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House of Commons

Wednesday 11 March 2015

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Political Parties: Donations and Loans

1. Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): What progress she has made on her consultation with the Electoral Commission on the transparency of donations and loans to political parties in Northern Ireland. [907932]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Dr Andrew Murrison): The whole House will have been deeply saddened by the passing of Lord Molyneaux of Killead. James Molyneaux was a distinguished second world war veteran and a fine parliamentarian who served Northern Ireland with great distinction for more than four decades, both in this House and the other place.

We are committed to ensuring the maximum transparency in party funding in Northern Ireland that the prevailing security situation allows, and progress has been made in detailed discussions with the Electoral Commission on finalising the new arrangements. I have spoken with the electoral commissioner, and I am confident that the necessary draft legislation will be ready to lay early in the next Parliament.

Naomi Long: I add my condolences and those of my party to those expressed by the Minister to the family, friends and former colleagues of Lord Molyneaux.

During the passage of the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014, an undertaking was given here that last October the security situation would be reviewed again with a view to lifting the secrecy pertaining to party political donations. What progress has been made in that regard?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Lady is right that during the passage of the Act we discussed a review of the security situation and amending the measure accordingly. It is our aspiration to have full transparency in Northern Ireland, as we do in Great Britain. At the moment, our judgment is that the security situation does not warrant it and that we cannot take that risk, but we will keep the matter under constant review.

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Mr Andrew Robathan (South Leicestershire) (Con): While looking at the transparency of donations to political parties, will my hon. Friend ask the National Crime Agency and the Chief Constable, when they are investigating organised crime, especially things such as fuel laundering in the border area, particularly South Armagh, to look carefully at the destination of funds arising from organised crime, given that the people taking part in crime—

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. I was indulgent towards him in not taking account of the fact that he has Question 8, but the substance of his question just now has nothing to do with Question 1.

Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, Lord Molyneaux of Killead, KBE, who served in this House as the Member for South Antrim from 1970 until 1983 and then from 1983 to 1997 as the Member for the new constituency of Lagan Valley. He is fondly remembered by my constituents. He was the consummate parliamentarian and provided strong leadership in very dark days in Northern Ireland. He will be fondly remembered and missed by many, and our thoughts and prayers are with his family.

The Secretary of State and the Minister will be aware that Sinn Fein raises millions of pounds by various means each year for its electoral campaigns. There is a clear disparity in political party funding in Northern Ireland, yet Sinn Fein Members continue to draw hundreds of thousands of pounds in allowances from this House, despite not taking their seats. When will the Government address this disparity?

Dr Murrison: The right hon. Gentleman will know that that is a matter for the House, not me. It was last determined in 2006, and I would not wish to trespass further on the prerogative of the House.

Government's Economic Pact

2. **Mr William Bain (Glasgow North East) (Lab):** When she plans to make a progress report on the Government's economic pact for Northern Ireland. [907933]

3. **Mrs Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab):** When she plans to make a progress report on the Government's economic pact for Northern Ireland. [907934]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): An annual progress report on the economic pact was published last July. The range of items so far delivered include improvements to business access to finance; funding projects secured from the Green Investment Bank; the continuation of 100% assisted area status for Northern Ireland; and a record year for inward investment following the G8 and follow-up investment conference.

Mr Bain: With one in six people in Northern Ireland on low pay and intergenerational poverty remaining stubbornly high, should not the Government be getting a move on to raise the minimum wage to at least £8 an hour and get as many people as possible on to the living wage to make this a recovery in living standards for all the people of Northern Ireland?

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Mrs Villiers: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said he would like to see increases in the minimum wage. We are cutting taxes for those on the lowest incomes. We have cut taxes for 670,000 people in Northern Ireland, and those on the minimum wage have had their income tax bills halved. We have also seen unemployment in Northern Ireland fall for the 25th consecutive month—it has fallen by 1,700—giving many more people the security and reassurance of a pay packet.

Mrs Glindon: Will the Secretary of State meet the Northern Ireland union leaders, as I did recently, so that she can understand the frustrations of squeezed teachers, bus drivers and health workers, and praise their vital work rather than condemn them for being forced to vote for industrial action?

Mrs Villiers: I have met trade union groups on various occasions, including in Northern Ireland, and I am of course hugely supportive of the work done by our public servants and our front-line workers. It is important that the whole public sector takes part in the austerity programme, and the Government are doing everything they can to put our public finances right to ensure that we can continue to provide the best possible public services for the country.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What impact does the Secretary of State think another round of stalemate at Stormont will have on measures to attract investment and encourage growth in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: There is no doubt that the announcement by Sinn Féin on Monday was a significant setback for the Stormont House agreement, but it is inevitable that there will be bumps in the road with agreements of this nature. That has been the case in the past. I will be working hard to get things back on track and to help the parties get this matter resolved. Political stability is, of course, crucial when it comes to attracting inward investment. That is one of the many reasons why we need to press ahead with implementing the Stormont House agreement.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept that people in Northern Ireland and those who observe the Northern Ireland political scene are stunned, bewildered—and, indeed, angry—at what Sinn Féin has done in renegeing on its agreement on welfare reform, without any good reason whatsoever? Does the Secretary of State wish to spell out now from the Dispatch Box the implications for corporation tax and other issues of the Stormont House agreement not proceeding? It is clear that Sinn Féin is putting its own narrow party interests ahead of vulnerable people and the entire community in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Villiers: As I have said, this is a serious setback. I believe that Sinn Fein's change of mind is unhelpful and hugely disappointing. As I have said, however, the task now is for the Northern Ireland Executive parties to continue their efforts to implement the Stormont House agreement. I hope to get the party leaders together as soon as possible to discuss how to resolve this welfare question, but the Stormont House agreement will not be reopened; we need to press ahead with implementation.

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The corporation tax question is difficult. It is expressly linked with the resolution of welfare reform. The Bill contains a commencement clause, and there is no question but that this welfare issue must be resolved. The Executive must fulfil their obligations under the Stormont House agreement before the commencement clause can be operated. In the interim, the Government propose to continue with the legislation and to complete its parliamentary progress, because we are determined to implement the agreement fully and fairly. Let me be clear: Northern Ireland will not get these devolved powers until the Stormont House agreement has been implemented.

Mr Dodds: It is important now that people in Northern Ireland, this House and everybody looking at the political scene are clear that the responsibility for the current crisis lies squarely with Sinn Fein, which is renegeing on its commitments clearly made and openly expressed in the Stormont House agreement. Will the Secretary of State be clear that she will not take this blanket condemnation or blame approach, but focus on the problem—Sinn Fein?

Mrs Villiers: I will indeed focus on the problem. The right hon. Gentleman is right that this current setback is the result of the actions of Sinn Fein, which is, as I have said, hugely disappointing and unhelpful. To be honest, it was a significant surprise, too, given the enthusiasm with which the Deputy First Minister and Sinn Fein were promoting the agreement. Now I think we all need to work together to try to get this sorted, because it would be a huge step backwards if the Stormont House agreement were to be jeopardised. It would potentially plunge us back into the sort of budget and political crisis with which we were grappling last year.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): May I, on behalf of my party, associate myself with the tributes paid to Lord Molyneaux of Killead, and convey our condolences to his family, friends and colleagues?

Given the need to create economic and political stability in Northern Ireland, will the Secretary of State prevail on the Chancellor to reduce VAT on United Kingdom tourism products in next week's Budget? That would have important financial consequences for the tourism industry in Northern Ireland.

Mrs Villiers: Let me also take the opportunity to associate myself with the comments of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State about the distinguished record of Lord Molyneaux. He was indeed a very distinguished parliamentarian over many years, and this is a sad loss to Northern Ireland.

The Chancellor is well aware of the campaign for the tax change that the hon. Lady would like to see. Tax reductions are difficult because the imperative must be repairing the public finances, but the Chancellor has relieved tax burdens on business by reducing corporation tax, introducing an employment allowance and, of course, helping people into work.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Lab): May I associate my party with the comments that have been made about Lord Molyneaux?

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As the Secretary of State has said, economic progress and political stability in Northern Ireland are inextricably linked. Does she agree that the unravelling of the Stormont House agreement would be an unmitigated disaster for economic and political confidence in Northern Ireland, and that now is the time for responsible leadership which accepts the need for a reformed welfare system that mitigates the impact of cuts on the most vulnerable while also being affordable and sustainable?

Mrs Villiers: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. Now is the time for level-headed consideration of how we can resolve this matter. In the autumn, Northern Ireland faced a budget crisis that was so serious that the very sustainability and future credibility of the institutions was at stake, and we were looking over a cliff at the possibility that devolution would collapse altogether. Returning to that position would be a huge step backward. The Stormont House agreement was a big step forward, and it is vital for all parties to work to ensure that it is implemented fully and fairly.

Mr Lewis: Does the Secretary of State intend to convene urgent all-party talks in an effort to put the Welfare Reform Bill back on track? By what date must the Bill be passed, if the Executive rather than civil servants are to set next year's budget in Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: As I said earlier to the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds), I expect to meet the five party leaders in the coming days. I hope to do so tomorrow, but that will depend on when the First and Deputy First Minister return from New York.

It is vital for progress to be made on welfare reform. That is a key part of the Stormont Castle and the Stormont House agreements. I will press for such progress, not least because without it the Northern Ireland Executive's budget will become unsustainable, which will hugely impair its ability to function effectively.

Political Situation

4. **Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the current political situation in Northern Ireland. [907935]

7. **Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con):** What assessment she has made of the current political situation in Northern Ireland. [907938]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): The political situation suffered a setback on Monday following Sinn Fein's withdrawal of support for the Welfare Reform Bill. It is very important for the Stormont House agreement to be implemented fully and fairly, including all the sections on welfare and budgets. I will continue to work intensively with the Northern Ireland parties to resolve the impasse.

Fiona Bruce: What does the Secretary of State consider to be the wider political implications of Sinn Fein's withdrawal of support for the welfare proposals?

Mrs Villiers: The political implications are very serious. They put in jeopardy corporation tax devolution, a financial package of about £2 billion in extra spending power, and a fresh approach to the past which is designed

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to produce better outcomes for victims and survivors. All that is under threat as a result of what has happened this week, and I will do all that I can to retrieve the situation so that the Stormont House agreement can go ahead.

Andrew Rosindell: Does the Secretary of State agree that Her Majesty's Government must take resolute action against Sinn Fein over its irresponsible and selfish behaviour, which is jeopardising the Stormont Parliament and everything that has been achieved in Northern Ireland so far?

Mrs Villiers: As I said, the approach taken by Sinn Fein is hugely disappointing and dramatically different from everything that it has been saying over the past few months. I am urging Sinn Fein to change its approach. It is vital that we have a responsible and realistic approach to welfare. The welfare reform package agreed under the Stormont House agreement is a good one, a generous one and a fair one, and therefore it is vital that it is implemented.

Mr Peter Hain (Neath) (Lab): May I wish all my friends in Northern Ireland the very best for the future? People often take for granted the peace and stability that has been secured in Northern Ireland since the 2007 agreement, but that was won only after conflict, terror and hatred going back centuries, through very difficult

negotiations. It took dedicated skill and constant strong leadership by the Labour Government to achieve it. Does the Secretary of State accept that maintaining that progress requires nurturing by this Government and by any Governments to follow?

Mrs Villiers: I do accept that. This Government will continue to do all they can to support and nurture that political settlement. That is a message that all parties need to hear, including Sinn Fein—that we should not take risks with political stability in Northern Ireland, because the consequences could be very grave.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State recognise that it is not just Sinn Fein, but their lapdogs in the Social Democratic and Labour party who have blocked welfare reform in Northern Ireland and put the Assembly in jeopardy? Will she spell out the consequences for corporation tax, the economic package and the long-term sustainability of the budget in Northern Ireland as a result of that irresponsible behaviour?

Mrs Villiers: If this question is not resolved, if the welfare reform legislation remains permanently stalled, obviously the rest of the Stormont House agreement does not happen. That includes the financial package and the devolution of corporation tax, but we are not at that point yet. It is important to work intensively, and in the meantime the UK Government will do everything we can to continue to implement the agreement.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): The Secretary of State will be at pains not to feed the sense of impasse that surrounds the Stormont House agreement. She knows that there were two elements to the understanding on welfare reform—one was the understanding about the amount of money from the Executive's budget that could mitigate measures; the other was the degree of

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leeway within the welfare spending. Has anything changed in the lines from the Department for Work and Pensions that have given rise to the allegations that Sinn Fein is making against the Democratic Unionist party?

Mrs Villiers: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to do all we can to keep the situation as calm as possible. Unfortunately, episodes of this kind are characteristic of the implementation process of agreements. It will be helpful for as many facts as possible to be made clear about how the welfare reform programme will operate in Northern Ireland and how the top-ups will operate. It is a generous package, and once the details are clear I hope everyone will be convinced of that.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): At this, the last Northern Ireland questions before the election, there is an air of some melancholy. Who knows where we will meet again or on what side of the Dispatch Box? May I ask the right hon. Lady what, in her three years as Secretary of State, in which she has been unfailingly courteous, she would consider her proudest—her finest—achievement?

Mrs Villiers: Up to Monday, I would have said the Stormont House agreement—*[Interruption]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) asked a question. I want to hear the Secretary of State's answer, and she is entitled to have her answer heard.

Mrs Villiers: Up until Monday, I would have said the Stormont House agreement. I think that is still the greatest thing that I have contributed to and it is still on the road. We have had a bump on the road, but the Stormont House agreement will carry on. The other thing of which I am proud is the progress that we have made towards devolution of corporation tax. I do not want to see that thrown off course by events that have taken place this week.

Flags and Parades

5. **Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab):** What further steps the Government plan to take to resolve outstanding issues relating to flags and parades. [907936]

9. **Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab):** What further steps the Government plan to take to resolve outstanding issues relating to flags and parades. [907940]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): The Stormont House agreement identified a clear way forward on parades and flags. *[Interruption.]* The Government will continue to work with the five parties in the Executive on the implementation of all the provisions of the agreement, including on these issues. *[Interruption.]*

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer, although I must admit I had trouble hearing it. Unrest around the parades has an unsettling impact on the community, on local businesses and on tourism. What steps are the Government taking this year to try to ensure a peaceful parade season?

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Mrs Villiers: I urge everyone involved in parades or parades-related protest to ensure that all activity related to parades and protest is both peaceful and lawful and that the determinations of the Parades Commission, as the lawfully constituted authority, are complied with. I continue to have a series of meetings to try to find a way forward on the parading impasse in north Belfast.

Rosie Cooper: In Belfast, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) recently said that securing the peace process and a strong economy went hand in hand. Does the Secretary of State agree, and will she support the Heenan-Anderson commission to ensure that people at the margins are not drawn to violence on issues such as flags and parades?

Mrs Villiers: I agree that politics and economics are intertwined in Northern Ireland. Political stability is crucial for a successful economy. I note the Labour commission on this, but I think the crucial thing is to stick to the Government's long-term economic plan, because that is delivering economic recovery in Northern Ireland.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State recognise the feeling of injustice in the Unionist community on the issue of parades? In my constituency we have waited 16 years to get a return parade—a church parade. When are we going to get a resolution?

Mrs Villiers: I am very conscious of the concern felt in the community in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. It is crucial that the Parades Commission's determination needs to be abided by, but it is also important to press ahead with a reformed and devolved system of parades adjudication, as envisaged by the Stormont House agreement.

Cost of Living

6. Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the cost of living in Northern Ireland. [907937]

10. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to reduce the cost of living in Northern Ireland. [907942]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Dr Andrew Murrison): Cutting income tax, freezing fuel duty, welfare reform, dealing with the spectacular deficit we inherited and keeping interest rates low are practical examples of how this Government are helping hard-pressed families in Northern Ireland.

Nic Dakin: Labour has set out clear plans to raise the national minimum wage to at least £8 by 2020. What is the Minister doing to tackle low pay, when one in six people in Northern Ireland are in low pay?

Dr Murrison: I thought the hon. Gentleman would have started by welcoming the Government's efforts to reduce unemployment in Northern Ireland—17,000 extra jobs in the private sector over the past year alone. If he was listening, he would have heard the answer to his question from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State earlier

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Alex Cunningham: The Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action estimates that introducing the living wage would see 173,000 low-paid employees receive an average gross pay rise of £1,300 a year. Will the Government look at strengthening the living wage to help Northern Ireland, which has the lowest private sector pay in the UK?

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman will, I hope, have seen the Institute for Fiscal Studies incomes report published earlier this month. It marked a major milestone, for it is now clear that average incomes in Northern Ireland are back from the pit they were in prior to Labour's deficit crisis. The IFS further forecasts that incomes will rise above inflation in the year ahead, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome that.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Does the Minister recognise that the Democratic Unionist party's long-term economic plan to see household taxes at their lowest and a freeze on the regional rate on household taxes for five years is working? However, this Government could have a direct impact by reducing energy costs for employers and consumers alike, and they should address that immediately.

Dr Murrison: The hon. Gentleman makes his points in his characteristically formidable fashion, and I am sure he will welcome the freeze on fuel duty, which will mean that by the end of this Parliament a tank of petrol will cost £10 less. He will also welcome inward investment to Northern Ireland, which I know he feels very strongly about given what has happened in his constituency, with, for example, Kainos, Randox, WhiteHat, Revel and PricewaterhouseCoopers. They will be creating 800 jobs in Northern Ireland—high-quality jobs—in the year ahead.

National Crime Agency

8. **Mr Andrew Robathan (South Leicestershire) (Con):** What recent progress has been made on the status and operation of the National Crime Agency in Northern Ireland. [907939]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mrs Theresa Villiers): I welcome the vote in the Assembly that will enable the full operation of the National Crime Agency in Northern Ireland. This will ensure that the people of Northern Ireland are afforded the same protections from serious and organised crime as those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Mr Robathan: When the NCA is up and running in Northern Ireland, will my right hon. Friend speak via the Chief Constable to ensure that the agency investigates the destination of funds from serious and organised crime? Many of the serious and organised criminals in the border area are the people giving funds to the IRA, and it is important that those funds do not fund political parties.

Mrs Villiers: I am sure my right hon. Friend will understand that I cannot comment on individual cases, but I know that the full implementation of the NCA in Northern Ireland is a welcome step. I pay tribute to the Justice Minister and others for securing that result, and

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I know that they will bear down on all the perpetrators of such activities and on any who receive the funds that those activities create.

Mr Speaker: Last but not least, Mr Gregory Campbell.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Will the National Crime Agency specifically target the organised criminal gangs that are engaging in subterfuge and in the organised criminal activity of fuel laundering along the border areas of Northern Ireland?

Mrs Villiers: That is a significant problem, and the House will have the chance to debate it later. Significant cross-border co-operation is under way, and the authorities in Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and the police services on both sides of the border are determined to tackle the problem and bring the perpetrators to justice.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [907992] Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 11 March.

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

Stella Creasy: Our allies are warning of a dangerous gap between us and America on this, so will the Prime Minister tell us what will be more important to him in the next Parliament: protecting our armed forces or introducing tax cuts?

The Prime Minister: What is important is combining economic security and national security, and the two go together. We inherited a £38 billion black hole in our defence budget, but because of the excellent stewardship of the economy by this Chancellor and this Government, we have filled that gap. We are investing in defence, our economy is strong and our country is safe.

Mr James Arbuthnot (North East Hampshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in connection with the Post Office mediation scheme, the Post Office has just sacked the independent investigator, Second Sight, and told it to destroy all its papers? Does he agree that it is essential that Second Sight's second report should not be suppressed, but should be supplied to sub-postmasters and MPs, starting with the hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) and the Business, Innovation and Skills Select Committee?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. I know that he has consistently raised the concerns of some sub-postmasters about the operation of the Post Office IT system and the matter of the Post Office mediation scheme. The Business Committee is

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currently taking evidence on this issue, and it should be given all the relevant information. The Government should not interfere with the independent mediation process, but I will ask the Business Secretary to write to my right hon. Friend about his concern and to ensure that the Business Committee can do its job properly.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): Less than two months ago, the Prime Minister said in this House that he wanted a head-to-head debate between me and him. He said it was game on. When did he lose his nerve?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman wants a debate, I have offered a date: the week starting 23 March. Why won't he say yes to it?

Edward Miliband: I am going to be at the debates set by the broadcasters on 2 and 16 April, but I am asking the Prime Minister about a two-way debate between him and me. The original proposal for the two-way debate did not come from me or from the broadcasters but from him. He said:

"I've suggested...we need a debate where the two people who could actually be Prime Minister debate directly with each other."

It was a good proposal then, and it is a good proposal now. Why does he not just name the day?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman said "anytime, anyplace, anywhere". I have told him: 23 March—let's hold that debate. But I will tell him what has changed: it is now obvious that Labour cannot win without the Scottish National party. He says we need the two leaders, but we need the two leaders who can call the tune—that is me and Alex Salmond. Let us have the debate.

Edward Miliband: The Prime Minister says it is all about leadership. He says it is about him and me—
[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Nobody in the House of Commons—*[Interruption.]* The Government Chief Whip should not be smirking about it, as it is not a laughing matter. Nobody in the House of Commons should be shouted down. I have got news for Members: however long it takes, it is not going to happen—Members will be heard.

Edward Miliband: These are pathetic, feeble excuses. Can we now take it that there are no circumstances in which he will debate with me head to head between now and the general election?

The Prime Minister: We have had four years of debates and we have found out he has got no policies; he has got no plan; he has got no team; and he has got no clue about running the country. The truth is this: Labour is now saying that it cannot win the election. I have here the leaflet that Labour put out in Scotland—I think the SNP might be interested in this. It says:

“At the General Election we need to stop the Tories being the largest party.”

Labour is not trying to win; it is just trying to crawl through the gates of Downing street on the coat tails of the SNP. The right hon. Gentleman has to prove he is not a chicken and rule that out.

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Edward Miliband: There is only one person preparing for defeat and it is this Prime Minister. He is not going to be able to wriggle out of this. This is what he said before the last general election:

“we have the opportunity to debate...at prime minister’s questions. But that is a very different matter to a proper television debate during a general election campaign...when Parliament is not sitting, and when people will be most receptive to engaging in political discussion.”

We know he lost to the Deputy Prime Minister last time. Why does he not just cut out the feeble excuses and admit the truth: he is worried he might lose again?

The Prime Minister: Amazing! The right hon. Gentleman wants to talk about the future of a television programme; I want to talk about the future of the country. Four questions, three weeks to go, and he cannot talk about jobs because we are growing jobs. He cannot talk about unemployment because unemployment is plummeting. He cannot talk about inflation because it is at a record low. The truth is he is weak and despicable and wants to crawl to power in Alex Salmond’s pocket.

Edward Miliband: If the Prime Minister is so confident, why is he chickening out of the debates with me? Everyone can see it. Mr Speaker, I will tell you why this matters. It matters because it goes to his character. The public will see through his feeble excuses. Instead of these ridiculous tactics, why does he not show a bit more backbone and turn up for the head-to-head debate with me—any time, anywhere, any place?

The Prime Minister: I shall tell the hon. Gentleman what goes to character: someone who is prepared to crawl into Downing street in alliance with people who want to break up our country. What a despicable and weak thing to do, risking our defences, risking our country, risking our United Kingdom. If he had an ounce of courage, he would rule it out.

Edward Miliband: There is only one person who is a risk to the integrity of the United Kingdom and it is this useless Prime Minister. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The question will be heard. The noise calculatedly being made by some Members on both sides of the House is a disgrace to the House of Commons. The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) will be heard and the Prime Minister will be heard. That is the end of the matter.

Edward Miliband: There is only one person who is a risk to the integrity of our country, and that is this Prime Minister. On the head-to-head debate, we have learned something about him: like all bullies, when the heat is really on he runs for cover.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has been offered a debate any time, any place, anywhere, but he will not take it. The truth is that Labour has nothing to say on policy and nothing to say on the economy.

Its only way into Downing street is on Alex Salmond's coat tails. It is an alliance between the people who want to bankrupt Britain and the people who want to break up Britain, and the British people will never have it.

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Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): On 25 March, the Penrose inquiry, which has been looking at the tragedy of contaminated blood in Scotland, will finally report. It is likely to have implications for the rest of the United Kingdom. The time scale means that it is highly unlikely that there will be a full response by this Government before the end of Parliament. Will my right hon. Friend, who has taken a great personal interest in this—as have more than 100 Members of this House—give an assurance that the matter will not slip from his or the Government's agenda, and that as soon as possible in the new Parliament there will be an attempt at closing this terrible tragedy in our country?

The Prime Minister: Let me first pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for leading on this issue. I suspect that, like me, every Member of Parliament has heard moving stories at their surgeries from constituents who have hepatitis C or HIV because of contaminated blood. It is right to wait for the Penrose inquiry. Let me make it clear that that is not an excuse, because I want us to take action. I am not sure whether that action will ever fully satisfy those who want this wrong to be righted, but as a wealthy and successful country we should be helping these people more. We will help them more, but we need Penrose first, and if I am standing here after the next election it will be done.

Q2. [907993] Douglas Carswell (Clacton) (UKIP): Before the last election, the Prime Minister repeatedly promised to cut immigration. Instead it has gone up. Net immigration is now three times higher than he promised. Why has he failed?

The Prime Minister: We have cut net migration from outside the European Union. We have created more jobs than the rest of the European Union put together, so we now need to reform welfare to ensure that people who come from other European countries cannot claim unemployment benefit, leave after six months without a job and have to work for four years before they get tax credits. That is what people will get if there is a Conservative Government after the next election.

Mary Macleod (Brentford and Isleworth) (Con): In celebrating international women's day, the Prime Minister can be congratulated on making it happen for women: we have more women in work than ever before, more female-led businesses than ever before, more females on boards than ever before, and more child care provision than ever before. Given that women are core to the long-term economic plan, will my right hon. Friend support the creation of a women and equalities Select Committee to ensure that future Governments do as much for women as the current Government have?

The Prime Minister: I certainly join my hon. Friend in agreeing to that. Of course we still have to break down disadvantage and barriers in our country, but there are more women in work than ever before; the pay gap for the under-40s has been eradicated; we are doing more to help with child care and to help people with caring responsibilities; and we have tried to help women around the world, not least by campaigning and working to cut out female genital mutilation and to put an end to the horrors of forced marriage. This Government have a good record on promoting women's issues and rights, not just in the UK but right around the world.

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Q3. [907994] Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister share my admiration for The Brick, a Wigan charity that last year gave 6,000 food parcels to local families? Will he tell those families why, 30 years after the miners' strike, yet again our community is having to compensate for its heartless and hopeless Government? I would be ashamed of that record; is that why he will not go head to head and debate it?

The Prime Minister: I shall tell the hon. Lady what we inherited in Wigan: since we came to office, unemployment has come down by 44% in terms of the claimant count. In the north-west, we have seen 124,000 more people in work. Those people are now able to provide for their families. That is what is happening. We have a growing economy because we dealt with the mess left by the hon. Lady and her party.

Q4. [907995] Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): We can be rightly proud of our science and technology research base, but there is a danger that Government spending on that important area is falling behind. When my right hon. Friend is returned as Prime Minister in only a few weeks' time, will he commit to a real-terms increase in the science budget, thus supporting Basildon's innovative industries, maintaining our world standing in the sciences and helping to create the high-paid jobs that we need to deliver our long-term economic plan?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention science. Of course, we ring-fenced the science budget during this Parliament because it is absolutely essential to building the modern manufacturing and advanced economy that we want to see. We can also see excellent initiatives such as the Newton fund, the Alan Turing institute and the Sir Henry Royce institute—all big investments in science in the next Parliament.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): It has been estimated that entrenching market structures in the NHS, for example through tendering, bidding and contracting to the private sector, costs over £10 billion a year. Why does the Prime Minister not think that that money would be better spent on patient care?

The Prime Minister: What we have done is save money by cutting out bureaucracy, so we are seeing an extra £4.5 billion go into the NHS. If the hon. Lady is saying that there is no occasion at all when anyone from the independent, charitable or voluntary sectors can help in our NHS, I think that she is wrong. I think of the work that Macmillan cancer nurses and Marie Curie Cancer Care do, helping with the end of life. The idea that there is only one way to deliver health care in our brilliant NHS, which is expanding under this Government, is completely wrong.

Q5. [907996] Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Despite record numbers of new jobs, people with a learning disability can still find it tough to get into work. Will the Prime Minister join me in welcoming the Basingstoke inclusion zone, which will recognise the commitment of local employers to people with a learning disability, whose talents and ability in the workplace are too often hidden?

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The Prime Minister: I certainly join my right hon. Friend in praising the great work of the inclusion zone, which is launching this Friday. We need to build on the success we have already, with employment of disabled people up by 141,000 over the past year. We need a change not only in action, but in culture, which is why the Disability Confident campaign is so important for encouraging employers to join in and give employment opportunities to disabled people. We now have over 1,000 committing to change their practices with disabled people, and I want to see that go right across the country.

Q6. [907997] Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): I am sure that the Prime Minister will want to join me in congratulating Titanic Belfast, which this week beat competition from the London Eye and the Eiffel tower to become the best international group visitor attraction. Does he therefore share my frustration and anger that in the same week the much bigger prize of political stability and economic progress is being jeopardised by Sinn Fein reneging on promises made in the Stormont House agreement?

The Prime Minister: First, let me join the hon. Lady in praising the Titanic exhibition, which I have been to see myself. It is an absolutely brilliant visitor attraction and yet another reason to visit Belfast, and not only for people from across our United Kingdom, but for people from across Europe and around the world. I agree that what matters now is implementing the Stormont House agreement. Everyone should do what they signed up to do in that agreement, including Sinn Fein. I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is working very hard to try to ensure that everyone fulfils their pledges.

Q7. [907998] Mark Hunter (Cheadle) (LD): Will the Prime Minister join me in paying tribute to the many dedicated health professionals who work at St Ann's hospice in my constituency, and does he agree that the decision to devolve £6 billion of NHS spending to Greater Manchester presents a tremendous opportunity to integrate health care services better and secure a more positive long-term funding arrangement for our local hospices?

The Prime Minister: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. The hospice movement is another good example of something that provides vital health and social services in our country but is not necessarily owned and

operated by the NHS. I am a parent who used a hospice in Oxford regularly, and I was absolutely amazed by the brilliant work they do. We have allocated over £100 million of capital funding to hospices since 2010, and that is in addition to the £10 million for children's hospices. I would welcome more NHS money being made available to hospices, as he says, and I think that the Greater Manchester decision is a way of ensuring that decisions are made between local authorities and the NHS and are made closer to the patients who they are serving.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): A leaked NHS report shows a looming deficit of £200 million in Staffordshire in three years' time. Last year, 10 more of these reports were commissioned into distressed local health economies around the country, and yet, after repeated stonewalling, health Ministers are now saying:

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“Consultancy firms were not commissioned to produce reports on the local health economies, as described in the question”.

May I ask the Prime Minister why, election or no election, the Government are engaged in a cover-up of what lies in store for large parts of the NHS around the country?

The Prime Minister: There is a pattern, which is that Labour MPs in Staffordshire are determined to try to frighten people about the future of the NHS, and they are the last people who should do that after the appalling mess they made in Mid Staffordshire. We are seeing £12.7 billion more money going into our NHS and a strong future for the NHS in Staffordshire that will be continued as long as I am in this place.

Q8. [907999] Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): This is the third time in four months that I have raised at Prime Minister's questions NHS England letting down the 180 or so people with ultra-rare diseases, some of whom are outside the House today, who have been failed by a flawed process. Some of those children will lose access to their drugs from May, and their conditions will deteriorate irreversibly. We have two sessions of Prime Minister's questions left. Can he tell me that, in that time, he will announce when we will get interim funding for the drugs that these children and these people need?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, because these are very rare and debilitating conditions, and there are drugs that can help the children who have them. Having looked at this—and I know that the health and science Ministers have looked very carefully at it and met the families and the drug companies, as well as NHS England—my understanding is that NHS England is holding a review, which will be completed by the end of April, and the companies are currently funding these drugs until the end of May. So I do not see any reason why there should not be continuity of care and continuity of drugs, and that is what I hope we can achieve.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): Spending 2% of GDP on defence is not only significant as part of our NATO commitment—it is also a commitment to being a reliable ally. Only last September, the Prime Minister still thought it was important when he lectured other NATO countries on meeting Britain's commitment. Is he not just a little bit embarrassed that he himself has now reneged on that?

The Prime Minister: This country has met its NATO commitments, not only for 2% but to spend the money on deployable equipment and forces, which is just as important a commitment. What I would say to the hon. Lady is this: how does she feel about her leader contemplating a deal with the SNP, who want to strip this country of their defences? That is what they are prepared to do. He will not rule it out. It says very clearly in his leaflet: they are only trying to be the largest party; they are not trying to win a majority. That is the risk we face: no Trident, no protection for our country—defence stripped bare by a Labour party in hock to the SNP.

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Q9. [908000] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): With unemployment falling in Southend, enterprises expanding and 310 new businesses being created, will my right hon. Friend describe to the House which Government policies will see this recovery continuing so that the irresistible and unstoppable case for Southend to be made a city actually happens?

The Prime Minister: May I once again commend my hon. Friend on the consistency of his campaign to see Southend recognised in that way? He asked me what policies will make a difference and continue to bring businesses to Southend. We are cutting the jobs tax for businesses and charities, and that is helping; we have got the lowest rate of corporation tax in the G7, and that is helping; we are abolishing national insurance contributions for under-21s; and we are extending the doubling of the small business rate relief. All of these things, sticking to our long-term economic plan as the OECD, IMF and others have advised us to, can make sure that Southend can continue to grow and perform well.

Q10. [908001] **Rosie Cooper (West Lancashire) (Lab):** In protecting universal benefits, the Prime Minister said that pensioners “deserve dignity” when they retire. Retired constituents in West Lancashire say, “What’s the point of a bus pass when there are no buses?” *[Interruption.]* There are not even trains, as the Conservative borough council has pocketed the additional money that would have been used to allow pensioners to have access to trains. Will the Prime Minister do the right thing—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Lady needs to bring her question to a close, but that question, notwithstanding a display of very considerable rudeness towards her, will be heard. That is the end of it. It will be heard however long it takes; it does not matter to me.

Rosie Cooper: Will the Prime Minister do the right thing and ensure that concessionary travel for all pensioners is fair and equitable?

The Prime Minister: Of course, buses are the responsibility of the county council, so I think the point made was a fair one. I have talked about dignity and security in retirement, because we have kept our commitments and upgraded the pension by the triple lock, so pensioners in the hon. Lady’s constituency will have £950 more in terms of the basic state pension than when I become Prime Minister in 2010. We committed to keeping the free bus pass, keeping the free television licence, keeping the freedom from prescription charges. We have kept each and every one of those promises. We have gone beyond that by saying to pensioners that they do not need to buy an annuity: it is their money, their savings, and they can spend it as they choose. This has been a Government who have recognised that people deserve that dignity and security, and we have delivered in full.

Annette Brooke (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Seventy-five per cent. of our schools contain asbestos, more than 20 teachers a year are dying from exposure to asbestos and our children are known to be particularly vulnerable. Will the Prime Minister ensure that the Government publish their completed policy review on asbestos in schools before Dissolution?

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The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises a very important issue, which has been well broadcast and covered in the media in the past couple of days. That is why we are carrying out an asbestos review going through all schools. We will publish it in due course, and action will have to be taken.

Q11. [908002] **Mr David Blunkett (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab):** I was thinking of raising with the Prime Minister the Conservatives’ so-called long-term economic plan—like Pinocchio’s nose, it grows longer and less attractive by the day—but with just two Prime Minister’s questions to go, I thought that I would ask the Prime Minister whether he shared my imminent relief that neither he nor I will have to pencil in 12 noon on a Wednesday any longer.

The Prime Minister: May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, as he will shortly be leaving the House? As a new Back Bencher, I will never forget coming to this place in 2001 and, in the light of the appalling terrorist attacks that had taken place across the world, seeing the strong leadership he gave on the importance of keeping our country safe. He is a remarkable politician, a remarkable man. I remember once in the Home Affairs Committee that, even though he could not see who we all were, he knew exactly who was concentrating and who was not. I do not know how—he has this extraordinary gift—but he is an extraordinary politician. I pay tribute to him, and I know the rest of the House will join me in doing so.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): During his conference speech, the Prime Minister rightly warned voters flirting with UKIP that if they went to bed with Nigel Farage on 7 May, they could end up waking up

with the Leader of the Opposition on 8 May. May I put it to the Prime Minister that the outcome could actually be a lot more unpleasant? Is it not now the case that if voters go to bed with Nigel Farage on 7 May, they could wake up not only with the Leader of the Opposition, but snuggled up next to Alex Salmond?

The Prime Minister: That is the point. Who knows who you could wake up in bed with? It might not just be Alex Salmond; it might be Nigel Farage. It could be any number of people. [Hon. Members: "It could be Nick Clegg."] Yes, of course that is an option too. It all points to the difference between the competence of the Conservatives and the chaos of the alternatives.

Q12. [908003] Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): People in Northern Ireland have once more seen the issue of sexual abuse put under the spotlight as members of the IRA stand accused of holding kangaroo courts, re-traumatising victims as a result. Will the Prime Minister help to establish a cross-border inquiry with the power to call key witnesses, to try to bring some form of closure and justice, especially to young people who have been abused and whose abusers have been sheltered by the IRA?

The Prime Minister: I will look carefully at what the hon. Gentleman has said. The Stormont House agreement includes a set of measures and proposals to try to deal

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with the issues of the past in a fair and accountable way—perhaps this is one such issue that could be dealt with in that way.

Q13. [908004] Caroline Dinéage (Gosport) (Con): In Gosport we have a proud history of supporting the armed forces, and the recent £420 million contract to service the Chinook helicopter fleet will help local companies such as Vector Aerospace to preserve those links. With that in mind, will the Prime Minister reassure the House of his commitment to defence spending, the defence industry, defence procurement and defence jobs?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly make that commitment. We have said that the £160 billion equipment programme over the next decade is fully protected and will grow in real terms, and I have recently been to Portsmouth to see for myself the new docks that are being put in to welcome the Queen Elizabeth aircraft carrier, and the massive investment that will go into Portsmouth for ship servicing. My hon. Friend's constituency will benefit from the Chinook contract—a new order of Chinooks pumping money into our defence industry and leading to the training of apprentices, jobs and livelihoods for many years to come.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): A couple with two children where the man earns £25,000 and the woman earns £10,000 will be £9,417 worse off in tax credits if they stay together, as opposed to if they break up. Is that brutal attack on working families another reason why the Prime Minister will not go head to head in a pre-election debate with the Leader of the Opposition?

The Prime Minister: This Government have obviously helped all couples by lifting the first £10,600 that someone earns out of tax, and we are the first Government to introduce a married couple's tax allowance, which I seem to remember the hon. Gentleman voted against. If he cares about couples and commitment, he should be voting with us.

Q14. [908005] Dan Byles (North Warwickshire) (Con): It has been an honour and a privilege to be the Member of Parliament for North Warwickshire for the past five years, and I am particularly proud that in that time crime in North Warwickshire has fallen. There are more doctors and nurses in the George Eliot hospital, and the number of schools rated as needing improvement has halved. Perhaps most importantly, unemployment in North Warwickshire has fallen to the lowest level since constituency records began in 1983. Does the Prime Minister agree that that shows that gripping the economy, gripping the deficit, and having an effective long-term economic plan is not just empty rhetoric but makes a real difference to people on the ground?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work he has done. The claimant count in North Warwickshire has come down by 70% since the election, and the long-term youth claimant count has

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come down by 64%. I know that, working with Craig Tracey, he will work hard to ensure that North Warwickshire continues to benefit from our long-term economic plan.

Q15. [908006] Mr Gerry Sutcliffe (Bradford South) (Lab): The Prime Minister may know that this could be my last Prime Minister's questions after 20 happy years representing Bradford South. He will be pleased to know that I am making my retirement plans—what are his?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman not only on his service in this House but on winning a by-election. Any of us who have taken part in by-elections—I remember the Bradford South by-election, not entirely happily from my point of view—knows what daunting prospects they are. We all have plans for after 7 May, and people who we want to spend more time with, and less time with. I have a little list, and I suspect he has one too.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Members of the Scottish National party have been licking their lips in public at the prospect of blackmailing one of the two main parties into delaying or abandoning the replacement of the Trident submarines. Will the Prime Minister confirm that if he is still Prime Minister in 2016, as he should be, he will ensure that the main gate contracts for four successor submarines are signed that year?

The Prime Minister: I can reassure my hon. Friend. For me, Trident and its replacement are non-negotiable. They are an absolutely vital part of this nation's security. Let me just remind Labour Members of the leaflet going out across Scotland. It says this:

“At the General Election we need to stop the Tories being the largest party.”

They have given up trying to be the Government and trying to win a majority. They want to crawl into Downing street on the coat tails of the SNP and put our country at risk. The British people will never have it.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Seventeen thousand police officers have gone in this Parliament. Under the Chancellor's spending plans, another 30,000 would go in the next Parliament. The outgoing president of the Association of Chief Police Officers, Sir Hugh Orde, has warned that it would no longer be possible adequately to protect the public from criminals or from the growing threat of home-grown terrorists. Is he right?

The Prime Minister: What we have seen in this Parliament is that, yes, we have made difficult decisions on police spending, but crime is down, including crime in the west midlands.

As for the shadow Chancellor's dossier this week, he briefed against it before we even had a chance. I have heard of him briefing against the leader, but he has beaten his own records. He now briefs against himself.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order.

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Points of Order

12.37 pm

Alison Seabeck (Plymouth, Moor View) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I need to declare an indirect interest. I seek your advice, because I would hate for a Minister to have unwittingly misled the House. Is it in order for the Chief Secretary to return to the Dispatch Box and supply the correct figures for social house building? Yesterday, in response to me, he said that the Government

“have the highest annual rate of social house building than under the previous Government”.—[*Official Report*, 10 March 2015; Vol. 594, c. 145.]

The *UK Housing Review*, published on Monday, had within it a Department for Communities and Local Government live table, which had the following figures for social rent starts and completions: in 2009-10, there were 39,492 starts and 30,939 completions. The figures in 2013-14—the last full year—were 3,961 and 7,559 respectively. As you can see, Mr Speaker, the Chief Secretary's statement is wrong, and his Government have not out-built the Labour Government.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order and for notice of its likely content. She has put her point on the record. I hope she will understand if I say that the content of Ministers' observations in the House is not a matter for the Chair. If the Chief Secretary, upon reflection, judges that he has made an inaccurate observation, it is of course open to him to correct the record in one or other of a number of different ways. I hope the hon. Lady will not take offence if I say—it is meant as a compliment—that she is a wily character. She has largely achieved her objective by putting her point on the record in prime time.

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have always advised Members of this House of the importance of showing respect to others in the workplace. In that regard, is it appropriate, in this House, which is a workplace, that a female Minister should be referred to as a washing machine?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I certainly did not say that a Member was a washing machine. If I caused offence to an hon. Member on Monday afternoon in the course of Question Time, in rebuking her for a long answer—it did result in a somewhat shorter one after that—and if I caused offence by what I said, I very happily apologise to that Member. I intended to cause no offence to her and hold her in the highest esteem. I hope I ordinarily treat Members with great courtesy. It was an off-the-cuff remark, it may well have been a foolish one, and I apologise for it.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In this House, during a Division, if Members wish positively to abstain, the option of walking through both the Aye and the No Lobby is available to them.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): No it is not.

Conor Burns: It is possible to walk both through the Aye Lobby and the No Lobby and—

Chris Bryant: No, it is not.

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Mr Speaker: Order. Please, Mr Bryant, I know you are an exceptionally clever man. No one is more aware of your cleverness than you, but you can leave me to deal with this matter.

Conor Burns: We are, of course, regularly reminded of that, not least by the hon. Gentleman himself.

In a deferred Division, when one wishes to abstain, as I tried to recently, I was told that if one fills in both the Aye and the No Lobby one is recorded as “not voting”. Was that advice correct, or should it be possible, in the same way that one can vote in both Lobbies, to do the same in a deferred Division?

Mr Speaker: I am advised that the advice the hon. Gentleman was given is correct. The hon. Gentleman will have heard that the Acting Clerk has confirmed the accuracy of that advice to the Chair.

More widely, perhaps I can take this opportunity to make it clear—I think this largely deals with the concerns of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—that the occasional practice, and it is usually a very occasional matter, of a Member going through both Lobbies as a means of abstaining has long been deprecated by the Chair. It is not a breach of any particular rules, so far as I am aware, but it has long been deprecated by the Chair. It did happen on a piece of legislation a couple of years ago. I have to say, I strongly deprecated the decision of a particular Member to abstain in that way. I think it is an unsatisfactory way to behave and it is better avoided.

I think we have dealt with the matter, but if the hon. Member for Rhondda now wants to have his say on his feet, rather than from his seat, doubtless he will do so.

Chris Bryant *indicated dissent.*

BILLS PRESENTED

Standardised Testing for Diabetes (People Aged 40 and Over)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Keith Vaz, Mike Freer, Andrew George, Grahame M. Morris, Jim Shannon, Mark Durkan, Mark Reckless, Mr Adrian Sanders, Dr Julian Huppert, Valerie Vaz, John Robertson, Mr Jim Cunningham, Mr Alan Campbell and Phil Wilson presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to provide annual standardised tests for diabetes for those aged 40 and over; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 March, and to be printed (Bill 186).

National Health Service

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Caroline Lucas, Andrew George, John Pugh, Mr Michael Meacher, Chris Williamson, Mr Roger Godsiff, Kelvin Hopkins, Jeremy Corbyn, John McDonnell, Dr Eilidh Whiteford, Hywel Williams and Katy Clark presented a Bill to re-establish the Secretary of State's legal duty as to the National Health Service in England and to make provision about the other duties of the Secretary of State in that regard; to make provision about the administration and accountability of the National

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Health Service in England; to repeal section 1 of the National Health Service (Private Finance) Act 1997 and sections 38 and 39 of the Immigration Act 2014; to make provision about the application of international law in relation to health services in the United Kingdom; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 March, and to be printed (Bill 187).

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Horses and Ponies (Live Export)

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

12.42 pm

Gregory Barker (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about improving and enforcing the arrangements for the regulation of the export of live British horses and ponies from the United Kingdom; to require the Secretary of State to commission and publish a study of the effectiveness of such arrangements, including their efficacy in distinguishing between the transportation of live horses and ponies for sports and those for meat; and for connected purposes.

The Bill would require the Animal and Plant Health Agency to take full responsibility for enforcement of horse health and welfare laws at British ports. It would require them to use the Government Agency Intelligence Network to involve Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the National Crime Agency and other authorities to crack down on the illegal trafficking of tens of thousands of British horses, ponies and donkeys each year.

The UK can be proud of its laws that protect the welfare of every one of our country's 1 million equines, including protecting them from indiscriminate export for slaughter. Indeed, if I want to export a horse legally

I must complete various papers and declarations citing the purpose of export, the destination address, the veterinary certification that I have obtained stating that the horse is in good health, and details of the horse passport and microchip numbers. Ponies must also be above a certain value—at least £145, depending on size—if they are to be eligible for export. One might think that the information declared in these export applications would be occasionally checked and the destination address validated to ensure it exists. Sadly, it seems that this simply does not happen.

One might think that, at the very least, the health certification of animals leaving or entering our country would be checked by the APHA at our ports, but that does not happen. One might also think that occasional checks are made to ensure that the horses listed in the export declaration are the ones on the given lorry, but that does not happen, either. One might think that occasional checks would be made to ascertain the transported animal's welfare, as advised by the European animal transport regulation, but that does not happen, either. In fact, horses and ponies can effectively be shipped anywhere, for any purpose, in any condition, despite our laws, which are meant to protect them.

For instance, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs says that there have been no applications to export horses for slaughter for very many years. However, World Horse Welfare, which I thank for its help in preparing the Bill, has clear evidence that many horses and ponies exported under the pretence of sport or leisure are actually taken directly to addresses associated with the meat trade, including markets on the continent where slaughter buyers are present. We are not talking about a few dozen horses slipping through the net; we are talking about tens of thousands of horses and ponies each year.

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For example, over just one weekend of monitoring in 2013, World Horse Welfare saw 51 shipments exported from Dover to France and 41 shipments imported, on vehicles taking between two and 22 horses. Not a single check was observed being carried out by the APHA. It is no secret that these low-value horses and ponies are probably being exported with fraudulent identification documents, thereby allowing them to be entered into the meat trade on the continent. Without proper identification, these horses could not be considered safe to enter the food chain, but European abattoirs are much more likely to be fooled by false UK paperwork than our own abattoirs here in the UK. We are watching this happen and, it appears, doing nothing. I am afraid that this is exactly the kind of complacency that contributed to the horsemeat scandal. Horses, unlike other livestock, are relatively unregulated, so trafficking in them is easy to get away with.

Organised criminals are also exploiting the fact that horseboxes can sometimes travel in and out of Britain without a single check or search. Imagine the tax revenue we are losing by letting this trade flourish under the radar, never mind the value of the proceeds from crime. The case of a horse dealer from Northern Ireland, caught smuggling nearly 25 kg of cannabis worth nearly £250,000 in his horsebox, is just one example of the kind of trade we are dealing with. The charity World Horse Welfare estimates that a lorry load of 20 horses could be worth anything from £5,000 to £10,000 at the meat markets, and that trafficking 10,000 horses per year would fetch criminals £2 million to £5 million.

There no enforcement because there is no longer a workable line of responsibility or, it appears, the effective resources to enforce the laws. Instead, we seem to have a dysfunctional system where responsibility appears to be shunted between DEFRA, the APHA and local authorities. As the competent authority, DEFRA is responsible for the enforcement of the laws governing the welfare, transport and trade of animals. However, it has delegated that duty across different agencies. The APHA is clear that it does not enforce those laws. That is a job for local authorities through trading standards or other agencies, but trading standards will not consider enforcement unless there have been reported breaches in compliance. Even then, it must meet its public interest and proportionality tests. As the APHA does not have an intelligence capability, it can only act on specific intelligence. Without intelligence, the APHA is reliant on assessing the declared information of compliant individuals, which does nothing to identify or assess the non-compliant trade. Effectively, therefore, we have no enforcement whatsoever and criminals will continue to profit from horse suffering.

My Bill would, I hope, change that. First, it would require the Secretary of State to commission and publish a study of the effectiveness of the current enforcement

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in horse exports. Secondly, DEFRA would make the APHA the enforcement authority for all equine exports and imports, including health, welfare and documentation. That streamlining of enforcement would be effective and simple to implement. A similar scheme was in place some years ago when checks at our ports were carried out by the State Veterinary Service before the current arrangements were put in place.

Penalties for breaches would be increased and the maximum imposed to serve as a deterrent. The penalties imposed for breaches of welfare-in-transit laws are usually insignificant—cautions or brief suspensions—despite the courts having the option of fines of up to £5,000 per animal. Penalties for breaches of other laws, such as the use of false horse passports or vehicle violations, are also relatively small and are therefore also too often not considered worth the time of local authorities. However, if it follows the national intelligence model the APHA could target prolific offenders collectively and significant penalties could be imposed through the courts, thus delivering much-needed revenue to the Government, never mind what tax officials and the criminal enforcement agencies might be able to recoup from the proceeds of these traffickers' crimes.

My Bill would also require the APHA to put in place an effective collaborative framework to gather, assess, disseminate and act on intelligence regarding equine health, welfare and documentation irregularities as well as suspicious patterns in the trade. The APHA claims that it already conducts intelligence-led enforcement but it has no effective system to hold, analyse or act on that intelligence. Non-governmental organisations such as World Horse Welfare have extensive intelligence that they share with Government agencies and are keen to share with the APHA. Many NGOs are ready and willing to do all they can to help.

Finally, my Bill would require greater transparency and therefore accountability for the APHA by publishing enforcement actions and suspensions, as happens with vehicles through traffic commissioners and the Vehicle and Operator Services Agency. I hope that the House will support the Bill so that we can better protect our horses, stop this criminal trade and ensure that the Government receive their due revenues.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Gregory Barker, Mrs Anne Main, Zac Goldsmith, Sir John Randall, Caroline Nokes, Jim Fitzpatrick, Simon Kirby, Joan Walley, Michael Fabricant, Charlie Elphicke, Andrew Rosindell and Mr Shaun Woodward present the Bill.

Gregory Barker accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 March and to be printed (Bill 188).

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Opposition Day

[19th Allotted Day]

General Election Television Debates

12.52 pm

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the potential value of broadcast general election debates between party leaders; notes however that neither the broadcasters nor politicians can escape the charge of self-interest in their organisation, and that they should best be left to an independent body to arrange; further notes that the broadcast debate formats proposed for 2015 have been inconsistently and incompetently formulated so far; further notes that there exists a substantial danger as a result that these debates will now not happen; and believes that the point of any debates which do happen must be to benefit those who watch them, not those who appear in them or broadcast them.

Mr Speaker, you are the first among us to mention when the public think we are doing a good job of debating and whether we get it right or wrong. You, sir, do a much better job of ensuring that debates happen than the broadcasters do and, if I may say so, of ensuring that all the relevant people turn up, including Ministers. In this Parliament, Ministers have certainly been made much more accountable than they have been in previous Parliaments, and I am sure that the whole House is grateful for that.

With just eight weeks to go to polling day, there are as many questions as ever about the proposed television broadcast debates. Who will be debating with whom? Who is invited? Who will actually turn up? When are the debates happening? On not one point has agreement been established, and we heard again today at Prime Minister's questions that the controversy continues to rage. The situation is completely unsatisfactory and deeply disappointing.

Before the broadcasters report critically about us, they must first ask what they have got wrong in this process. Did they engage constructively and sensibly with all the parties? Can they honestly say that they have had at the front of their minds the interests of the voters, their viewers? Has not the self-interest of the broadcasters been rather too evident in much of the many mistakes they have made so far?

When we put ourselves before the voters, we hope for a fair hearing. Does anyone think that the broadcasters have had that, rather than ratings and spectacle, in mind? If they did, how does one explain their oscillation from one format for debates to another?

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Did the right hon. Gentleman welcome, as I did, the intervention by Lord Grade, the former chairman of the BBC and chairman of ITV? He knows what he is talking about when he says that the arrangements for these debates are deeply flawed.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. The intervention in a letter to *The Times* this morning from the noble Lord was interesting and pertinent. It is interesting to note that someone

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who might have a party political affiliation but who is so experienced in broadcasting for ITV and in the world of the BBC is speaking so forthrightly about how broadcasters have handled the situation. It has to be said that that is particularly the case with the BBC, which has a responsibility as a public broadcaster to be fair and impartial to everyone. One issue that concerns television licence fee payers in Northern Ireland is the deliberate exclusion of Northern Ireland parties when other parties from Scotland and Wales that stand only in their respective countries are included. That prompts serious questions about the impartiality and fairness of the BBC, in particular.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman's last point. It is no good the broadcasters saying that the Welsh nationalists and Scottish nationalists can take part in the debates if the parties from Northern Ireland cannot. He should pursue his case vigorously.

Mr Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his support. I am also grateful for the support that has been evident from Members on both sides of the House. Indeed, I have with me letters from the leaders of other parties throughout the United Kingdom defending and supporting our inclusion in the national debates.

Let me make the position of the Democratic Unionist party very clear. We want the national debates to happen and we do not want to intrude or ask to be involved in a national debate involving the national parties. For instance, we are quite happy that there should be a head-to-head debate between the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition or a debate among those parties that are deemed to be national and have sufficient standing to stand in all parts of the United Kingdom. We did not raise any objections to that or ask to be included in that debate. When the broadcasters decided that they would invite the Scottish National party from Scotland and Plaid Cymru from Wales to be involved in the national debate, however, that prompted the question of why they would include a party that stands only in Scotland and a party that stands only in Wales but not the Democratic Unionist party, which has more MPs and more votes than Plaid Cymru and more MPs than the Greens, Plaid and the SNP put together. The whole thing is ludicrous.

We met the BBC at our request after it had proposed its second formulation. As I understand it, the BBC never asked to speak to any of the parties in Northern Ireland. Not only did the BBC not speak to the political

parties in Northern Ireland but, as I understand it, the BBC mandarins and fonctionnaires did not even speak to their own journalists in Northern Ireland. I am not sure what happened in other countries or regions of the UK, but they took the decision without consulting the people directly involved in Northern Ireland. I hear them talk about consulting all the parties, but it is clear that they have not fulfilled their obligation, because they have not consulted us, despite our size and contribution and the potential for a hung Parliament on 8 May. These are serious questions, particularly for the BBC, that need to be answered. I reiterate our position: we are concerned with the national debates only because parties from other countries are to be involved but Northern Ireland is to be excluded, and there will be parties in

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those national debates putting forward candidates in Northern Ireland, and therefore it is prejudicial to Northern Ireland parties, particularly the DUP.

It is sometimes said by the BBC and other broadcasters, “Well, there will be local debates in Northern Ireland among the main parties. That is the opportunity for Northern Ireland politicians and parties to debate in front of the Northern Ireland electorate and set out their policies.” That is all fine and well—we have no objection to debating in that format—but I understand that such debates will also take place in Scotland and Wales. Yes, let us have those debates, but when it comes to the national debates, we cannot have one rule for parties chosen arbitrarily at the whim of unaccountable broadcasters deciding what is best for everyone else and having a different rule for Northern Ireland. That is totally unacceptable.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): Lord Grade is reported as having accused channel bosses of breaking their legal duty of impartiality in threatening to stage the debates without the Prime Minister, but does that duty not also extend to the DUP, which is well represented in this House, given the inclusion of Plaid Cymru and the SNP?

Mr Dodds: My hon. Friend raises the important point, which the noble Lord referred to in his article, about the duty of impartiality that is placed on the BBC and to which I think other broadcasters should show due high regard. It remains to be seen what happens. Significantly, in this debate about debates, people have been forthright in saying, “This will happen”, but the reality keeps turning out to be very different. In the first formulation, the broadcasters assured us that there would be three debates with invitations to four parties—the Conservative party, the Labour party, the Lib Dems and UKIP—and that if anyone did not turn up, they would be “empty chaired”, but then of course they changed their minds.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case, but is it not paradoxical to have party political broadcasts that virtually nobody watches but not to have debates that 23 million people watched the last time they took place? Are the broadcasters not trying simply to step into the vacuum that the House has left, and should we not legislate to ensure fair debates across the UK and in the nations and regions of the UK?

Mr Dodds: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point to which I shall return. Indeed, our motion states that the matter has been so badly handled by the broadcasters—undoubtedly political self-interest has raised its head as well—that steps should be taken, as a result of this debacle, to ensure a fair and equitable basis on which to agree proper and fair debates. This experience makes that point very strongly—although whether it should be done through legislation is another matter.

Ian Swales (Redcar) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case, and he makes his point about regional differences very well. Of course, the BBC and commercial stations can put on regional programmes involving regional politicians—regional parties are emerging in England, such as the North East party now standing

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in my seat, and Cornwall has a tradition of regional parties—but does he agree that the broadcasters need a model that fits all future purposes, whether for regional or national broadcasts, and that can determine which parties participate? They need to express a model that makes sense.

Mr Dodds: Until now, the broadcasters have made it up as they have gone along, responding to pressure here, there and everywhere. They have responded to the latest opinion polls—the exclusion and then inclusion of the Greens was done on the basis of opinion polls—but polls go up and down, so a decision on whether someone should be included will depend on when one takes note of the polls. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. A model needs to be designed in good time, well before a general election—especially because with fixed-term Parliaments everybody knows when the election will be—and with maximum agreement, setting out fairly and squarely the rules that will apply come what may. It needs to be fair to all parties and all regions and countries of the UK. We cannot have one country excluded and one major party in the House disadvantaged compared with other smaller parties. It cannot go on like this—he is right about that.

The broadcasters came up with their first formulation—three debates, four parties—but then they changed their minds and told us that seven parties would be invited. Not only did they completely change the proposed format and bin the nonsense about dissidents being “empty chaired”; they came up with proposals that, among other fascinating things, told us that the Liberal Democrats and Plaid amounted to pretty much the same thing—I mean no disrespect to either party when I point out to the broadcasters that there is quite a big difference between them in terms of size and appeal across the UK.

Until last week, no one had agreed even to that second unsustainable debate format—Labour had not agreed; UKIP had not agreed; the Liberals were vigorously denouncing the prospect of being relegated to football conference status; and the DUP had not agreed either. We have been absolutely consistent. As I said in response to earlier interventions, we can entirely see the case for the parties that Ofcom deems “the big four” debating with one another. One can debate whether Ofcom is right, but that is what it has said, so we can see the case for the broadcasters organising the debates on that basis. At a stretch, we can see the case for including the Greens—it is arguable, although it would make for much better television, from the broadcasters’ point of view—but we do not accept that the BBC and other broadcasters can pick and choose which parties from the countries and regions of the UK they deem fit to attend.

Naomi Long (Belfast East) (Alliance): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the problem arose when the broadcasters broke their rationale simply to include UKIP, rather than sticking with the previous elections as the basis on which to decide who should participate? That is where the rot stems from.

Mr Dodds: The hon. Lady raises the point I referred to about Ofcom’s definition for deciding which the main parties are. It is for Ofcom to make its own

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decisions and explain its rationale, and she certainly has a point, but we are where we are with that decision. It goes back to the point made earlier by the hon. Member for Redcar (Ian Swales). We cannot go on making it up as we go along. We need a set of rules, well in advance of the elections, that are clear, rational, fair and understandable.

Ian Swales: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman is coming on to the issue later in his speech, but the question of thresholds is relevant. Will such arrangements or models contain some sort of threshold, based perhaps on current representation in this House or some other method? Such a system would have various features, which could be explained in advance, and then used on every occasion.

Mr Dodds: The hon. Gentleman is right. That is certainly part of the debate that should happen, but it should happen well in advance—not in the heat of a general election and not in the run-up to the election when so many vested interests are at stake. As we have discovered, people who were previously enthusiastic have become less enthusiastic, depending on their particular vested interest. Likewise, others who were not so keen have suddenly become very keen indeed.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The right hon. Gentleman is making a compelling argument. Does he agree that the wider body politic and all our constituents right across the community would like to see us debating the substance of the issues that impact on them on a day-to-day basis, on which the general election will be decided?

Mr Dodds: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, which is why it is important to have a debate about ensuring that that happens. As things stand, it looks likely that the public, who watched the debates in considerable numbers last time, will be denied the opportunity to hear the contributions from the various party leaders who could form the Government. The public would be very interested to hear about the priorities for the smaller parties that could play a significant role one way or the other—what is their general outlook and how would they see things shaping up? I agree entirely with the hon. Lady.

As I have said, at this time no one has any idea what debates, if any, are going to occur. The broadcasters can say what they like about being determined to proceed and can make threats of empty-chairing, but there is no consensus at all about whether these debates are going to occur.

I want to make it very clear to the House and people beyond it that Northern Ireland Members will certainly not tamely accept any attempt to pick and choose the parties to the detriment of Northern Ireland. We are part of the United Kingdom; we play a very significant role in the House. The Democratic Unionist party has eight MPs, but there are other Northern Ireland Members from other parties, and indeed no party, who play a role here, too. They deserve to have their voice heard on behalf of the people they represent. They should not be excluded, especially in a context where the Democratic

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Unionist party could play a much more significant role on 8 May than some of the parties that are going to be included in the debates. People across the United Kingdom need to know where we stand on the national issues.

Glyn Davies (Montgomeryshire) (Con): I agree with virtually everything the right hon. Gentleman has said in this debate so far. Let me ask him about timing, which is a huge concern to me as a candidate. By having the TV debates within the last three or four weeks of the campaign, we convert it into a sort of “X Factor” whereby people will decide how to vote on the basis of looking at the television screen. The role of the hundreds and hundreds of candidates out there campaigning will be completely sidelined by this process if it takes place in the last few weeks of the campaign. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman intends to cover this, but I think the timing of these debates in a short campaign, which devalues the role of candidates, is an important one.

Mr Dodds: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point, which I think should be discussed in the wider context of setting out a model for how these debates should be run in the future. The timing is extremely important. I have a lot of sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman said about the effect of these big debates and the attention they receive. The Prime Minister’s argument about sucking the life out of the campaign is relevant, particularly to local campaigns.

Having said that, however, I also have a lot of sympathy with the view that the public are interested in having these sort of debates between people who might become the Prime Minister and form the Government. It is a question of balance, and looking at when these debates should happen is relevant, but I am not going to be prescriptive about it. It should be discussed and debated, and we need an independent model to take it all into account. It is wrong to say merely that we should go along with what the broadcasters have outlined because they believe that it is the right approach, and that anyone who disagrees with that does not have the interest of the wider public at heart. I do not believe that that is the right approach; it is a question of balance.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): My right hon. Friend has alluded to the fact that after 8 May Democratic Unionist Members could have a say on who walks into Downing street as Prime Minister. That being the case, is it not right and proper that the national audience should know where smaller parties such as ours stand on the issues of national defence and the Union, on grammar school education, health care, taxation, the cost of living, defence spending and so forth? The public are entitled to know that; it will help them to decide which parties should help to create and form the next Government.

Mr Dodds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; that is in the interests of people throughout the United Kingdom. If we are to hear the views of the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, it is absolutely right for people to hear the views of the Democratic Unionist party and others on the national issues, because this could have a major impact on the next Parliament.

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When the leader of my party, Peter Robinson, and I met the BBC in Belfast, we heard this argument: “We have included the SNP and Plaid in addition to UKIP, the Greens and the three major national parties, but it would be difficult now to include the DUP. We recognise the strength of your numbers; we recognise the role you could play in the next Parliament; we recognise that you have more votes than Plaid; we recognise that you have more seats than Plaid; we recognise that, unlike some parties, you are genuinely going to weigh up the options after the election on the basis of proposals that come forward. You are not in the pocket of any party; you have not already sold your vote. You have not already said that you are going to oppose the Tories, come what may, or that you will never go into coalition with the Labour party. All that is perfectly valid, but it will be very difficult to broadcast a debate because we would have to invite all the Northern Ireland parties, which would make it very unwieldy.”

So it comes down to a problem the broadcasters have created by the inclusion of the SNP and Plaid Cymru, leading them to say, “It is too difficult to cover Northern Ireland because we would then have to include more parties than the DUP”. It is a problem of their own creation. It is hardly fair to blame the DUP or Northern Ireland when this is a problem that the broadcasters have created themselves. When they came forward with this formulation and created this problem, they must have done so with their eyes wide open. They must have known that the effect would be to exclude Northern Ireland completely and that they would have to resort to a weak argument along the lines of: “It would be very unwieldy in broadcasting terms and it would not be a great television show.” I have no reason to doubt that functionaries at the top of the BBC and elsewhere are reasonably intelligent people, so they must have known the implications, but they were prepared to proceed nevertheless. In my view, that is a gross dereliction of their duty of fairness and reasonableness.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is blatant arrogance coming from the BBC. This is an organisation funded by the general public who pay the licence fee. The public want to hear what the parties have to offer. This is just blatant arrogance.

Mr Dodds: That is absolutely right, and I think the BBC will live to regret that arrogance. The way it is treating the political parties of Northern Ireland displays a great level of contempt for the people of Northern Ireland.

I shall start my conclusion as I know other Members want to speak. Where are we at the moment? We are, preposterously, supposed to believe the threat from the broadcasters that they can legally contrive debates during the short general election campaign at which the Prime Minister is not present while many of his political opponents are. Reference has been made to what Lord Grade has said today. Some people may believe that that is possible. Some people in the BBC, including broadcasters, may believe that it is possible, although I should add, in fairness to the BBC’s employees, that I have yet to meet a BBC journalist who believes that it is. It would do the BBC Trust, and indeed Rona Fairhead, some good to listen sometimes to what members of their front-line infantry are saying.

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Even now, it is not too late to do what should have been done long ago. A matter of such importance—putting the electoral choices of the British people directly in front of them—should be raised above the level of partisan squabbling or media meddling. Even at this late hour, a Speaker’s conference would start to take us where we need to go, towards the establishment of an independent commission to superintend broadcast election debates. Of course the public want to hear from us, but they must hear from us fairly, without bias and without the blatant incompetence that we have seen here before getting in the way.

Throughout the world, broadcasters work with independent commissions arranging political debates of this kind, and the end result is that in other countries, those debates happen. Here, it seems that the broadcasters know best. They know how to organise the debates, and they go ahead and try to do so on their terms. What has been the end result here? Chaos and confusion—and, eight weeks before the general election, no one has any idea what is happening about any of these debates.

Dr McCrea: Lord Grade, whom I mentioned earlier, writes that the BBC and the broadcasters

“are not the guardians of democracy.”

He also writes that they are “unequivocally playing politics.” Surely those are not characteristics of an independent BBC, and surely that means that an independent body to arrange the debates is required.

Mr Dodds: Again, my hon. Friend has made an important point. We must remember that we are sent to this House, having been elected by the people, to speak for the people: that is our role. We must take some responsibility, and learn the lessons of this debacle. We need to ensure that the debates happen in future, but on the basis of a model that sets their organisation and formulation aside from broadcasters and politicians.

I want the debates to happen. I sense that many Members on both sides of the House want them to happen, and that many members of the public do as well. The public want to see their politicians in front of them, debating the issues, at the appropriate juncture. The tragedy is that, at present, it is the broadcasters who are getting in the way,

During Northern Ireland questions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Mr Donaldson) referred to the late Lord Molyneux of Killead. Let me, as leader of the DUP group at Westminster, add my own tribute. I know that Jim Molyneux, who was a distinguished and valiant Member of the House for many years, would have relished the excitable mess—as he would have put it—that people have got themselves into. He would have been getting them together and counselling them to sit down and find a way through it, calmly and rationally. He conveyed such a sense of authority that I think he was almost born an elder statesman, rather than growing into the role. He wanted people to engage in politics in sentences and paragraphs rather than in soundbites, and that is what these debates should be about. We should be seeking to place serious, coherent, cogent arguments before the public. That is one of the reasons I believe in a debate. I believe that, sadly, Prime Minister’s Question Time has become largely an exchange of soundbites, all sound and fury and very little elucidation.

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Mr Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): Lord Molyneux was adept in another respect. At the time of the last hung Parliament when Unionists held the balance of power, he showed that Ulstermen, and indeed women, are very good at doing politics when the occasion arises.

Mr Dodds: My right hon. Friend has made a very pertinent point, but I think it is a debate for another day.

Obviously my party will always stand up for Northern Ireland, and in raising this matter today, we are standing against an illogical and unreasonable attempt by some broadcasters to exclude us from the debates. However, the issue is wider than just us. Who are these debates for? Are they for the people who take part in them? Are they for the people who so desperately want to produce them? No, they are not. They are for the people who watch them, and who then decide whether we are to come back to this place. If the broadcasters cannot be trusted to put the interests of the voters first, in all parts of the United Kingdom, we must remember our historic role. We speak for the people because we are elected by the people, and others should never dare to presume to get in the way of the people when they are trying to hear their elected representatives speak and debate with one another. I commend the motion to the House.

1.25 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Greg Clark): I thank the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) for giving us an opportunity to debate this matter, and for making such a powerful speech. I also thank him for evoking the spirit of Lord Molyneux, whose presence, given the respect that he enjoyed in this place, would no doubt have been very welcome during these rather turbulent discussions.

This may be a debate about debates, but it still matters. Millions of people watched the televised debates at the time of the last general election, and I think that it was a positive step for our democracy that the electorate were able to reflect on the choices that were put before them. However, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Glyn Davies), television debates are not the only feature of a general election campaign, and the intensity and concentration of their sequencing tends to generate a close interest which, as the Prime Minister put it, sucks some of the life and vitality out of the campaign itself. That was certainly the case last time. Three years ago, the Prime Minister proposed that we should agree on a set

of debates that would, ideally, take place before rather than during the short campaign, so that campaigning in the constituencies would not be overshadowed by the very important aspects of the debate.

Ian Swales: Does the Minister believe that such debates should take place before the publication of party manifestos?

Greg Clark: As was made plain today during Prime Minister's Question Time, there is plenty to talk about. I think that the choices between the parties are pretty clear, and I see absolutely no reason why we should not have a debate. The Prime Minister proposed that we should have one during the week beginning 23 March, and I hope that his proposal will be taken up.

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The right hon. Member for Belfast North was ingenious in drafting the motion. This is not, of course, a matter in which the Government have any direct legislative say. I think it important for the press—and broadcasters specifically, as part of the press—to be recognised as being robustly independent, and I would not want to breach that in any way

The Government have no direct role in the conduct of the leaders debates, which, in my view, is entirely proper. Government policy extends only to the framework by which broadcasters are regulated in the United Kingdom. Under the Communications Act 2003, Ofcom, the United Kingdom's independent communications regulator and competition authority, is required to set the standards for programmes on television and radio, which are embodied in the broadcasting code. The code applies to all broadcasters who are licensed by Ofcom. Crucially, it contains specific rules that apply during election periods and require licensed broadcasters to ensure that their coverage is duly impartial. That includes the requirement for due weight to be given to the parties.

In parallel the BBC, whose output is overseen by the BBC Trust, has editorial guidelines and election guidelines that set out the requirements for impartiality and accuracy generally, and specifically within an election period. The role of the press has been debated extensively during this Parliament and I know that all Members will support me in recognising the principle that independence and the requirements for accuracy and impartiality should be at the heart of broadcasting in this country.

Let me say a little about the particular contention in this debate. The aspect that the right hon. Member for Belfast North raised is who gets the power, in effect, to decide who gets a platform and who does not, and the way in which that has been conducted. He made a powerful case on behalf of his party and all parties in Northern Ireland. He expressed forcefully their concern about their exclusion from the arrangements proposed by the broadcasters. He referred to the fact that at the last election the Democratic Unionist party won more votes than one of the parties that is included in the seven-way debate, and more seats than four of them.

To try to cut through the logjam, the Prime Minister made an offer to participate in a seven-way debate before the start of the campaign. The leader of the Labour party said that he would debate the Prime Minister "any time, any place, anywhere", as I understand it. The Prime Minister has proposed a time: he proposed that there should be a debate the week after next. The offer has been made; it is now up to the Leader of the Opposition to accept it.

As for the specific line-up of the parties, the Prime Minister has said, as the right hon. Member for Belfast North will be aware, that the leader of the DUP should be permitted to make his case for why he should be included, but that case should be made to the broadcasters rather than to the Government.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): May I take the Minister back to the point about the timing of these debates? Of course the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition can find plenty to talk about. No doubt they could fill an hour arguing every day of the week, but the point is that in elections the electorate has the opportunity to vote for a manifesto.

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Is it not absurd for the Prime Minister to propose a debate before the manifesto is published? That is a con on the electorate.

Greg Clark: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. There is plenty to debate, as he is kind enough to acknowledge, week after week. There will be no shortage of points that can be made in the debate and it would be a good thing to get on with it. I hope the Leader of the Opposition will change his mind and agree to participate in the debate.

In every part of the United Kingdom, we are living through a time of rapid political change. Between one election and the next, we have seen major shifts in voter support, so it is vital that we do not see the result of previous elections fossilised in the format of the TV debates. It is for this reason that the Prime Minister objected to the exclusion of the Green party from the broadcasters' original proposal. To people who ask, "Why should he care?", let me give an answer that should appeal to all of us in the House. The more we are seen as turning our back on the legitimate expectation that people whose parties enjoy some support in the country should be able to make their case, the more we risk increasing the sense of alienation between this place and the country we represent. I also think it is a good thing to put the smaller parties on the spot. We know they can protest, and they often do so vociferously, but the question is whether they can propose workable solutions to the problems that they draw attention to. That is a different matter.

Speaking of workable solutions, it is clear, as the right hon. Gentleman affirmed in his remarks, that the broadcasters have failed to produce one in regard to the debates. Today's debate demonstrates that the proposals made thus far have not achieved the breakthrough or the consensus that three years ago the Prime Minister said should have been engaged in ahead of the general election. Lord Grade's letter, which many hon. Members have spoken about today, comes from a very distinguished and experienced broadcaster and regulator, who should obviously be listened to with respect. My party entered into negotiations with the broadcasters in good faith and repeatedly made the case for a more representative debate structure. Initially this was unilaterally disregarded, as the exclusion of the Green party made clear. The follow-up proposal was made without any consultation.

The motion before the House today proposes a new way forward—the creation of an independent body with responsibility for arranging the debates. The right hon. Gentleman would acknowledge that it is rather late in the Parliament to debate the proposal, but he proposes it to reflect his dismay at the arrangements that have been suggested. It gives us the opportunity to raise the key questions—most fundamentally, who would the independent body be independent of? How would it be established and how would it be funded? Which debates would it produce? Who would it invite and how would this stand up to challenge? How would it succeed in convening the parties at all? Would they be compelled to participate? How would it secure the distribution of the debates by the broadcasters?

Ian Swales: The Minister mentions the possibility of parties being compelled to participate. As a great student of politics, he will know that rule 101 for incumbency is,

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"Don't give your opponent a platform." Does he accept that those in power will try not to have such debates, as we are seeing right now?

Greg Clark: I can only speak for my party, but a platform for the Leader of the Opposition is something devoutly to be wished for by those of us on the Government Benches. I do not know whether that breaks rule 101, but I very much hope that the Leader of the Opposition will accept the invitation.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): On that point, the Leader of the Opposition has agreed to the broadcasters' proposal for a head-to-head debate with the Prime Minister. Why is the Prime Minister refusing to have that debate?

Greg Clark: The Prime Minister has made an offer. The Leader of the Opposition said that he would debate "any time, any place, anywhere". The Prime Minister said that he would appear in the debate the week after next, and I look forward to the Leader of the Opposition appearing there.

The proposal for an independent body is not a new one. The House will be aware that the Select Committee on Communications in the House of Lords examined these questions and published its findings on 13 May 2014, in good time before the general election. Though recommendations were explicitly not made to the Government, reflecting the point that I made earlier, the Committee's key conclusion questioned whether an independent body was required. It said that it had considered carefully the potential case for a body to be established independently of the broadcasters to oversee and produce broadcast election debates, but it has not been persuaded. It found no good arguments for the introduction of such a body.

Given the events of the past year, others, no doubt including the right hon. Member for Belfast North, will insist that the status quo is not working, and would perhaps invite that Committee to reflect on its proposals. In the immediate term, this is the purpose of the Prime Minister's offer of a televised debate before the campaign proper, but time is running out. If the Leader of the Opposition does not make up his mind soon, it will be too late. Inevitably, he wants to distract us by insisting that the debate be restricted to the Prime Minister and himself alone. He does not want the scrutiny of the other party leaders—

Stephen Twigg *rose*—

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman will have his chance.

The Leader of the Opposition does not want the scrutiny of other party leaders, including the leaders of other parties who are entitled to their say—the point that the right hon. Member for Belfast North made.

The Leader of the Opposition has already had his chance. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was debating with him again today. I have calculated that they have spent nearly 40 hours facing each other across this very Dispatch Box over the past four and a bit years. The latest instalment of this long-running televised head-to-head debate took place just a few minutes ago, and it will continue up to the moment that Parliament is dissolved. I can understand that the Leader of the

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Opposition might like one more chance to get it right—he tends not to come off the better in these head-to-head debates—but if it has not happened yet, I suspect it never will.

I read in the papers that the latest wheeze from the official Opposition is a law to make the TV debates mandatory. It is hard to know where to begin, or where the legal action from excluded parties would end. If participation in the debates is to be made compulsory, then, goodness me, are we to make watching them compulsory too, as part of the edification of voters? Indeed, it sometimes seems that the Opposition's way of thinking is: why achieve anything through voluntary action when we can use the power of the state to enforce our will? It is very revealing of the instincts of the Labour party that, faced with a difficulty, it reaches for legislation and compulsion rather than agreeing a consensual way forward. In making this ludicrous proposal, the Labour leader has done more to reveal the likely chaos that would ensue from the election of a Labour Government than any number of debates could achieve.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On voluntary or compulsory participation, does the Minister agree that the ideal solution would be some form of independent commission for the next election five years hence, which every party is obligated to agree to, and with fairness as the essence of the decision about how the debate would be constructed? In that way, no one would have any excuse for running away from the debate.

Greg Clark: I listened with respect to the proposal from the right hon. Member for Belfast North and his party. I understand the frustration they feel and why they are proposing this, but it is rather late in the day. I put on record my concern that compelling voluntary organisations to participate is not in the spirit of the way we have conducted these things. I accept the spirit in which the proposal has been made, however, and I do not think the intention is to put this on the statute book, but rather to explore the issues.

Dr William McCrea (South Antrim) (DUP): To assist in this matter, could a Speaker's conference be brought into existence immediately after the election to ensure we have a way forward for the following election?

Greg Clark: This will be a matter for the next Parliament, and the Government have not taken a view to that extent—and, speaking for the Government, I think it is right for me to record that. No doubt, however, having raised the debate this side of the election, if the Members of the hon. Gentleman's party are returned after the election, they may well come back to it. The right hon. Member for Belfast North said in his speech that if anyone should compel the party leaders to give an account of themselves, it should be in this House by Mr Speaker, not by an unelected quango. This is, thank goodness, a parliamentary democracy. We do not have a presidential system, although if it was the presidential system of the United States of America, it could be that the Leader of the Opposition will be spending more time in the USA with his brother before long. Before that, however, let us give him one last chance through

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his spokesman here: an opportunity to appear before the nation with the other party leaders to explain why he should be Prime Minister. Our offer of this televised debate before the campaign starts still stands. Is he up for the challenge, or is he frit?

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for giving way; I thought he had sat down and had not allowed me in. Will he answer this question clearly for the record, because he has not done so yet: has the Prime Minister ruled out a head to head, potential Prime Minister with potential Prime Minister? Has he ruled that out, and am I correct in thinking that the debate he is offering is just one with other leaders?

Greg Clark: I am always happy to extend my remarks to include the hon. Lady. What we have seen—I think this has been attested to in the speeches so far—is complete chaos and confusion on the part of the broadcasters. The Prime Minister has made an offer—an offer he first made three years ago—to have a debate before the election campaign starts. The offer is there on the table; I very much hope the Leader of the Opposition takes it up.

1.44 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I join the Minister in congratulating the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Mr Dodds) on securing this timely debate on this important subject. As has been said, the general election is just eight weeks away. In the 21st century, it is surely right that the public have an opportunity, in the weeks before polling day, to see the party leaders and potential Prime Ministers debate the issues.

Voter turnout has fallen significantly in recent years. Trust in politics and politicians is at a low ebb. We must do more to confront these challenges, and television debates are an opportunity for the party leaders to reach out, to inspire, to answer concerns and to attempt to engage with people. In 2010, nearly 10 million people watched the first TV debate between the leaders, eclipsing even “Coronation street” and “EastEnders”. It is an extraordinary opportunity to reach out to people, many of whom have not remotely started thinking about the election yet, and to give them the opportunity to hear from the leaders of the political parties. To reject that opportunity would be to show a disregard for the British public, who have made it clear that they want these debates to happen.

On this side of the House, we want these debates to happen. We have said that the broadcasters should make proposals, and we have accepted their proposals for three debates during the campaign. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Julie Hilling) just reminded us, the Leader of the Opposition wants to debate the issues head to head with the Prime Minister. Realistically, there are only two leaders who could be Prime Minister after this general election, and the country should have the opportunity to see them debate head to head, and the broadcasters are proposing that there should be such a debate, alongside two others. That is why the Leader of the Opposition has said, to use his much quoted term, he will debate with the Prime Minister

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any time, any place anywhere. Of course, regardless of who is in power, we might expect the Leader of the Opposition to be bullish.

Greg Clark: Does that offer extend to appearing in the week commencing 23 March?

Stephen Twigg: If that is the proposal that comes forward and is supported by other parties, but not as the only debate. What the right hon. Gentleman and the Prime Minister are proposing is an election debate before the campaign has even started. As the hon. Member for Redcar (Ian Swales) and my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) have said in this debate, party manifestos will not even have been published in that week. If the citizens of the country are going to have an opportunity to question, and listen to, party leaders, that should happen after manifestos have been published.

Greg Clark: As the hon. Gentleman said, part of the Leader of the Opposition's phrase was "any time", but the hon. Gentleman is now saying that there is a certain time before the election that is not acceptable. How does he reconcile that with the commitment to debate any time, any place, anywhere? Why not the week commencing 23 March?

Stephen Twigg: Because we do not believe these are decisions to be cooked up between the party leaders. They should not be being made by the party politicians. They should be taken away from them. The broadcasters have proposed three debates, two with seven parties and one a head-to-head debate, and we have accepted those proposals. Why can the Conservative party and the Prime Minister not accept those proposals? Does the Minister want me to give way to him so he can tell us why they are so reluctant to accept a head-to-head debate?

Dr Julian Huppert (Cambridge) (LD) rose—

Stephen Twigg: If not, I give way to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Dr Huppert).

Dr Huppert: The hon. Gentleman is making a strong case as to why we need to have debates, and I share his characterisation of the Prime Minister as a bit too scared to want to be properly involved, but why was neither his leader nor the Prime Minister prepared to take part in debates before the European elections? They both turned down invitations to debate with the leader of my party and the leader of the UK Independence party. If the Prime Minister continues to refuse to show up, is the Leader of the Opposition prepared to debate with the Deputy Prime Minister, leader of my party, or is he too scared to have that head-to-head debate?

Stephen Twigg: The reality is that the two people who may become Prime Minister after this election are the leader of my party and the current Prime Minister. I very much doubt that the Deputy Prime Minister, even in his most wildly optimistic moments, is expecting to form a Liberal Democrat-led coalition or majority Government after this election.

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