedrone ban. We need to be geared up to respond to these issues quickly, but I hope that we can also debate them more widely. In that way, we can make sure that whatever we do is the most effective way to tackle the crime and health consequences associated with drug use.

3.15 pm

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I apologise for arriving late at this important debate. It is a pleasure to have my first opportunity to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Davies.

First, I want to acknowledge—this has probably been acknowledged before in one form or another—what a difference an election makes. In a short time, the Government have shown a firm lead on the issue of legal highs. Not so long ago—back in March—Professor Nutt, the former chairman of the ACMD, said of legal highs that

“it is virtually impossible to police the problem...the crime and justice side of things would get out of control. The police would spend their whole lives just arresting teenagers with mephedrone in their pockets”.

That defeatist attitude has been kicked into touch by a very sensible approach to mephedrone.

John Woodcock: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Burrowes: In a moment. I concede that the previous Government eventually took action in relation to mephedrone on 17 April, but that was too little, too late.

John Woodcock: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman made some concession after I signalled that I wanted to intervene. If he wants to make partisan points, he needs to do slightly better. I hope that he agrees that this is a really difficult problem. We should welcome the fact that the previous Government acted very quickly in dealing with the difficult advice that it got from the advisory council, just as we welcome the fact that the new Government are taking further action.

Mr Burrowes: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. If he gives me the opportunity, I will reflect on the fact that it is not straightforward properly to legislate and carry out enforcement in this area. Nevertheless, we must recognise that by the time mephedrone was finally banned on 17 April, it was estimated to be the UK's fourth most popular club drug and was used quite broadly, rather than by just a stereotypical demographic. It was sold by a new type of dealer. London was the world's mephedrone capital and host to 53% of worldwide outlets. Mephedrone was implicated in 18 deaths in England and seven in Scotland. Given those figures, I repeat that the ban came too late.

None the less, I welcome the steps taken by the previous Government to ban mephedrone, and I welcome those taken by the coalition Government properly to put in place ways to help us to act quickly to tackle legal high drugs. The issue is that we should be able to move quickly to deal not just with mephedrone, but with the new drugs on the market. These drugs are readily accessible at the press of a mouse button, and they are coming on to the streets of the capital and the country. We need to look at how we can deal with the issue properly, and the Government have proposed ways to do that.

I want briefly to raise another issue. We must look overseas at the models that other countries are using to deal with the issue, which is obviously not just a domestic, but an international one. The context is the fact that when this country got to the point of banning mephedrone on 17 April, other countries, including European countries, did it more promptly. One need not go further than Ireland to see what is being done. I want to raise Ireland as an example, so that the Minister can take the opportunity to respond and consider whether its approach would be a way forward for this country.

On 11 May, Ireland's Minister for Health and Children announced an immediate criminal ban, publishing a full list of “legal high” substances that were subject to a Government order and that were to be banned, as well as a criminal ban on a list of head shop products, and the prosecution of head shops themselves. Is there an opportunity to consider that example or any other examples in this country? As well as trying to deal with the substances and the ready access to them, and being able to respond quickly, Ireland dealt with another source of concern—the head shops that were springing up as an industry. That was dealt with on 11 May by the measure I have referred to, which led to the Government approving a crackdown on the operation of head shops.

The Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010 will further curb the threats posed by head shops and psychoactive substances. Under the new provisions, the sale or supply of substances that may not be specifically proscribed under Ireland's Misuse of Drugs Act 1977, but which have psychoactive effects, would be a criminal

offence. That is a much wider use of legislation to deal with new psychoactive substances coming on to the market, and will make it possible in Ireland to avoid the prolonged processes that we may well still be subject to. It would allow flexibility of approach in dealing with, and the mounting of prosecutions in relation to, the new psychoactive substances that are coming on to the market and causing such damage, particularly to young people.

I do not suggest that the Minister will be able to give a full response to that example, but it is worthy of consideration, not least because it comes from near neighbours with issues similar to ours. We may be able to learn from their example.

3.22 pm

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): I welcome you to your role as Chairman, Mr Davies, particularly as this is your first debate in that role. I can imagine that the Minister's heart sank when he saw you coming into the Chamber, given your robust and independent manner. When you sat in the Chair he probably relaxed slightly.

I was not going to respond to the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), but I shall briefly say that I hope he will reflect on the opening comments of his short speech, because he is usually a thoughtful contributor to debates. To start by saying what a difference an election makes and then completely to misunderstand the history of the issue did not do him any credit on this occasion, unusually. That is not least because Professor Nutt's disagreement was with the previous Government, not the current Government—I do not know his views on the current Government's drugs policy—but the Minister was gracious enough in his opening remarks at least to allude to the continuity that is important in these matters. I was grateful for the support that his party in opposition offered on the important matter of drugs and legal highs. We had our disagreements but I think there was much more support than difference. I hope that we shall be able to offer the Minister that degree of support. Perhaps if the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate had been here for the opening remarks he would not have said what he said.

The debate is timely and has allowed the Minister to build on his announcement of last month about legal highs. He has set out the programme by which the Government want to tackle the issue, and, as I have said, we want to be as supportive as we can be. I share the nervousness of my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) about continually using the term "legal high", but I suppose they are legal until they are not legal. I hope that someone can come up with a new term, but that is not the real point, which is how to tackle the emerging problem quickly enough to avoid the harm that in some cases is already being done, particularly to young people. The Minister knows that we share the Government's concern about legal highs. We also share their broad approach, including in relation to consultation. If it is built on the pillars of preventing drug taking, disrupting supply, strengthening enforcement and promoting drug treatment there is a lot that we can agree with.

There is common cause in tackling legal highs not just because it is the right thing to do but because the previous Government began that journey, in relation

to spice, GBL and mephedrone. I am grateful for the update from the Minister on how he sees that ban working out. I was encouraged by his remarks and look forward to hearing more. He knows, although there was an election in between, that we supported the Government with respect to naphyrone when they brought forward a ban in July. I am pleased that the generic approach is continuing, because that is the right one. It prevents manufacturers from tweaking compounds to try to stay ahead of any ban, and, in the words of the chair of the ACMD, it permits a systematic approach. That is important and I am reassured by the Minister's assurance that it will continue.

I want to talk about the temporary ban, which has been the subject of comment in the debate. It is true that the introduction of a temporary ban would be a new development, but it is not an entirely new idea in discussions in this country, and it is part of the law in other countries. It may have the potential to make a real difference, not least in combating the frustration that is particularly acute among the families and friends of people who are victims of the relevant substances. I shall examine the temporary ban provisions, and we want to be as supportive as we can.

The Minister mentioned the importance of the press and other media, which is a double-edged sword, in my experience. The media can get involved when a substance such as Ivory Wave emerges, and give it publicity. They can campaign, as has happened in the past with some substances that we went on to ban, and can play an important part. The downside is that the media reaction is often to call for a very quick, if not instantaneous, response, without really understanding the need for evidence, and sometimes without even having the facts about what has happened to victims. If that provokes a knee-jerk reaction—that may be a danger with the temporary ban, if we are not careful—that will not be a good basis for drugs policy. We must be aware of that, but I know that the Minister does not operate in a media vacuum, and he will know from the trawl that his staff do through the newspapers and other media every day how those campaigns can take off.

As the Minister has said—I am grateful for the reassurance that there will be a degree of continuity in the way the issues are considered—it is important that the advisory council should be given time to examine the scientific and medical evidence for the harm that a drug might do, and then report to the Home Secretary, who would have time for due consideration. The problem with that approach, as we discovered, is that it takes too long and we get to the issues too late, as the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate suggested, although not in a particularly helpful way. We knew about the need to act swiftly, and tried to do so. The new Government followed, in the case of naphyrone, and used a similar agreement to obtain the change in the law that we recognised was important. The matter will go further because, as I understand matters, the temporary ban will be a 12-month ban on imports, pending final advice from the advisory council. I want to ask in passing why the method that I think the Minister used, and which we certainly used for mephedrone, is not sufficient. That is, using the open general licensing system so that the existing legislation can be used. I think that I know the answer to that, but I should be grateful if the Minister could tell me.

[Mr Alan Campbell]

The Government and various commentators have pointed to other countries that have temporary bans in place. Perhaps the Minister will help the debate by writing to hon. Members and listing those countries that have temporary bans and detailing the substances that are subject to those bans. New Zealand is the country most often mentioned but as far as I am concerned—this point was picked up by Professor Iversen in his comments to the Select Committee—New Zealand currently has no substances in the holding pen, or in class D or class X, or whatever one wants to call it. If his officials are looking again at practices in New Zealand, the Minister might also wish to look at the term “harm reduction,” which occurs more in New Zealand’s drug policy than in ours, particularly with reference to treatment. Perhaps it is possible to learn from that.

I would like to pick up on the point made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness about what would happen if a substance were banned temporarily but then the ACMD—unusually, as this is unlikely—recommended that it did not need to be banned because it was not harmful. Would the Government be subject to a legal challenge from businesses that had not been able to import those substances? The issue might come back later. Those substances are not illegal—that is the whole point. Returning to the analogy with cocaine, we cannot say, “Well, those substances were illegal.” As I understand it, those substances would not be illegal because the legislation would not have been passed.

As hon. Members know, GBL was extremely dangerous, which is why it was banned. However, it contains a chemical that is used in hundreds and thousands of household and industrial products. If a substance such as that was the subject of a temporary ban, but then found not to be harmful, I shiver at the thought of what businesses might do. The Government must be aware of that—I am sure that they are—and they must have a defence in place when they present the evidence. What if the ACMD came to a different conclusion and the Government were left with a bill?

As I understand it, a breach of a temporary ban could mean jail sentence of up to 14 years and/or an unlimited fine for suppliers and manufacturers of a substance. If I remember rightly, that equates to the sentence for the supply of a class B drug. A legal high could find itself in that category, but there is no offence of possession. If the same substance was a class B drug and it was found in someone’s possession, there would be severe penalties. However, we are told that if someone possesses a substance that might end up as a class B drug, they would not be subject to those penalties even if there were a ban on possession. As I understand it, New Zealand has not gone down that route but there is an amnesty. After a six-month period, if someone is caught with a drug that has been temporarily banned, they are subject to the full force of the law under which possession is an offence. We must be careful with that issue.

To some extent, I agree with the Minister when he says that we do not want to criminalise young people. That was not our intention, and it is not the intention of the present Government. However, in going down that route, any Government will be in danger of sending out

a mixed message and in relying entirely on the health reasons for why certain substances should not be taken, rather than having the back-up of the law and the penalties that come with that. There is an element of that in the way that many drugs policies are enacted on our street; agencies do not automatically go out of their way to criminalise young people as there are warnings and other things that they can use.

The Minister’s comments from 19 August have been seized on, even today, by some in the media and some bloggers—including some in the legal profession who should, quite frankly, know better—to say that that was the first step towards the legalisation of drugs for personal use. The Minister shakes his head, but I mention that so that in his concluding speech he can reassure me that that is not the case. The next step taken by the bloggers was to claim that they knew who was behind the policy, because the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister—and, we learn today, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington—appear from their comments to have some sympathy with that view.

The hon. Gentleman accused me of wanting to say that the Liberal Democrats are soft on crime. I am not going to say that—this is probably the first occasion on which I will not say that. However, I would like a reassurance from the Minister that the coalition Government are not going soft on drugs. I do not think that they are, but I will give him the opportunity to reassure people. The subject is open to misinterpretation. When the Minister’s officials are found to have taken a particular interest in Portugal, which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington picked up on, that raises the question of whether we are heading along a route towards the legalisation of drugs.

Tom Brake: Let me inform the hon. Gentleman that members of the Home Affairs Committee went to Portugal and Spain and therefore have first-hand evidence of what has been done there. I seek reassurance that when sound, factual evidence is produced to show what is effective in tackling drug crime and addressing health issues, the hon. Gentleman will sign up to that.

Mr Campbell: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman the assurance he seeks because he is sending me along a route he knows I cannot go down. There is a great deal of evidence that if we both studied this issue, he would reach one conclusion and I would reach another. The Government are looking around for all sorts of ideas from elsewhere—they are not the first Government to do that; all Governments do it. We are getting our schools policy from Sweden, although I gather that we are not getting our drugs policy from Portugal. It is no bad thing to learn lessons from abroad, but we need a drugs policy for this country that reflects the evidence and takes into account the views of the public. The hon. Gentleman’s view about public opinion on this matter is different from what I believe to be the case, yet we look at the same evidence. I cannot give him the commitment he asks for, but I support his call for a mature debate on drugs policy. That is what the consultation will do. However, if he thinks we have had an immature debate on drugs policy today, I disagree with him.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman go on the record and confirm that if a policy is backed by clear, evidence-based research that shows the most effective

way of tackling drugs to be something that the public do not support, he will back the public rather than scientific fact?

Mr Campbell: Politicians always think that they back the public because they hope the public will back them. The hon. Gentleman misses my point—perhaps I am not explaining it sufficiently to him. We can take the evidence, but we must also take into account what the public think about such matters. There is an argument to say that scientific evidence alone can be collected on the harm that a drug would do to someone's health, and that the judgment can be made entirely from that. However, that is not the basis on which the advisory council is set up. Other factors must be taken into account, not least the attitude of the public, which I hope is informed by the evidence, as the hon. Gentleman suggests it will be. I hope we will get to that position. He and I disagree on this matter, as he believes the public to be in one place and I think they are somewhere else. The Government must be absolutely clear—the Minister has the opportunity to do this in his winding-up speech—and ensure that what is being suggested about legal highs is not open to misinterpretation, and that we are still following a tough approach that the Labour party will be pleased to support.

In reality, anyone can make an economic case for the legalisation of drugs. That is dead easy. Look at how much it costs to enforce drug legislation. Anyone can make that case even if they are amateurs at economics. However, if anyone believes for one minute that freer access to drugs will not lead to more drug abuse, they are mistaken. If anyone thinks for one minute, looking at the crime implications, that if drugs were legalised, drug traffickers would give up crime, they are mistaken, because the people who traffic drugs are criminals and will traffic whatever they can to make some cash out of it, whether it is people, substances or anything else, so we need to be very careful before we go down that route.

I want to say something about the practical aspects of the policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness picked up on some of those points. The Minister mentioned trading standards. I know that if he has a similar portfolio to the one I had, he could give a different priority to trading standards every day of the week. Monday it could be alcohol sales; Tuesday it could be knife sales; and Wednesday it could be legal highs. That is not to diminish the importance of legal highs, but it says something about trading standards, which too often are the Cinderella services in councils. They are not the ones that are financed enough to do all these things, and if councils are facing the sort of cuts in their budgets that we have heard about, the Government must be absolutely clear that they are not offering anything, in combating legal highs, that will be delivered on the ground, because the people are not there.

The Minister talked, at least in the press releases that went out on this issue, about the shipments and importation of drugs, including legal highs, and he mentioned the importance of officers who work abroad, SOCA and others. I have seen them in the field, doing the work that they do, and I pay tribute to their work, because they are among the bravest people whom I have ever met. They often operate in very difficult circumstances. The hon. Gentleman reaffirmed the importance of starting

our drugs policy not at our borders, but somewhere else in the world. That is very important, particularly at times when money is tight.

However, it is the internet that is very important when it comes to the buying and selling of legal highs. It is not a criticism of this Minister, because he knows more about tackling crime on the internet than most people, to say that Governments, by and large, are behind the curve on that. It is really difficult stuff. It is very difficult to work out how we tackle crime on the internet in the way that we can tackle crime in the real world, but it is very important that we do that.

Even if we can identify the suppliers, it is extremely difficult sometimes to find out what the substance is. The Minister talked about the problems with Ivory Wave. The situation was the same with mephedrone and other things. Forensic investigation is required; and more often than not, the cost of forensic investigation comes out of police budgets. Again, therefore, we must ensure that the Home Office is fighting its corner to make sure that the forensics budget is there for the police and, of course, that there are sufficient police officers to make it effective on the ground where it matters.

Communications is very important, but communications budgets in Departments are precisely the ones that the Government are examining to see what savings can be made. If that budget is under pressure in the Home Office, I say to the Minister—although he already knows—that FRANK is very good but it is not enough. There must be a communications budget that goes beyond the FRANK website. Again, this is about fighting the corner to ensure that when there is a campaign, for students or anyone else, it is financed and financeable; otherwise we offer something that we cannot deliver.

When the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Lynne Featherstone), introduced the ban on naphyrone, she was unable to say how much that ban would cost. To some extent, she got away with that at the time, because we were keen to ensure that the ban was in place, but it is a fair question: how much will the ban cost?

This Minister said—I support him in this—that the proceeds of crime, the assets of drug traffickers, should be targeted in tackling the problem. I agree, but we know how difficult it is to get at assets, particularly from drug traffickers, because they can hire the best lawyers as well as stashing those assets away in the names of friends and family. Targeting the proceeds of crime and seizing assets should be happening anyway. That is precisely what the assets legislation is in place for.

The Minister also knows—I imagine that he still has responsibility for proceeds of crime—that there is much debate about who gets the proceeds of crime. The Home Office used to get the first 50% and the rest was shared between the police and other agencies. If money is to be diverted into tackling drugs, which I think is a great reason for doing it, then unless more money is guaranteed, someone will get less. People have to be absolutely clear that they can deliver on that.

I have spoken for longer than I thought I would, but we have had a useful interchange of views—I hope so, anyway. My final point is this. I have had long discussions

[Mr Alan Campbell]

with my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker), who was not only a well respected drugs Minister but a very distinguished teacher. We talked at length about drug education, and I agree with the Minister: I think that drug education is very important. Many schools do have drug education and much of it is very good, but the question that we need to ask is whether it is effective. Is it actually, given the money that goes in—I am not advocating cutting it—effective? Is the money that goes in effective? I ask that because of the very bright and intelligent young people who have their lives ahead of them, who have huge potential, who have had drug education at school, who have gone to music festivals and stood in nightclub queues and been given information and who have got the message about the risk to their health, but who still take these substances. They put their health at risk and, in some cases, there are tragic consequences. They use legal highs alone. They mix them with other legal highs and other drugs. Sometimes they mix them with alcohol. As a Member of Parliament and as a parent, I am concerned. Why, when young people know the risks, do they still do that? If we can find the answer to that question, we will not spend quite as much time in this place talking about bans and legislation.

3.46 pm

James Brokenshire: We have had a good, wide-ranging debate about legal highs. Various hon. Members highlighted the fact that even using that terminology brings about a misconception. To take the last point from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr Campbell), about why people take drugs, including legal highs, when they know the risks, I think that that is part of the problem—they do not know the risks. The fact that something is branded as a legal high implies that it is safe. Therein lies part of the challenge in relation to these newly emerging psychoactive substances—I agree that that does not trip off the tongue, either—that highlights the important need to ensure that the legislation is there as a mechanism for telegraphing clear messages about enforcement of the law and about safety.

I noted the hon. Gentleman's comments about mixed messages. I say to him very gently that his Government sent out very mixed messages about cannabis, so perhaps he is not in the strongest of positions from which to be pointing fingers about communicating messages.

Mr Alan Campbell: I just want to make a very personal point. The records show that in fact the very first time that the messages started getting mixed, it was not this Member of Parliament who supported that process.

James Brokenshire: I note the point that the hon. Gentleman has made, but clearly it was his Government who sent out some very mixed messages, even if he was not personally responsible for the decisions that underpinned them.

I want to cover as many as possible of the points raised during the debate, which has been helpful and constructive on the issues and challenges surrounding legal highs. It also touched on the drugs strategy from a broader perspective. I do not regard this as an opportunity for that broader debate, but it is important to recognise

that the coalition Government are consulting on their new drug strategy. We intend to publish the new drug strategy by the end of this year. Our strategic vision is set around the framework for the future delivery of drugs policy with four key themes, to which the hon. Gentleman has already alluded: preventing drug use; strengthening enforcement, criminal justice and the legal framework; rebalancing treatment to support drug-free outcomes, which is an important point to emphasise; and supporting recovery to break the cycle of drug addiction.

The Government are opposed to the legalisation of drugs and to decriminalisation for personal use. It would run entirely counter to our health and education messages. In many respects, the equation of safety with legality, as we have been debating on the issue of legal highs, makes that a very direct construct. On the possession of legal highs, I say to the shadow Minister that the temporary ban is, as it suggests, intended to be only temporary—a maximum of 12 months. If advice supports the classification of a drug within that 12-month period, we would act within that period. It may therefore happen in less than 12 months, which would then create the possession offence. Our approach with the temporary ban is to act quickly to stop supply and prevent harm, which is why we have tailored it as we have. It does not send out mixed messages, due to legality—in its broadest sense—being equated with safety. We have seen that and seen how the classification of drugs can have an impact on whether someone perceives a drug to be safe. That goes back to my original point on the equation of safety and knowledge, which has been highlighted.

We do not support the legalisation of drugs. Many drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine are clearly addictive and harmful to health, and our educational message, to young people in particular, is that illegal drugs are harmful and no one should take them. To legalise their supply for personal consumption would send the wrong message to the majority of young people, who do not take drugs on a regular basis, if at all, and, alongside that, it would increase the risk of drug use and abuse.

On the specific point about the Portuguese model, we are against that proposal. The Government are determined to prevent drug use and strengthen enforcement against supply, which is why we are asking experts for their views on a range of issues, so that users are strongly encouraged to address their dependency. That wider debate and consultation is taking place, but we are not looking at the Portuguese model, and do not think that it is the right way forward.

Tom Brake: The Minister says that he is not looking at the Portuguese model, but there were references in the press last week to the Government looking at the Portuguese and Spanish models. Were those press reports wrong?

James Brokenshire: I cannot comment on the countenance of reporting in *The Observer*, but I can send out a very clear message from this debate—the Government do not believe that decriminalisation is the right approach. Our priorities are clear. We want to reduce drug use, crack down on drug-related crime and disorder, and help addicts come off drugs for good. That is the emphasis of Government policy.

I would like to come on to the specific points that have been raised, and, in particular, the important point raised by the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on the Medicines Act. The Act applies to medicinal products, so we need to establish certain key components—in other words, that a substance has psychoactive properties and is potentially meant for human consumption. That is where those who have sought to subvert the law through using certain phraseology in their advertisements have sought to obviate medicines control legislation.

I assure the hon. Gentleman that we remain in close contact with the Department of Health, as well as trading standards, to see how we can use the Medicines Act more effectively and to explore those options. I agree with him that it is absurd that products can be marketed as bath salts and other things, and are “not for human consumption”, when implicitly they may be intended to be so used, or there is recklessness. We are carefully exploring this area to see what enforcement options exist.

The points about the protocol and triggers are important. The purpose of the working protocol is to set out our engagement with the ACMD, and, through it, any legal controls on dealing with legal highs would be enacted. I am in close consultation with the ACMD to develop that working protocol, because it is important to give reassurance that the temporary banning power is appropriate. As I said to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake), the Government remain committed to the general response to the drugs being based on the existing framework under the Misuse of Drugs Act and on how the ACMD normally operates. Clarity over the protocol and the triggers, and setting out it in the working protocol with the ACMD are important to give reassurance on how we would use the temporary banning power.

Tom Brake: The Minister may be about to come on to this, but when does he expect the temporary ban to kick in after a product such as Ivory Wave suddenly hits the market? Obviously he cannot give us an exact response. What time scale are we talking about?

James Brokenshire: It is difficult to second-guess the issue or look into a crystal ball. We are in close consultation with the ACMD on the development of the working protocol, which I would not wish to pre-empt. In all the discussions I have had with the ACMD, it is clear that if a newly emerging psychoactive substance is identified, the intention is that advice would be sought on the associated harms. We would seek its advice on whether a temporary ban would be appropriate, so it is about working around that and the identification. Hon. Members also made points about the early warning system, and working with the ACMD on that and picking up things early enough to deal with appropriately.

Mr Alan Campbell: I am genuinely confused, but I am sure that the Minister can put my mind at rest. If a substance is subject to a temporary ban, why is it illegal to import or supply it, with fairly draconian penalties, but not illegal to possess it?

James Brokenshire: I thought I had already explained the position. I am sorry if I have not made it clear. The emphasis behind the policy is about ensuring that we

stop the supply, importation and sale of the drugs and about ensuring that we can act quickly to deal with some of the challenges that I know the shadow Minister faced in Government over mephedrone. Perhaps I share his frustration at being told by the ACMD that there was a problematic psychoactive substance and feeling that one is unable to respond. There are certainly issues; he highlighted importation issues and the general licence that could be invoked, but that does not tackle domestic supply. To ensure that drugs do not get on to the streets and into the hands of young people, it is important to deal with the problem at the border and in this country. That is why we believe that the temporary ban approach is the right way forward when a newly emerging psychoactive substance that has been indentified as harmful comes through.

I would like to address the issue of whether a newly emerging substance has other uses. It is fair to make that point, and the Government will seek parallel advice from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills on a drug's legitimate use and will develop any required impact assessment, which will inform the decision on whether to impose a temporary ban on that drug. In the event that a legitimate commercial use is identified in discussions with BIS, the Home Office will take reasonable steps in light of the ACMD's advice on the risk to public health when a substance is misused, to ensure its continued availability for legitimate use under the temporary ban and, subject to further consideration, under circumstances in which that ban is made permanent. There are examples showing how that approach could be taken. It is important to recognise that point, and advice will be sought from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the ACMD in relation to the application of those powers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) raised the issue of what other countries are doing, and gave the specific example of Ireland. I am aware of the changes that are taking place there and of the fact that the Irish are considering a broader definition of drugs. We can look, too, at the example of the United States and the analogue legislation that is in operation there. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs is considering the broad policy issues and the various different examples. Although I cannot comment on whether it is looking at the Irish situation, it is doing broader work on legal highs. We await its report on appropriate approaches, which may take into account factors such as a broader definition. I do not want to prejudge or pre-empt the work of the ACMD, but we appreciate the work that it is doing, and look forward to its response. Certainly, we are considering a proportionate response based on the tenets of harm before imposing criminal penalties.

The hon. Member for Tynemouth asked whether other EU countries had taken different approaches on temporary bans. The experience is that those countries have tended to take a very narrow perspective on the utilisation of temporary banning powers. Spice was one of the cases in point. In this country, we have sought to take a more generic approach to a class of drugs, so that we avoid the issue of tweaking and slight chemical manipulation. The temporary bans and the immediate action that were taken in some other EU countries were much more narrowly focused, so we are not comparing like with like in that regard. The approach that we hope

[James Brokenshire]

to take is very much looking at that broader categorisation rather than at one specific drug alone, without necessarily considering the analogues that may exist alongside all of that. That is very much part and parcel of the work that we would adopt.

I have a couple of things to mention in relation to the New Zealand case. I am advised that its class D is currently empty, but that could be a reflection of the fact that New Zealand has not had to respond to legal highs in the way in which the United Kingdom has. It is difficult to make cross-over judgments. Moreover, the class D model envisages a regulated supply as well, which is not the approach that the UK seeks to adopt.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington highlighted the issue of khat. The Government acknowledge the concern in communities affected by khat use, particularly in relation to the social problems, which include unemployment, family breakdown and financial hardship. We are committed to addressing any form of substance misuse and will keep the issue under close scrutiny. Home Office research into the social harms of khat use,

as well as the treatment needs of users, was commissioned last year by the previous Government, and it looked at a number of communities and areas in England and Wales. We are quality-assuring the work and will produce an independent review of the findings, as is standard practice with all Home Office research reports. We will publish those reports later this year and consider them carefully.

This has been a positive and productive discussion on a sensitive issue that has impacted on far too many communities. Reflecting on conversations with parents of children who have been adversely affected by drugs and with those who have lost very close loved ones, I can say that they underline the importance that we must place on addressing the harms linked to these so-called highs. It is incumbent on us to continue to send out the message that simply because something is marketed as legal does not necessarily mean that it is legal, and above all it certainly does not mean that it is safe.

Question put and agreed to.

4.5 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Ministerial Statements

Thursday 9 September 2010

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Pre-Council Statement (Foreign Affairs)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (Mr Edward Davey): The Foreign Affairs Council will be held on 10 September in Brussels. I will be representing the UK.

The agenda items are as follows:

Economic Partnership Agreements

Ministers will discuss next steps on the economic partnership agreements (EPAs) with African, Caribbean and Pacific States, including how to progress negotiations further, being as flexible as possible while retaining compatibility with the rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). They may also discuss the implementation of EPAs already signed and the impact of EPAs on regional integration.

South Korea Free Trade Agreement

The presidency will seek Ministers' approval and signature of this free trade agreement (FTA) on behalf of the European Council. Discussion is also likely to cover the progress of the associated bilateral safeguard regulation through ordinary legislative procedure in the European Parliament. They will also agree to provisional application of the FTA's commitments, the date to be confirmed later in the year following parallel work in the European Parliament.

Investment

Ministers will discuss the Commission's communication on the future of the European Union's international investment policy. This discussion is likely to cover which countries will take priority as the EU seeks partners for new EU-investment agreements and what these agreements should cover. It is also likely that the regulation to manage the transfer of competency for international investment policy, which was published in parallel with the communication will also be raised.

Any Other Business: Pakistan

Following the catastrophic flooding which continues to cause considerable devastation in Pakistan, Ministers will discuss plans for the EU to agree a comprehensive package of support for Pakistan's recovery both in the short and longer-term, including substantive measures on trade. The discussion is likely to cover both increased humanitarian assistance from member states and the Commission, as well as mechanisms to grant Pakistan increased market access to the EU, either through membership of the generalised system of preferences(+) (GSP+) scheme or through immediate, short-term reductions in EU tariffs on key Pakistani exports.

Any Other Business: Malaysia FTA

Trade Commissioner Karel de Gucht will inform Ministers of recent discussions with Malaysia about the possible start of negotiations for a free trade agreement under the EU-ASEAN free trade agreement mandate.

EDUCATION

Vocational Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Michael Gove): For many years our education system has failed to value practical education, choosing to give far greater emphasis to purely academic achievements. This has left a gap in the country's skills base and, as a result, a shortage of appropriately trained and educated young people to fulfil the needs of our employers. To help support our economic recovery, we need to ensure that this position does not continue and in future we are able to meet the needs of our labour market. I am today announcing an independent review of vocational education which will be chaired by Professor Alison Wolf

To enable us to achieve this long-term aim, the Government are currently developing a new approach to qualifications, considering all routes which are available to young people, to ensure that the qualifications that they study for are rigorous, relevant and bear comparison with the best in the world. As part of this I have asked Professor Wolf to consider how we can improve vocational education for 14 to 19-year-olds to support participation and progression, specifically: how vocational education for 14 to 19-year-olds can be improved; what the appropriate target audience for vocational education is; what principles should underpin the content, structure and teaching methods of the vocational education offer; and how progression from vocational education to positive destinations can be improved. The review will not be considering the detailed content of specific qualifications, but will be focusing on the effectiveness of the overall structure of the vocational offer.

I have asked Professor Wolf to report to me by spring 2011, and to make practical recommendations that will ensure real change and have regard to current financial constraints.

I have today placed a copy of the letter I have sent to Professor Wolf in the Library of the House.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

EU Foreign Policy Meetings

The Minister for Europe (Mr David Lidington): There will be a series of EU foreign policy meetings in September.

10 to 11 September: Informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers "Gymnich". My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will attend.

10 September: Foreign Affairs Council (FAC). The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, the Minister with responsibility for employment relations, consumer and postal affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr Davey) will attend. The Department for Business, Innovation and Skills will table a written ministerial statement on this prior to the FAC.

13 September: General Affairs Council (GAC). I will represent the UK.

16 September: European Council: My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary will attend.

Gymnich: 10-11 September

The Gymnich will be co-chaired by Baroness Ashton and the Belgian Foreign Minister, Vanackere. The main item will be the EU's relations with strategic partners, in preparation for the European Council. The meeting will also discuss Pakistan, Turkey and the workings of Foreign Affairs Councils. There will also be a meeting with EU candidate countries. Other topical issues—middle east peace process and western Balkans—may be discussed. But, because it is an informal meeting, there will be no conclusions.

General Affairs Council (GAC): 13 September

The GAC, chaired by the Belgian presidency, will predominantly cover final preparations for the September European Council which will discuss EU relations with strategic powers and include a Heads lunch discussion on economic governance.

President Van Rompuy will join Ministers over lunch where we will stress the importance for having substantive foreign policy outcomes at the September European Council. The GAC will also take a first look at the October European Council which will review President Van Rompuy's economic governance taskforce, prepare for the Cancun meeting on climate change and November's G20 meeting in South Korea.

European Council: 16 September

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will report to the House following the meeting of the Council.

HEALTH**National Programme for IT**

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Simon Burns): The National Programme for IT is being reconfigured to reflect the changes described in the White Paper "Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS" and the outcome of the cross-Government review of ICT projects initiated in May.

A departmental review of the National Programme for IT has concluded that we deliver best value for taxpayers by retaining a national infrastructure and applications whilst devolving leadership of IT development to NHS organisations on the principle of connected systems and interoperability with a plural system of suppliers.

The programme has delivered a national infrastructure for the NHS, and a number of successful national applications such as choose and book, the picture archiving and communications (digital imaging) system, and the electronic prescription service should now be integrated with the running of current health services.

The remaining work of the programme largely involves local systems and services, and the Government believe these should now be driven by local NHS organisations. Localised decision making and responsibility will create fresh ways of ensuring that clinicians and patients are involved in planning and delivering front line care and driving change. This reflects the coalition Government's commitment to ending top-down government.

The new approach to implementation will be modular, allowing NHS organisations to introduce smaller, more manageable change, in line with their business requirements and capacity. NHS services will be the customers of a more plural IT supplier base, embodying the core assumption of connecting all systems together rather than replacing all systems.

This approach will also address the delays, particularly in the acute sector, that resulted from the national programme's previous focus on complete system replacement. It will allow NHS trusts to retain existing systems that meet modern standards, and move forward in a way that best fits their own circumstances.

An appropriate structure for health informatics is a key element of the organisational design work currently underway following the publication of "Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS". The direction of travel being announced today for IT services very much reflects the key theme of the White Paper, of bringing decisions closer to the front line. It follows that the national programme will no longer be run as a centralised programme. Some elements will need to continue to be nationally managed and it is expected that new structures will be fully in place by April 2012.

Existing contracts will be honoured and it is vital that their value be maximised. However, by moving IT systems closer to the frontline, it is expected to make additional savings of £700 million, on top of the £600 million announced by the previous Administration in December 2009. These savings will mean that the total cost of the programme will be reduced significantly from the original forecast of £12.7 billion for combined central and local spending to £11.4 billion.

A separate review of the summary care record is currently underway, incorporating two elements: what content the summary electronic record should hold and make available for sharing across the health system; and whether the processes by which patients are able to withhold their consent are as clear and simple as possible. This review is expected to report by the end of September.

Reciprocal Health Agreement (UK and Isle of Man)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Anne Milton): Following discussions between the Department, the Isle of Man Government and the devolved Administrations, a new reciprocal health agreement between the United Kingdom and the Isle of Man will come into effect from 1 October 2010.

The new agreement will put the current temporary arrangements on a permanent footing meaning that UK residents visiting the Isle of Man will receive free, state provided health care, as will Isle of Man residents visiting the UK.

Under the agreement, no public funds will change hands and this brings the Isle of Man into line with other agreements that the UK has with a number of non-European Economic Area countries.

The new agreement represents a sensible and logical conclusion and provides certainty for travellers on temporary visits between the UK and Isle of Man.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biometric Provision for UK Border Agency

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): The Home Secretary announced the cancellation of ID cards and a halt to work on second biometric passports on 27 May 2010. UKBA has now renegotiated one of the key contracts that supported this work, saving £50 million. Using the restructured contract UKBA will build the immigration and asylum biometric system (IABS). This system will strengthen our ability to control the entry of foreign nationals into the United Kingdom and identify those who pose a risk to our country. Those who have previously been deported, or committed a criminal offence, or been turned down for a visa will find it much harder to enter the UK.

Following the Home Secretary's announcement, Government reviewed the future use of all contracts let in connection with ID cards and second biometric passports. One of the relevant contracts is for the provision of a database of fingerprints and facial images. This contract, titled the national identity assurance service (NIAS) also supports key UKBA initiatives for the control of immigration and asylum. UKBA has been able to save £50 million from the contract price by removing components that stored data on UK nationals, and which are no longer needed.

Using the revised contract UKBA will completely modernise our ability to use biometrics to protect our borders. The new system is scheduled for delivery by IBM at the end of 2011 and will support the checking of biometric visas, registration cards for asylum seekers and biometric residence permits. It will replace an existing system that was first commissioned in 2000 and is now nearing its design capacity. The new system is faster, more accurate and more resilient. It can also be expanded to cater for future immigration applications, for example streamlined border entry processes. The revised contract is worth £191 million over seven years.

Charging for Immigration and Nationality Services
2010-11

The Minister for Immigration (Damian Green): I am announcing proposals to change the fees for immigration and nationality applications made to the UK Border Agency. The Government review these fees on a regular basis and makes appropriate changes as necessary.

The Chancellor's emergency Budget set out the state of the nation's finances and demonstrated the very difficult choices that must be made to reduce the budget deficit. As part of that, the Government have looked again at the contribution made towards the costs of running an immigration system by the users of that system, balanced against those costs met by the UK taxpayer and we believe proposals to increase fees at this time are in the best interests of the UK. Securing the border brings with it an unavoidable core of cost, especially as we seek to improve customer service for visa applicants: something which we believe is important in the efficient running of the UK economy.

We set some fees above the administrative cost of providing the service. This allows us to generate revenue which is used to fund the UK immigration system and to set certain fees below cost recovery to support wider Government objectives. The revenue generated will continue to strengthen our capability in underpinning technology and process improvement. For transparency, I have included details of the estimated unit cost for each route, so that it is clear the degree to which individual routes are set above or below cost.

I will shortly lay two sets of regulations in Parliament to effect fee increases and the table below sets out details of all the proposed increases. The table includes indicative unit costs for each application for 2010-11. The unit cost is the estimated average cost to UK Border Agency of processing each application. Although our unit costs are not fixed over the course of the financial year, we publish unit costs to enable you to see which fees we set over cost and by how much. Further details of all fees changes will be outlined in the explanatory memoranda accompanying the regulations.

Regulations to set fees at or below the cost of processing are subject to the negative parliamentary procedure and I propose these fees will increase from 1 October 2010. Where we charge a fee that is set above the processing cost, the regulations are subject to the affirmative parliamentary process, and I aim for these fees to come into effect in November, subject to parliamentary timetabling.

I believe our proposals continue to strike the right balance between maintaining secure and effective border controls, and ensuring that our fees structure does not inhibit the UK's ability to attract those migrants and visitors who most benefit the UK. In principle it is right that those who benefit most from the immigration system should bear a higher share of the contribution to the running of the system.

Full details on how to apply for all of these services will be provided on our website at: www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk.

Fees to be Implemented from 1 October 2010

<i>Non PBS Visas</i>			
<i>Products</i>	<i>Unit Cost</i>	<i>Current Fees</i>	<i>New Proposal</i>
		<i>Main applicant</i>	<i>Main applicant</i>
Visit visa - short	£140	£68	£70
Certificate of Entitlement	£245	£220	£245
Transit Visa	£94	£47	£47
Vignette Transfer Fee	£93	£75	£93
Call Out/Out of Hours Fee	134/hr	£130/Hr up to Max £939/day	£130/Hr up to Max £939/day
<i>PBS Visas</i>			
<i>Products</i>	<i>Unit Cost</i>	<i>Current Fees</i>	<i>New Proposal</i>
		<i>Main applicant</i>	<i>Main applicant</i>
Tier 1 (Transition)	£332	£256	£332
Tier 1 (Transition) CESC	£332	£235	£300
Tier 1 Post Study	£344	£315	£344
Tier 4	£242	£199	£220
Tier 5	£173	£128	£130
Tier 5 CESC	£173	£112	£120

Nationality Applications - Migrants In UK

Products	Current Fees			New Proposal	
	Unit Cost	Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Renunciation of Nationality	£208	£208	N/A	£208	N/A
Nationality Right of Abode	£150	£143	N/A	£150	N/A
Nationality Reissued Certificate	£178	£76	N/A	£80	N/A
Nationality Reconsiderations	£100	£100	N/A	£100	N/A
Status Letter (Nationality)	£107	£76	N/A	£80	N/A
Non-Acquisition Letter (Nationality)	£107	£76	N/A	£80	N/A

Non PBS Routes - Migrants In UK

Products	Current Fees			New Proposal	
	Unit Cost	Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Transfer of Conditions Postal	£381	£169	£16	£200	£50
Travel Documents Adult (CoT)	£246	£220	N/A	£220	N/A
Travel Documents Adult CTD	£246	£77.50	N/A	£77.50	N/A
Travel Documents Child (CoT)	£231	£138	N/A	£138	N/A
Travel Documents Child CTD	£255	£49	N/A	£49	N/A
Replacement BRP	£35	£30	N/A	£30	N/A
Call Out/ Out of Hours Fee	134/hr	£130/Hr up to Max £939/day	N/A	£130/Hr up to Max £939/day	N/A
Work Permit Technical Changes	£116	£20	N/A	£20	N/A

PBS Routes – Migrants in UK

Products	Current Fees			New Proposal	
	Unit Cost	Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Tier 4 - Postal	£357	£357	£80	£357	£100
Tier 5 - Postal	£359	£128	£12	£130	£30
Tier 5 - Postal CESC	£380	£112	£11	£120	£30

PBS Sponsorship Products

Products	Unit Cost	Current Fees		New Proposal	
		Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Tier 2 Small Sponsor Licence		£880	£300	£300	
Tier 4 Sponsor Licence		£950	£400	£400	
Tier 5 Sponsor Licence		£880	£400	£400	
Tiers 2 & 4 Small Sponsor		£950	£400	£400	
Tiers 2 & 5 Small Sponsor		£880	£400	£400	
Tiers 4 & 5 Sponsor Licence		£950	£400	£400	
Tiers 2 & 4 & 5 Small Sponsor		£950	£400	£400	
Tier 2 Medium /Large Sponsor Licence, where they already hold Tier 4 &/or 5 Licence		£950	£600	£600	

PBS Sponsorship Products

Products	Unit Cost	Current Fees		New Proposal	
		Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Tier 4 &/or 5 Sponsor Licence, where they already hold Tier 2 Small Sponsor Licence	£950	£100		£100	
Tier 4 Highly Trusted Sponsor Licence	£950	£400		£400	
Sponsor Action Plan	£1,100	£600		£1,000	
Tier 5 COS	£25	£10		£10	
Tier 4 CAS	£25	£10		£10	

CESC = Council of Europe Social Charter Nationals

Fees to be Implemented from November 2010

Products	Current Fees			New Proposal	
	Unit Cost	Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Visit visa - long 2 year	£140	£230		£245	
Visit visa - long 5 year	£141	£420		£450	
Visit visa - long 10 year	£155	£610		£650	
Settlement	£249	£644		£750	
Settlement - Dependant Relative	£272	£1,680		£1,680	
Other Visa	£115	£230		£245	

PBS Visas

Products	Current Fees			New Proposal	
	Unit Cost	Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Tier 1 (Gen, Investor, Ent)	£332	£690		£750	
Tier 1 (Gen & Ent) CESC	£332	£629		£700	
Tier 2	£197	£270		£350	
Tier 2 CESC	£196	£250		£300	

Nationality Applications - Migrants In UK

Products	Current Fees			New Proposal	
	Unit Cost	Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
Naturalisation 6 (1) Single *	£208	£735	N/A	£780	N/A
Naturalisation 6 (1) Joint *	£231	£930	N/A	£1010	N/A
Naturalisation 6 (2) *	£208	£735	N/A	£780	N/A
Nationality Registration Adult *	£208	£550	N/A	£580	N/A
Nationality Registration Single Minor	£208	£470	N/A	£500	N/A
Nationality Registration Multiple Minors	£255	£567	£97	£600	£150

*£80 per person for the Citizenship Ceremony is included in these fees.

Non PBS Routes - Migrants In UK

Products	Unit Cost	Current Fees		New Proposal	
		Main applicant	Dependant	Main applicant	Dependant
ILR Postal	£341	£840	£129	£900	£250
ILR PEO	£256	£1,095	£154	£1,250	£350
ILR Postal CESC	£341	£767	£121	£850	£250
ILR PEO CESC	£256	£992	£144	£1,100	£300
ILR Dependant Relative Postal	£341	£1,680	N/A	£1,680	N/A
ILR Dependant Relative PEO	£256	£1,930	N/A	£2,050	N/A
LTR Non Student Postal Main	£419	£475	£92	£500	£150

Non PBS Routes - Migrants In UK

<i>Products</i>	<i>Unit Cost</i>	<i>Current Fees</i>		<i>New Proposal</i>	
		<i>Main applicant</i>	<i>Dependant</i>	<i>Main applicant</i>	<i>Dependant</i>
LTR Non Student PEO Main	£348	£730	£118	£800	£200
FLR (IED) (Postal)	£210	£400	£85	£500	£150
FLR(IED)(PEO)	£210	£650	£110	£800	£200
FLR (BUS) (Postal)	£210	£800	£125	£850	£250
Transfer of Conditions PEO	£341	£578	£57	£600	£150
Mobile Case working (Premium+)	£1,982	£15,000	N/A	£15,000	N/A
Employment LTR outside PBS Postal	£419	£475	£92	£500	£150
Employment LTR outside PBS PEO	£348	£730	£118	£800	£200

PBS Routes - Migrants In UK

<i>Products</i>	<i>Unit Cost</i>	<i>Current Fees</i>		<i>New Proposal</i>	
		<i>Main applicant</i>	<i>Dependant</i>	<i>Main applicant</i>	<i>Dependant</i>
Tier 1 General, Investor & Ent – Postal	£317	£840	£129	£850	£250
Tier 1 General, Investor & Ent PEO	£288	£1,095	£154	£1,150	£300
Tier 1 General/Ent - Postal CESC	£317	£767	£121	£770	£250
Tier 1 General/Ent PEO CESC	£288	£992	£144	£1,000	£300
Tier 1 (Post Study) - Postal	£317	£550	£100	£550	£150
Tier 1 (Post Study) - PEO	£325	£800	£125	£850	£250
Tier 1 Transition Postal	£259	£408	£85	£500	£150
Tier 1 Transition PEO	£275	£663	£111	£700	£200
Tier 2 - Postal	£344	£475	£92	£500	£150
Tier 2 - PEO	£330	£730	£118	£800	£200
Tier 2 - Postal CESC	£344	£434	£88	£450	£150
Tier 2-PEO CESC	£330	£669	£111	£700	£200
Tier 4-PEO	£374	£628	£107	£650	£150
Tier 5 - PEO	£369	£578	£57	£600	£150
Tier 5-PEO CESC	£380	£521	£52	£550	£150

PBS Sponsorship Products

<i>Products</i>	<i>Unit Cost</i>	<i>Current Fees</i>	<i>New Proposal</i>
Tier 2 Medium /Large Sponsor Licence	£880	£1,000	£1,000
Tiers 2 & 5 Medium /Large Sponsor	£880	£1,000	£1,000

PBS Sponsorship Products

<i>Products</i>	<i>Unit Cost</i>	<i>Current Fees</i>	<i>New Proposal</i>
Tiers 2 & 5 Medium /Large Sponsor	£880	£1,000	£1,000
Tiers 2 & 4 & 5 Medium /Large Sponsor	£950	£1,000	£1,000
Tier 2 COS	£25	£170	£170

CECSC = Council of Europe Social Charter Nationals

WALES**National Assembly for Wales (Referendum on Law-making Powers)**

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mrs Cheryl Gillan): The National Assembly for Wales passed a resolution on 9 February 2010 calling for a referendum under the terms of the Government of Wales Act 2006. The First Minister notified my predecessor of this resolution on 17 February 2010.

I have a statutory duty to consult the Electoral Commission on the question that will be included in the draft referendum order. I referred a question proposed by the Wales Office Referendum Project Board to the Electoral Commission on 23 June 2010. The commission has conducted a thorough assessment of the preamble and question, including carrying out public opinion research, gathering views from interested parties and seeking advice from experts on plain language and accessibility in English and Welsh. It published its findings and recommendations on 2 September 2010.

I welcome the objectivity and independence that the Electoral Commission has brought to the process. It has suggested changes that take into account the generally low level of public awareness of issues and terminology relating to the referendum encountered during the testing process. I have discussed the conclusions of the report with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and, with their agreement, have decided to accept the commission's recommended revision of the question and its preamble.

I will lay the draft order before Parliament shortly for consideration by both Houses, and my intention remains for the referendum in Wales to take place in the first quarter of next year.

Petitions

Thursday 9 September 2010

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH

Blandford Community Hospital (Dorset)

The Petition of Mrs Jacqueline Stayt and Mrs Josephine Seath, residents of the North Dorset community and others,

Declares that they are concerned about the future of Portman Ward at Blandford Community Hospital, Dorset.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Health to encourage NHS Dorset to consider seriously the impact on the local community of proposed cuts to services at Blandford Hospital, in particular the proposed closure of Portman Ward, and to ensure that decisions affecting the hospital's future reflect the concerns and needs of patients, staff and the community at large.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Mr Robert Walter, Official Report, Monday 26 July 2010; Vol. 514, c. 836.*]

[P000851]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Health:

The issues raised in the petition are local matters for Dorset Primary Care Trust and my Department will bring these to the attention of the South West Strategic Health Authority.

Lady Forester Community Nursing Home and Forester's Court

The Petition of the people of Much Wenlock

Declares that Lady Forester Community Nursing Home contains 15 single bedrooms and offers residents nursing care; notes that four of the places are funded by the local GP service through Shropshire Primary Care Trust; further notes that Forester's Court comprises 10 one bedroom apartments and provides very sheltered housing; and further declares that the petitioners are opposed to the proposed closure of both Lady Forester Community Nursing Home and Forester's Court.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Secretary of State for Health to take steps to prevent the closure of Lady Forester Community Nursing Home and Forester's Court.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented, Official Report, Thursday 22 July 2010; Vol. 514, c. 8P.*]

[P000846]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Health:

We understand that a potential buyer has been found for Lady Forester Community Nursing Home and that the home will, subject to successful negotiations, remain open.

Lady Forester Community Nursing Home is privately owned and operated by the ExtraCare Charitable Trust. The trust, in common with all independent care providers, is free to take its own decisions regarding the financial viability of the services it owns and operates. The Secretary of State for Health does not have the power to intervene if an owner decides, for whatever reason, to close or sell their care or nursing home. However, in the event of the closure of a care or nursing home, local council social services have a duty to assess the care needs of residents and, if appropriate, provide or arrange alternative care for them.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 9 September 2010

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Council Housing: Lewisham

Heidi Alexander: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much funding his Department plans to provide to Lewisham Homes for the purposes of meeting the Decent Homes standard in respect of its housing stock. [13836]

Andrew Stunell: The Homes and Communities Agency has made a provisional indicative capital funding offer of £153.8 million to Lewisham Homes to deliver a Decent Homes investment programme. Future funding allocations for the Decent Homes programme will be decided in the context of the spending review.

Council Housing: Waiting Lists

Eric Ollerenshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many people there were seeking properties of each size on council house waiting lists in each local authority area in each of the last five years. [R] [13858]

Andrew Stunell: Information on social housing waiting lists is collected in terms of the number of households (rather than people). Information on the bedroom size requirement of households on social housing waiting lists, as at 1 April each year, is collected on the Housing Strategy Statistical Appendix (HSSA) from each local authority in England.

A table giving this information has been placed in the Library of the House. Information as at 1 April 2010 is due for publication in November/December 2010.

Departmental Allowances

Matthew Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much his Department and its predecessors spent on (a) reimbursement of staff expenses and (b) the 10 largest staff expense reimbursement claims in each year since 1997. [13042]

Robert Neill: Expenditure on reimbursement of staff expenses from 2002-03 is set out in the following table. Information for previous years is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

	Reimbursement of staff expenses (£)
2002-03	2,385,831
2003-04	1,040,504
2004-05	1,046,485
2005-06	939,512
2006-07	836,829

Reimbursement of staff expenses (£)

2007-08	758,112
2008-09	785,698
2009-10	666,765

Information on the 10 largest staff expense reimbursement claims in each year since 1997 could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Furniture

Matthew Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many chairs his Department and its predecessors purchased in each year since 1997; how much was spent in each such year; and what the five most expensive chairs purchased in each such year were. [12803]

Robert Neill: The number of chairs purchased by Communities and Local Government, their cost and details of the five most expensive chairs purchased each year since its inception in 2006 are laid out in the two tables.

Chairs purchased by CLG

	Number purchased	Cost (£000)
2006	298	68,520
2007	1,751	464,362
2008	386	140,740
2009	1,210	390,680
2010	4	2,147

All this expenditure has been incurred prior to the 2010 general election, with the exception of two orthopaedic chairs.

Five most expensive purchased

2006	Opera range (Advanced Seating Design), Think (Steelcase) and Imbrex (Godfrey Syrett)
2007	Opera 66 and other Opera range chairs (Advanced Seating Design)
2008	Opera 27 and other Opera range chairs (Advanced Seating Design) and orthopaedic chairs from Posturite range
2009	HM34 (Hitch Mylius), Opera 26 (Advance Seating Design) Lola (Allermuir), RH300 Logic(Posturite)
2010	Opera 30, Opera 30-8 and Opera 64 (Advance Seating Design)

With the exception of the Think chairs purchased in 2006 and the Lola and Hitch Mylius chairs purchased in 2009, the remainder of the most expensive chairs purchased each year, including all chairs purchased in 2010, are orthopaedic chairs that have been tailored to meet the specific outcomes of display screen assessments and workstation assessments.

No specific data is held for chairs purchased in the period from 1997 to 2005.

Departmental ICT

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government which IT contracts awarded by his Department in each of the last five years have been abandoned; and what the monetary value of each such contract was. [12718]

Robert Neill: The information requested is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Departmental Pensions

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what the cost was of pension contributions incurred by (a) his Department and (b) each (i) non-departmental public body and (ii) executive agency for which he is responsible in (A) Scotland, (B) Wales, (C) each region of England and (D) Northern Ireland in each of the last three financial years; and what the planned expenditure is for 2010-11.

[12471]

Robert Neill: The cost of pension contributions made over the last three financial years for the main Department is shown in the following table:

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Cost (£ million)</i>
2007-08	15.6
2008-09	15.4
2009-10	15.4

Based on current staffing levels, forecast expenditure this year on pension costs is £14.7 million for the main Department.

All the above figures relate to main Department in England and we are not able to break these figures down into the Government office regions. Information on the Department's NDPBs and executive agencies is not held centrally.

Departmental Public Relations

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what the monetary value was of (a) public opinion research and (b) public relations contracts awarded by his Department in each (i) nation and (ii) region of the UK in each of the last five years.

[12473]

Robert Neill: For public opinion research and public relations activity the Department's Communication Directorate primarily uses the contracts operated by the Central Office of Information (COI). Information provided by the COI detailing the monetary value of (a) opinion research and (b) public relations work commissioned by the Department under these contracts in each of the last five years has been deposited in the Library of the House. A breakdown by nation, Government office region and London could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Empty Dwelling Management Orders

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many empty dwelling management orders have been issued in each local authority area in each year since 2006.

[13739]

Grant Shapps: A list of Empty Dwelling Management Orders issued in each local authority in each year since 2006 is as follows:

<i>Authority</i>	<i>Number of EDMOs</i>
<i>2006</i>	
South Oxfordshire DC	1
<i>2007</i>	
Carlisle DC	1
LB Hounslow	1
LB Lewisham	5
Norwich CC	1
Peterborough CC	1
Swale BC	1
Wychavon DC	1
<i>2008</i>	
LB Bromley	1
LB Hammersmith & Fulham	1
Norwich CC	5
South Norfolk DC	1
<i>2009</i>	
Bolton BC	1
Carlisle DC	1
New Forest DC	1
Peterborough CC	1
Southend on Sea	2
South Gloucestershire Council	1
South Tyneside BC	1
<i>2010</i>	
Bolton BC	1
LB Lewisham	22
Staffordshire Moorlands DC	1
Stockton on Tees Council	1

Government Offices for the Regions

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he has set a timetable for the closure of the Government Office in each region; whether he expects existing employees will be made redundant under the present compensation terms; and if he will make a statement.

[13387]

Greg Clark: On 22 July the Secretary of State announced the Government's intention in principle to abolish the remaining Government Offices following consideration of consequential issues. I refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement made to the House on 22 July 2010, *Official Report*, columns 27-28WS, on Regional Government in which we state the final decisions on the future of the Government Office Network, including arrangements for closure and for the redeployment or release of staff, will be made at the end of the spending review in the autumn.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether employees of the Government Offices for the Regions fall within the definition of surplus staff contained in the Cabinet Office's April 2008 publication *Efficiency and Relocation Support Programme: Protocol for Handling Surplus Staff Situations*; and if he will make a statement.

[13388]

Greg Clark: The announcement made on 22 July regarding the remaining Government Offices made clear that final decisions will be made at the end of the spending review. Until that time Government Office staff are not regarded as being surplus.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what cost/benefit analysis he carried out prior to his decision on the future of the Government offices for the regions. [13389]

Greg Clark: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Katy Clark) on 27 July 2010, *Official Report*, column 1038W.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what consultation he undertook with trades unions on his decision on the future of the Government Offices for the Regions; and if he will make a statement. [13390]

Greg Clark: The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government met Government office network trade union representatives prior to making his announcement on 22 July. A final decision on the future of the network will be made at the end of the spending review and discussions with Government office network trade union representatives continue as part of the spending review process.

I also refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) on 27 July 2010, *Official Report*, column 1037W.

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government which (1) bodies at what structural (a) level and (b) location will be responsible for economic regional development fund activity following the proposed abolition of regional government offices; [13768]

(2) functions hitherto undertaken by Government Offices (a) will be undertaken by (i) Government departments and (ii) local enterprise partnerships and (b) have yet to be assigned to another body following the abolition of the Government Offices for the Regions. [13769]

Greg Clark: On 22 July 2010 the Government announced their intention in principle to abolish the remaining Government offices subject to consideration of consequential issues including which Government office functions need to continue. The spending review process is being used to test which activities should continue, and to decide the most cost-effective way of doing this. The final decisions on the future of the Government office network, including the transfer of on-going functions, will be announced at the end of the spending review in the autumn.

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many redundancies he expects will take place (a) in the South West and (b) in England as a result of his decision to close the Government Office for the South West; and what the projected cost savings are arising from the closure of the other Government Offices for the Regions in the first year after closure. [14087]

Greg Clark: I refer the hon. Member to the written ministerial statement made to the House on 22 July 2010, *Official Report*, columns 27-28WS, on Regional Government in which we state the final decisions on the future of the Government Office Network, including

arrangements for the redeployment or release of Government Office staff, will be made at the end of the spending review in the autumn.

We anticipate savings from any final decision to close the Government Office Network. The exact sums will not be clear until the end of the spending review.

Housing: Construction

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what steps he has taken to implement his policy on not telling communities how or where to build; and what effect the implementation of this policy will have on developments on green belt land. [14122]

Robert Neill: In the coalition agreement we undertook to maintain the green belt. One major step has already been taken—on 6 July we revoked all regional strategies, thus removing regional housing targets and the pressure they created to release green belt land for development. That means the protection of green belts is in the hands of local communities. Local planning authorities should have regard to Planning Policy Guidance Note 2, “Green Belts”, which establishes a presumption against inappropriate development on green belt land.

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much Kickstart funding was (a) allocated and (b) disbursed to each local authority for building projects in 2009-10. [14487]

Grant Shapps: There was no Kick-start funding allocated or disbursed to local authorities as they were not eligible to apply.

Details of all Kickstart schemes that are proceeding are shown on the Homes and Communities Agency’s website.

Hyndburn Borough Council

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what recent representations he has received from Hyndburn borough council on reductions in levels of public expenditure. [14022]

Robert Neill: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has not received any recent representation from Hyndburn borough council on reductions in levels of public expenditure.

Local Government Finance

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what estimate he has made of the average percentage change in local authority budgets in 2012-13 consequent upon the removal of area-based grant and changes to revenue support grant; and what estimate he has made of the percentage budget change in these circumstances for each top-tier local authority. [14031]

Robert Neill: Decisions on local authority budgets is a matter for individual local authorities. Spending plans for local government for 2011-12 onwards are being considered in the context of the spending review which will be announced on 20 October 2010.

Local Government: Investment

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much money (a) in total and (b) derived from the sale of council houses each local authority invested in financial markets in the most recent period for which figures are available.

[13470]

Robert Neill: Local authorities in England had estimated total investments in financial markets of £20.004 million as at 31 March 2010. The data are as reported by local authorities to Communities and Local Government on the annual capital payments and receipts (CPR4) forms. I have today placed in the Library of the House a table giving details of the investments for each local authority.

It is not possible to say how much of these investments are derived from the sale of council houses as local authority investments cannot be attributed to particular sources from which they derive funds.

Local Government: Regulation

Christopher Pincher: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government if he will take steps to reduce the regulatory burden placed on local authorities by his Department.

[12548]

Robert Neill: We are already taking steps to reduce the regulatory burden by abolishing comprehensive area assessment and disbanding the Audit Commission. We are also reducing the unnecessary burden of secondary legislation and other forms of regulation to remove needless bureaucracy. We have already announced various changes including consolidation of building regulations and consolidation of three sets of tree protection regulations together with streamlining of this system. And, the forthcoming Localism Bill will contain additional measures that will further free local government from central and regional control so that they can ensure services are delivered according to local needs.

The Government are committed to ensuring that new burdens on local authorities are fully and properly funded to avoid pressure on council tax.

Private Rented Housing: Regulation

Graham Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much has been spent by each local authority on enforcement of the law relating to the private rented sector in each year since 2004.

[13740]

Grant Shapps: This information is not held centrally. Under the Housing Act 2004, local authorities can, in many cases, recover all or part of the costs associated with enforcement action against a private landlord.

Regional Planning and Development

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how many staff employed by (a) regional development agencies and (b) local government leaders' forums have been involved in preparing regional strategies in each region outside London in each of the last five years.

[14491]

Robert Neill: The information requested is not held centrally by my Department and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Renewable Energy

Edward Miliband: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government what assessment he has made of the effects of the abolition of regional spatial strategies on the amount of renewable energy produced at a local level.

[13968]

Greg Clark: The regional strategies were ineffective and flawed; just as with house building, imposing top-down targets does not increase the level of sustainable development. This Government want to see real increases in renewable energy produced at the local level. We are committed to meeting the challenge of climate change and securing a low carbon future as shown in our Annual Energy Statement. As laid out in the DECC press release of 9 August 2010, the new Government have overturned the law banning councils from selling their surplus renewable energy, and will be introducing new incentives to spur local power generation from renewables, to bring in long-term income to benefit local areas and to secure local acceptance for low carbon energy projects. This is a fundamental different approach from the last Government.

Social Rented Housing: Greater London

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government how much funding his Department has allocated for the construction of social housing in (a) London, (b) the London borough of Lambeth and (c) Streatham constituency in 2010-11.

[14166]

Andrew Stunell: The following table shows allocation provided in 2010-11 through the Homes and Communities Agency's National Affordable Housing Programme, Local Authority New Build and Kickstart programmes for the provision of affordable housing. The table shows the split of allocation between social rent and low cost home ownership, so far as follows:

<i>Category</i>	<i>London</i>	<i>Lambeth</i>
NAHP Social Rent	64,377,372	5,400,000
NAHP LCHO	13,348,511	1,941,680
LA New Build	777,484	0
Kickstart Rent	2,680,000	0
Kickstart LCHO	682,928	0

HCA do not collate information down to areas within local authorities. Allocation of funding from the NAHP is done on a bids basis so the actual allocation for the year is unknown at present. The figures in the table are to the end of August for the programme.

Travellers

Mr Ellwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government whether he plans to review the powers and responsibilities of local authorities in respect of Gypsies and Travellers.

[14394]

Andrew Stunell: The Government will bring into force section 318 of the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008 which includes local authority traveller sites in the Mobile Homes Act 1983. Residents of authorised local authority traveller sites will gain improved protection against eviction which means they will be treated in the same way as those who live on other residential mobile home sites.

Councils will be given incentives through the New Homes Bonus scheme to deliver traveller sites.

The Government intend, subject to necessary impact assessments, to revoke Planning Circular 01/2006 Planning for Gypsy and Traveller Sites and replace it with a short policy statement and light touch guidance.

The Government are working on proposals to strengthen the powers that local authorities have to enforce against breaches of planning control and to limit the opportunities for retrospective planning applications in relation to any form of unauthorised development.

TRANSPORT

Airports: Planning

Nicky Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether airports required to publish master plans will be required to continue to do so following the abolition of local development frameworks. [13360]

Mrs Villiers: On 6 July 2010, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government made a statement informing Parliament that regional strategies (outside London) had been revoked with immediate effect, returning decision-making powers on housing and planning to local councils. Local plans and development frameworks have not been abolished.

The 2003 "The Future of Air Transport" White Paper, published by the previous Government, recommended that the operators of certain airports maintain a master plan document detailing their airport development proposals, to inform the content of local development frameworks. This recommendation did not constitute a mandatory requirement for airports to publish master plans.

Aviation: Security

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether passive millimetre wave and X-ray technology body scanners have been used at any UK (a) airport, (b) port, (c) railway station and (d) underground station in the last 10 years. [14366]

Mrs Villiers: Passive millimetre wave technology is not in use in the UK. Security scanners using backscatter x-ray and active millimetre wave technology are in use in London Heathrow, London Gatwick and Manchester airports for transport security purposes.

Security scanners are not currently deployed operationally at any port, railway station or underground station for transport security purposes. The Department for Transport has, however, carried out trials of security scanners at Paddington railway station in the past.

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of passive millimetre wave and X-ray technology body scanners; and whether he plans to introduce them at UK airports. [14367]

Mrs Villiers: Security scanners based on active millimetre wave and backscatter x-ray technologies are already deployed in UK airports.

The effectiveness of security scanners is assessed through detailed laboratory testing carried out by the Home Office Scientific Development Branch on behalf of the Department for Transport. Passive millimetre wave security scanners have been tested but were not found to be as effective as other technologies.

Government Departments: Tyres

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what guidance his Department issues on the frequency and nature of tyre condition checks for vehicles owned by Government departments and their agencies and non-departmental public bodies; and what steps his Department is taking to ensure that such guidance is observed. [13554]

Mike Penning: None. It is for each Government Department to decide how best to ensure the compliance of any vehicles it owns with the legal requirements relating to tyre tread depth.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what minimum requirements for tread depth his Department sets for vehicles owned by Government departments, their agencies and non-departmental bodies; and what steps his Department is taking to ensure that these requirements are observed. [13558]

Mike Penning: Minimum requirements for tread depth are set out in the Road Vehicles (Construction and Use) Regulations 1986, as amended, and vary according to type of vehicle. For cars, the minimum depth is 1.6 mm. The Department for Transport does not set different standards specifically for Government owned vehicles.

It is for each Government Department to decide how best to ensure the compliance of any vehicles it owns with the legal requirements relating to tyre tread depth.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will bring forward proposals to increase the (a) frequency and (b) quality of tyre condition checks for vehicles owned by Government Departments and their agencies and non-departmental public bodies. [13561]

Mike Penning: No.

It is for each Government Department to decide how best to check the compliance of any vehicles it owns with the legal requirements relating to tyre tread depth.

Leamside Railway Line

Mrs Hodgson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what steps have been taken to preserve the infrastructure of the Leamside Line for potential future use. [14571]

Mrs Villiers: The land occupied by the Leamside Line is owned by Network Rail which has no plans to dispose of it. The Department for Transport has the opportunity to object to any disposal of this nature proposed by Network Rail, should this ever arise, as part of a process regulated by the Office of Rail Regulation. Planning Policy Guidance (PPG13) gives guidance on the safeguarding of transport routes and local authorities have planning powers to prevent disused railway lines from being used for development.

Mrs Hodgson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what studies have been carried out by his Department on the case for reopening the Leamside Line. [14572]

Mrs Villiers: The Department for Transport has not carried out any studies on the case for reopening the Leamside Line. However a study was carried out by Tyne and Wear PTE (Nexus) in 2008 which looked at a range of options for possible use of the line and estimated the costs of reopening and likely value for money.

London Airports

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether the South East Airports Task Force will consider the scope for reducing the number of transfer passengers using airports in the South East. [13907]

Mrs Villiers: Heathrow is the UK's only major hub airport and therefore the only UK airport handling large numbers of transfer passengers. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear the importance of securing Heathrow's hub status within the constraints of the existing runways. The South East Airports Taskforce is exploring measures to help make the most of existing infrastructure and improve conditions for all users at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports. I intend to publish the taskforce's terms of reference shortly.

Railways: Construction

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what plans there are for high speed rail services to stop at Preston. [13185]

Mr Philip Hammond: The Government's vision is of a truly national high speed rail network linking the UK's major conurbations. No final decisions on the shape or phasing of the network will be taken until full public consultation has taken place. Decisions on operational specification—including service patterns—will not be taken until a later stage in the project's life cycle.

Renewable Transport Fuel Obligation

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to the answer of 22 June 2010, *Official Report*, column 109W, on biofuels: EU action, if he will make the acceleration of the rate of annual increases of the UK renewable transport fuel obligations conditional on mandatory sustainability criteria. [13447]

Norman Baker: The Renewable Energy Directive (RED) and Fuel Quality Directive (FQD) contain mandatory sustainability criteria for biofuels. These include that biofuels must deliver a GHG saving of at least 35%, and must not be sourced from areas of high biodiversity, or from high carbon soils (such as rainforests or wetlands).

All biofuels will have to meet mandatory sustainability criteria in order to be counted towards meeting the targets in the RED and FQD, subject to certain exceptions. We will be consulting soon on proposals to implement the RED and FQD, including on how to ensure biofuels used in the UK meet mandatory sustainability criteria set out in the directives.

Future decisions on obligation levels under the renewable transport fuel obligation will be made in the light of available information on the impacts of higher targets on sustainability, indirect land use change and how best to deploy biomass resources across different sectors.

Roads: Accidents

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport how many fatal road accidents have involved quad bikes in each of the last four years. [14129]

Mike Penning: The information requested cannot be identified separately. Quad bikes do not fall into any of the main vehicle categories recorded by the police in road accidents. Those involved in reported personal injury accidents are recorded as part of the 'other motor vehicle' category along with vehicles such as ambulances, fire engines, and motorised wheel chairs.

Speed Limits: Cameras

Mr Watson: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for East Yorkshire of 20 July 2010, *Official Report*, column 188W, on speed limits: cameras, how many responses he has received to his letter dated 24 June 2010 on the Government's position on speed cameras; and if he will place in the Library a copy of each response. [12202]

Mike Penning: I have received six responses to my letter dated 24 June in which I set out the Government's position regarding speed cameras. To comply with data protection requirements these have been summarised. The summary has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Tyres

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what discussions he has had with his counterparts in other EU countries on labelling of tyres with respect to fuel efficiency. [13546]

Mike Penning: None. EU Regulation No. 1222/2009 on the labelling of tyres with respect to fuel efficiency and other essential parameters was adopted on 25 November 2009. It will come into effect from 1 November 2012 for all tyres produced from 1 July 2012. Coalition Ministers have not had any discussions with counterparts in EU member states on this regulation.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport whether his Department has assessed the merits of strengthening the inspection requirements for the tyre condition of school buses. [13547]

Mike Penning: No. Large passenger-carrying vehicles such as school buses must have a tread depth of at least 1 mm across three-quarters of the breadth of the tread and in a continuous band around the entire circumference.

This is checked at the annual roadworthiness test and is also enforced at the roadside by the police and the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency. The operator of the service has a responsibility to ensure that the vehicle is always roadworthy.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport what research his Department has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on the relationship between the rolling resistance of tyres and levels of fuel consumption. [13555]

Mike Penning: The Department for Transport has not commissioned any research on the relationship between tyre rolling resistance and fuel economy. However, in the process of producing an Impact Assessment on EU Regulation 661/2008, which sets limits on the maximum permissible rolling resistance of tyres, the Department drew on research conducted by other organisations. This included a joint study by the organisations TNO Science and Industry, the Laboratory of Applied Thermodynamics and the Institute of European Environmental Policy entitled "Review and analysis of the reduction potential and costs of technological and other measures to reduce CO₂ emissions from passenger cars" and the "Tyre/road noise reference book" by Informex.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if he will bring forward proposals to improve the provision of information to businesses about the relationship between the rolling resistance of tyres and levels of fuel consumption. [13557]

Mike Penning: The EU Tyre Labelling Regulation 1222/2009 will require tyre suppliers to provide consumers with information on the rolling resistance, wet grip and noise performance of all tyres from November 2012. The Department for Transport will work with industry to ensure that private and business consumers are educated to enable them to understand this information and the fuel economy benefits of low rolling resistance tyres.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport on how many occasions he has held meetings with representatives of road safety organisations since his appointment; and whether he discussed enforcement of the tyre condition law for motor vehicles on any such occasion. [13559]

Mike Penning: Ministers regularly meet with a wide range of road safety organisations and a broad range of road safety issues are discussed at these meetings. However, the specific subject of enforcing tyre condition regulations has not been discussed in detail.

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Transport (1) whether (a) his Department, (b) the Government Car and Dispatch Agency and (c) other

agencies and non-departmental public bodies take into account rolling resistance as a performance criterion when purchasing tyres; [13562]

(2) if he will make it his policy to ensure that rolling resistance is taken into account by Government Departments and their agencies and non-departmental public bodies as a performance criterion when purchasing tyres. [13556]

Mike Penning: Current Government Buying Standards published on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs website provide Government Departments and agencies with advice on procurement and maintenance of vehicles. This already includes guidance encouraging the use of lower rolling resistance tyres. The increased availability of objective information on tyre rolling resistance, as required by EU Regulation 1222/2009, will help support these decisions. Purchasing decisions are ultimately a matter for individual Departments and agencies to take bearing in mind their own budgets and the benefits of different technologies within their specific operation.

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY COMMITTEE

Members: Telephones

Mr Meacher: To ask the hon. Member for Broxbourne, representing the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, what steps the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority is taking to reduce the average length of time taken before telephone calls from hon. Members are answered. [13690]

Mr Charles Walker: The Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority has recently introduced a new call handling system. This has allowed IPSA to make a number of improvements (such as queuing calls more efficiently across a wider group of operatives) which will enable them to deal with calls more effectively and reduce the average call waiting time.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

Catering: Prices

Graham Jones: To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the House of Commons Commission, what estimate the House of Commons Commission has made of the increase in the House's income in 2011-12 arising from increased catering and bar prices; and whether the Commission has estimated the likely effect of those increased prices on the amount claimed by hon. Members for subsistence from the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority in 2011-12. [14065]

Sir Stuart Bell: It is difficult to forecast accurately the impact on take-up of services following price increases. However, the Commission intends that the increases will yield additional income of around £500,000 this year, and believes that this figure is a cautious estimate. The Commission is not responsible for Members' expenses and has made no estimate of the likely effect of the

price increases on amounts which will be claimed by hon. Members for subsistence from the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Arts: Public Expenditure

Ms Bagshawe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of public expenditure on the arts in each year since 1997. [13999]

Hugh Robertson: DCMS expenditure on the arts since 1997 is set out in the following table.

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Arts sector support (£ million)</i>
1997-98	196.4
1998-99	199.7
1999-2000	229.8
2000-01	238.8
2001-02	252.9
2002-03	301.5
2003-04	367.6
2004-05	398.2
2005-06	410.6
2006-07	430.4
2007-08	425.9
2008-09	435.8

The provisional outturn figure for 2009-10 is £449.0 million, and the planned figure for 2010-11 is £443.3 million.

Copyright

Tristram Hunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what discussions (a) he and (b) officials in his Department have had with Ofcom on the Online Copyright Infringement Initial Obligations Code and (i) compliance with data protection and privacy law, (ii) the standard of evidence required to take action against alleged copyright infringers and (iii) ensuring a fair and accessible appeals process; and if he will make a statement. [13824]

Hugh Robertson: DCMS officials have been in regular contact with Ofcom as they have consulted on the Initial Obligations Code, and considered their draft in the light of the responses they received. We will continue with this dialogue as both Ofcom and Government need to be confident that the code meets the requirements of the Digital Economy Act. This includes important aspects such as data protection and privacy, and the standard of evidence. We and Ofcom have always been clear that the appeals process is an important and integral part of the process.

Museums, Libraries and Archives Council

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the total savings which will accrue to the Exchequer as a result of the closure of the regional offices of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. [13576]

Hugh Robertson: The offices of the MLA's nine regional agencies were closed between January 2009 and March 2010. These closures and related savings enabled DCMS to reduce the MLA's core funding by £3.4 million per annum.

Mr Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the total savings which will accrue to the Exchequer as a result of the abolition of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council. [13577]

Hugh Robertson: The abolition of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) will free up resources for front line museum services, ensuring value for money and improving transparency about where taxpayers money is spent. Officials are working with the MLA to discuss the transfer of a number of existing programmes, including Renaissance in the Regions. MLA's allocation for 2010-11 is £62.6 million, however, until discussions on the transfer of programmes have been completed, it is not possible to estimate the total scale of savings per year. Further details on this will be given in due course.

Swimming

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport how much expenditure will be saved in 2010-11 by ending the free swimming initiative. [13812]

Hugh Robertson: A total of £25,951,788 from the £40 million resource funding allocated for 2010-11 has been saved by ending the free swimming programme. An additional £25 million of capital funding allocated for the programme in 2010-11 has also been saved.

Television: Digital Broadcasting

Mr Mark Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of people in (a) Wales, (b) England, (c) Scotland and (d) Northern Ireland who receive television through a relay transmitter. [12741]

Mr Vaizey: I have made no such estimate. As the independent regulator for the communications industry, Ofcom is responsible for ensuring broadcasters and transmission operators comply with their licence conditions in areas such as transmission coverage and reception, including monitoring the quality and quantity of reception received through relay transmitters.

I have therefore asked Ofcom's chief executive to consider the question raised by the hon. Member for Ceredigion and to write to him direct.

Copies of the reply will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Television: Urban Areas

Emma Reynolds: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what his estimate is (1) of the number of cities that could be served by city TV stations; [13373]

(2) of the minimum size of conurbation that could support a city TV station; [13374]

(3) of the number of rural areas that would be able to receive a broadcast signal from city TV stations.

[13375]

Hugh Robertson: The Government would like to see as many local television services emerge as the market can provide. We are currently awaiting the outcome of Nicholas Shott's review into the commercial viability of local television, including the areas and conurbations which might support these services. We expect to publish its proposals later this autumn.

Theatre: National Income

Ms Bagshawe: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the contribution of the theatre sector to gross domestic product in each year since 1997. [14070]

Hugh Robertson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) on 26 July 2010, *Official Report*, column 608W.

UK Film Council

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Olympics, Media and Sport what impact assessment he has (a) commissioned and (b) evaluated on the abolition of the UK Film Council. [14103]

Hugh Robertson: No formal impact assessment was commissioned. The basis for the decision has been the need to find savings in all areas of the Department's spending, and to ensure that every pound of public money we allocate to supporting the film industry gives the maximum benefit. This commitment to the UK film industry is why we are increasing their share of lottery funding.

SCOTLAND

Future Jobs Fund: Scotland

Gregg McClymont: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on how many occasions since his appointment he has held meetings with ministerial colleagues to discuss the Future Jobs Fund in Scotland. [14321]

Michael Moore: The Future Jobs Fund will be replaced next year by the Work Programme, which is being developed as part of the Government's plans to get Britain working. Existing commitments to the Future Jobs Fund are being met by the Government. I discussed the reform of the benefits system with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 28 July.

Housing Benefit

Ann McKechin: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland with which (a) housing associations, (b) local authorities and (c) other organisations in Scotland he held meetings to discuss the impact of the proposed changes in housing benefit in July and August 2010. [13686]

Michael Moore: The Department for Work and Pensions has had preliminary discussions with the Scottish Government and shall continue to liaise with it and key stakeholders on the changes to housing benefit affecting the social rented sector. As part of the process to introduce the necessary legislation the Department for Work and Pensions will publish its proposals and associated impact assessments in due course.

Official Visits

Ann McKechin: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which local authority areas in Scotland (a) he and (b) the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State visited in August 2010. [13685]

Michael Moore: During August 2010 my colleague, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, and I visited a number of local authority areas on official business. In the course of the next few weeks we will carry out more such visits.

Ports: Police

Mr Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with Home Office Ministers on reductions to UK Border Agency funding for police posts at Stranraer port. [14315]

Michael Moore: I regularly discuss a range of matters with ministerial colleagues including issues around an appropriate Common Travel Area policy for Scotland.

State Visits: Vatican

Gemma Doyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Scottish Executive on the forthcoming Papal visit. [14390]

Michael Moore: My officials are, and have been, in close and ongoing touch with officials in the Scottish Government and also other Government Departments to ensure that the visit proceeds smoothly.

Gemma Doyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what arrangements have been made for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Scotland. [14391]

Michael Moore: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office, in liaison with the Holy See, have led on all the arrangements for the Papal visit. As part of the visit to Scotland, Pope Benedict will be received at the Palace of Holyrood House by Her Majesty the Queen.

Gemma Doyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland whether officials in his Department will be permitted to attend official events comprising part of the Papal visit during working hours. [14392]

Michael Moore: I will attend the reception being held at Holyrood House and I will be accompanied by one of my Private Office staff. The Scotland Office Director and one of the Deputy Directors have also been invited to attend. No other officials are formally attending the official events. Applications from staff for leave of absence to attend official events will be considered in the usual way.

Gemma Doyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met Cardinal Keith O'Brien to discuss the forthcoming Papal visit. [14393]

Michael Moore: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office are leading on all arrangements for the papal visit. FCO officials and Lord Patten, the Prime Minister's Personal Representative on all matters pertaining to the visit, are in regular contact with the Scottish Catholic Bishops Conference.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

Departmental Billing

Philip Davies: To ask the Minister for Women and Equalities how many payments to suppliers were made by the Government Equalities Office (a) within 30 days of, (b) over 30 days after, (c) over 60 days after and (d) over 90 days after the date of invoice in the latest period for which figures are available. [13924]

Lynne Featherstone: The Government Equalities Office calculates prompt payment statistics from the date the invoice is received within the Department and not from the actual date of the invoice. On this basis the latest figures we have available are as follows:

August 2010

	Number
Total number of invoices received	81
Total paid within 30 days	81
Total paid at over 30 days	0
Total paid at over 60 days	0
Total paid at over 90 days	0

Financial year	Royal Navy		Army		RAF	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2005-06	40	1	80	7	15	6
2006-07	47	4	99	11	23	6
2007-08	45	3	68	5	57	13
2008-09	51	6	74	7	93	15
2009-10	65	4	76	5	59	14

Armed Forces: Housing

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he plans to take to improve service accommodation for soldiers and their families. [13860]

Mr Robathan: The Department will look at whether there is scope to refurbish the armed forces' accommodation from efficiencies within the Ministry of Defence.

Kris Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much his Department has paid to (a) local authorities in council tax and (b) Annington Homes in rent for empty properties in the defence housing estate in each of the last five years. [13995]

Mr Robathan: The amount the Ministry of Defence (MOD) pays in council tax and rent for empty Service

DEFENCE

Aircraft Carriers

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence whether the electromagnetic catapult system designed for the Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers will be capable of launching Dassault Rafale M. [13571]

Peter Luff: On current plans, the Queen Elizabeth (QE) class aircraft carriers do not have an electro-magnetic catapult system in their design, as their initial configuration is for the operation of Short Take Off and Vertical Landing (STOVL) aircraft. The US has developed the Electro-Magnetic Aircraft Launch System (EMALS) for their CVN-78 programme. The adaptable nature of the QE class design would enable the fitting of an electro-magnetic catapult in the future, should that become a UK requirement; this would be capable of launching a number of aircraft types, including the Rafale M.

The Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) will define the future shape and role of the armed forces and the equipment that they will need.

Armed Forces: Gloucester

Richard Graham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) men and (b) women were recruited to each service through the Armed Forces Careers centre in Gloucester in each of the last five years. [13401]

Mr Robathan: The number of personnel recruited through the armed forces careers office in Gloucester over the last five years, broken down by gender, is presented in the following table.

family accommodation properties, which are normally only empty for short periods between occupants, is not separately identifiable from that for other properties.

The MOD will always be required to hold a management margin of empty properties in order to ensure that homes are available for entitled Service families when required and to allow for major improvement works to take place.

Kris Hopkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) service family accommodation units and (b) single living accommodation units have been classified as unfit for occupation in each of the last five years. [13998]

Mr Robathan: All currently occupied accommodation is considered to be of a habitable standard.

Sometimes accommodation units are unable to be occupied for various reasons including demolition or major refurbishment. Our records do not separately identify such units from other unoccupied accommodation.

Mr Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many units of accommodation for UK armed forces personnel there were in Germany at the latest date for which figures are available. [14074]

Mr Robathan: There are 13,316 single living accommodation bed-spaces and 11,664 service family accommodation properties in Germany.

Armed Forces: Manpower

Karl McCartney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of the armed forces have been serving for 10 years or more. [14250]

Mr Robathan: As at 1 April 2010, the latest date for which tri-service data are available, there was an estimated 77,260 personnel who have served for 10 years or more.

Armoured Fighting Vehicles

Angus Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) which companies have re-bid for the Warrior Capability Sustainment programme; [13569]

(2) what recent estimate he has made of the total cost to the public purse of the Warrior Capability Sustainment programme. [13570]

Peter Luff: The total value of the Warrior Capability Sustainment Programme (WCSP) cannot be confirmed until Main Gate approval has been obtained, which is likely to be early next year. Only at that point is the Department in a position to define, with confidence, the level of performance we can deliver, at what cost, by when and at what level of risk.

BAE Systems Global Combat Systems and Lockheed Martin UK have resubmitted their tenders for the WCSP.

Atomic Weapons Establishment: Manpower

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many staff are employed at the Atomic Weapons Establishment sites in (a) Aldermaston and (b) Burghfield. [14333]

Peter Luff: Atomic Weapons Establishment plc employs 4,230 staff at the Aldermaston site and 340 staff at the Burghfield site. These numbers are full-time equivalent staff employed on 27 August 2010 and are rounded to the nearest 10.

In addition some 2,000 staff are employed by contractors at these sites.

AWE Aldermaston: Fires

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps were taken to protect (a) Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Aldermaston, (b) emergency service personnel and (c) members of the public from asbestos contamination arising from the

fire at AWE Aldermaston on 3 August 2010; and what steps were taken to investigate potential asbestos contamination in the area surrounding the site of the fire. [13459]

Peter Luff: Asbestos was known to be present in the structure of the building, so, while dealing with the incident, Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Fire and Rescue crews and other emergency services wore the appropriate personal protection equipment.

A 600 metre cordon was set up around the building, which was judged by the emergency services to afford adequate protection to the public from any potential hazard.

Since the fire, thorough sampling, both on- and off-site, has not detected any asbestos outside the building, so the asbestos contamination is assessed to have been limited to within the building itself. As a result, there was no risk to AWE staff or members of the public. The asbestos that was found in the building is being dealt with in accordance with established safety procedures.

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which fire brigades attended the fire at the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston on 3 August 2010; how many firefighting personnel attended; and how many fire appliances attended. [13465]

Peter Luff: The Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) attended with four fire appliances: two fire tenders, one ambulance and one fire response vehicle. The 11 AWE fire service personnel in attendance carried out the necessary fire fighting activities.

Royal Berkshire FRS attended and took the primary operational role after being fully briefed by AWE FRS of the situation, with AWE FRS then providing a support role. Hampshire FRS, the London Fire Brigade and the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation also attended.

The total number of fire service personnel attending the incident peaked at 95, at the time of the change in shift. The number of fire appliances present peaked at 20.

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what date and at what time the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Aldermaston notified the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service of the fire at AWE Aldermaston on 3 August 2010. [13466]

Peter Luff: The Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Fire and Rescue Service were notified on 3 August 2010 at 9.06 pm. Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service were notified by AWE on 3 August 2010 at 9.08 pm and put on stand-by. The AWE Fire and Rescue Service requested that the Royal Berkshire Service attend at 9.23 pm.

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reason the AWE Off-Site Contingency Arrangements were not activated to direct the response to the fire at the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston on 3 August 2010. [13467]

Peter Luff: The Atomic Weapons Establishment off-site emergency plan was not put into operation because this plan covers an incident where radioactivity is present, and there was no release of radioactive material.

The plans that were implemented were those relating to the conventional explosives area where the fire occurred. As an explosives licensed facility, its emergency plan is regulated by the Hazardous Installations Directorate, part of the Health and Safety Executive.

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place a copy of each document provided by AWE plc of written instructions and advice to firefighting personnel attending incidents at the Atomic Weapons Establishment in the Library. [13468]

Peter Luff: AWE plc does not produce separate written instructions and advice for firefighting personnel attending incidents. As part of the Defence Fire Risk Management Organisation, the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Fire and Rescue Service (FRS) is required to comply

with instructions issued by the Home Office, the Health and Safety Executive and the Ministry of Defence.

The Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service has its own plans and documentation in respect of AWE sites at Aldermaston and Burghfield, and engages regularly with colleagues in the AWEFRS.

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many incidents at the Atomic Weapons Establishment Aldermaston have resulted in attendance of the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service in each year from 2006 to 2010; and on what dates each such incident occurred. [13469]

Peter Luff: Since 2006, there have been four events at the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) Aldermaston site where the Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service (RBFRS) has been requested to attend. In addition, there have been three events where RBFRS acted as a stand-by resource while the AWE Fire and Rescue Service attended the event. These are summarised in the following table:

<i>Date</i>	<i>RBFRS involvement</i>	<i>Event</i>
3 August 2010	Attendance	Fire in explosives facility
9 January 2009	Attendance	Welding steel frame caused adjacent timber cladding and wall insulation fire
20 July 2007	Attendance	Pumping of flood water from medical building
17 October 2006	Attendance	High voltage equipment smoking and smell of burning
22 July 2006	Stand-by	Vehicle fire
29 June 2006	Stand-by	Small fire in a container during decommissioning operations
19 March 2006	Stand-by	False alarm

Civil Servants: Redundancy Pay

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many Transport Regiment Royal Logistics Corps personnel are covered by the Civil Service Compensation Scheme. [13805]

Mr Robathan: All Ministry of Defence civilian personnel are covered by the civil service compensation scheme.

There are 128 civilian posts within the nine Royal Logistic Corps Transport Regiments.

Cyprus: Armed Forces

Mr Mike Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many (a) one-bedroom, (b) two-bedroom, (c) three-bedroom and (d) four-bedroom properties are owned by his Department in Cyprus. [14245]

Mr Robathan: These are the following number of service family accommodation properties in Cyprus:

<i>Bedrooms</i>	<i>Number</i>
One	2
Two	519
Three	1,301
Four	364

Under various improvement initiatives, some 240 of these properties will be demolished by March 2011.

Departmental Billing

Stewart Hosie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proportion of invoices from suppliers his Department paid within 10 days of receipt in July and August 2010. [13292]

Mr Robathan: Since 1 May 2010 the Department began measuring performance against a target of payment within five working days, instead of the 10 day target that was introduced in October 2008.

Data available against the new target is published on the MOD's website

www.mod.uk

and provided in the following table:

<i>Percentage of invoices paid within five days of receipt</i>	<i>%</i>
July 2010	95.36
August 2010	96.56

Departmental Fines

Stewart Hosie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many transport-related fines his Department has settled on behalf of its staff in each year since 2005; and what the cost to the public purse was in each such year. [13294]

Mr Robathan: There is no requirement to hold centrally details of fines incurred by Ministry of Defence officials while driving service vehicles; this information could, therefore, be provided only at disproportionate cost. Officials are, however, personally liable for the payment of any such fines, which are usually paid by the Department and then recovered from the individual. Only in exceptional circumstances, such as the death or retirement of the official, might it be impossible to recover such costs.

Future Large Aircraft

Mr Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the maximum lift capacity of the A400M will be for the UK purchased fleet. [13182]

Peter Luff: The UK A400M aircraft has been specified to carry a payload of 32 tonnes.

Navy: Museums and Galleries

Dr Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for what purpose the National Museum of the Royal Navy was established; [13644]

(2) what the objectives are of the co-ordinating role for the National Museum of the Royal Navy in respect of (a) the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth, (b) the Royal Marines Museum, Southsea, (c) the Royal Navy Submarine Museum, Gosport and (d) the Fleet Air Arm Museum, Yeovilton; [13645]

(3) for what reason the National Museum of the Royal Navy was created as the sole corporate trustee of the Royal Naval Museum, Portsmouth; and if he will make a statement. [13646]

Mr Robathan [*holding answer 8 September 2010*]: The Government welcome the establishment of the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN) as a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. The Department and the Royal Navy looks to the NMRN for leadership on naval heritage matters; and to ensure that the full range of our naval heritage assets are managed and employed in a coherent manner.

The NMRN is classed as a non-departmental public body (NDPB), therefore as an NDPB, the questions raised by the hon. Member are a matter for the National Museum's director general.

Dr Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) for what reason (a) the National Museum of the Royal Navy and (b) his Department, on behalf of HMS Victory have indicated an intention to withdraw from common ticketing arrangements for admission to Portsmouth Historic Dockyard; [13647]

(2) what assessment he has made of the effect on (a) the Mary Rose Trust, (b) the Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust and (c) the Warrior Preservation Trust of the withdrawal of existing common ticketing arrangements; and if he will assess the (i) advantages and (ii) disadvantages of a takeover of the three trusts by the National Museum of the Royal Navy. [13648]

Mr Robathan [*holding answer 8 September 2010*]: For over a year the Ministry of Defence (MOD), together with the National Museum of the Royal Navy (NMRN), has been exploring with partners in Portsmouth Historic

Dockyard how best to develop a new governance construct for the Historic Dockyard that builds on the strengths of the current arrangements, reflects current realities and provides a strong base for handling future challenges. As part of this process of change, the NMRN and the MOD have announced their intention to withdraw from the current arrangements.

The assessment of any change within the governance structure of the Portsmouth Historic Dockyard is a matter for the boards of trustees of the individual attractions. I would certainly hope that the individual museums will be able to reach agreement with the National Museum on a new construct, and I understand a process of dialogue is continuing. Each trust is free to make its own decision on the nature of future arrangements in the Dockyard.

Navy: Talybont-on-Usk

Roger Williams: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many properties the Royal Navy rents in Talybont-on-Usk, Powys; and if he will make a statement. [13766]

Mr Robathan: There are two properties rented by the Royal Navy in Talybont-on-Usk, Powys.

RAF St Mawgan

Stephen Gilbert: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has for future flying activities at RAF St Mawgan. [14389]

Nick Harvey: Ministry of Defence (MOD) flying activity ceased at RAF St Mawgan in 2008. The airfield was sold to Cornwall county council and now operates as Newquay Cornwall airport. There are no flying units located at the residual RAF St Mawgan site and MOD has no plans to conduct routine flying operations from the site for the foreseeable future.

Trident

John Woodcock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) how many staff are employed on the Trident Value for Money review; [14334]

(2) how much has been spent to date on carrying out the value for money review of Trident; and what estimate he has made of the final cost. [14335]

Mr Robathan: Two members of staff are employed full time on the Trident Value for Money review, with a number of other Ministry of Defence staff providing significant input to the review within the scope of their existing posts.

As at the end of August, the total cost of both officials assigned full time on the Trident Value for Money review is approximately £70,000. The final staff cost is estimated to be approximately £120,000.

In addition, there has been some expenditure on external assistance and technical consultancy for the Value for Money review and linked aspects of the Strategic Defence and Security Review. It has not been possible, in the time available, to determine the precise amount attributable to the Trident Value for Money review and I will write to the hon. Member in due course.

EDUCATION

Building Schools for the Future Programme

Ed Balls: To ask the Secretary of State for Education if he will publish the advice he received from officials of his Department on his decision on the Building Schools for the Future programme. [8495]

Mr Gibb: Information relating to internal discussion and advice is not normally disclosed and I do not intend to do so on this issue.

Vernon Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for Education whether an estimate has been made of costs which will be incurred in the future by local authorities on Building Schools for the Future projects that will not now go ahead; what representations he has received from local authorities on the matter; whether he plans to provide compensation to local authorities for such costs; and if he will make a statement. [8560]

Mr Gibb [holding answer 15 July 2010]: The costs incurred by individual local authorities and schools in preparing for Building Schools for the Future are not held centrally. The costs vary for local authorities depending on how they have chosen to manage their BSF projects and the stage they had reached. The Secretary of State has received representation from a number of MPs, local authorities and stakeholders. There are no plans to compensate local authorities for any costs incurred.

Building Schools for the Future Programme: Merseyside

Bill Esterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education (1) what plans he has for the building projects at (a) Chesterfield High School and (b) Crosby High School; [4610]

(2) what plans he has to complete phase two of the Aintree Davenhill School building project. [4611]

Mr Gibb [holding answer 28 June 2010]: On 5 July, the Secretary of State announced a major overhaul of capital expenditure on schools spearheaded by the capital review led by Sebastian James. To ensure that buildings are built on budget and on time, and to ensure that a higher proportion of capital investment gets rapidly to the front line, the announcement included the ending of a major part of the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme. BSF developments are being maintained for three groups of schools:

those in a local authority area's initial BSF scheme where Financial Close has been reached;

the first projects due to be taken forward in a local authority area where Financial Close has not been reached but where very significant work has been undertaken, to the point of appointing a preferred bidder at "close of dialogue"; and

some schools with planned projects subsequent to their authority's initial scheme—projects with Outline Business Cases approved before 1 January 2010.

This means that the projects at Chesterfield High School and Crosby High Special School have stopped. Aintree Davenhill School is a primary school, and BSF did not fund projects at primary schools. The Primary Capital Programme funds primary school projects, and

its operation is different from BSF's—local authorities prioritise funds that the Department for Education allocates.

Sefton was allocated £9.6 million for 2008-11. According to information provided by the local authority, the first phase of Aintree Davenport is a £2 million refurbishment funded from its Primary Capital Programme allocation and which is due to be finished this year. The Department for Education does not hold information relating to subsequent phases of this project; it is for the local authority to make decisions about its priorities for primary investment.

Plans for future Government funding for primary schools will be included in the capital review announced on 5 July 2010 by the Secretary of State.

Departmental Pay

Tom Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Education how much was paid in bonuses to civil servants in his Department in 2009-10. [2176]

Michael Gove: The Department for Education was created on 12 May 2010. In the predecessor Department for Children, Schools and Families £1.98 million was spent on non-consolidated performance pay in 2009-10. This represents 1.4% of the 2009-10 pay bill with 1,434 (52%) of staff receiving a non-consolidated performance payment. The average non-consolidated performance payment for senior civil service staff (97) was £8,732 and £851 for departmental staff (1,337).

All employees are eligible for non-consolidated performance payments, subject to strict criteria. Senior civil service non-consolidated payments are determined as part of a central performance management framework managed by the Cabinet Office. Payments for other grades are subject to the pay remit process and reflect previous pay settlements. Non-consolidated performance payments have to be re-earned each year and do not add to future pay bill costs (e.g. pensions).

Departmental Reorganisation

Mr Iain Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what his estimate is of the cost to the public purse of the re-branding of his Department (a) on the latest date for which figures are available and (b) in total. [96]

Michael Gove: The renaming of the Department for Education cost £5,250.

Primary Education: Curriculum

Ed Balls: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what his policy is on the introduction of a new primary school curriculum in September 2011; and what recent representations he has received on such a curriculum. [1215]

Mr Gibb: As I announced in my statement at oral questions on Monday 7 June, the Government do not intend to proceed with the changes to the primary curriculum that the previous Government had proposed for introduction in September 2011. We have had a number of representations about such a curriculum. As our document "The Coalition: our programme for

government” makes clear, we intend to allow schools more freedom over the curriculum: we believe that the approach which the previous Government proposed was too prescriptive in terms of how teachers should teach. We were also deeply concerned about the proposed move away from teaching distinct subject disciplines at primary level.

We want to ensure that our national curriculum is a properly international curriculum that reflects the best collective wisdom we have about how children learn, what they should know and how quickly they can grow in knowledge. We want to arrive at a simple core, informed by the best international practice, which will provide a minimum entitlement for pupils and which can act as a benchmark against which parents can ask meaningful and informed questions about progress. We will announce our detailed plans for reviewing the curriculum in the autumn.

Schools: Information and Communications Technology

Tom Blenkinsop: To ask the Secretary of State for Education what plans he has for the Harnessing Technology grant; and if he will make a statement.

[10337]

Mr Gibb: The Harnessing Technology grant is being reduced by £100 million in the current financial year. £50 million of the reduction has been used to provide capital for Free Schools as announced on 18 June. A further £50 million is the result of the 5 July announcement on End Year Flexibility (EYF), and is to address inherited spending commitments for 2010-11, where funding was reliant on under-spends through the EYF system or additional funding from the Reserve.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum: Deportation

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what minimum notice period of the date and time of deportation her Department has set for failed asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. [13218]

Damian Green: A minimum of 72 hours (including at least two working days) must generally be allowed between informing a person of their removal directions and the removal itself. The last 24 hours of this period must include a working day. There are occasions where this will not apply which officers should consider before setting removal directions.

Persons detained for removal should, where possible, be given access to telephone facilities to enable instruction of and allow contact with representatives.

Instructions can be found in the public domain in chapter 60 of the Enforcement and Instruction Guidance manual which can be found on the UK Border Agency website at:

www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk/policyandlaw/guidance/enforcement

Borders: Personal Records

Robert Halfon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many (a) consultants and (b) civil servants were working on the e-Borders programme in each year since 2005. [12875]

Damian Green: The ratios of consultants and independent contractors to civil servants can be found in the following table:

	<i>Average ratio of consultants to civil servants</i>
2005-06	2:3
2006-07	3:4
2007-08	3:5
2008-09	2:3
2009-10	2:3
2010-11 (first three months)	2:4

The ratio of consultants and contractors to civil servants in 2010-11 is anticipated to fall further to 1:4 by October 2010.

Detainees: Children

Lisa Nandy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in respect of how many forced removals have children been separated from a primary carer and remained in the care of children’s services departments or in private fostering arrangements in the last 10 years. [13772]

Damian Green: The UK Border Agency has a policy of not separating parents from children although it will sometimes have to deal with circumstances in which such a separation has already taken place. Information about those circumstances is not recorded centrally by the UK Border Agency and can be obtained only through examination of individual case records at disproportionate cost.

Detection Rates

Mr Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the detection rates for (a) burglary offences, (b) violence against the person, (c) murder and (d) all reported offences were in (i) Gloucestershire and (ii) England and Wales in the most recent year for which figures are available. [14607]

James Brokenshire: The available information relates to detection rates for offences recorded by the police and is given in the table.

From 1 April 2007 the rules governing recording of non-sanction detections were revised to reduce the scope within which they can be claimed to a very small limited set of circumstances. This has significantly reduced the number of non-sanction detections which has been reflected in the overall detection rates.

Detection rates are a ratio of crimes detected in a period to crimes recorded in a period. They are not based on tracking whether individual crimes recorded in a period have eventually been detected.

Figures for the category of ‘homicide’ are provided rather than for murder. When a victim of homicide is discovered it is not always possible at the time of recording to determine whether the offence is one of murder or manslaughter.

Detection rates for selected offences in Gloucestershire and England and Wales, 2009-10

Offence	Detection rates			
	Gloucestershire		England and Wales	
	All detections	Sanction detections	All detections	Sanction detections
Burglary	17	17	13	13
Violence against the person ¹	46	46	45	44
Homicide ^{2,3}	120	120	91	86
All offences	30	30	28	28

¹ Including offences of homicide.

² Includes offences of murder, manslaughter and infanticide.

³ Offences detected in the current year were initially recorded in an earlier year and for this reason the percentage exceeds 100.

DNA: Databases

Damian Collins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will take steps to end the retention of (a) DNA samples and (b) fingerprints of those arrested for but not convicted of an offence; and if she will make a statement. [12091]

James Brokenshire [*holding answer 6 September 2010*]: We are determined to ensure that the National DNA Database only contains the DNA of those who should be on it, including those who have been convicted but whose DNA was not previously taken.

The Government will bring forward proposals in the Freedom Bill later this year to end the indefinite retention of DNA and fingerprints taken from those not convicted of crime. We will achieve this by adopting protections similar to those offered by the Scottish model for DNA retention, under which DNA from those not convicted is only held in the case of serious offences—and then only for a limited period. DNA and fingerprints taken in respect of a minor offence will not be retained at all for those who are not convicted.

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people are registered on the national DNA database. [12850]

James Brokenshire: As at 30 June 2010, there were 6,261,470 DNA profile records on the National DNA Database (NDNAD) taken by all UK police forces, which relate to an estimated 5,378,663 individuals. At the same date, there were 5,859,508 profile records taken by police forces in England and Wales, which relate to an estimated 5,042,201 individuals.

The number of individuals is estimated because a proportion of DNA profiles held on the NDNAD are replicates, that is a person's profile has been loaded on more than one occasion, for example because a person gave different names on separate arrests. The presence of these replicate profiles on the NDNAD does not impact on the effectiveness and integrity of the database.

The data provided are management information and have not been formally assessed for compliance with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

Domestic Violence: Immigrants

Mike Crockart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much funding has been allocated for women with no recourse to public funds to seek refuge from domestic abuse after the end of the pilot period in August 2010. [4432]

James Brokenshire: A Home Office pilot project for victims of domestic violence with no recourse to public funds commenced in November 2009 and was scheduled to run to the end of August 2010. On 16 July, the Home Secretary announced an extension to the pilot until the end of March 2011 with funding to support it.

The Home Office has allocated over £1.9 million to support the pilot in 2010-11. Costs of the pilot are subject to the number of eligible referrals received and so total costs for the period after August 2010 will not be known until its completion. The Government have also committed to finding a long term solution to this issue.

Firearms: Smuggling

Daniel Kawczynski: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the security arrangements in place intended to prevent arms smuggling in the UK. [14142]

Damian Green: The UK Border Agency enforce the prohibitions and restrictions on the importation of arms into the UK, working closely with the Serious Organised Crime Agency and police forces, with whom they share information and intelligence. They also collaborate on operations to disrupt smuggling attempts and to follow up detections of firearms.

In the last two years (2008-09 and 2009-10) the Border Agency has met its published target to increase its firearms seizures by 10% year on year. In 2009-10, that meant there were 296 seizures of firearms and stun guns totalling 870 items and 56 seizures of gun parts and ammunition totalling 3,325 items. Seizure statistics for previous years are contained in HM Revenue and Customs Annual Reports.

The UK Border Agency also work with HM Revenue and Customs and other agencies to enforce export licensing controls on arms.

The latest UK National Threat Assessment (UKTA) on organised crime describes and assess the threats posed to the UK by organised criminals and considers how these threats may develop, including in relation to firearms. The UKTA 2009-10 states that there is no evidence that firearms are trafficked into the UK on a significant scale.

Forensic Science: DNA

Tracey Crouch: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate has been made of the number of convictions that could be overturned as a consequence of being based on low copy number DNA; and if she will make a statement. [8089]

James Brokenshire: It has never been the case that convictions have been based solely on the DNA evidence, including that obtained through the low copy number technique.

In November 2006 the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) set up a multi-agency group to consider and oversee reanalysis of all low copy number samples analysed by the FSS prior to September 2005, this was referred to as Operation Cube. Under this operation the police service and Forensic Science Service (FSS) Ltd identified 4,841 samples that required re-analysis. The FSS undertook this work, free of charge, and 885 new DNA profiles were obtained. These profiles related to 342 criminal investigations across a range of crime. The results of the re-analysis have been reported to police forces and they have taken action based on these results. There were 15 cases with the potential for new and significant lines of inquiry.

Only two of the 15 cases have resulted in prosecution and conviction. In both cases the re-analysed DNA evidence was made available to the defence. But in neither case did DNA play a significant part. One conviction was quashed under appeal, through evidence unconnected to DNA. An appeal in the other case was unsuccessful and I am advised that, although the DNA analysis reinforced earlier findings, the DNA evidence as a whole had a very limited impact upon the judgment. In one other case, the re-analysis led to the elimination of persons previously suspected of, but not charged with, the crime.

Identity Cards: Compensation

Meg Hillier: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when she expects to publish the level of compensation payable to companies involved in the development of identity cards whose contracts (a) have been and (b) will be terminated. [11631]

Damian Green: Negotiations with the companies involved in the development of identity cards are ongoing and are currently planned to conclude by end of September 2010.

On conclusion of the negotiations, the Department will consult with the affected suppliers and Home Office colleagues regarding the decision to publish details of compensation sums payable.

UK Border Agency: Patrol Craft

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what illegal goods have been seized by the UK Border Agency as a result of coastline patrols in each of the last five years; and what estimate she has made of the monetary value of such goods. [13217]

Damian Green: Illicit goods with the following approximate values have been detected by cutter activity in UK and international waters the last five years:

	£
2006	
Cocaine	4.5 million

	£
2007	
Cocaine	30 million
2008	
Cocaine	10 million
Cannabis	4 million
2009	
Amphetamine	2 million
Cannabis	150,000
2010 ¹	
Cocaine	15 million

¹ To date.

This amounts to approximately 16.5 tonnes of controlled drugs. In addition, in the same period, cutters have seized in excess of 7 million cigarettes, 40 firearms, over 200 other prohibitions including paedophile material, in excess of £700,000 under the Proceeds of Crime Act and in excess of £15 million in unpaid value added tax.

Vetting

Damian Hinds: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidance she issues to police forces on (a) policy and (b) practice on the retention of information on persons cleared of criminal charges and the subsequent disclosure of such information in enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks. [12857]

Lynne Featherstone: Information relating to an arrest for a recordable offence, together with the subsequent outcome, is recorded on the police national computer (PNC). This includes both 'not guilty' verdicts and decisions taken by the police or Crown Prosecution Service to take no further action against an individual. It is currently the policy of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) to retain this information for 100 years from the subject's date of birth.

Any intelligence or information deemed necessary for policing purposes is recorded in local police records. Such information is recorded and retained in accordance with the statutory code of practice on the management of police information

www.npia.police.uk/en/15088.htm

Operational guidance supporting the code states that records should be reviewed and disposed of when there is no longer a policing purpose for retaining them. This decision is the responsibility of the chief police officer, as the data owner. Part 5 of the Police Act 1997 requires that all information held in police records must be considered for disclosure. If, in the opinion of the chief police officer concerned, the information is considered relevant to the post applied for and ought to be included on the certificate, then it must be disclosed. Information on persons cleared of criminal charges may be disclosed on this basis, but is not routinely disclosed on a CRB enhanced disclosure.

The Government have indicated that they intend to review the criminal records regime. Terms of reference for the review are under consideration and a further announcement will be made by Ministers in due course.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS**Food Labelling**

23. **Henry Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans her Department has to amend the food labelling standards for which it is responsible; and if she will make a statement. [14194]

Mrs Spelman: The Government have made a commitment to clear and honest food labelling. Our food labelling standards work remains focused on protecting consumers and enabling them to make informed choices, as well as ensuring a level playing field to promote the competitiveness of our food industry.

Sustainable Agriculture

24. **Roger Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions her Department has had on a strategy for sustainable agriculture in England; and if she will make a statement. [14196]

Mr Paice: Our objective is to support British farming and encourage sustainable food production. Environmentally sustainable farming is essential to protect the natural resources on which future food production depends, and to protect biodiversity and the countryside. Economically sustainable farming is essential for having a thriving farming industry. Strategic priorities are set out in the Structural Reform Plan and we will be elaborating on our sustainable agriculture objectives as we develop our departmental business plan in October.

Agricultural Wages Board

Mr David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for the future of the Agricultural Wages Board. [13431]

Mr Paice: I refer the hon. Member to the statement made by the Secretary of State on 22 July 2010, regarding the changes to arm's length bodies, which, as part of the Government's Structural Reform Plan, made clear that the Agricultural Wages Board, and the 15 Agricultural Wages Committees, would be abolished.

Agriculture: Regulation

Simon Hart: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what recent discussions she has had on reducing the regulatory burden on farmers; and if she will make a statement. [14195]

Mr Paice: We are very aware of the need to reduce burdens on farmers, increase competitiveness and trust in business and maintain standards. The Task Force on Farm Regulation, appointed in July, will consider how to reduce regulatory burdens, and deliver risk-based and integrated compliance and inspection. It will consider all regulation that bears on farmers, including hill farmers, and have started a wide consultation to understand which issues cause farmers most concern.

Animal Products: Imports

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps her Department has taken to monitor the entry of imported animal products and cloned animal products into the food chain. [14161]

Mr Paice: The rules governing the importation of animal products including meat, milk and genetic material are laid down in EU legislation. Each consignment must come from an approved establishment (food for human consumption) or an approved collection centre (genetic material) in an approved third country, be accompanied by animal health and public health certification as appropriate and enter the EU through a Border Inspection Post where veterinary checks are carried out to ensure that import conditions have been met.

The EU health certification does not require information to be provided on whether the product or genetic material is from a clone or the progeny of a clone. However, EU rules do not apply to imports of cloned embryos, which must be licensed under National legislation.

The Government are mindful of the concerns surrounding this emerging technology. EU Agriculture Ministers have collectively asked the European Commission to produce a detailed report on cloning by the end of 2010 and this will provide a proper basis for evidence-based decision making at EU level. We will be looking carefully at the Commission's report as we consider this issue further.

Cattle: Cloning

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what mechanism her Department has put in place to record and trace cloned cattle and their descendants. [13588]

Mr Paice: Cattle identification and traceability requirements are harmonised and defined by EU law and are designed to protect human and animal health. There are no requirements to identify cattle as clones or descendants of clones.

However, the Government are mindful of the concerns surrounding this emerging technology. EU Agriculture Ministers have collectively asked the European Commission to produce a detailed report on cloning by the end of 2010 and this will provide a proper basis for evidence-based decision making at EU level. We will be looking carefully at the Commission's report as we consider this issue further.

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what regulations her Department has put in place in respect of cattle clone embryo and sperm imports. [13589]

Mr Paice: The rules governing the importation of bovine genetic material (embryos and semen) are laid down in EU legislation. Each consignment must come from an approved collection centre in an approved third country, be accompanied by animal health certification and enter the EU through a Border Inspection Post where veterinary checks are carried out to ensure that

import conditions have been met. The EU health certification does not require information to be provided on whether the genetic material is from a clone or the progeny of a clone.

EU rules do not apply to imports of cloned embryos, which continue to require a licence under The Importation of Embryos, Ova and Semen Order 1980 as amended.

However, the Government are mindful of the concerns surrounding this emerging technology. EU Agriculture Ministers have collectively asked the European Commission to produce a detailed report on cloning by the end of 2010 and this will provide a proper basis for evidence-based decision, making at EU level. We will be looking carefully at the Commission's report as we consider this issue further.

Circuses: Animal Welfare

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (1) what assessment she has made of the responses to her Department's consultation on the use of wild animals in circuses; [13514]

(2) when her Department plans to respond to its consultation on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. [13515]

Mr Paice: My Noble Friend Lord Henley is currently considering the large number of responses (over 12,000) to the previous Administration's public consultation exercise on the use of wild animals in travelling circuses. As part of this exercise, he has recently met representatives of animal welfare organisations and the circus industry. Once all the different aspects of this issue have been considered within this Department, we will need to consult within Whitehall. We hope to be in a position to make an announcement on our proposed way forward later in the autumn.

Environmental Stewardship Scheme

Hilary Benn: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what requirement there is on her Department to make payments for the whole period of an entry level stewardship or higher level stewardship agreement once it has been signed; and what the standard length of such agreements is. [14274]

Mr Paice: Provided that the conditions for payment are respected by the agreement-holder, the Department is obliged by contract law to make payments for the whole period of an Entry Level Stewardship (ELS) or Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) agreement. Agreements that run beyond 2015 are subject to review in 2012 because under the current legal framework, the EU Commission (which part funds the payments) does not have legal authority to make payments beyond that point. The standard length of ELS agreements is FIVE years. The standard length of HLS agreements is 10 years.

Fisheries: Scotland

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what steps she plans to take in discussions at EU level to address the future sustainability of the fisheries industry in fishing communities in Scotland. [14379]

Richard Benyon: The specific management of fisheries in Scotland is a devolved matter. However the UK shares the Commission's ambition for radical reform of the common fisheries policy to achieve healthy fish stocks, a prosperous fishing industry and a healthy marine environment.

The priorities for reform are for simplified and de-centralised decision making, moving away from the micro-management of fishermen's activities; a properly designed system of rights-based management that will give fishermen the freedom to engage in rational economic activity and applied to all, with safeguards for certain parts of the fleet where necessary; greater integration of fisheries with other marine policies, with fisheries no longer isolated from other marine users; and an end to the wasteful practice of discarding fish, with reform providing the incentives and regulatory framework to enable us to catch less but land more of it, for example replacing landing based quota with catch quotas.

Food Standards Agency

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs for which functions of the Food Standards Agency she has responsibility. [14082]

Mr Paice: On 20 July 2010 the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs took over responsibility for policy on food labelling and composition in England, when this is not related to food safety or nutrition, from the Food Standards Agency in England. Responsibility for these policy areas in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland remain the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency in those countries, but arrangements are being considered separately by the devolved Administrations.

Food: Labelling

Mike Freer: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the Government's policy is on proposals at EU level to include the provision of information on food labelling about methods of animal slaughter. [13776]

Mr Paice: The Government are still considering its position on this and the other amendments to EU food labelling regulations proposed by the European Parliament.

Mike Freer: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what discussions she has had on the effects on faith communities in the UK of proposals at EU level on the requirement of labelling of food from animals which have not been stunned prior to slaughter. [13777]

Mr Paice: No discussions have taken place to date on this specific requirement proposed by the European Parliament.

Food: Safety

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when she last met the Secretary of State for Health to discuss food safety matters. [14081]

Mr Paice: Food safety matters remain the responsibility of the Food Standards Agency. The Secretary of State would therefore discuss these with the agency's chair or chief executive.

The Secretary of State and I met the chair, deputy chair and chief executive of the Food Standards Agency on 8 July.

Gangmasters Licensing Authority

Mr David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what the running costs for the Gangmasters Licensing Authority were in each of the last five years. [13705]

Mr Paice: The running costs for the Gangmasters Licensing Authority in each of the last five years is set out in the following table.

	£000		
	<i>Expenditure</i>	<i>Income from fees</i>	<i>Net running costs¹</i>
2005-06	2,687	—	2,687
2006-07	2,910	1,367	1,543
2007-08	3,271	1,375	1,896
2008-09	4,098	1,529	2,569
2009-10	4,125	1,271	2,854

¹ Net running costs compiled from expenditure less income from fees. Source: Gangmasters Licensing Authority Annual Report and Accounts.

Mr David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for the future of the Gangmasters Licensing Authority. [13706]

Mr Paice: DEFRA is examining its network of arm's length bodies, including the Gangmasters Licensing Authority, in line with the Government's commitment to making substantial reforms, increasing accountability and reducing cost. Further announcements will be made in due course.

Rural Payments Agency

Mr Spencer: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what plans she has for the future operation and efficiency of the Rural Payments Agency. [12527]

Mr Paice: In my written statement of 20 July, *Official Report*, column 9WS, I reported on the findings of an independent review of the Rural Payments Agency. That statement also set out my priorities for future action in meeting the agency's key challenge, namely to deliver a better quality of service, while reducing operating costs so that both farmers and taxpayers get a better deal. Subsequently, an interim chief executive (Richard Judge) has been appointed and he attended the first meeting of the new Agency Oversight Board that I chaired on 9 August. Through that Board I will be working to ensure that the independent review recommendations are carefully considered and action is taken.

Timber: EU Law

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs what timetable she has set for the implementation in the UK of the EU Due Diligence Regulation on timber. [13896]

Mr Paice: Informal agreement was reached on the EU Timber Due Diligence Regulation in July; the regulation will now be formally adopted at a Council in the autumn. Once formal agreement has been reached, member states will then have 27 months to implement the regulation. We will seek to implement the regulation efficiently, in consultation with a wide range of interested parties and non-governmental organisations, whilst ensuring that we put in place an effective, robust and proportional enforcement regime which will send a strong message that illegal timber has no place on the UK market.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Afghanistan: International Assistance

David Miliband: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs pursuant to the answer of 20 July 2010, *Official Report*, column 189W, on Afghanistan: international assistance, what the evidential basis is for his statement that ISAF has no allocated funds for microgrants. [12285]

Mr Hague: Although there has been reporting which indicates that International Security Assistance Force money has been used as micro-grants, this refers to US funds. The US embassy in London has confirmed that the micro-grants of \$92,394 were US Commander Emergency Response Projects funded and so my original reply stands.

Aung San Suu Kyi

Mr Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Government of Burma on the detention on Aung San Suu Kyi; and if he will make a statement. [14456]

Mr Lidington: The continued detention of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent 15 of the last 21 years as a prisoner, is a deliberate policy by the military regime to isolate her from her supporters and to prevent a legitimate expression of the will of the people of Burma. Her sham trial in 2009, which extended her house arrest by a further 18 months, highlights the regime's fear of her influence as a credible political leader. My hon. Friend Jeremy Browne raised Burma at the EU-ASEAN meeting on 26 May 2010, at which the Burmese Foreign Minister was present. He made clear that the continued detention of political prisoners including Aung San Suu Kyi is unacceptable. Our ambassador in Rangoon repeatedly raises the need for the release of all political prisoners, including Aung San Suu Kyi, with ministers in the Burmese military government and will continue to do so.

Chen Guangcheng

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has had with the Government of China on the case of Chen Guangcheng since July 2010; and if he will make a statement. [14319]

Mr Jeremy Browne: We have regularly raised Chen Guangcheng's case with the Chinese authorities. We last raised the case at the EU/China human rights dialogue on 29 June as part of an individual case list. We continue to monitor this case closely, and are in regular contact with his lawyer.

COE Parliamentary Assembly

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs who the members are of the UK Delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; when he expects a new UK delegation to be appointed; and if he will make a statement. [14320]

Mr Lidington: The current members of the UK delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) are as follows:

Lord Prescott
 Lord Anderson
 Mr John Austin
 Mr Tim Boswell
 Lord Chidgey
 Mr Christopher Chope
 Mr James Clappison
 Ms Ann Clwyd
 Mrs Claire Curtis-Thomas
 Mr Nigel Dodds
 Earl of Alexander Dundee
 Mr Bill Etherington
 Mr Nigel Evans
 Mr Paul Flynn
 Baroness Gale
 Mr John Greenway
 Mr Michael Hancock
 Mr Oliver Heald
 Mr Doug Henderson
 Mr Jim Hood
 Baroness Knight
 Mr Bob Laxton
 Mr Denis MacShane
 Mr Khalid Mahmood
 Mr Humfrey Malins
 Mrs Christine McCafferty
 Mr Alan Meale
 Mr Mark Oaten
 Mr Edward O'Hara
 Mr Paul Rowen
 Lord Tomlinson
 Mr Robert Walter
 Mrs Betty Williams
 Mr David Wilshire
 The rules of PACE state that:

"Following parliamentary elections, the national parliament concerned ... shall make appointments to the Assembly within six months of the election. If the national parliament cannot make all such appointments in time for the opening of a new ordinary session of the Assembly, it may decide, for a period of not more than six months after the election, to be represented in the Assembly by members of the existing delegation."

A new delegation will be named when the Government receive names from the Labour party.

EU Enlargement

Mark Pritchard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's position is on (a) Albania, (b) Kosovo, (c) Serbia and (d) Macedonia joining the European Union. [14094]

Mr Lidington: The Government firmly support EU membership for all the countries of the Western Balkans region, once they meet the EU's robust membership criteria. Enlargement of the EU will help to create stability, security and prosperity across Europe on a firm foundation of democracy, the rule of law and shared values. The prospect of EU membership is an opportunity for the governments and citizens of the Western Balkans to entrench stability and prosperity and turn the page on the difficult chapters of the past. It requires concrete steps to meet the criteria set by the EU in a genuine merit-based process.

This autumn, the European Commission will publish its opinion on Albania's application for EU membership. It will also issue progress reports for Serbia, Macedonia and Kosovo, detailing the progress made in their relationship with the EU and where further reform is still required. The Government will continue to encourage all countries of the Western Balkans to show sustained effort and political leadership in overcoming problems and implementing the reforms required to meet the criteria for membership.

Indonesia: Foreign Relations

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his most recent assessment is of UK relations with Indonesia; and if he will make a statement. [14289]

Mr Jeremy Browne: UK relations with Indonesia across a range of shared priorities are strong bilaterally, through the EU and in our partnership in multilateral forums such as the G20 and UN. We are determined to strengthen relations yet further as part of our initiative to enhance engagement with the world's emerging powers. As the fourth most populous country in the world, with strong democratic institutions and a fast growing economy, Indonesia is taking a larger role on the world stage. The UK is the third largest investor in Indonesia. There is a regular flow of ministerial and senior official visitors in both directions. There were six UK ministerial level visits to Indonesia in 2009, Foreign Minister Marty Natalegawa visited London for the Afghanistan Conference in January 2010 and I met senior Ministers in Jakarta in July 2010.

Iran: Nuclear Power

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his most recent assessment is of the development of Iran's nuclear programme. [14290]

Alistair Burt: We continue to be greatly concerned about Iran's nuclear programme. The Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has issued a number of reports on Iran, all making clear that Iran had shown no sign of suspending its enrichment-related activities and continued to stockpile uranium, as required by six UN Security Council Resolutions (UNSCRs) and numerous IAEA resolutions. The estimates in his May 2010 report showed Iran had produced 2,427 kg of low enriched uranium since the start of operations in February 2007, and that Iran had also produced a total of 5.7 kg of uranium enriched to nearly 20%, a significant step towards weapons grade enrichment.

Pope Benedict XVI

Mr Amess: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent progress has been made on arrangements for the visit to the UK of Pope Benedict XVI; and if he will make a statement. [14262]

Mr Bellingham: The Government have been working closely with the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England and Wales and of Scotland on arrangements for Pope Benedict XVI's visit, which are now well in hand.

We greatly look forward to Pope Benedict's visit. The Holy See is a valuable partner on many of the foreign policy and international development issues that most affect citizens worldwide. These include tackling poverty, tackling climate change, and preventing and resolving conflict. This visit offers an important opportunity to strengthen ties between the UK and the Holy See on these issues.

Serbia: EU Accession

Mr MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the prospects for Serbia's accession to the EU; and if he will make a statement. [13516]

Mr Lidington: The Government fully support EU accession for all the countries of the Western Balkans region, including Serbia, once they meet the robust criteria set by the EU for membership. Serbia has the capacity and potential to make good progress towards meeting these criteria, if it chooses to do so.

Following the latest report of the Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in June 2010, EU member states noted that Serbia had maintained the level of its co-operation with the tribunal and agreed to submit Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU to their Parliaments for ratification. The Government continue to urge the Serbian authorities to maintain maximum effort and commitment in their ICTY co-operation, and will assess this at each stage of Serbia's accession process.

More broadly, in order for Serbia to progress along the path to EU accession, the Government will need to be confident that it is committed to all aspects of the conditions-based accession process—including the requirements of regional co-operation—in a way which would allow all countries in the region, including Kosovo, to realise their own European perspectives.

Mr MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his policy is on the surrender of Ratko Mladic to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia as a precondition for the commencement of accession negotiations between the EU and Serbia. [13517]

Mr Lidington: The UK, along with all other EU member states, has consistently made clear that achieving and maintaining full co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) is essential for Serbia's progress towards EU membership. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary underlined this during his visit to Belgrade on 31 August.

Following the latest report of the Chief Prosecutor of the ICTY in June 2010, EU member states noted that Serbia had maintained its co-operation with the Tribunal and agreed to submit Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU to their Parliaments for ratification.

The Government will continue to keep Serbia's co-operation with ICTY under review, including at each stage of its EU accession process, in order to ensure that it continues to co-operate fully with the Tribunal.

Syrian Arab Republic: EU External Trade

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is on EU trade with Syria. [14288]

Alistair Burt: We welcome the steps that have been made towards finalising the EU-Syria Association Agreement. The EU high representative is currently leading on discussions with Syria about signing the agreement.

The agreement will allow us to use the EU's dialogue with Syria to pursue issues of concern, which including human rights and counter-proliferation.

Syrian Arab Republic: Foreign Relations

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what his most recent assessment is of UK relations with Syria; and if he will make a statement. [14286]

Alistair Burt: The UK has full diplomatic relations with Syria and we assess that Syria is an important player in the region. We will work to continue our firm, frank and frequent dialogue with the Government in Damascus. However, we remain concerned about the human rights situation in Syria, and about reports of Syrian facilitation of weapons to Hezbollah. I have made these concerns known to my Syrian counterpart during my visit to the region in July.

Syrian Arab Republic: Nuclear Power

Nicholas Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what the Government's policy is within the International Atomic Energy Agency on inspection of Syria's nuclear programme. [14287]

Alistair Burt: The UK strongly supports the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) investigations on Syria and welcomes the latest report by the director general. It is important that Syria co-operates fully with this international body and ensures that the IAEA can complete its investigations.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Buildings

Matthew Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much office space per employee his Department occupied in each year since 1997. [13003]

Mr O'Brien: The following figures indicate the average density per employee for the combined net internal area (NIA) of our London and East Kilbride offices. We are not able to provide this information prior to our move to 1 Palace street in 2001.

	<i>NIA per head</i>
2003	16.46
2004	16.37
2005	15.23
2006	15.85
2007	16.44
2008	17.55
2009	17.31
2010	16.25

Departmental Consultants

Alun Cairns: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the (a) average and (b) highest daily rate paid to consultants by his Department was in each of the last five years. [13060]

Mr O'Brien: The Department for International Development does not hold consultancy rates on a central register. To gather this information would incur disproportionate cost.

Departmental Furniture

Matthew Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many chairs his Department has purchased in each year since 1997; how much it spent in each such year; and what the five most expensive chairs purchased in each such year were. [12802]

Mr O'Brien: We are unable to provide this information without incurring disproportionate cost.

Wines

Matthew Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how much his Department spent on wine in each year since 1997. [12821]

Mr O'Brien: It is not possible to provide the requested information without incurring disproportionate cost.

Any such expenditure is incurred in accordance with the principles of Managing Public Money and the Treasury handbook on Regularity and Propriety.

WORK AND PENSIONS

EU Agency Workers Directive

Stephen McPartland: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions what assessment he has made of the likely effects on employers of the EU Agency Workers Directive coming into force. [14151]

Mr Davey: I have been asked to reply.

An impact assessment (IA) on the agency workers regulations was published when they were laid by the previous Government in January 2010. This considered a range of possible dynamic and financial effects on business. The IA noted that higher costs associated with hiring temporary agency workers may manifest themselves in terms of price (wages) and/or quantity (number of agency workers hired) adjustments, and that the nature of the effect is likely to vary by sector or occupation.

Poverty: Wales

Huw Irranca-Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions whether his Department has forecast the effect of the proposals in the 2010 Budget on levels of (a) child and (b) pensioner poverty in (i) Wales and (ii) the Bridgend County Borough Council area in each of the next five years. [5946]

Justine Greening: I have been asked to reply.

The Budget announced a package of reforms to tackle unaffordable spending and support the most vulnerable as set out on page 34 of the Red Book. Measures announced at Budget will have no measurable impact on child poverty over the next two years.

Estimates of the impact of Budget tax and benefit measures on the number of children in relative poverty are only available at the UK level, as lower geographical disaggregations do not provide sufficiently robust results. Estimates post 2012-13 are not available due to greater uncertainty surrounding longer term economic forecasts underpinning the modelling.

The Budget announced reforms to the uprating rules for the basic state pension. The earnings link for basic state pension will be restored from April 2011, with a triple guarantee that it will increase by the highest of earnings, prices or 2.5%, benefiting 11 million pensioners in the UK. CPI will be used as the measure of prices, but the Government will increase the basic state pension in April 2011 by at least the equivalent of RPI. In 2011, in the event that the basic state pension is increased by more than earnings, under the terms of the triple guarantee,

the Government's intention is that, as a minimum, single pension credit recipients will benefit from the full cash value of this increase. These changes will have a positive impact on pensioners' incomes.

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER

Alternative Vote: Referendums

Mr David: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what discussions he had with the First Minister of Wales on the date of the referendum on the alternative vote prior to 5 July 2010. [11789]

Mr Wallace: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what representations he has received from the devolved Administrations on the timing of the referendum on the alternative vote system. [13186]

Mr Harper: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I have held no direct discussions with the First Minister of Wales on the date of the proposed referendum on the parliamentary voting system. However, the Secretary of State for Wales and the First Minister of Wales have had discussions on this issue.

The First Minister for Scotland, the right hon. Alex Salmond MSP, wrote to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on 9 July regarding the proposed date for the referendum. A response was sent in July.

The First Minister of Wales, the right hon. Carwyn Jones AM wrote to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister on 7 July and 12 July. Mr Jones wrote again to the Secretary of State for Wales and the Deputy Prime Minister on 13 July and 5 August. Responses to these letters were sent on 21 July and 28 August.

The First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, the right hon. Peter Robinson MLA and Martin McGuinness MP MLA wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Deputy Prime Minister on 28 July. A response was sent on 24 August.

Copies of all of these letters are being placed in the Library.

It was right that we announced the Government's proposals for the referendum to Parliament first. Following that announcement, we have been working and will continue to work closely with the Electoral Commission and others to make sure that the devolved elections, the local elections in England and the referendum are run effectively on 5 May next year.

Elections

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what elections are planned to be held on 7 May 2015 in (a) England, (b) Scotland, (c) Wales and (d) Northern Ireland. [13382]

Mr Harper: The Fixed-term Parliaments Bill, introduced to Parliament on 22 July 2010, would provide for the next parliamentary general election to be held on 7 May 2015. Existing legislation provides that elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales are scheduled to be held on that day.

In addition there are elections scheduled in 36 Metropolitan Districts, 194 Shire Districts and 49 Single Tier (Unitary) Districts in England. A list of all the relevant Districts has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. Four Mayoral elections are also scheduled.

Electoral Register

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Deputy Prime Minister what steps he is taking to increase levels of voter registration. [13430]

Mr Harper: The Electoral Commission reported in March 2010 that the completeness of Great Britain's electoral registers remains broadly similar to the levels achieved internationally. However, we are committed to taking steps to improve levels of registration. As part of the Government's commitment to speed up the introduction of individual electoral registration we are investigating allowing electoral registration officers to compare their electoral registers against existing public authority databases to identify individuals who are not on the register and to encourage them to register.

ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Biofuels

Elizabeth Truss: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (1) what environmental effects his Department has identified from the use of bioliquids in (a) electricity generation and (b) combined heat and power; [13620]

(2) what assessment he has made of the merits of bioliquids produced from wastes and residues compared to those produced from virgin crops in improving sustainability and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. [13621]

Charles Hendry [*holding answer 8 September 2010*]: DECC commissioned a report into the comparative life cycle analysis of a number of liquid feedstocks that can be used as bioliquids. This can be found on the website of the National Non-Food Crops Centre:

http://www.nfcc.co.uk/metadot/index.pl?id=10478;isa=DBRow;op=show;dbview_id=2539

This indicates that high greenhouse gas savings can be achieved in heat, electricity and transport from fuels derived from used cooking oil and we consider that these provide a more sustainable way to make renewable energy than virgin oils, offering higher greenhouse gas savings.

The Department is conducting further work to consider how best to support technologies such as those using wastes and residues through the renewables incentives and has already held discussions with industry in order to further work and seek further evidence.

We have launched a consultation on amendments to the renewables obligation

<http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/consultations/ro/ro.aspx>

and will be engaging with stakeholders on changes to the renewable transport fuel obligation to ensure our incentives meet the requirements of the renewable energy directive, including the sustainability criteria for biofuels and bioliquids.

We are working closely with other Government Departments to achieve a co-ordinated approach to the use of bioliquids across the sectors in which used cooking oil is a feedstock.

Carbon Emissions: Local Government

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change if he will take steps to ensure that local councils involve local people in implementing their carbon reduction plans. [13750]

Gregory Barker: Local authorities need to show strong leadership and accountability in cutting emissions from their own estates and operations and those arising within their areas.

The coalition Government are currently running a programme of low carbon framework pilots to explore ways of building capacity in local authorities in support of this objective. It is important to understand what the barriers to action are and how we are best placed to overcome these together as part of Big Society. Behavioural change and the role of individuals and communities are an inherent part of this.

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change if he will provide additional financial and technical support for local councils to meet local carbon reduction targets. [13754]

Gregory Barker: The coalition Government are aiding local action by taking forward the local carbon framework pilots programme (LCFs) until the end of this financial year.

The LCF programme will enable baseline work on emissions data to be undertaken, enable innovative approaches to carbon reduction to be trialled, and for technical and practical expertise to be shared between central and local government, business and communities.

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change if he will encourage each local council to set a cap on carbon dioxide emissions taking into account (a) scientific evidence on the level of reductions required to avoid dangerous climate change and (b) local circumstances. [13755]

Gregory Barker: We expect the local carbon frameworks pilot programme to encourage local initiatives to reduce emissions-without imposing central burdens on local authorities. We expect and will encourage local authorities to develop stretching ambitions on CO₂ emissions. Local circumstances greatly influence what it is possible to achieve and make it inappropriate to impose rigid top down targets, though it is important to ensure there are the right governance structures in place to ensure accountability.

Coal: Subsidies

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what his policy is on the European Commission proposal to phase out subsidies for hard-coal industries in the EU by 2014. [14482]

Charles Hendry: The Government's main policy objective in relation to the coal industry is to ensure that the United Kingdom and the European Union are enabled to make best use of a valuable natural resource which continues to make an important contribution to security of energy supplies, where it is economically viable and environmentally acceptable to do so.

Coal production was subject to an industry-specific state aid regime under the European Coal and Steel Community Treaty. This expired in July 2002 and was replaced by Regulation 1407/2002, which expires on 31 December 2010. The Regulation has continued to permit closure, operating and mining legacy aid. It also introduced investment aid to support qualifying projects to maintain access to reserves at potentially viable mines; such projects remain ineligible for support under the general state aid regime.

UK coal producers received around £162 million of operating aid during 2000-02 and £53 million of investment aid during 2003-08, but the Government are not currently paying any subsidy for coal production.

In 2009 the European Commission consulted on the post-2010 regime, stating its preference for bringing the coal mining industry within the general state aid regime. This would mean an end to operating, closure and legacy aid, while mining and other coal-related projects would become eligible in principle to receive other state aid products.

The UK Government broadly support this objective, but also recognises the need to provide limited transitional arrangements from 1 January 2011, subject to strict closure timetables and progressive reductions in payments, for member states which have already given commitments to provide closure aid after that date.

Closure aid is an economic and social policy measure designed to help former miners and their communities through orderly management of mine closures with support for retraining, local economic diversification, etc. It has no effect on-total coal use or related emissions levels in either the relevant member state or the EU as a whole. This is because, in broad terms, coal produced by mines receiving closure aid merely displaces coal which would otherwise be imported to meet overall demand; and because emissions from coal used for energy production, industrial processes, etc., whatever its origin, are subject to existing EU legislation (e.g. LCPD) and the EU Emissions-Trading System.

Energy Supply

Dan Byles: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change (1) what estimate he has made of the minimum number of days stock of (a) natural gas, (b) oil, (c) petrol and (d) diesel required for the UK to maintain an acceptable level of energy security; [14355]

(2) how many days stock of (a) natural gas, (b) oil, (c) petrol and (d) diesel are routinely stored within the UK. [14356]

Charles Hendry: The information is as follows:
Natural Gas

The Government do not provide estimates of minimum stock levels of natural gas needed to maintain security of supply.

Moreover, the UK does not have a “routine” level of gas in stock; stock levels are determined by the market. Gas companies typically build stocks progressively from around April until October/November and then draw on their stocks during winter. From 1 October 2009 to 5 September 2010, the period available, the UK held average stocks equivalent to about 10 days of consumption, with a peak of about 22 days in summer 2009, and a minimum of about one day in winter.

Petroleum products

Under EU Council directive 2006/67/EC, member states of the European Union (EU) are required to hold stocks of oil and oil products equivalent to 90 days of national inland consumption. However, because the UK is a producer of crude oil its obligation is reduced by 25% to 67.5 days.

In June 2010, the latest period for which data are available, the UK held about 91 days worth of oil and oil products.

Kyoto Protocol

Zac Goldsmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent assessment he has made of the implications for the UK of a second commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. [13714]

Gregory Barker: Being an already established legally binding framework, the EU, and therefore the UK, has already adopted all the requirements in EU law for the next commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. Continuing with the KP approach for a second commitment period would therefore not have any implications for the UK. However, certain elements of the KP are likely to change as the current round of UNFCCC negotiations progresses. Particularly, the mitigation target to which the UK is subject is likely to be higher than in the first commitment period, though ultimately the level will depend on the outcome of the negotiations.

Microgeneration: Finance

Richard Graham: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what incentives his Department provides to members of the public to generate their own electricity. [13399]

Charles Hendry: The Feed-in Tariff Scheme incentivises small-scale, low carbon electricity generation of up to 5MW incapacity.

The scheme aims to deliver rates of return of approximately 5-8% for investors with both the generation tariffs and export tariffs linked to the Retail Price Index (RPI). Additionally, householders who use renewable technologies to generate electricity mainly for their own use will not be subject to income tax on their FITs revenue.

Nuclear Power: Finance

Mr Bain: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what the policy of his Department is on provision of subsidies for the construction of new nuclear power stations. [14131]

Charles Hendry: The coalition agreement makes clear that there will be no public subsidy for new nuclear power stations.

Nuclear Power: Insolvency

Paul Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change whether an assessment has been made of the merits of creating a special administration regime for a nuclear plant operator which becomes insolvent and is unable to maintain its nuclear plants; and whether his Department has discussed the matter with the Insolvency Service. [14080]

Charles Hendry: The Department has had discussions with the Insolvency Service over whether, in addition to the relevant provisions of the Energy Act 2008, a special administration regime for nuclear operators is required. It has concluded, for existing nuclear operators, that such a regime is not required but will keep the matter under review given the potential for new nuclear build.

Nuclear Power: Scotland

Fiona O'Donnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent assessment he has made of the contribution of the Scottish nuclear energy industry to (a) energy security and (b) carbon dioxide reduction targets. [13629]

Charles Hendry [*holding answer 8 September 2010*]: The Department does not assess the contribution of nuclear power to energy security and carbon dioxide reduction on a sub-national basis.

Sub-national electricity statistics, including nuclear generation in Scotland, are published annually in Energy Trends. The latest figures are available at:

<http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/statistics/publications/trends/trends.aspx>

These show that in 2008, nuclear stations in Scotland generated 15.1 TWh of electricity (around 4% of total UK generation).

Nuclear Reactors: Thorium

Dr Huppert: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what recent assessment his Department has made of the use of thorium-based nuclear reactors. [13659]

Charles Hendry [*holding answer 8 September 2010*]: DECC officials maintain an oversight of developments in future reactor designs and thorium continues to be a possibility for use as a fuel in nuclear power reactors. This involves the Department working with technical experts both from industry and academia and in this respect I am making arrangements to host a meeting with Professor Ian Fells to explore topics of this nature.

Ultimately it is for the industry to propose what type of fuel to use in any future nuclear reactors, the designs of which would be subject to independent regulatory assessment and acceptance. At present the UK safety and environment regulators are undertaking a generic design assessment process on two new nuclear reactor designs that use uranium oxide fuel. No proposals have been made for reactor designs using thorium based nuclear fuel, but we would of course consider a proposal if one was to come forward.

Renewable Energy: Feed-in Tariffs

Neil Parish: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what progress his Department is making in establishing a full system of feed-in tariffs for small-scale low-carbon electricity technologies. [13845]

Gregory Barker: The feed-in tariff scheme (FITs) for small scale low carbon electricity (up to 5MW) has been in place since April 2010. As we set out in the Coalition programme for government, we are committed to establishing a full system of FITs in electricity. As part of this, we are currently looking at features of the FITs scheme to see what changes we may need to make.

Renewable Energy: Finance

Chris Heaton-Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change if he will bring forward proposals for the support of renewables from funds raised by means other than taxation. [13535]

Charles Hendry: The Renewables Obligation (RO) and Feed-in Tariffs (FITs) for the support of renewable electricity generation are already funded direct by electricity suppliers, rather than from taxation. However, it is important to note that these mechanisms impact on consumers' bills, so we need to make sure that we deliver value for money in supporting renewables by whatever means.

Renewable Energy: Local Government

Mr Weir: To ask the Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change what expressions of interest he has received from local authorities following the removal of restrictions on local authorities selling renewable electricity to the grid; and whether there will be any restriction on how such revenue can be spent. [13511]

Charles Hendry: Seven local authorities have sent emails to the address provided in the Secretary of State's recent letter announcing the removal of restrictions on their sale of electricity from renewable sources.

There will be no restriction on how local authorities may spend the resulting revenue, as long as it fits within their remit as authorities.

HEALTH

NHS Commissioning Board

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the NHS Commissioning Board will differ from existing strategic health authorities in their healthcare commissioning role. [14405]

Mr Simon Burns: Strategic health authorities (SHAs) are currently responsible for commissioning some highly specialised services. However, the majority of national health service health care is commissioned by primary care trusts (PCTs). The role of SHAs has primarily been one of system and performance management, supporting PCTs in their commissioning capacity, promoting choice and competition as well as monitoring NHS provider trusts.

As set out in the White Paper "Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS" the Government intend to create a more autonomous and accountable NHS—with greater clarity about the roles and responsibilities of different organisations for provision and commissioning. The proposed NHS Commissioning Board will therefore be responsible for ensuring an effective and transparent system of NHS commissioning which drives improvements in quality of patient care and health outcomes, maximises opportunities for patients to exercise choice and is underpinned by effective patient and public engagement.

The majority of NHS health care will in future be commissioned by consortia of general practitioner (GP) practices. The Commissioning Board would hold GP commissioners to account for outcomes and financial management rather than for delivering top-down, process-driven targets.

The Commissioning Board will also have direct responsibility for commissioning those services which it would be less appropriate for GP consortia to commission. We propose that this will include all specialised services, including those currently commissioned by PCTs, as well as primary care, prison health and maternity services. It would have no responsibilities in relation to NHS providers (such as hospital trusts), other than in relation to those services it is directly responsible for commissioning.

Ambulance Services: South West

Richard Graham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the cost to the Great Western Ambulance Service of the relocation of its headquarters to Chippenham has been. [13395]

Mr Burstow: The information requested is not collected centrally.

However, the hon. Member may wish to contact the Great Western Ambulance Service NHS Trust direct for more information.

Cancer: Eyes

Mr Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the time taken for people diagnosed with eye cancer to be seen by a consultant; what steps he is taking to reduce the time; and if he will make a statement. [14332]

Mr Burstow: No estimate has been made of the time taken for people with eye cancer to be seen by a consultant. The statistics held centrally do not distinguish between different types of head and neck cancer as a result. In the last period for which statistics are available (Quarter 1 2010-11), 96.1% of patients with suspected head and neck cancer, including cancers of the eye, were seen within two weeks of referral from primary care.

As part of the of the Cancer Reform Strategy (CRS) review, we are examining the cancer waiting times commitments put forward in the Cancer Plan (2000) and the CRS (2007). This is to ensure they remain clinically appropriate and focus on what is most important to patients and their families. We aim to publish an updated strategy in the winter.

Departmental Public Consultation

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he is taking to increase the involvement of young members of the public in the making of decisions that effect them by (a) Ministers in his Department, (b) officials in his Department and (c) public bodies which fall within his Department's area of responsibility. [12265]

Mr Simon Burns: The Department is committed to ensuring that the public have the opportunity to participate in shaping and developing policy, and always undertakes to seek the views of those who are likely to be affected by changes of policy and groups representing them.

As part of this commitment, the Department subscribes to the Government Code of Practice on consultations. This makes clear that consultation exercises should be designed to be accessible and effectively targeted. Where relevant this would include younger people and thought is always given to whether alternative versions of consultation documents should be produced which could be used to reach a wider audience.

A copy of the Code of Practice has already been placed in the Library and is available online at:

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/files/file47158.pdf>

We have engaged and continue to engage with children and young people on a range of issues in a number of ways. For example, the Department is in regular contact with YoungMinds, a voluntary sector organisation that deals specifically with the mental health issues of children and young people. YoungMinds have established a group called Very Important Kids who contribute their views through their regional networks into how mental health services for young people can be improved.

Diabetes: Drugs

Mr Cash: To ask the Secretary of State for Health for what reasons the recommendation of the Commission on Human Medicines on the diabetes medication Avandia was not implemented throughout the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [14410]

Mr Simon Burns: Avandia (rosiglitazone) is licensed on a Europe-wide basis by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), not directly by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). In response to emerging evidence, it has been necessary to review the balance of risks and benefits of this medicine throughout Europe.

To inform its input into the European debate the MHRA has conducted its own assessment of the safety of rosiglitazone and sought the advice of the Commission on Human Medicines (CHM). The CHM advised in July 2010 that the risks of rosiglitazone outweigh its benefits and that it no longer has a place on the United Kingdom market. In addition, the CHM considered action should be taken promptly and ideally within the appropriate European Union framework.

Emerging data on rosiglitazone have been evaluated, and updated advice, including new restrictions on use and warnings, has been issued to prescribers, via the Drug Safety Update bulletin. Following the CHM advice in July, the MHRA contacted health care professionals

to provide clear advice on the need to closely follow the current prescribing advice regarding the use of rosiglitazone and to consider alternative treatments where appropriate.

The MHRA is contributing to the current European assessment of the balance of risks and benefits of rosiglitazone, which is anticipated to conclude this month.

Drugs: Generic Substitution

Mr David: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) when his Department will publish its response to the consultation on proposals to implement generic substitution in primary care further to the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme 2009; [14063]

(2) how many responses to his Department's consultation on proposals to implement generic substitution in primary care further to the Pharmaceutical Price Regulation Scheme 2009 were in favour of Option 1 of the three options presented. [14064]

Mr Simon Burns: Responses to the consultation are currently being considered. In accordance with the 'Code of Practice on Consultation', a summary of responses and the Department's response to the consultation, including next steps, will be published soon. The summary of responses will specifically address how many responses were in favour of the three options presented.

Epilepsy: Nurses

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many specialist epilepsy nurses (a) left the NHS and have not been replaced, (b) were reassigned to other inpatient duties and (c) were in positions which are under review since 22 June 2010. [13820]

Mr Burstow: Information on the number of specialist epilepsy nurses that have left the national health service and not been replaced, were reassigned to other in-patient duties, and were in positions which are under review, are not collected centrally. Local health bodies have responsibility for commissioning services to meet the needs of those living with epilepsy, this includes the recruitment of specialist nurses.

Gender Recognition

Caroline Lucas: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether the choice of treatment and provider in some mental health services referred to on page 52 of the White Paper, Equity and Excellence: liberating the NHS, will apply to gender identity services; and whether commissioning for gender identity services will fall under the responsibility of the new NHS Commissioning Board. [13488]

Mr Burstow: The introduction of choice of treatment and provider in some mental health services will begin from April 2011, and this will be extended wherever practicable. As set out in the White Paper, the NHS Commissioning Board will have responsibility for commissioning specialised services, which will include gender identity services.

General Practitioners

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to his Department's proposals for GP commissioning, who will be responsible for the funding of GP-led health centres. [14407]

Mr Simon Burns: Our overarching principle is that commissioning decisions should, wherever possible, reflect the views of local clinicians and the local public. Under the proposals set out, our NHS White Paper: "Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS", an NHS Commissioning Board will be responsible for commissioning primary care services for registered patients, whilst general practitioner (GP) consortia will be responsible for commissioning urgent care. The responses to the consultation on Commissioning for Patients, as part of the wider proposed changes in the White Paper, will enable us to proceed to set out the full details of how GP-led commissioning will work. We urge anyone who has any concerns to respond to the consultation by 11 October.

General Practitioners: Finance

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health with reference to his Department's proposals for GP commissioning, what penalties practices will be required to pay in year (a) one and (b) two of actual budgets if they overspend. [14406]

Mr Simon Burns: Under the proposals in the White Paper, the responsibility for managing commissioning budgets will rest with general practitioner (GP) commissioning consortia, rather than with the individual practices that make up a consortium. The White Paper and the consultation document on 'Commissioning for Patients' seek views on the proposal that a proportion of GP practice reward should, however, be linked to the performance of its consortium, both in terms of the outcomes that the consortium achieves for patients and in terms of its financial performance. These arrangements will be developed following discussion with the British Medical Association in the light of consultation responses.

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether GP practices will be reimbursed for rent under his Department's plans for GP commissioning; and what his policy is on the funding of primary care premises. [14409]

Mr Simon Burns: The arrangements for reimbursement of general practitioner premises costs are set out in "The NHS Premises Costs Directions 2004". This document has been placed in the Library, and the move to NHS Commissioning Board responsibility for contracting with primary care would not alter these arrangements.

General Practitioners: Prescriptions

Tony Baldry: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether GP practices will be permitted to dispense prescriptions under the new arrangements for GP commissioning. [14408]

Mr Simon Burns: General practitioner practices currently provide dispensing services to their patients under arrangements set out in the NHS (Pharmaceutical Services) Regulations 2005.

The proposed reforms in the White Paper, "Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS", would not in themselves affect dispensing practices any differently from non-dispensing practices.

Haemophilia Alliance

Huw Irranca-Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the terms of reference are for the programme of bi-annual meetings between his Department and the Haemophilia Alliance; and if he will make a statement. [13756]

Anne Milton: The terms of reference for the bi-annual meetings between the Department and the Haemophilia Alliance are as follows:

to share information between the United Kingdom Health Departments and the Haemophilia Alliance and consult on all aspects of treatment and care relating to inherited bleeding disorders;

to ensure there is effective communication between patient representatives, health and social care professionals, and policy officials on health and social care matters of mutual interest and concern;

to ensure links are developed between this group and other groups responsible for advising Government on blood safety issues; and

in fulfilling the above, the group recognises that health is a devolved matter, and therefore policy and practice may vary in different parts of the UK.

Two meetings have been held so far and the next one will be held in November 2010.

Health Professions: Insurance

Gordon Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects to be in a position to respond to the Finlay Scott Review on indemnity insurance as a condition of registration for health care professionals. [14455]

Mr Simon Burns: Finlay Scott has delivered his report "Independent review of requirement to have insurance or indemnity as a condition of registration as a healthcare professional" to the Secretary of State and other United Kingdom Health Ministers. This was published on the Department's website on 14 July, at:

www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117454

The Government welcome the report which contains a comprehensive appraisal of the issues and clear recommendations. The report requires careful consideration and we intend to publish a substantive response in due course, after Ministers in all four UK countries have had the opportunity to consider its content.

Health Services: Learning Disability

Mr Tom Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps his Department is taking to improve standards of health of people with a learning disability; and if he will make a statement; [13846]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to improve the training of NHS healthcare professionals for interacting with patients with a learning disability; and if he will make a statement; [13847]

(3) how many people with a learning disability received an annual health check in each year since 2008; [13848]

(4) when his Department plans to respond to Professor Jim Mansell's report *Raising our Sights*; and if he will make a statement; [13849]

(5) what steps his Department is taking to increase the number of learning disability liaison nurses; and if he will make a statement; [13850]

(6) whether the new NHS Commissioning Board referred to in the Health White Paper will require GP consortiums to provide annual health checks for people with a learning disability; [13851]

(7) what steps his Department plans to take to ensure that GP consortiums are able effectively to commission services for people with a learning disability; [13855]

(8) what progress has been made in extending the use of patients passports for people with a learning disability in the NHS; and if he will make a statement. [13857]

Mr Burstow: This Government are committed to supporting people with learning disabilities and in particular to improving health outcomes of people with learning disabilities. As our White Paper for the national health service makes clear, this Government's ambition is for health outcomes—and quality health services—as good as any in the world. And that means we are committed to providing a high quality service for everyone—especially those who are more disadvantaged and have experienced real inequity in the past.

Like all other patients, people with learning disabilities will be at the heart of everything. They will have more choice and control to shape health services around them, enabled by easy access to the information they need and want. They (or their families and advocates) will be involved in decisions about their care and we expect NHS professionals to ensure that they fully involve people with learning disabilities and their family carers and enable them to be part of that decision-making process.

We are pressing ahead with action to address the health inequalities which people with learning disabilities experience, especially a new confidential inquiry and Public Health Observatory. Representatives from Mencap, the National Forum for people with learning difficulties and the National Valuing Families forum are on the group scrutinising progress on these.

Annual health check figures are now on the *Improving Health and Lives: Learning Disabilities Observatory* website at

www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk

In 2008-09 27,011 people with learning disabilities were reported to have received a health check (23% of those people with learning disabilities known to services). In 2009-10 the number more than doubled to 58,919, (43% of those known to services). There is, though, wide variation between primary care trusts and there is still more to do. The functions of the new NHS Commissioning Board have still to be finalised pending

the outcome of the consultation which closes on 11 October. But we expect that the NHS Commissioning Board will commission the family health services that general practitioners (GPs) provide.

“*Liberating the NHS: Commissioning for patients*” sets out further details on the intended arrangements for GP commissioning, providing the basis for fuller consultation and engagement with primary care professionals, patients and the public. We intend that GP consortia will be responsible for commissioning the majority of NHS services, including elective hospital care and rehabilitative care, urgent and emergency care (including out-of hours services), most community health services and mental health and specialist learning disability services. Consortia will be responsible for meeting prescribing and associated costs. It will be for consortia to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to commission services themselves, or to make appropriate arrangements with another commissioning organisation (for instance a lead consortium). The NHS Commissioning Board will develop a commissioning outcomes framework which measures health outcomes. The Government are considering how the outcomes framework will measure improved health outcomes, including for people with learning disabilities.

The Department is working through strategic health authorities (SHAs) to review and improve training for healthcare staff to ensure that they give appropriate support to people with learning disabilities. SHA Education Commissioners are taking action to review the training provision for healthcare staff and people with learning disabilities. Staff in all GP practices delivering annual health checks have had training in meeting the needs of people with learning disabilities. The Royal College of General Practitioners is due to publish additional training materials for GPs later this autumn on getting health checks right for people with learning disabilities.

The Department is looking very carefully at the detailed recommendations set out in this report and how these support our objectives to improve outcomes for people with learning disabilities who have complex needs and their families. The elements of good service and good practice examples included in this report sit very clearly within the programme of work which government is leading to support independent living for people with learning disabilities and to support local service planning and commissioning to meet identified needs in their locality.

The Department has encouraged NHS bodies and local authorities (LAs) to set up these posts and promoted examples of good practice in involving learning disability acute hospital liaison nurses such as the Royal Sussex Hospital in Brighton. We have also encouraged NHS bodies to use patient passports for people with learning disabilities as an important way of ensuring that their health needs are all in one place. The Learning Disability Partnership Boards have reported some good progress on improving health outcomes for people with learning disabilities.

The national director for learning disabilities has written to all NHS and LA chief executives in July to remind them of the recommendations in the ombudsmen's report “*Six lives: the provision of public services to people with learning disabilities*” and to ask them to

report on progress in meeting those recommendations. We will shortly publish a response on progress against those recommendations.

Mr Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what assessment his Department has made of (a) trends in numbers of adults with learning disabilities and (b) the effects of such trends on future funding requirements for services for such people; and if he will make a statement; [13889]

(2) if he will meet representatives of the learning disability sector to discuss future funding of services for people with a learning disability; and if he will make a statement; [13890]

(3) what steps the Government plans to take to improve care and support services for people with a learning disability in (a) Blaydon, (b) the North East of England and (c) England; and if he will make a statement; [13891]

(4) how much and what proportion of the (a) adult social care and (b) NHS budget was spent on people with a learning disability in each year since 2001; and if he will make a statement; [13948]

(5) how much the NHS spent on each category of its services for adults with learning disabilities in each year since 2001; and if he will make a statement. [13949]

Mr Burstow: The Centre for Disability Research (2008) predicted a sustained increase in the number of people with learning disabilities known to services, from 2009 to 2026. The research detailed a number of scenarios, based on expected levels of need and anticipated levels of eligibility criteria in local authorities. All scenarios suggest sustained growth in the need for social care services for adults with learning disabilities over the full time period. However, average estimated annual increases vary from 1.04% (lower estimate, services are only provided to new entrants with critical or substantial needs) to 7.94% (upper estimate, services are provided to new entrants with critical, substantial or moderate needs).

The impact of these increases upon future funding requirements will depend on the ability of the social care system to deliver efficiency savings through a range of measures—including a renewed focus on preventing needs from escalating, greater personalisation, and improved community-based services to keep people independent. Future funding requirements will also depend upon decisions taken at a local level around charging policies and eligibility criteria.

Plans to improve care and support services for people with a learning disability within Blaydon and in the North East region are a matter for local decision. We have made clear our commitment to drive forward action to improve support and outcomes for people with learning disabilities across England and to support independent living. For this year, our priorities are to improve health outcomes and support people into jobs and homes of their own.

Gross expenditure on problems of Learning Disability from the NHS Programme Budgeting data, from 2003-04 onwards is shown as follows; we do not have data for previous years.

	£000
2003-04	2,272,971

	£000
2004-05	2,355,887
2005-06	2,595,671
2006-07	2,494,242
2007-08	2,856,102
2008-09	2,929,036

Source:
NHS Programme Budgeting data

Data on local authority expenditure on state funded care is collected and published by the NHS Information Centre for health and social care.

Table 1 following shows the gross expenditure for councils in England with Adult Social Services Responsibilities on adults aged 18 to 64 with learning disabilities as their primary client group between 2000-01 and 2008-09.

Table 1: Gross current expenditure for clients with a learning disability from 2000-01 to 2008-09, England¹

	Total gross current expenditure for adults aged under 65 with a learning disability	Total gross current expenditure for adult services	Percentage of total gross current expenditure for adults aged under 65 with a learning disability
2000-01 ²	1,751,908	9,619,210	18
2001-02 ²	1,903,991	10,111,585	19
2002-03 ²	2,253,481	11,316,088	20
2003-04 ^{2,3}	2,609,441	12,483,581	21
2004-05 ^{2,3}	2,850,224	13,497,922	21
2005-06 ^{2,3}	3,110,326	14,356,579	22
2006-07 ^{2,3}	3,292,281	14,898,163	22
2007-08 ³	3,453,006	15,274,794	23
2008-09 ³	3,807,216	16,075,810	24

¹ Expenditure figures have not been adjusted for inflation.

² 2000-01 to 2006-07 figures include estimated Service Strategy and Asylum Seekers Assessment and Care Management apportioned to Adult Services and Children and Families Services using proportions calculated using 2007-08 data. Since 2007-08 this information has been collected separately.

³ Includes expenditure funded from the Supporting People grant that councils have classified as Social Services expenditure rather than housing expenditure.

I have already agreed to meet with the Learning Disability Coalition to discuss future funding of services for people with learning disability.

Infant Foods: Nurseries

Margaret Curran: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what information his Department holds on the effectiveness of the nursery milk scheme as a measure available to all children; [14247]

(2) what recent assessment he has made of the value for money of the nursery milk scheme; [14337]

(3) what discussions he has had with the Minister for Public Health on proposals to terminate the nursery milk scheme; and on what dates such discussions took place. [14475]

Anne Milton: Milk is a source of important nutrients (such as calcium) as part of a balanced varied diet for young children.

The Department is unaware of any external studies undertaken on the value for money of the nursery milk scheme.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have regular discussions on a range of matters.

Members: Correspondence

Mr Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will arrange for the chief executive of University Hospital Birmingham to send a substantive reply to the letter of 6 July 2010 from the hon. Member for Walsall North, on a constituent, reference JM/CC/3223. [14398]

Mr Simon Burns: The Secretary of State for Health has no powers to direct national health service foundation trusts. We have brought the hon. Member's question to the attention of the chairman of Monitor (the statutory name of which is the independent regulator of NHS foundation trusts) from whom we understand that the chief executive of University Hospital Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust has sent a further response to your letter which you should receive shortly, and that your complaint is being processed in line with the trust's complaints policy.

Mental Health Services

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether he has made a recent assessment of the level of confidence of general practitioners in the quality of secondary mental health services. [14495]

Mr Burstow: No such assessment has been made.

Mental Health Services: Children

Mrs Moon: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many consultants are working in child and adolescent mental health services in each primary care trust; and if he will make a statement. [13252]

Mr Burstow: The number of consultants working in child and adolescent mental health services in each primary care trust (PCT) is not collected centrally.

However, information on the various sub specialties, which may be involved in providing psychiatric services to children and adolescents, can be found in the following table showing a breakdown by PCT.

Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): Consultants in each psychiatry specialty by primary care trust—England at 30 September 2009

		<i>Number (headcount)</i>				
		<i>Child and adolescent psychiatry</i>	<i>Forensic psychiatry</i>	<i>General psychiatry</i>	<i>Learning disabilities</i>	<i>Psychotherapy</i>
5A5	Kingston PCT	0	0	0	3	0
5C1	Enfield PCT	0	0	0	2	0
5CN	Herefordshire PCT	2	0	9	1	0
5CQ	Milton Keynes PCT	3	0	9	1	0
5D7	Newcastle PCT	0	0	1	0	0
5F1	Plymouth Teaching PCT	5	0	13	2	0
5FE	Portsmouth City Teaching PCT	3	0	8	1	0
5GC	Luton PCT	0	0	2	0	0
5HP	Blackpool PCT	2	0	0	0	0
5HX	Ealing PCT	0	0	1	0	0
5HY	Hounslow PCT	0	0	0	1	0
5JE	Barnsley PCT	2	0	8	1	0
5K8	Islington PCT	3	0	5	0	0
5L1	Southampton City PCT	11	0	0	0	0
5M1	South Birmingham PCT	0	0	0	7	0
5MK	Telford and Wrekin PCT	6	0	0	0	0
5MV	Wolverhampton City PCT	1	0	10	2	0
5N1	Leeds PCT	6	0	0	0	0
5N3	Wakefield District PCT	3	0	0	0	0
5N9	Lincolnshire PCT	0	0	1	0	0
5NG	Central Lancashire PCT	3	0	0	0	0
5NL	Liverpool PCT	0	0	0	0	1
5NV	North Yorkshire and York PCT	7	1	30	2	0
5P5	Surrey PCT	1	0	0	0	0
5PE	Dudley PCT	0	0	0	2	0
5PL	Worcestershire PCT	6	0	0	0	0
5PW	North East Essex PCT	0	0	0	7	0
5QC	Hampshire PCT	8	0	0	0	0
5QD	Buckinghamshire PCT	1	0	0	0	0
5QM	Dorset PCT	0	0	10	0	0
5QT	Isle of Wight PCT	0	0	12	0	0
TAM	Solihull Care Trust	4	0	0	0	0
TAN	North East Lincolnshire Care Trust Plus	0	0	9	0	0

Hospital and Community Health Services (HCHS): Consultants in each psychiatry specialty by primary care trust—England at 30 September 2009

	Number (headcount)				
	Child and adolescent psychiatry	Forensic psychiatry	General psychiatry	Learning disabilities	Psychotherapy
Total	77	1	128	32	1

Data quality:

The NHS Information Centre for health and social care seeks to minimise inaccuracies and the effect of missing and invalid data but responsibility for data accuracy lies with the organisations providing the data. Methods are continually being updated to improve data quality. Where changes impact on figures already published, this is assessed but unless it is significant at national level figures are not changed. Impact at detailed or local level is footnoted in relevant analyses.

Source:

The NHS Information Centre for health and social care Medical and Dental Workforce Census

Mental Illness

Chi Onwurah: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether he has made a recent estimate of the effect on life expectancy of a mental illness; and if he will take steps to seek to reduce that effect. [14493]

Mr Burstow: We have made no recent estimate of the effect on life expectancy of someone with a mental illness. However, we are aware of the body of evidence which suggests that there are increased rates in morbidity and premature mortality in those with serious mental illness. This is also true of those with common mental health disorders which coincide with increased obesity and smoking for example. We intend to address this issue in the new mental health strategy and mention of this has already been made in the new national health service outcomes framework.

Midwives: Manpower

Gordon Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many midwives were employed by the NHS in (a) 2008, (b) 2009 and (c) 2010. [14474]

Anne Milton: The following table shows the number of midwives, both full-time equivalent (FTE) and headcount, working in the hospital and community health services as at 30 September 2008 and 30 September 2009. Information for 30 September 2010 is not yet available; it is due to be published in March 2011.

NHS hospital and community health services: Qualified midwifery staff in England as at 30 September 2008-09

	2008	2009
<i>Registered midwives</i>		
Headcount	25,664	26,451
FTE	19,639	20,236

Source:

NHS Information Centre Non Medical Workforce Census.

Gordon Banks: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many independent midwives there were in (a) 2008, (b) 2009 and (c) 2010. [14498]

Anne Milton: The number of independent midwives is not collected or held centrally.

Motor Neurone Disease: Health Services

Kerry McCarthy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of

the merits of establishing a national strategy for motor neurone disease; and if he will make a statement. [14091]

Mr Burstow: Motor neurone disease is a long-term neurological condition; the National Service Framework for Long-Term neurological Conditions (NSF) was developed to address long-standing issues in neurological care, e.g. inequity in access to services; work force shortages and variable quality of care across the country. The NSF's quality requirements include a separate section on addressing the needs of people with rapidly progressing conditions, such as motor neurone disease, where services need to respond quickly.

We have made no assessment of the merits of establishing a national strategy for motor neurone disease.

NHS Walk-in Centres

Frank Dobson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health whether proposed GP commissioning bodies will have the power to close existing NHS walk-in centres. [13698]

Mr Simon Burns: Our overarching principle is that commissioning decisions should wherever possible, reflect the views of local clinicians and the local public. Under the proposals set out our NHS White Paper: "Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS", an NHS Commissioning Board will be responsible for commissioning primary care services for registered patients, while general practitioner (GP) consortia will be responsible for commissioning urgent care. The responses to the consultation on "Commissioning for Patients", as part of the wider proposed changes in the White Paper, will enable us to proceed to set out the full details of how GP-led commissioning will work. We urge anyone who has any concerns to respond to the consultation by 11 October.

NHS: Private Sector

Mr Meacher: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much income has been received from private patients using NHS hospitals and other NHS facilities since 1990. [13691]

Mr Simon Burns: The information is shown in the following table.

£ million

	<i>Regional and district health authorities and special authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals¹</i>	<i>Health authorities²</i>	<i>Primary care trusts³</i>	<i>NHS trusts⁴</i>	<i>NHS foundation trusts⁵</i>	<i>Total</i>
2009-10	—	—	2.6	190.3	223.5	416.4
2008-09	—	—	3.2	227.3	189.8	420.3
2007-08	—	—	2.9	238.4	165.6	406.9
2006-07	—	—	3.2	280.7	124.0	407.9
2005-06	—	—	2.6	295.5	98.4	396.5
2004-05	—	—	2.3	303.0	73.3	378.6
2003-04	—	—	2.6	374.7	—	377.3
2002-03	—	n/a	n/a	366.7	—	366.7
2001-02	—	n/a	n/a	340.8	—	340.8
2000-01	—	n/a	n/a	316.6	—	316.6
1999-2000	—	n/a	—	340.8	—	340.8
1998-99	—	n/a	—	290.8	—	290.8
1997-98	—	n/a	—	273.2	—	273.2
1996-97	—	n/a	—	235.7	—	235.7
1995-96	2.2	—	—	207.4	—	209.6
1994-95	5.9	—	—	189.5	—	195.4
1993-94	66.4	—	—	109.9	—	176.3
1992-93	98.8	—	—	58.5	—	157.3
1991-92	108.6	—	—	32.3	—	140.9
1990-91	107.5	—	—	—	—	107.5

— Indicates that there were no organisations in the sector for the particular year.

¹ Figures taken from the summarised account of regional and district health authorities and special health authorities for the London postgraduate teaching hospitals.

² Figures for private patient income are not separately disclosed in the summarised account of health authorities. The information is not held centrally.

³ Figures taken from the primary care trust audited summarisation schedules which are only retained for seven years. Figures for private patient income are not separately disclosed in the summarised account of primary care trusts.

⁴ Figures taken from the summarised account of NHS trusts.

⁵ Figures taken from the consolidated account of NHS foundation trusts.

Obesity

Alan Keen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the number of people registered with GPs who have a body mass index of (a) 40 or more and (b) 35 or more with a co-morbidity of each (i) sex and (ii) ethnic origin. [13829]

Anne Milton: The information is not available in the format requested.

The data the NHS Information Centre holds on general practitioner-recorded adult obesity relate to the Quality and Outcomes Framework. The Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) includes a register of patients who have had their body mass index (BMI) recorded as greater than or equal to 30 in the last 15 months. This register only includes patients aged 16 and over. In 2008-09, (the latest period for which data have been published) the number of such patients was 4,389,964.

Data relating to sex and ethnic origin are not available via the Quality and Outcomes Framework.

Notes:

1. The QOF is GP-recorded adult obesity status which is collected on behalf of the Department by the NHS Information Centre.

2. QOF does not record the actual BMI so it is not possible to split this figure as to those with a BMI of over 40 or over 35. Sex or ethnicity data are not available via the QOF.

3. Patients will only contribute to the figures in QOF if they are registered with a general practice participating in QOF and who visit their GP in the year in question.

Palliative Care: Finance

Mr Leech: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for the use of (a) patient-reported outcome measures, (b) care plans and (c) bereaved relative surveys in developing his Department's policy on end of life care. [13582]

Mr Burstow: The Department is currently consulting on an Outcomes Framework as part of the programme to implement the White Paper "Equity and excellence: Liberating the NHS". The Outcomes Framework will include patient-reported outcome measures and end of life care is covered in the consultation document (ref. "Transparency in outcomes—a framework for the NHS", Department of Health, 19 July 2010). A copy of the consultation document has already been placed in the Library.

The End of Life Care Strategy highlights the importance of ensuring patients approaching the end of life and their carers have care plans. End of life care is one of the work streams in the Department Quality, Innovation, Productivity and Prevention programme. This is focussing on accelerating progression on the first steps on the end of life care pathway—identifying people who are approaching the end of life and then planning for their care, including Advance Care Planning.

The End of Life Care Strategy made a commitment to pilot, and then roll out, a survey of bereaved informal carers, which can be used as a proxy measure for the

quality of care provided to the deceased, as well as measuring the care provided to the carers themselves. This commitment is being met through the Views of Informal Carers—Evaluation of Services (VOICES) questionnaire. This has been revised to reflect the recommendations in the Strategy and a pilot is currently under way to test out how the VOICES questionnaire could be most effectively utilised in a national survey. The pilot will run to January 2011. The results from such surveys will inform local policy development.

Social Services: Finance

Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the number of people using (a) direct payments and (b) personal budgets to fund their care who had engaged the services of agency care staff who (i) did not have relevant skills qualifications, (ii) were not subject to regulation and (iii) had not received clearance from the Criminal Records Bureau in the latest period for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [14466]

Mr Burstow: The Department does not hold this information.

BUSINESS, INNOVATION AND SKILLS

Apprentices

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what recent assessment he has made of the contribution of apprenticeships to the economy (a) nationally and (b) in the North East. [13693]

Mr Hayes: A report commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills in 2007 estimated that the net present value (NPV) of completing an apprenticeship is around £105,000 at Level 3, and £73,000 at Level 2. NPV captures the surplus of lifetime benefits, in terms of higher wages and employment likelihoods, over the costs of undertaking the learning, including both the resource costs to the state and the employer, as well as the value of output foregone during learning.

The full report—“A Cost Benefit Analysis of Apprenticeships and Other Vocational Qualifications”—can be accessed at:

<http://www.education.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR834.pdf>

A report commissioned by the Apprenticeship Ambassadors Network in 2008, found that employers recouped the cost of their investment in apprenticeship training within two to three years in the majority of cases. Employers also identified a number of longer term benefits from the training, outlined in the report.

The full report—“The Net Benefit to Employer Investment in Apprenticeship Training”—can be accessed at:

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/publications/2008/apprenticeship_report_research_1_521.pdf

In neither report is the analysis broken down according to region.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many apprenticeships were available (a) nationally and (b) in the North East on the most recent date for which figures are available. [13694]

Mr Hayes: Apprenticeships are jointly funded by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills, and the Department for Education. In 2008/09, the latest full year for which data are available, there were 240,000 Apprenticeship starts in England and 17,200 in the north east. Final full year data for 2009/10 will be available in January 2011. In the 2010/11 academic year 131,000 16 to 18-year-old and 167,000 adult Apprenticeship starts are planned. The Government's decision to redeploy £150 million of our savings in 2010-11, creating an additional 50,000 adult places, demonstrates our commitment to high-quality employer owned Apprenticeships. We fund Apprenticeships on a national basis through the Skills Funding Agency—there are no regional or sectoral allocations.

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what estimate he has made of the number of persons seeking an apprenticeship (a) nationally and (b) in the North East. [13695]

Mr Hayes: Information on the total number of young people and adults seeking an Apprenticeship is not collected centrally. People may start an Apprenticeship through a variety of routes, including using Apprenticeships vacancies, the national on-line system for advertising and applying for Apprenticeship vacancies. Alternatively people may apply directly to a training provider or to an employer offering an Apprenticeship programme, or may already be employed and undertake an Apprenticeship. However from this academic year (2010/11) training providers are required to submit all Apprenticeship vacancies through the national Apprenticeships vacancies system. This does not apply where it is proposed that the Apprenticeship opportunity will be offered to a learner already employed. In the last academic year (August 2009 to July 2010) 354,000 candidates had registered to use Apprenticeship vacancies and 75,000 candidates made at least one application. A regional breakdown is not available.

Jon Trickett: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many higher level apprenticeship courses will be available in each constituency in the 2010-11 academic year. [13944]

Mr Hayes: Data on the number of higher (level 4) apprenticeships by constituency are not currently available. Aggregate information about the total number of higher apprentice starts is also not separately available at present because of the historically small number of starts at this level. Higher apprenticeships are currently included with advanced (level 3) apprenticeships and data are available through the Department for Business Innovation and Skills Statistical First Releases (SFR) by parliamentary constituency. The supplementary tables through the following link include these data:

http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirst release/sfr_supplementary_tables/

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many people commenced an apprenticeship in (a) 1997 and (b) May 2010. [13960]

Mr Hayes: The number of Apprenticeships in 1996/97 was 75,000 last published in the Statistical First Release on the 24 Oct 2002, however this data was calculated on a different basis and therefore may not be directly comparable with later years.

Table 1 shows the number of Apprenticeship starts for England from 2003/04 to 2008/09. 2003/04 is the earliest year for which comparable data is available and 2008/09 is the latest year for which full year data is available.

Table 1: Apprenticeship Programme Starts, 2003/04 to 2008/09

Academic Year	Apprenticeships
2003/04	193,600
2004/05	189,000
2005/06	175,000
2006/07	184,400
2007/08	224,800
2008/09	239,900

Note:

1 All figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

Source:

Individualised Learner Record

Information on the number of Apprenticeship starts is published in a quarterly statistical first release (SFR). The latest SFR was published on 24 June 2010

http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirstrelease/sfr_current

Apprentices: Disability

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) what steps his Department is taking to (a) encourage take-up of apprenticeships by and (b) broaden access to apprenticeships for people with disabilities; [14017]

(2) what steps his Department is taking to promote (a) gender and (b) racial equality in the take-up of apprenticeships in all trades. [14018]

Mr Hayes: Both my Department and the Department for Education are responsible for the promotion of equality of access to apprenticeships. The National Apprenticeships Service (NAS), as the body responsible for promoting apprenticeships to employers and to potential apprentices, manages its systems to ensure equal access to information about the programme and to apprenticeship vacancies. Enhanced support includes additional funding available for training providers to support learners with a learning difficulty and/or disability. A priority for NAS is to address stereotyping and under-representation across apprenticeships including gender, race and disability. NAS and the Skills Funding Agency fund apprenticeships through a wide range of training providers including specialist providers that support disadvantaged learners. NAS also work with employers to help them understand and be more responsive to the needs of under-represented groups.

This Department regularly publishes starts, completion and success rate data for all these groups and Ofsted assess training providers on their equality and diversity support for apprentices.

Apprentices: Finance

Richard Graham: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what (a) the total administrative cost and (b) the (i) absolute and (ii) percentage administrative cost per apprentice of the National Apprenticeship Scheme was in 2009-10. [13398]

Mr Hayes: In 2009-10, the total expenditure on participation in apprenticeship training was £1,072 million, including the Department for Education's expenditure on apprenticeships for 16 to 18-year-olds. Additionally, a total of £33 million was spent on activities supporting the expansion of the Apprenticeships Programme, such as maintaining the Apprenticeship vacancies IT system, marketing and communications and piloting new delivery models.

It is not possible to provide a meaningful average cost to the public purse of an apprenticeship. The public cost of delivering an apprenticeship varies significantly depending on the industry in which the apprenticeship framework is being delivered; length of stay on the programme; whether the framework is at Level 2 or 3; and whether the participant is in the 16 to 18, 19 to 25 or 25+ age group. For example, the Skills Funding Agency estimates that the cost of delivering a Level 2 adult apprenticeship in business and administration is around £2,700 and is £16,300 for an advanced apprenticeship (Level 3) in engineering for a 16 to 18-year-old.

The Apprenticeship programme is administered by the National Apprenticeship Service, which was housed within the LSC during 2009-10. The total administrative cost of the LSC in 2009-10 was £247 million. Information on the proportion of this expenditure that relates to the administration of apprenticeships is not available.

Business Links

Mr Umunna: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will take steps to ensure the continuation of business advice services provided to small and medium-sized enterprises through Business Link. [14168]

Mr Prisk: This Department is committed to modernising how support, information and advice are provided to businesses. With the proposed abolition of the regional development agencies who manage the Business Link service in the regions, we are currently considering how best to deliver support to business in the future.

Our aim is to establish a better, simpler, more cost effective system of business support delivering:

- reduced spend in light of the pressures on public finances;
- a clear focus on growth to drive recovery;
- support targeted on the businesses which would most benefit;
- more local involvement;
- best use of technology to ensure a fully modernised and cost effective approach to publicly funded business support, drawing in and complementing more extensive private sector provision.

Whatever the final shape of the business support system, we will work with all delivery partners to ensure an orderly transition and will ensure that any changes to relevant functions and responsibilities are managed as smoothly as possible.

Departmental ICT

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills which IT contracts awarded by his Department in each of the last five years have been abandoned; and what the monetary value of each such contract was. [12711]

Mr Davey: Since the coalition Government was formed on 11 May, the Department has not yet terminated, nor been informed by its agencies, NDPBs and other partner organisations of the termination of any legally binding IT contracts with a lifetime value over £100,000. A process is currently under way to review ICT projects in line with the coalition Government's ICT moratorium guidance.

Prior to 11 May, the information requested was not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Education: Qualifications

Andrew Griffiths: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (1) what assessment he has made of the consultation undertaken with further education colleges by Summit Skills when developing new qualifications under the Qualifications and Credit Framework; [13688]

(2) what steps he takes to ensure that sector skills councils represent the views of small and medium-sized businesses when developing qualifications under the Qualifications and Credit Framework. [13689]

Mr Hayes: Sector Skills Councils consult with a wide range of employers and other interested parties when developing National Occupational Standards, Sector Qualifications Strategies and Action Plans; all of which allow them to decide on the vocational qualifications that then need to be developed for the Qualifications and Credit Framework in their sector.

Sector Qualifications Strategies outline the learning and qualifications needs of employers in their sector and action plans specify where changes and new vocational qualifications are needed. Consultation is built into this process; for example, Summit Skills regularly attends further education conferences to listen to colleges' views. Awarding organisations then develop vocational qualifications and SSCs approve these before they are accredited onto the QCF to ensure that they meet the sectors' skills needs.

National Occupational Standards underpin vocational qualifications and SSCs have specific targets for consulting with small and medium-sized enterprises when developing these standards.

Employment Agency

Mr David Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what plans he has for the future of the Employment Agency Standards Inspectorate. [13704]

Mr Davey: There are no current plans to make any changes to the Employment Agency Standards inspectorate (EAS). EAS will continue to investigate complaints from workers and enforce the Conduct Regulations using a risk based approach.

EU Grants and Loans

Mr Blunkett: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills which body will be responsible for administering European Regional Development Funding in circumstances where that funding is relevant to multi-agency and cross-local authority boundary work, and where the requirement for the funding lies clearly out with any potential local enterprise partnership boundary following the abolition of regional development agencies; and if he will make a statement. [14032]

Robert Neill: I have been asked to reply.

My Department will continue to be the managing authority for ERDF programmes in England. We are currently considering the future arrangements for managing the programmes across England, following the abolition of regional development agencies. This will cover the management of all ERDF projects, including those which involve multi-agency work and cross local authority boundaries.

EU Grants and Loans: Blackpool

Mr Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what assessment he has made of the effect on Blackpool of the decision to freeze further allocations of North West Development Agency funding under the current European Regional Development Fund programme. [14012]

Mr Prisk [holding answer 8 September 2010]: Funding for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programme is still available. We have frozen any further matched funding from the RDA Single Pot, given the in-year budget cuts and the need to manage down RDA commitments during their wind down.

However, ERDF funding is available where it is matched by private sector or other public sector funding, and we would not expect this decision to have any adverse effect on Blackpool.

Mr Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what the status is of funding allocated by the North West Development Agency to ongoing regeneration projects in Blackpool backed by funding allocated from the European Regional Development Fund. [14013]

Mr Prisk [holding answer 8 September 2010]: NWDA have confirmed that they will continue to fund those projects that are already contractually committed. However they will not be able to fund any project which is not yet contracted. This may affect some of the ongoing regeneration projects in Blackpool.

Graduates

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what proportion of people in (a) Liverpool Wavertree constituency and (b) England have graduate or higher level qualifications. [13752]

Mr Hayes: The following table shows the number and percentage of working age adults (men aged 19 to 64 and women aged 19 to 59) in Liverpool local authority and England that hold qualifications equivalent to NGF level 4 or above. These estimates are from the Annual Population Survey (APS) and cover the period from January to December 2009, the latest year for which data are available.

Table 1: Number and percentage of people aged 19-59/64 holding qualifications at NQF Level 4 or above, 2009

	England	Liverpool LA
Working age adults at Level 4 or above	9,547,000	76,000
Percentage of all working age adults	30.0%	27.1%
95% Confidence Intervals	+/-0.2ppts	+/- 2.6ppts

While local authority level estimates can be calculated from the Annual Population Survey, the sample is not large enough to provide estimates for smaller geographies such as parliamentary constituencies. Furthermore, estimates for local authorities are subject to large sampling variability and should therefore be treated with caution and viewed in conjunction with their Confidence Intervals¹ (CIs), which indicate how accurate an estimate is. For example, a 95% CI of +1-2.6 percentage points (pp) means that the true value for the Liverpool estimate shown above is between 24.5% and 29.7% for 95% of cases.

¹ Those given are 95% confidence intervals

It is important to note that the estimates provided here will not be comparable with estimates from the Labour Force Survey, which BIS uses to report headline measures of qualifications held within the population at national level in England. As well as being based on different time periods, the estimates from the two data sets are compiled using different methodologies. The method used to calculate the headline Labour Force Survey measure allows for known issues arising in capturing data on attainment through social surveys, but this method cannot be applied to the Annual Population Survey data. As a result, the estimates provided above potentially underestimate attainment within the population.

Minimum Wage: Work Experience

Luciana Berger: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills what guidance his Department provides to businesses on their legal obligations under national minimum wage legislation in respect of unpaid interns. [13809]

Mr Davey: The Department provides guidance for businesses on national minimum wage requirements in respect of internships on the businesslink.gov website. This guidance can be found at

www.businesslink.gov.uk/nmw

Public Sector: Procurement

Pat Glass: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills if he will take steps to ensure that small and medium-sized construction development firms in the North East have the opportunity to

compete for public sector procurement contracts on an equal basis with large, national and centralised companies. [11780]

Mr Maude: I have been asked to reply.

The Coalition Programme for Government signals the Government's commitment to small and medium-sized businesses succeeding in the public sector. The Government have set an aspiration that 25% of Government contracts should be awarded to SMEs, and has committed to publishing Government tenders in full online and free of charge.

To make it easier for SMEs to win public sector business, the Government are also taking steps to simplify and streamline the procurement process. Which we will update Parliament on in due course.

Government procurement policy requires that contracts be awarded through fair and open competition, in compliance with EU Treaty principles and UK regulations implementing the EU Procurement Directives. Such competitions are open to all companies regardless of size.

Unemployment: Young People

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many persons aged under 25 years are not in education, employment or training (a) nationally and (b) in the North East. [13696]

Mr Hayes: Estimates of the number and proportion of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET) in England are published quarterly by the Department for Education.

The latest publication is available at:

<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d000950/index.shtml>

The supplementary table giving a regional breakdown of 16 to 24-year-olds NEET, and the England total, is available at:

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d000950/NEET16_24.xls

Catherine McKinnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills how many apprenticeships funded from the public purse have been taken up in each financial year since the publication of the Leitch Review of Skills in 2004. [13697]

Mr Hayes: Table 1 shows the number of apprenticeship starts for England from 2004/05. 2008/09 is the latest year for which full year data is available.

Table 1: Apprenticeship programme starts, 2004/05 to 2008/09

Academic year	Apprenticeships
2004/05	189,000
2005/06	175,000
2006/07	184,400
2007/08	224,800
2008/09	239,900

Notes:

1. All figures are rounded to the nearest 100.

2. '-' indicates a base figure of less than 50.

Source:

Individualised Learner Record

Information on the number of apprenticeship starts is published in a quarterly statistical first release (SFR). The latest SFR was published on 24 June 2010:

[http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirst release/sfr_current](http://www.thedataservice.org.uk/statistics/statisticalfirst%20release/sfr_current)

CABINET OFFICE

Public Sector: Pay

Gregg McClymont: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what recent estimate the Office for National Statistics has made of the proportion of public sector workers in Scotland who earn (a) less than £21,000 per annum and (b) £21,000 or more per annum. [14342]

Mr Hurd: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the UK Statistics Authority. I have asked the authority to reply.

Letter from Stephen Penneck, dated September 2010:

As Director General for the Office for National Statistics, I have been asked to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what recent estimate the Office for National Statistics has made of the proportion of public sector workers in Scotland who earn (a) less than £21,000 per annum and (b) £21,000 per annum and over. (14342)

Annual levels of earnings are estimated from the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE), and are provided for all employees on adult rates of pay, who have been in the same job for more than a year. The ASHE, carried out in April each year, is the most comprehensive source of earnings information in the United Kingdom. It is a sample of all employees who are members of pay-as-you-earn (PAYE) schemes.

I attach a table showing the proportion of public sector employees in Scotland who earn (a) less than £21,000 per annum and (b) £21,000 per annum and over in 2009, the latest period for which figures are available. Figures are provided for all employees and full-time employees.

Proportion of all and full time public sector employees' earning < £21,000 per annum and > £21,000 per annum (£)—Scotland 2009

	Percentage	
	<£21,000	>£21,000
All public sector employees	46.8	53.2
Full time public sector employees	28.9	71.1

¹ Employees on adult rates who have been in the same job for more than a year. As at April 2009.

Source:

Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, Office for National Statistics

TREASURY

Academies: Finance

Stewart Hosie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether enactment of the Academies Bill would have Barnett consequential for (a) Scotland, (b) Wales and (c) Northern Ireland. [12186]

Danny Alexander: Funding for the Department of Education in England will be determined in the spending review in the autumn. As education is devolved to the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and Northern Ireland Executive, any Barnett consequential will be determined in the spending review in the usual way.

Banks: Loans

Mr Meacher: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will establish an inquiry into the effectiveness of banks' lending practices in supporting economic recovery. [13692]

Mr Hoban: On 26 July, the Government published a Green Paper on business finance to help inform and take forward its agenda on credit and other sources of finance for businesses.

The Government are inviting views from businesses and the financial community to suggest approaches for enhancing access to finance, including suggestions for the improvement of banks' current lending practices. The Green Paper and information about providing responses are available here:

<http://www.bis.gov.uk/businessfinance>

The deadline for responses is 20 September 2010.

Departmental Travel

Graham Evans: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much his (a) Department and (b) its agencies and non-departmental public bodies has spent on travel for its employees in each year since 1997. [7416]

Justine Greening: The available information on travel spending for the organisations requested is shown in the following table. Data for HM Treasury and the Debt Management Office is only available from 2002-03 due to the introduction of a new accounting system in that year. The Asset Protection Agency was created in 2009-10. The figure quoted for the Royal Mint Advisory Committee includes subsistence. Data for prior years is not available.

	HM Treasury	Debt Management Office	Asset Protection Agency	Royal Mint Advisory Committee
				£000
2002-03	1,333	14	n/a	n/a
2003-04	1,828	36	n/a	n/a
2004-05	1,764	22	n/a	n/a
2005-06	1,929	36	n/a	n/a
2006-07	2,079	23	n/a	n/a
2007-08	1,776	37	n/a	n/a
2008-09	1,735	48	n/a	n/a
2009-10	1,639	33	1	4

EU Budget

Philip Davies: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the monetary value was of the last bi-monthly payment from the UK to the EU budget. [11302]

Justine Greening: The latest UK payment to the EU Budget was made on 1 September 2010 and was £804,367,165.72.

The Government have been leading efforts to bear down on the 2011 EU Budget. We believe that it is only fair that the EU Budget plays its part in the difficult fiscal consolidation faced by many EU member states.

As the Chancellor of the Exchequer told a recent meeting of EU Finance Ministers, a freeze in EU spending levels should be considered.

The Government are also taking steps to contain the cost of the EU Budget and when negotiations of the 2014-20 budget envelope begin (expected in the first half of 2011), the Government will strongly defend the UK's national interests and ensure that spending is focused on those areas where the EU adds value.

EU Internal Trade: Fraud

Rehman Chishti: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to reduce missing trader intra-community fraud. [14136]

Mr Gauke: The Government have in place a comprehensive strategy to combat VAT missing trader intra-community fraud. This comprises a wide range of different activities, carried out by staff across HMRC and the United Kingdom Border Force.

As a result, the estimate of attempted fraud has fallen from its peak of between £4 billion and £6 billion in 2005-06 to between £1.0 billion and £2.5 billion in 2008-09. The impact on VAT receipts has also substantially reduced from £2.5-£4.5 billion in 2005-06 to £1.0-£2.5 billion in 2008-09.

Members: Correspondence

Mr Winnick: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when his Department plans to respond to the letter from the hon. Member for Walsall North of 30 June, (reference 7/21100/2010), transferred to him from the Department for Work and Pensions. [14336]

Mr Hoban: I have replied to the hon. Member.

Minimum Wage: Enforcement

Mr David Hamilton: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to improve enforcement of legislation governing the national minimum wage by HM Revenue and Customs. [13701]

Mr Davey: I have been asked to reply.

Effective enforcement of the national minimum wage (NMW) plays a crucial role in driving up compliance levels. Officials are working with HMRC to deliver a compliance strategy that ensures that enforcement is targeted on the areas where there is the greatest risk of non-compliance. To achieve this, HMRC will be testing new ways of working to focus on the most 'at risk' employers and the most 'at risk' workers. This will include piloting a triage approach to investigating complaints and making greater use of the contribution that community bodies, unions, trade associations in the low pay sectors and other interested parties can make to promoting the NMW and raising the profile of enforcement. We will also be encouraging more NMW inspection activity co-ordinated with the work of other bodies, including the Employment Agency Standards inspectorate. This will build on the joint working agreements put in place following the launch of the single Pay and Work Rights helpline last year.

Central to our compliance strategy is the proposition that a 'one size fits all approach' is not the most effective. We will therefore continue to use a variety of tools and techniques to reach different audiences, ranging from ensuring that up-to-date, practical and accessible guidance is available, through to prosecution of the worst employers. This tailored approach to NMW compliance ensures that employers who want to comply have access to information and tools to enable them to do so and those employers who would otherwise be tempted to operate outside of the law are deterred from doing so.

NHS: Finance

Stewart Hosie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the likely financial effect on Barnett consequential to (a) Scotland, (b) Wales and (c) Northern Ireland of proposed changes to health spending in England. [12185]

Danny Alexander: Funding for the NHS in England will be determined in the spending review in the autumn. As health policy is devolved to the Scottish Executive, Welsh Assembly Government and Northern Ireland Executive, any Barnett consequential will be determined in the spending review in the usual way.

Public Sector: Pay

Natascha Engel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer whether the public sector pay freeze for those earning over £21,000 per year will include local government craft workers whose rates of pay are governed by agreements of the Joint Negotiating Committee for Local Authority Craft and Associated Employees; and whether the £250 annual payment for public sector workers earning under £21,000 per year will be paid to such workers. [13992]

Robert Neill: I have been asked to reply.

The pay of local government craft workers is determined by the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) for Local Authority Craft and Associated Employees, made up of the employers' side and the trade union side. Central Government have no role in respect of the JNC.

Tax Avoidance

Mr Bain: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps have been taken by his Department to reduce levels of tax avoidance; and how much additional tax revenue he estimates will accrue from such steps. [13235]

Mr Gauke: This Government are committed to tackling avoidance and intends to build in sustainable defences against avoidance opportunities when undertaking policy reform and to review areas of the tax system in which repeated changes have been necessary to close loopholes.

HMRC's anti-avoidance strategy is based on stopping avoidance at source as far as possible, through robust legislation, early detection of avoidance schemes and engaging with taxpayers to deter them from engaging in tax avoidance.

The disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime forms a key part of this. It provides early information about schemes and informs efforts to prevent avoidance through legislation and operational intervention. Where avoidance

is identified, HMRC responds quickly by advising the Government on legislative changes to close loopholes and by challenging avoidance schemes vigorously, including, where necessary, through litigation.

As the emphasis of HMRC's strategy is on prevention, it is difficult to provide estimates of the total amount of tax that is protected. However, HMRC estimate that the disclosure of tax avoidance schemes regime has already helped to prevent over £12 billion in avoidance opportunities since 2004. Changes announced in the Budget will further strengthen the regime to provide HMRC with better information and make it harder for those who do not to comply.

Taxation: Business

Stewart Hosie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which accountancy firms have been approved by HM Revenue and Customs to conduct independent business reviews of companies seeking to defer their tax payments; and what mechanism his Department used to select these firms. [13337]

Mr Gauke: In a document published on its website on 8 March 2010, HMRC invited expressions of interest from industry experts who wanted to be included on the Independent Business Review Panel. The details of this invitation can be found at:

<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/consultations/ibr-eoi.htm>

Following the expression of interest exercise a full list of the successful applicants was published on HMRC's website on the 22 April 2010:

<http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/consultations/ibr-panel.htm>

Trade Unions

Priti Patel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many (1) civil servants in his Department spent the equivalent of (a) five days or fewer, (b) five to 10 days, (c) 10 to 15 days, (d) 15 to 20 days, (e) 20 to 25 days and (f) 25 days or more on trade union-related activities or duties while being paid salaries from the public purse in each year since 1997; [11678]

(2) paid manpower hours civil servants in his Department spent on trade union-related duties and activities in each year since 1997. [11677]

Justine Greening: HM Treasury has one member of staff, Grade 7, who spends 0.60 (FTE) of time working as a trade union official.

HM Treasury follow the ACAS Code of Practice "Time off for Trades Union Duties and Activities" when allowing other staff time off for trade union activities available at:

<http://www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2391>.

VAT

Stephen Hammond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will estimate the sums to accrue to the Exchequer if zero rating for value added tax were removed from (a) domestic passenger transport, (b) newspapers and magazines and (c) water and sewerage in (i) 2010, (ii) 2012 and (iii) 2015; [12942]

(2) if he will estimate the sum to accrue to the Exchequer if the exemption from value added tax of betting, gaming and the National Lottery were removed in (a) 2010, (b) 2012 and (c) 2015; [12944]

(3) if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer if residential property (a) conversions and (b) renovations were exempt from value added tax in (i) 2010, (ii) 2012 and (iii) 2015. [12957]

Mr Gauke: The estimated costs of VAT zero rates and exemptions are published in table 1.5 'Estimated costs of the principal tax expenditure and structural reliefs' on the HMRC website at

http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/stats/tax_expenditures/table1-5.pdf

This shows the broad estimated costs of the VAT zero rates on

domestic passenger transport,
books, newspapers and magazines, and
water and sewerage services.

and the VAT exemption from betting, gaming and lottery duties.

As they are based on the current reliefs, they do not include behavioural effects were they to be removed.

No estimates are available of the cost of exempting residential property on conversions and renovations from value added tax.

The specific set of estimates requested could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

JUSTICE

Prisoners: Compensation

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much compensation has been paid to prisoners in each of the last eight years; and on what grounds each payment was made. [12391]

Mr Blunt: The following table details the total amount of compensation paid to prisoners over the last five financial years as a result of civil claims, by way of out of court settlement, or by court award. The figures exclude private establishments. Compensation figures prior to 2004-05 were not collated centrally. The grounds on which individual claims were concluded would entail the checking of more than a thousand files and would entail disproportionate cost.

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Type of prisoner claim</i>	<i>Settlement amounts (£)</i>	<i>Court awards (£)</i>
2004-05	Abuse/ harassment	500	0
	Assault by prisoner	79,409	0
	Assault by staff	180,408	0
	Injury—other	406,028	9,000
	Slip, trip and fall	102,975	2,750
	Medical negligence	1,441,500	350
	ODPL	0	0
	Other	36,825	0
	Property	7,015	7,540
	Unlawful detention	104,927	350

<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Type of prisoner claim</i>	<i>Settlement amounts (£)</i>	<i>Court awards (£)</i>	<i>Financial year</i>	<i>Type of prisoner claim</i>	<i>Settlement amounts (£)</i>	<i>Court awards (£)</i>
	2004-05 totals	2,359,587	19,990		Assault by staff	165,950	3,500
					Injury—other	179,060	10
2005-06	Abuse/harassment	7,000	0		Slip, trip and fall	139,333	0
	HRA—Article 5(4)	0	0		Medical negligence	203,933	0
	HRA—Sanitation	0	0		ODPL	0	0
	Assault by prisoner	13,270	0		Other	134,223	0
	Assault by staff	134,750	0		Property	23,918	2,443
	Injury—other	3,491,744	0		Unlawful detention	491,059	0
	Slip, trip and fall	81,678	2,500		2008-09 totals	1,648,045	21,267
	Medical negligence	553,200	0				
	ODPL	0	0	2009-10	Abuse/harassment	0	0
	Other	73,328	20,000		Claims by estate	85,500	0
	Property	15,860	2,144		Article 5(4)	13,050	0
	Unlawful detention	80,297	0		Article 3—heating	0	0
	2005-06 totals	4,451,127	24,644		Article 3—sanitation	0	0
					Article 5(4)—delay	0	0
2006-07	Abuse/harassment	0	0		Assault by prisoner	107,057	0
	HRA—Article 5(4)	0	0		Assault by staff	512,225	22,403
	HRA—Sanitation	0	0		Injury—other	202,831	0
	Assault by prisoner	74,100	0		Slip, trip and fall	205,153	0
	Assault by staff	91,850	0		Medical negligence	1,609,250	0
	Injury—other	646,569	0		ODPL	0	0
	Slip, trip and fall	189,820	1,425		Other	238,235	2,643
	Medical negligence	195,508	0		Property	24,648	3,583
	ODPL	749,999	0		Unlawful detention	259,943	0
	Other	79,783	157		2009-10 totals	3,257,692	26,629
	Property	19,666	11,104				
	Unlawful detention	95,376	0				
	2006-07 totals	2,142,671	12,686				
2007-08	Abuse/harassment	0	0				
	Claims by estate	349,100	0				
	Article 5(4)	0	0				
	Article 3—heating	0	0				
	Article 3—sanitation	0	0				
	Assault by prisoner	39,433	0				
	Assault by staff	66,683	0				
	Injury—other	172,754	500				
	Slip, trip and fall	138,265	3,210				
	Medical negligence	222,333	0				
	ODPL	0	0				
	Other	169,814	17,729				
	Property	17,670	8,922				
	Unlawful detention	276,257	0				
	2007-08 totals	1,452,309	30,361				
2008-09	Abuse/harassment	1,500	0				
	Claims by estate	164,000	0				
	Article 5(4)	65,250	15,314				
	Article 3—heating	0	0				
	Article 3—sanitation	0	0				
	Assault by prisoner	79,819	0				

Notes:

1. The term “ODPL” refers to Opiate Dependant Prisoner Litigation. It relates to claims from prisoners who claimed that their drug detoxification treatment dating back to the late 1990’s was inadequate.
 2. The category “Injury—other” includes miscellaneous injuries that do not fit into categories elsewhere in the table, such as injuries at work, smoke inhalation, asbestos claims, etc. The category “Other” includes allegations of breaches of Human Rights, misfeasance in public office, discrimination etc.

Community Orders: Public Expenditure

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the cost to the public purse was of community sentences in each of the last three years. [12373]

Mr Blunt: It is not currently possible to separate the cost of supervising offenders on community sentences as probation case loads also include significant numbers of offenders that have been released from a custodial sentence or released temporarily into the community. Work is in hand in the National Offender Management Service to ensure that all offender services delivered in custody and in the community are properly specified and costed so that commissioners can ensure resources are targeted effectively to protect the public and reduce reoffending.

Our future plans for, and the balance of expenditure between, custodial and community provision will need to be considered in the light of the assessment of sentencing and work on new approaches to rehabilitation.

Departmental Consultants

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how much was spent on external consultants and advisers by (a) his Department and (b) each (i) non-departmental public body and (ii) executive agency for which his Department is responsible in each year since 2005.

[12484]

Mr Kenneth Clarke: The Ministry of Justice (MOJ) came into existence in May 2007, merging the former Department for Constitutional Affairs and part of the Home Office. This means comprehensive and comparable data are only available for 2007 onwards.

The Office of Government Commerce (OGC) collates data annually on consultancy expenditure as part of its Consultancy Value Programme which assists Departments in getting best value from Government's use of consultants. Expenditure is reported as a single total for those parts of the Department using central departmental procurement services, namely MOJ headquarters, Her Majesty's Courts Service (HMCS), the Tribunals Service, the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) and the Judicial Appointments Commission. The total was £50 million in 2008-09 and £56 million in 2007-08. A data collection exercise is currently under way for the expenditure on consultants in 2009-10. Figures for the Ministry of Justice family will be published in October 2010.

It is not possible to reliably distinguish consultancy costs from adviser costs, except at a disproportionate cost.

Expenditure on consultants and advisors are detailed in the below table.

	2007-08	2008-09
<i>Department and agencies</i>		
MOJ HQ, HMCS and Tribunals Service ¹	35,886	48,339
National Offenders Management Service (excluding Probation Trusts)	20,409	1,352
Office of the Public Guardian (OPG) ²	418	497
Sub total	56,713	50,188
<i>Executive NDPBs:</i>		
Legal Services Commission (LSC)	1,205	1,122
Youth Justice Board (YJB)	1,011	2,251
Parole Board	88	200
Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority	1,801	164
Criminal Cases Review Commission	6	11
Information Commissioner's Office ³	126	90
Judicial Appointments Commission	—	215
Legal Services Board ⁴	—	28
Office for Legal Complaints (OLC) ⁵	—	—
Sub total	4,237	4,081
Total	60,951	54,269

¹ Figures include MOJ HQ, Tribunals Service and HM Courts Service. It would incur disproportionate costs to separately identify these costs.

² The first six months in 2007-08 are for Public Guardian's Office and the second period of six months for OPG. The OPG was created under the terms of the Mental Capacity Act and exists as such from 1st October 2007.

³ These figures do not include Legal Counsel Costs for appeals to the Information Tribunal.

⁴ The LSB was established on 1 January 2009.

⁵ The OLC was established in July 2009 and has yet to commence live operations.

Note:

Refinements in the methodology for classifying expenditure in accordance with OGC taxonomy means that the 2007-08 and 2008-09 figures are not directly comparable at a detailed level.

Departmental Motor Vehicles

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the annual expenditure on vehicles of (a) his Department and (b) each (i) non-departmental public body and (ii) executive agency for which his Department is responsible in each English region was in each of the last three financial years; and what the planned expenditure is in each case for 2010-11. [12485]

Mr Djanogly: The Ministry of Justice uses vehicles for a wide range of front-line services, including the transportation of prisoners and defendants. The Ministry's accounting systems do not record information on a regional basis and it would incur disproportionate costs to determine a regional breakdown.

The following table shows the amount spent on the purchase, hire and maintenance of vehicles for Ministry of Justice headquarters, executive agencies and executive non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) where total annual expenditure exceeds £500:

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Nearest £000 2010-11 ¹
Ministry of Justice headquarters	922	835	249	595
<i>Agencies</i>				
Her Majesty's Courts Service	2,652	2,640	2,920	2,995
National Offender Management Services ²	4,061	4,403	4,367	4,257
Tribunals Service	96	65	82	58
<i>Non-departmental public bodies³</i>				
Legal Services Commission	58	57	44	35
Youth Justice Board ⁴	16	43	49	36
Parole Board for England and Wales	—	2	4	4
Criminal Cases Review Commission	4	4	3	4
Information Commissioner's Office	3	3	4	4
Total	7,812	8,052	7,722	7,988

Approximate split of expenditure: MoJ HQ/HMCS/TS/NOMS only

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Percentage 2010-11 ¹
Purchase	39	41	41	41
Hire of vehicles	51	48	47.5	50

Approximate split of expenditure: MoJ HQ/HMCS/TS/NOMS only

	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10	Percentage 2010-11 ¹
Maintenance of vehicles	10	11	11.5	9
	100	100	100	100

¹ Estimated.

² National Offender Management Services caveats: The expenditure for 2007-08 is for Her Majesty's Prison Service only. The expenditure for 2008-09 and 2009-10 is for the NOMS agency. The figures exclude the Probation Service as it would result in disproportionate cost and delay to obtain the probation figures.

³ The following executive NDPBs did not incur expenditure in excess of £500 per annum: Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority; Judicial Appointments Commission; Legal Services Board; Office for Legal Complaints.

⁴ Youth Justice Board expenditure in 2008-09 and 2009-10 includes car hire costs relating to the Wiring Up Youth Justice programme and form part of the total costs shown. A significant proportion of total YJB car hire costs were specific to this programme. In 2009-10 nearly two-thirds of total car hire spend was specific to this project. As the Wiring Up Youth Justice programme is now winding down, costs for the current financial year are expected to be significantly less than in 2009-10.

Departmental Pensions

Pete Wishart: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the cost was of pension contributions incurred by (a) his Department and (b) each (i) non-departmental public body and (ii) executive agency for which he is responsible in (A) Scotland, (B) Wales, (C) each of the English regions and (D) Northern Ireland in each of the last three financial years; and what the planned expenditure is for 2010-11. [12483]

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Details of planned expenditure for pension contributions for the Ministry of Justice, its non-departmental public bodies and executive agencies for 2010-11 are shown in the following table.

Planned expenditure for 2010-11

	£
MOJ & associated offices ¹	10,925,255
Legal Services Commission (NDPB) ²	0
Youth Justice Board for England & Wales (NDPB)	1,784,000
Parole Board for England & Wales (NDPB)	614,287
Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (NDPB)	1,731,960
Criminal Case Review Commission (NDPB)	487,000
Information Commissioner's Office (NDPB)	1,717,000
Judicial Appointments Commission (NDPB)	650,000
Legal Services Board (NDPB)	197,000
HM Courts Service (Agency) ¹	45,826,980
The Tribunals Service (Agency) ¹	8,587,335
Office of the Public Guardian (Agency) ¹	497,393

¹ It has not been possible to obtain planned expenditure for 2010-11 without incurring disproportional costs, information for year-to-date spend (i.e. April to July) expenditure are included in the table above.

² Legal Service Commission (LSC) pensions cost for 2009-10 are awaiting audit confirmation. LSC has used available funds in prior years to make prepayments to ease cash spend for future years and plan to make zero contribution in 2010-11.

The information on planned pension contributions for 2010-11 will be published in the relevant Department's/NDPB's Annual Report or Resource Accounts in due course. Estimates provided have not been audited and are therefore subject to change.

Information on planned pension contributions for 2010-11 covering National Offender Management Service Agency is not accessible at this time. My officials will provide the planned costs as soon as they are available.

Details of pension contributions made by the Ministry of Justice, its non-departmental public bodies and executive agencies for each of the last three financial years are shown in the following table.

	Financial year		
	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
MOJ and associated offices ³	22,817,000	23,968,000	23,941,000
Legal Services Commission (NDPB) ²	23,473,000	9,846,000	16,120,000
Youth Justice Board for England and Wales (NDPB)	1,415,000	1,871,000	1,879,000
Parole Board for England and Wales (NDPB)	364,688	399,215	472,270
Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority (NDPB)	1,729,512	1,569,366	1,697,823
Criminal Case Review Commission (NDPB)	552,000	514,000	478,000
Information Commissioner's Office (NDPB)	1,196,000	1,354,000	1,512,000
Judicial Appointments Commission (NDPB)	£544,818	£641,144	£692,404
Legal Services Board (NDPB) ⁴	0	0	169,000
National Offender Management Service inc Probation Board/Trusts (Agency)	321,358,980	336,852,342	343,580,735
HM Courts Service (Agency)	75,388,000	77,061,000	73,820,000
The Tribunals Service (Agency)	9,260,000	9,105,000	9,473,000
Office of the Public Guardian (Agency)	1,478,000	1,537,000	1,476,000

¹ It has not been possible to obtain planned expenditure for 2010-11 without incurring disproportional costs, information for year-to-date spend (i.e. April to July) expenditure are included in the table above.

² Legal Service Commission (LSC) pensions cost for 2009-10 are awaiting audit confirmation. LSC has used available funds in prior years to make prepayments to ease cash spend for future years and plan to make zero contribution in 2010-11.

³ Pension costs for MOJ and associated offices include the Wales Office and Scotland Office and covers employees, Ministers and Special Advisors.

⁴ Legal Services Board became operational on 1 January 2009 and its pension scheme (which is a defined contribution scheme) was set up during the financial year 2009-10.

It has not been possible to provide this information broken down according to contributions for (A) Scotland, (B) Wales, (C) each of the English regions and (D) Northern Ireland without incurring disproportional costs.

Judiciary: Public Expenditure

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what the average cost to the public purse was of a (a) district judge and (b) bench of magistrates in the latest period for which figures are available. [12367]

Mr Djanogly: The average 2010-11 costs of regional and London district judges (magistrates) will be £147,320 and £153,050 respectively.

The average 2009-10 cost of a bench of magistrates was £1,945.

Prisoners: Computers

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice how many prisoners have been provided laptop computers in each of the last five years. [12414]

Mr Blunt: The number of laptop computers issued to prisoners is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost by asking each prison to analyse records held locally.

There are two main reasons for the issue of laptop computers to prisoners:

(1) education—higher education/Open University-type course work, usually used under supervision in a classroom environment, although computers are also issued on a personal basis to a small number of risk-assessed prisoners for use in cell where this is considered appropriate; and

(2) access to justice—to assist in the preparation of defence, appeal, or related legal work in those cases where it is satisfactorily demonstrated that the refusal to grant such facilities would raise a genuine risk of prejudicing the legal proceedings.

In addition to the risk assessment process, any computer that prisoners have access to is subject to strict security controls. Any laptop computer issued for in-cell use will be restricted to specific applications with no unauthorised access to external programs, including the internet.

Trilateral Working

Maria Eagle: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what organisational arrangements he has made to ensure the effectiveness of trilateral working between his Department, the Home Office and the Attorney-General's Office on matters relating to the operation of (a) the criminal justice system and (b) the criminal law. [12161]

Mr Kenneth Clarke: There is joint working at all levels between the Ministry of Justice, Home Office and Attorney-General's Office on the operation of the criminal justice system and criminal law. The importance of a joined-up approach is reflected in the Prime Minister's appointment of my hon. Friend, Nick Herbert, as Minister of State for Policing and Criminal Justice, reporting to both me as Secretary of State for Justice and the Home Secretary.

These arrangements are underpinned by trilateral governance structures, including a Crime and Criminal Justice Strategy Board and a CJS Operational Board, which brings together heads of the criminal justice agencies and the Senior Presiding Judge.

In relation to matters pertaining to the criminal law, these are commonly discussed during the regular ministerial meetings which are held between me the Secretary of State for Justice, the Home Secretary and the Attorney-General. In addition, any proposals for new legislation are now required to be brought to my attention (the Secretary of State for Justice) as a gatekeeping measure. This function ensures both that only strictly necessary

legislation is introduced and confirms that joint working is taking place between relevant departments when considering the impact of legislation.

Unpaid Fines

Philip Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice what assessment his Department has made of the likely effect on the level of unpaid fines of his Department's plan to increase the use of fines. [12397]

Mr Blunt: The national payment rate for financial penalties at the end of the 2008-09 financial year was 85% and 71% excluding the value of administrative cancellations. The payment rate covers fines, compensation, victims surcharge, and unpaid fixed penalty notices. Her Majesty's Courts Service has in place a strategy to increase the success of compliance with court orders particularly with regard to financial penalties—the Criminal Compliance and Enforcement Services Blueprint. This was launched in July 2008 and is being implemented across HMCS. The blueprint sets out HMCS's strategic objective for enforcement which is for a cheaper, faster and more proportionate system that primarily focuses on 'first time' compliance while continuing to apply the principles of rigorous enforcement to the hard core of defaulters. The blueprint implementation ensures greater use of the sanctions available under the Courts Act 2003 and extended methods of payment. In the 2009-10 financial year HMCS collected £259,241,082 which was £12.5 million (5%) more cash against financial penalties than in the 2008-09 year.

The use of fines is currently under consideration by the Ministry of Justice as part of a full assessment of sentencing. We will publish sentencing proposals for consultation in a Green Paper in the autumn. Any proposals made in relation to fines will take into account the issue of enforcement.

Wildlife: Crime

Dr Whiteford: To ask the Secretary of State for Justice whether wildlife crime is addressed in any Home Office advice on sentencing. [12867]

Mr Blunt: The Government do not provide guidance on sentencing. That is the responsibility of the independent Sentencing Council and the Court of Appeal. The magistrates court sentencing guidelines, issued by the council, cover animal cruelty offences.

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