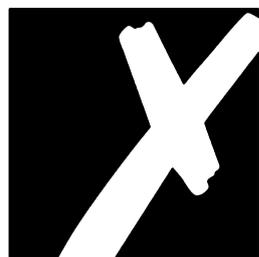




HOUSE OF COMMONS



United Kingdom

Youth Parliament
MAKING OUR MARK

United Kingdom Youth Parliament Debate

9th November 2018

House of Commons

Youth Parliament

Friday 9 November 2018

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

11 am

Mr Speaker: On behalf of all my parliamentary colleagues, notably this morning the Leader of the House of Commons, Andrea Leadsom, the shadow Leader of the House, Valerie Vaz, who I think will be joining us at some point, Wes Streeting, and Andrew Bowie, who will speak towards the end of our proceedings, let me welcome you to the 10th sitting, my friends—I think I can call you my friends—of the UK Youth Parliament in the House of Commons Chamber.

This marks the beginning of UK Parliament Week, a programme of events that connects people with the United Kingdom Parliament. This year's UK Parliament Week is the biggest yet, with over 7,900 organisations and half a million people set to take part across the United Kingdom. Although it is not in my script, at this juncture I just want to emphasise that this would not happen without your passion and commitment. As I am sure you would readily acknowledge, it also would not happen without the oversight, professionalism and skill of those at the British Youth Council, because they translate a concept into a fact, an ambition into a reality. We hugely appreciate their work, so let us say thank you to them at the start. [*Applause.*]

Let me say thank you also, from not only my head but my heart, to all the youth workers, both for what they have done in the run-up to today and will do in the course of today, but for what they have done to nurture, encourage and facilitate your activities throughout the year. They are often unsung heroines and heroes, and I know they do not seek the limelight, but, as Andrea, Wes and others will have often heard me say, one thing we say too rarely and ought to say more often—and which costs nothing and is courteous, but also has the merit of being true—is thank you. So thank you to them for what they have done, are doing and will go on doing, and I ask you to put your hands together in appreciation. [*Applause.*]

As you know will know, BBC Parliament will be able to broadcast this to the nation, and all of us are proud of this and proud of you. Today's five debate topics were chosen—I am able to say these words for the first time in a decade—by over 1 million 11 to 18-year-olds, who voted in the annual Make Your Mark ballot. [*Applause.*] Today, the UK Youth Parliament will choose the two issues that it wishes to take forward as priority campaigns for 2019.

This year's Youth Parliament also marks the fifth year of the Paul Boskett memorial award, which was set up in memory of Paul Boskett MBE, who was one of the driving forces behind the UK Youth Parliament at the British Youth Council. British Youth Council support workers, parliamentary staff and guests have been given ballot papers to vote for the two awards: best debate lead speech and best Back-Bench contribution. The presentation of the awards will take place at a reception to be held at a later date.

Today's proceedings will be broadcast by the UK Parliament on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, and on parliamentlive.tv. Just before we get under way, I just want to say something else: it has been my enormous honour and privilege to chair this sitting every year since 2009. Some of you may be aware—I do not, for one moment, imagine all of you will be, as that would be very presumptuous—that it is also my honour and privilege every year to come to the UK Youth Parliament annual meeting/conference, wherever it takes place in the United Kingdom. When I was elected Speaker, I changed the previous game plan, which was that the Deputy Speaker should chair the session—for the perfectly good reason that my predecessor as Speaker was Glasgow-based and expected to be in Glasgow on a Friday. First, I thought it would be massively enjoyable, and I know that the Leader of the House and Wes will massively enjoy their time with us today.

Secondly, I felt, and continue to feel, that if we in this place want ever to be respected by young people, we must show respect for young people. Respect is not our automatic right; it is an earned credit. To put that another way, respect is a two-way street. If I want you to respect me and my place of work, I have to respect you. I am absolutely passionate about the UK Youth Parliament. You are the very future of our democracy and, in a very real sense, my friends, you are the future of our country. Andrea, Wes and I had the pleasure half an hour ago of meeting and being photographed with the debate leaders in Speaker's House, and we were all very keen to emphasise to them that you should say what you think.

It would be ridiculous for us to tell you not to be nervous. You are bound to be nervous, and some nerves are no bad thing, because the adrenaline is flowing. Prime Minister Cameron, who was extraordinarily skilled at the Dispatch Box, would nevertheless have shaking hands when he came into the Chamber for Prime Minister's Question Time, and very often throughout the session. If you have ever read Tony Blair's memoirs, you will know that he said that, throughout his 10 years as Prime Minister, he always felt real apprehension and extreme nervousness at the prospect of the weekly Prime Minister's Question Time clash, even though he was also extremely adept at it.

There is no need to worry about being worried and no need to be anxious about the fact that you are anxious or nervous. The key is twofold. First, make sure that you master your nerves, rather than allowing your nerves to master you. Secondly—this should help with the first objective—remember that I am on your side, Andrea is on your side, Wes in on your side, your support workers are on your side and your fellow Members of the Youth Parliament are all on your side, and we are willing you to succeed. Enjoy it. Treasure the experience. Tell us what you really think on each of the topics before us today. I hope that you have the most stimulating and rewarding experience on which you can then build as you develop your political interest, your campaigning objectives and, perhaps, your attempt one day to launch political careers for yourselves.

With that, you will be relieved to know, my words are at an end. We will hear from the Leader of the House shortly, which we look forward to—it is extremely important to hear from her and Wes—but in the first instance I call Ali Raja, from London, to make a speech on the first world war centenary. I want you to give him a humongously friendly reception. I call Ali Raja. [*Applause.*]

11.8 am

Ali Raja (London): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

World war one was the catalyst for the emergence of today's modern society, in which we truly thrive. We realise that, if not for the noble actions of the people who lived in the time of the great war, none of us could sit on these green chairs in this grand building, freely voicing the opinions of young people. This colossal realisation hit me like the bombs and calamities that crashed upon our ancestors, which they endured day and night.

So, lest we forget. Lest we forget the nurses healing the injured, the soldiers on the very frontline, the families providing us with a backbone and supporting us in times of adversity, the fighter pilots, the engineers, the cooks, the ambulance drivers and every single individual who departed from their everyday lifestyle and put their life at stake. Their primary intention was to preserve the unity of the United Kingdom and to allow future generations to strive and flourish—united, for that is what we are: individuals coming together from a vast array of different countries and communities, without fault.

It is pivotal that we acknowledge that everyone who served in the war was like you and me; all different colours, shapes and sizes. However, it is clearly evident that they shared one common value: to never give up; to never let your bliss be demolished by the malicious things hurled at you.

So wear your poppy with absolute pride. These miniature soldiers are embellished with brave faces, despite the petrifying danger burdening their happiness. The soil from which they bloom is filled with tyranny, but still they stand upright. The frightening cold pierces the atmosphere, abolishing the morale of everyone, and petals are stolen from them by the vindictive winds, yet still their backs show no sign of weakness. They stand tall, soaring above all, and they carry on, withstanding disaster after disaster.

We all thank the gallant individuals for standing, whether on the frontline or back at home. Thank you to all the poppies that ever existed, for you are the true heroes. I strongly believe that everyone present here today, and every single young person we represent, has a connection to the honourable people who gave their lives selflessly so that we could be here today. So I urge you all to recognise the debt we owe to these admirable individuals. Lest we forget. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Ali, I hope that you are as proud of yourself as we are of you. You spoke with style and panache. Your family and your support workers will be proud of you. Well done, because you have got us off to an absolutely cracking start.

I now call Kaitlyn Robson, from Yorkshire and Humber, to come forward and read a message from the Prime Minister.

Kaitlyn Robson (Yorkshire and Humber): Thank you, Mr Speaker. This is the message from the Prime Minister:

“I am delighted to send a message of support for the 11th annual sitting of the UK Youth Parliament in the House of Commons.

This year has special significance for our country as we celebrate the centenary of the Representation of the People Act 1918, which gave all men an equal right to vote and extended the franchise to women for the first time. It is chastening to think that, just one hundred years ago, neither I nor any of my fellow

female Members of Parliament would have been able to enter the chamber in which we now sit—nor have a say on who could represent us in it.

We can be proud of the progress we have made as a country over the last hundred years, but there is much more to be done to ensure that we build a democracy in which every voice is heard. That is why I am proud to support the work of the Youth Parliament and I congratulate all of you on the dedication you show to representing young people around the UK, and ensuring that their voices are heard.

The Government wants to support you in your work. We have launched new ‘youth voice’ projects—including a Civil Society Youth Steering Group and a national Youth Commissioners and Inspectors Group—and we will also explore new ways in which young people can continue to play a central role in shaping policy, so that together we can build a future that works for everyone.

I wish you all the best in your sitting in the House of Commons today.”

Mr Speaker: Kaitlyn, thank you; you have done us proud and we really appreciate that. I think that you will agree, colleagues and friends, that that was a characteristically gracious and supportive message from the Prime Minister. There is a particular piquancy—let us face it—that in the year when we are marking the 100th anniversary of votes for some women, that message comes from our second female Prime Minister. In her absence, let us thank the Prime Minister. *[Applause.]*

Now I want you to give a very warm welcome to the Leader of the House of Commons, Andrea Leadsom. *[Applause.]*

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I agree with you; it is rather wonderful to be in the Chamber today. It is a rather better atmosphere than is often the case these days. I certainly join you in very warmly welcoming the Youth Parliament to Westminster today. It is incredibly impressive to hear that over 1 million young people have been involved in the process of selecting today's debate topics. Let's hear it again for those 1 million young people. *[Applause.]* It is an incredible figure, providing clear evidence that young people do want to be involved in the democratic process and the work that we do here. That is so important.

The issues that you have chosen to debate genuinely reflect some of the biggest problems facing not only young people, but our whole country. The fight against knife crime, tackling homelessness and improving mental health services are vital topics. Evidence shows that the earlier we support people—whether as babies, children or teenagers—the better chance we have of turning lives around, supporting every young person to be the best that they can be.

The Government absolutely share in your concern and understand the importance of these issues, and we are working hard to find solutions. For example, we recently launched a new serious violence strategy, looking at how to support young people to lead productive lives away from violence and knife crime. We have also announced a £100 million plan to help put an end to rough sleeping, £30 million of which is targeted at mental health problems among the homeless, so we are all genuinely looking forward to hearing your views on all the topics that you have selected for debate.

This Chamber is the beating heart of the UK's parliamentary democracy. This is a historic building. Although it is rather full of mice for my liking—we do

occasionally find that the mice are overrunning the place—it is an incredibly significant building with a vital role at the heart of our democracy. Many of our country's most significant changes have begun and evolved from here, so it is right that you are sitting here to continue the historic work. It also sends the message that I personally always try to put out in my travels around the country—that our Parliament is for everyone, not just parliamentarians. It is therefore a huge delight to see so many of you here today.

As Mr Speaker said, next year will mark a decade since the UK Youth Parliament first started to use the House of Commons as your debating chamber. We have witnessed many important and, yes, life-changing debates here in that time, so I congratulate each and every one of you on your commitment to being a part of this vital debate, which shows your own personal desire to make the world a better place. I am delighted to be hosting you along with Mr Speaker, and hope that there will be an opportunity to chat further with many of you again in the future. I already recognise a few faces, so to those of you who are back for the second or third time, or more, please keep coming back; you are always welcome in this place.

One of the most enjoyable parts of my job as Leader of the House of Commons is going out and talking to young people around the country. I do try to explain to them how the Government listen to Parliament—don't they, Mr Speaker? Yes, indeed. I also explain that the Government engage with Parliament, just as we are listening to and engaging with the Youth Parliament today. Together, you represent not just the vital voices of young people, but the fabulous diversity of the United Kingdom. I am delighted that 52% of you here today are women. That is fantastic. *[Applause.]* I genuinely hope to see some of you take your seats as Members of Parliament in the future.

As you all know, we are celebrating 100 years since some women—only those with property and over 30—were granted the right to vote, so it is fantastic to see lots more young women getting involved in politics. A century ago, women were shut out of politics, shut out of national public life and definitely shut out of this Chamber. All those years ago, the suffragettes and the suffragists made huge sacrifices to get that changed. Women were imprisoned, were humiliated in public and at home, and many endured hunger strikes for their cause, but thanks to the tenacity and determination of all those who spent pretty much their whole lives campaigning all those years ago, women won the right to stand in elections; and finally, 90 years ago, all women won the right to vote.

From the first women in the world to get the vote, in New Zealand, to those who just pipped us to the post in some states of the United States, this was a long and global fight, but it was a fight that changed the world. A century later, we need to find ways to make this place more reflective of who we are as a society. Great progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go. Take the 50:50 campaign, for example, to encourage more women to stand for Parliament and to strive for equal representation in Parliament—something we are long way off achieving.

As Leader of the Commons, I have to say that I am taking a hard look at the culture of this House right now. Reports of shockingly bad behaviour here show

how much work there is still to be done. Such reports paint our democracy in a very poor light. I am determined that we change the culture here and make sure that this House becomes the role model that we all expect to see and that we want to strive for in our society. I want to encourage more people across the country to get involved in our politics and in our democracy, but we can only expect people to step up if they are confident that they will be treated with dignity and respect.

When we think of democracy, it is easy to think of it as just voting—not those here; you all know it is much more than that—but I do urge you to take the message out of here that democracy today is a society that hears every voice, considers every view, and counts every hand. It is about giving a voice to the voiceless and a direct hand in bringing about real change in our society. So in the years to come, I hope that all of you here who get that will continue to use your voices to nurture these principles in every way you can, from blogging to campaign videos; from signing e-petitions to registering to vote. The digital age is allowing the opportunities for democratic engagement to be much easier, quicker and more effective.

So what about after the next hundred years, when we are all dust, as we will be? What kind of politics will we have then? What changes will we see? How can we help to ensure that it is the sort of politics we want to have? We need to shape the way we conduct our debates today to get the political culture we want tomorrow. The UK Youth Parliament is a superb opportunity to do this—for you to use your elected voices to bring about social change through debate and through your campaigning. So I want to wish you all the best with your debates today, and I hope that you really enjoy the experience. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Andrea, thank you very much indeed for what you have said and for the way in which you have said it.

Just before I call Wes Streeting, my friends, I want to announce the presence of a very important, special person in the House of Commons who does not like to be recognised but who should be recognised today, and that is the Clerk of the House, Sir David Natzler. David Natzler advises me and the other occupants of the Chair, the Deputy Speakers. He advises all Members of Parliament, and he advises the Government, on matters procedural. He has vast experience and expertise. I think, from memory, I can say with confidence that he has served this House, without interruption, since 1975. He has an enormous track record. I think that it is a mark of the man that he wants to be here today, even if not necessarily for very long, to show his support for the work, importance and future of the UK Youth Parliament. Thank you, David. *[Applause.]*

I call the former honorary president of the British Youth Council, who advises me that he is outgoing from this important role, which will itself, I suspect, elicit some considerable volume of protest, because his commitment to young people is intense and of long standing. We now look forward to hearing from—you will give him a tumultuous welcome, I hope—Wes Streeting. *[Applause.]*

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As I hand over the baton of honorary president of the British Youth Council to Labour's youngest MP, my

[Wes Streeting]

hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Danielle Rowley), I am genuinely delighted to welcome the UK Youth Parliament to the House of Commons on behalf of Her Majesty's official Opposition. In particular, I thank you, Mr Speaker, for consistently championing our Youth Parliament and the importance of young people's participation in our democracy. We could not have a greater champion in your Chair, so thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

I know that the House will indulge me for a brief moment when I express immense pride on behalf of the London Borough of Redbridge that one of our own MYPs, Ali Raja, spoke so powerfully this morning to mark the centenary of the end of the first world war. It was his debut at the Dispatch Box and this morning is my debut at the Dispatch Box, but for all sorts of reasons I suspect he may find himself back here sooner than me. I think we should give him a very warm round of applause. *[Applause.]*

The message Ali conveyed this morning was important. As the nation gathers this weekend at the Cenotaph and at war memorials across the United Kingdom to commemorate the centenary and to remember all those who have lost their lives in war, we remember those young people—much the same age as many of the MYPs gathered in this Chamber—who left their homes and their communities to fight for this country, but never to return.

It is fitting in a Chamber as diverse as this to remember that those whose service and sacrifice secured our freedom and democracy were drawn not just from every community of our United Kingdom, but from across the British empire and from countries that now form part of a Commonwealth of nations based on mutual respect and friendship. They included 1.5 million volunteers from India alone—Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus—who endured a colder climate and a foreign continent to secure our liberty.

When those in our country seek to appropriate the poppy while propagating the politics and racism of the swastika, we should never let those people forget the service and the sacrifice of those soldiers against the tyranny of Hitler and dictators from a range of countries. That stands in total contrast to those who seek to abuse our poppy and abuse our flag for their own seditious reasons.

Today, we too often take our democracy for granted. The rights and freedoms we enjoy today were hard won by great movements of ordinary men and women, including the Chartists, the Levellers and the trade union and co-operative movements, and of course in this centenary year we remember the suffragists and the suffragettes.

The 21st century is still a young century—as young as those who will live to see the dawn of the 22nd century. As we look around at what seems to be an age of unreason and extremes, and of demagogues and dictators, it is not yet clear whether democracy or tyranny will define and shape the future of our world in 100 years from now. It falls to my generation and to the generation represented here today to ensure that the liberties we enjoy are enjoyed by all; to stand up for equality and human rights in this country and around the world; to avert environmental disaster; to stand against bigotry and xenophobia; and to consign poverty to history.

It is often said that young people are important because they represent the future, but the problem with this cliché is that it overlooks the importance of young

people to the present day. The issues that young people—over 1 million young people—have selected for debate today are highly relevant not just to young people in my constituency and across the country, but to people of all ages. There is the scourge of knife crime, which only recently took the life of a young man in my constituency on his 23rd birthday. There is the mental health crisis, which sees worryingly high rates of depression, self-harm and suicide, particularly among young people. There is homelessness, which we see on the streets of our communities and on the doorsteps of Parliament. There is workplace rights and equal pay, especially for young workers at risk of exploitation, and there is the campaign I have long supported—the campaign for votes at 16.

You will debate all of these today, and based on your track record over the past nine years, I am sure we will enjoy a debate that is vibrant, engaging, respectful and that tells us something, as Members of Parliament, whether in government or opposition, that we can learn from as we return to our deliberations next week.

Some people sneer at the UK Youth Parliament and at these proceedings. I am sure that even now there are people taking to social media and asking what these precocious young people think they are doing in the House of Commons speaking up in the way that you will today, but I say to all MYPs gathered here that you should have absolutely none of it. You are here because you have been elected to be here by young people right across our country. More than 1 million of those young people have chosen the issues that you will debate, and rather than denigrate the participation of young people at the heart of our democracy, we should celebrate it.

Looking around this Chamber today, I can see that you are far more diverse than the House of Commons to which we will return next week, which I think is a cause for celebration. We know that for a democracy to be representative and relevant, it has to look like the country it represents. Although we have made great strides over recent general elections in improving the number of women, the number of disabled people, and the number of people from black and minority ethnic communities in this Parliament, as well as religious diversity, there is further to go. I note that even in this Parliament, which has been described as the gayest Parliament in the world, with more openly gay MPs and peers than any other, the UK Youth Parliament has managed to beat us on that front too. *[Applause.]*

In conclusion, you should all be proud of being here today, just as we are proud of you. You should not let nerves get the better of you, and you should feel free to stand up, speak out, and speak up for your communities in the way that we do in this place each and every week. For all the cynicism about politics—and there are good reasons why people are cynical about politics so much of the time—in my experience of just three years as a Member of this House, when I come to work here and look around the Chamber at my peers from across the country, I do not see people who are craven and just in it for themselves; I see people, whatever our party political differences, who are here because they want to serve their communities, they want to serve their country, and they have a deep belief and conviction in public service. That is a tradition and a spirit that many of you share here today, and in a world where so many people continue to live in terror and under tyranny, we should never take this precious democracy for granted. We should strive

to defend it, and to extend it so that everyone, wherever they are born in this world, can grow up with equal rights, equal freedoms and a chance to shape our world for the better, as I have no doubt all of you will do for generations and years to come. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Wes, you have done us proud, and just as I thanked Andrea with feeling, I thank you for what you have said and the way you said it. Thank you both for your commitment in being here today, to make clear beyond doubt your support for this great institution and every individual in it.

The Youth Parliament will now consider the first motion of the day, which is on votes at 16. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. Just before I call the mover of the motion, let me say as a guide that when you are called to speak, you should please say your name, which will be helpful to those writing the *Official Report*. Please say your name and where you represent. It will be clear from which region you have come because I will have said that, but it would be helpful to know from which borough or district you come. With that, I call the mover of the first motion, and I want you to give him, and the movers of all subsequent motions, terrific support and encouragement. To move the motion I call, from the East Midlands, Alex McDermott. *[Applause.]*

Votes at 16

11.34 am

Mr Alex McDermott (East Midlands): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.

I speak in favour of the motion:

Give 16 and 17 year olds the right to vote in all elections/referendums.

This is the single most important issue you will hear today: votes at 16. This is it. But you've heard it all before, haven't you? This has been a UK Youth Parliament national campaign. For the past two years it has been debated and debated and debated, and nothing has happened. There has been no change. I was born on 20 November 2003, believe it or not. I might not look it, but I am 14. *[Laughter.]* Between that day and this, there have been 16 parliamentary Bills and seven democratic calls for change: Children and Young People's Unit in 2002; the Votes at 16 campaign in 2003; and campaigns in 2006, 2007, 2014 and from 2012 to 2018. Just three weeks' ago, this 42-page House of Commons Library briefing paper was published—I am sure you have all read it in detail.

Yes, like I say, you have heard it all before and still there has been no change, so I am not going to go over old ground. I am not going to remind you of the compelling evidence for giving us the vote in the Markus Wagner electoral study from Austria—where, by the way, the voting age is 16—which proves that the quality of young people's votes is just as good as the quality of the older voters. I will not need to revisit the idea that 16 and 17-year-olds can legally marry, fight for and have sex with their MPs, but they cannot vote for them. *[Laughter.]* I won't bother to frighten you with the risks of not giving young people a voice: disaffection and disengagement; a lack of faith in our political system; and young people seeking a voice elsewhere, through gangs, crime, extremism and revolution.

No, I am not going to do any of that, simply because you've heard it all before. So why has nothing changed? Simple. There is not the political will. Those in power do not want another group to woo, a group who speak in languages they do not understand and who operate on social media platforms they have never heard of. Young people like to change things, including the people who lead them, so they won't give us the vote unless we make it happen! Therefore, I am going to ask you one question and one question only. Each of you will need to decide: how do you wish to be judged by your children, the future generation, when they look back at your decision today?

Let me give you some context. Who would say this about women getting the vote?

"Women would be neglecting their homes if they came into the House of Commons".—*[Official Report, 25 April 1906; Vol. 155, c. 1584.]*

It would be "cruel"

"to drag them into the political arena and to ask them to undertake responsibilities...which they did not understand and which they did not care for."—*[Official Report, 25 April 1906; Vol. 155, c. 1573-4.]*

Who would say this? I will tell you. One hundred and twelve years ago, Sir Samuel Evans, MP for Mid-Glamorgan, and Sir Randal Cremer, Liberal MP for

Hackney, who presented that argument on this very spot. How would you judge that kind of view now? Sexist, arrogant, ignorant and prejudicial.

We stand here at yet another crossroads in the UK's democracy. How do you wish to be judged by the future generations? Don't vote for arrogance. Don't vote for ignorance. Don't vote for prejudice. Don't be judged by the future generation for depriving us, the youth, of a voice. Yes, you have heard it all before, but this time let's make a real difference. Let's engage our youth, let's lobby our MPs and let's make votes at 16 our national campaign. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: In a moment, my friends, I shall call the speaker for the opposition to the motion, and I invite you to give them an equally warm and acclamatory reception, but I want first to say one thing. As you know, in the chairing of the proceedings of the House of Commons on a day-to-day basis, the Speaker is required to be an umpire, not a player. I am independent of, unconnected with, owing no allegiance to and expressing no support for any political party, and I take great care when matters are debated by Members of Parliament not to express my own views in the Chamber. Indeed, even outside the Chamber, I have to take considerable care in what I say.

That said, although I am impartial between parties, I am not impartial about Parliament or the quality of representation and force and significance of top-notch advocacy, and Alex, what we have just heard from you, whatever you think on this subject—and I think most of you agreed with Alex—in terms of speech making, self-assurance, logical thread and formidable delivery, was quite simply a brilliant speech. [*Applause.*]

I do not mind admitting—I think I say it every year at the UKYP conference and in any event it is simply a matter of recorded fact that you can easily find for yourselves—that, alongside Jo Swinson from the Lib Dems and Julie Morgan, one-time Labour Member of Parliament from Cardiff, and going back certainly to the mid-noughties, possibly slightly earlier, I have myself been a public and vociferous supporter of votes at 16. It is not a party political point, but a pro-young people point, and I make no apology for saying that on that matter I have a crystal-clear view that I have not changed since first I enunciated support for the cause.

It is very important in this Chamber that all views be heard with respect, so in thanking you, Alex, and saying, “Wow, you should feel proud”, I now ask you to give an extremely warm welcome to the representative from Army Welfare Services/ British Forces, Germany. To oppose the motion, please welcome Kate Jones.

Ms Kate Jones (Army Welfare Services/British Forces, Germany): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Young people have been campaigning for votes at 16 for the past 19 years. Clearly, it is an important issue. It was our national campaign last year, the year before and two years before that. Obviously, it is something we care about. The fact that over 1 million young people declared it a priority issue does nothing but exemplify that fact. But please can we turn our attention to the other four issues: tackling homelessness, equal pay for equal work, mental health and knife crime. All these can be addressed both individually and collectively by MYPs. Think of the good we can do in our own constituencies, the lives we can change!

Various eligibilities for the right to vote have been contested, arguably, since the English civil war, but they were not won until the Great Reform Act—a difference of 190 years. Suffice it to say that electoral reform is a long process. In no way am I saying that it cannot be done by people our age, by our generation or indeed by the very people in this room today; I am saying that a timespan of 12 months does not seem an adequate measure by which to effect the change we wish to see in our democracy.

Votes at 16 is an issue already on our manifesto and, Mr Speaker, I am sure that you can attest to the fact that Members of Parliament across parties already know that we care about it. In contrast, despite our voting for the prevention of knife crime as a priority issue, we are not well known for campaigning on it. Having previously demonstrated our support and enthusiasm for lowering the voting age, it is now time for us to prove our dedication to other areas we consider important. If we truly are passionate about bringing an end to the plague of knife crime in this United Kingdom, it is time we showed it.

Moreover, perhaps we as the Youth Parliament need to consider the power we hold currently. We have sat in this illustrious Chamber since 2009 and today are 50% composed of 16 and 17-year-olds. We must ask ourselves if the small slice of democracy we may gain from the vote will give us a greater voice than that which we already maintain. In the 2014 Scottish referendum, there were more than 3.6 million voters, of which approximately 100,000 were 16 and 17-year-olds. It is certainly a possibility that if 16 and 17-year-olds did win the vote, they might forfeit their place in the Youth Parliament, which is admittedly conjecture but definitely something worthy of consideration. Speaking of which, is it not of note that we are voting on this as a national campaign, and yet Scottish young people, at the age of 16, do have the right to vote in Scottish elections?

Lastly, as an MYP representing British forces overseas today, I feel it is my duty to state, in preparation for the debate, that current legislation prohibits anyone under the age of 18 from engaging in a hostile situation as expected in a war zone. Sixteen and 17-year-olds are eligible for recruitment, but may not serve in armed operations until their 18th birthday, often to the chagrin of the personnel themselves.

Regardless of your view on the vote at 16, I urge you all not to support this motion. With the timescale that we have, it simply is not feasible, especially when we can turn our attention to the other priority issues instead, and go forth to prove our wholehearted commitment to them.

Mr Speaker: Kate, thank you for that speech: for the content of what you said, which was carefully prepared and heartfelt, and for the power of your delivery. We met earlier; I know what a devoted habitué you are of the UK Youth Parliament, and you are respected and appreciated here.

We now come to the general debate. Time is always our enemy, but I will try to accommodate as many brief contributions as I can. I am looking, in the first instance, for a contributor from the south-west of England. Who wants to speak from the south-west? What about the young woman in the pale blue jacket—I think? Let us hear from you.

Hanna Wittek (South West): Dear members of the English parliament, let me ask: would you force your daughters into marriage? Would you force your son to work at a young age? Would you force your children to express themselves in the way that you please? Then why are the decisions and laws forced on our generation?

The decisions made in this Chamber influence our lives, and do we get a say? No. Sixteen and 17-year-olds need a say. We bring fresh ideas, a different perspective, and we are forward-thinking. Society is moving fast and constantly changing, and frankly the vast majority of people believe that young people are the most accepting and forward-thinking—and we have the privilege to pass it on to other generations to come. We can make a difference. Why do decision-makers want to silence our voice? Please vote for votes at 16.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That was very clear and very succinct.

Now, what about a contributor from the north-west of England? Yes, we will take you, waving your beret, if I may so describe it. It is a mildly eccentric way of trying to catch the attention of the Chair, but successful in this case.

Roshni Parmar-Hill (North West): I am Roshni from Oldham North West, home of the first test-tube baby.

Now is the time. Why? Finally, with the momentum of the extension of the franchise in local elections in Scotland and Wales, we have a legitimate chance of moving forward. Now one side of the House agrees, and the other is considering the possibility. Can we afford to give up this opportunity?

My fellow members of the Youth Parliament, let me remind you that change only comes from a continued fight for the cause. If you suggest that a campaign is too big for the British Youth Parliament—too broad or unachievable—I ask you to remind yourself of the women we are commemorating today. The vote in 1918 was won by a long and hard battle that changed the whole perception of women in Britain. It was done by incremental and pivotal gains, and campaigns that led to the ultimate enfranchisement in 1928. Did women give up before they even began? Did Millicent Fawcett and Emmeline Pankhurst and Annie Kenney give up, and turn their backs on the suffrage movement? Why should we deny the voices of the young people, when change begins here and change begins now? You have the mandate of the people. Now is the time to use it.

Mr Speaker: I hope you agree that we really are getting off to a cracking start to these proceedings.

I would like now to call a speaker from Scotland. Don't worry about the gender balance, as I'll try to ensure it. We look forward very much to hearing you and what you have to say.

Caitie Dundas (Scotland): I am the MYP for the Highlands and Islands. This year I turned 16, which is significant because, in Scotland, 16 and 17-year-olds can vote, and we do vote. In fact, 97% of young, first-time voters in the 2014 Scottish referendum said that they would vote again. We are engaged, we are knowledgeable and we are all eager to participate, which is why votes at 16 works so well in Scotland and why it is

so important to extend it to the rest of the UK. However, this all being said, today I urge you not to vote for it as our national campaign.

With cross-party backing and a Bill currently going through Parliament, the obstacle is no longer a lack of support. The obstacle is instead the repeated blocking of the Bill, so the campaign's aim is unachievable in the next year. Friends, continue to support the cause, continue to press your MP and continue to fight the fight for our right to vote, but not by choosing it as our campaign today.

Mr Speaker: How about a contributor from London?

Aziz Saiq (London): I am the MYP for Westminster. Votes at 16 is a campaign that has been running in the British Youth Council for years, but with the same tedious result: rejection and apathy from our decision makers, who represent our democratic virtues. I stand before you all to tell you that there is work to be done to strive towards our cause. Rather than expecting votes at 16 to be handed over to us as a gift, we must focus on working collectively with our decision makers, using the foundation provided by the BYC to support us. We must inform our politicians of the vast positive impacts of votes at 16, from encouraging participation in our democracy to allowing us to exercise our democratic virtues. Or, rather, we should regroup our collective focus and prevent our young people from dying deaths that could be so easily prevented with more care and concern.

When we focus, when we fight to protect our young people, we have succeeded in making the world a better place. Today, as previously mentioned, marks 100 years since some women of this nation were permitted the democratic right to vote. It was achieved through an unrivalled drive and a desire that was unquestionable. Together, 100 years from now, we could be the cause of the enhancement of our democracy.

Mr Speaker: Do we have a would-be speaker from Northern Ireland?

Luke Patterson (Northern Ireland): I represent the people of south Belfast. It is notable that, once again, we are debating the right to vote in this, one of the institutions and powerhouses of international democracy. One hundred years ago the suffragettes were chaining themselves to the railings outside this very building, and 90 years ago this Parliament voted to extend the right to vote to all citizens over the age of 18. Ninety years later, it is right that this Youth Parliament—the most diverse and representative Parliament of our United Kingdom—votes to continue our campaign for votes at 16.

For Northern Ireland, votes at 16 is an extremely pertinent issue. In our recent Make Your Mark ballot, it was the fourth most important issue; and at our election of the Northern Ireland delegation, it was the third most important issue. Like the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, our own politicians have voted for votes at 16. However, this was purely academic, because our institutions do not have responsibility as it is not a devolved matter.

All of us in this room know that shameful displays of corruption, cronyism, cynicism and ignorance of the political process and of rights have led to our being without the institutions that all of us on the Northern

Ireland Benches had taken for granted. This is a disgrace. Once again, in Northern Ireland we are being left behind other nations of the UK.

I feel that it is my responsibility as MYP for South Belfast to reference the complete ignorance of rights in areas such as LGBT equality and women's rights, especially around healthcare and reproductive healthcare. The Government must legislate on this issue immediately—there goes my pen! [*Laughter.*] The Government must legislate for that change and for the right of 1.5 million 16 and 17-year-olds to vote. As many of us know, at 16 and 17 we have to pay income tax and national insurance, and we can receive benefits in our own right. As was mentioned by the Army Welfare speaker, it is also possible to join our armed forces. Surely it is fair that we get to vote for the party that decides the laws on those issues. This is an issue of equality.

As the Youth Parliament—the leading voice of young people's rights in this country—it is not just our responsibility but our duty to ensure that, once again, we vote to extend equality and the right to vote to all young people. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Another powerful speech; I honestly believe that the quality gets better and better and better, year after year after year.

Samuel Taylor (Wales): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Speaker. I am the Member of the Youth Parliament for Blaenau Gwent.

Mr Speaker, my friends, I have a question to pose to you today: how many years have we seen votes at 16 on our agenda; how many times have we voted for it to be our national campaign; and how many times have we had our voices silenced at the ballot box?

I am very proud today to be an MYP from Wales. I know for a fact that everybody on my Bench is proud that the Welsh Assembly Government are drawing up and finalising legislation to bring votes at 16 to Wales. [*Applause.*] Wales is at the table, but Scotland are pioneers. Scotland introduced votes at 16 before any other home nation and has long supported the campaign. We should use Scotland as a model. Northern Ireland supports votes at 16 and, as has been mentioned, it is due only to the devolution situation that they have not been introduced already.

This summer, I worked with Young Wales and Children in Wales on a consultation on Brexit. The results of the consultation were compiled into a report, which was handed to the Welsh Government Minister for Children and Older People. One thing that kept coming up around Brexit was that if we had had the vote, we would not be leaving this March. Our future will be drastically affected, yet did anyone in this room manage to secure themselves a say?

I say to you, the Youth Parliament, let us keep pushing. The Government can only ignore us for so long. This campaign is going from strength to strength, and this motion continues to gain momentum. Vote for your votes; vote for votes at 16; give us a say in our future. To quote my fellow MYP from Northern Ireland, Darragh O'Reilly, we will

“no longer be the small part of the big society.”

We as young people are the future; we are the next generation of this amazing country; we are the next

Members of the House of Commons and the House of Lords; and the next Prime Minister could well be sat in this very room. Let us unite and let us use our votes to gain for the young people we represent their votes. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Thank you, for yet another magnificent speech.

Sophie Bush (East of England): We young people are the ones who will have to live with the consequences of political decisions today—we will have to live with them longer than any other generation in this country. We should be given the vote, so that we can have our say. Lowering the voting age would also mean that schools would have an obligation to teach pupils an in-depth understanding of the British political system, for example, by running debates where students represent the different political parties in our country. That would result in well prepared 16 and 17-year-olds who will go on to be more politically engaged adults. I urge you to vote for votes at 16.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed.

You are more spirited and enthusiastic than ever before, perhaps because it is the 10th successive year of your sitting or perhaps because of the million-plus voters—I know not why; but I am inspired that you are inspired.

Raakhi Sharma (South East): To the argument that 16-year-olds are too young to vote because of a lack of understanding and immaturity, I say: take a look around this room, where MYPs of 16 or even younger are representing their communities. It just goes to show that young people do have awareness and education. It is crazy to think of the things we can do when we are 16—we are trusted to have driving lessons—and yet we cannot be trusted to voice our opinions. Scotland has had votes at 16 and Wales has votes at 16, so it is time for England to have votes at 16.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That was absolutely brilliant; it was not only ringing and clear, but brief—that is outstanding.

Dominic Jones (Yorkshire and Humber): I represent the young people in the proud town of Barnsley.

Friends, colleagues and fellow campaigners, we are oppressed by a system that we are subjected to against our will, one that as young people we should, by rights, be influencing and changing, by participating in elections and referendums. The very nature of our democracy, which excludes so many from participating in democratic procedures, is one we should desperately try to overhaul. Reducing the voting age to 16 is the way we can change this, and by having it as our national campaign we can advocate for that right on behalf of all those excluded from the franchise.

The famous philosopher John Locke once said,

“no one can be...subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent.”

All our political power is in the hands of those who decide policy, plans and vision, without any mandate from those in the 16-to-18 bracket. Many of the issues brought here today for us to debate result directly from

austerity, a programme that has deeply affected the services young people rely on so much. Increasing waiting times for mental health services, increased dangers of street crimes in our communities, reforms to an education system which now treats young people as exam robots, and damaging cuts to youth services have all happened without our influence.

In a country that prides itself on tolerance and respect, I encourage MYPs to vote for this to be the national campaign, in order to send a message to this Government that we are fed up: we are fed up of having to bear the brunt of cuts such as the ending of the essential education maintenance allowance; we are fed up of having our futures put at risk as part of the Brexit negotiations; and we are fed up that 16 and 17-year-olds have no say in who runs not just our country, but the vital services and education across it. It has been like this for too long, and it is time action is taken to ensure that we, as the next generation, can have our say on how issues across the country are dealt with, both now and in the future.

Mr Speaker: In a moment we will hear the opposing speech from the Front Bench. However, there are three representatives of Army Welfare/British Forces Overseas here today. If one of them who has not spoken wants to do so in this debate, he or she can make themselves known. If they do not want to, they can contribute in another debate.

It is my normal practice to acknowledge parliamentary colleagues who make the effort and show the commitment to turn up in support of you. I am absolutely delighted to tell you that in the Gallery is my outstanding colleague, the Labour Member of Parliament for Lewisham, Deptford. She speaks passionately and regularly in the Chamber on behalf of her constituency and on behalf of young people—not least on behalf of the victims of knife crime, which you will debate later. Please give a very warm welcome to Vicky Foxcroft. [*Applause.*] Thanks, Vicky, for giving your support to the UK Youth Parliament.

Chloe Watson (Army Welfare Service): We go through life being told that we can make our own choices and be our own people, so why is that right taken away when it comes to voting? If we are old enough and mature enough to marry and to join the Army, why are we not allowed to vote? I turn 16 tomorrow, and I think that we should be given that right. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed. I am trying to be as fair as I possibly can, and there are only two areas of the country from which we have not heard anyone speak. The first is the north-east of England. Who from the north-east wants to speak? [*Interruption.*] You are alone in wanting to do so, but we will hear you.

Abbie Armstrong (North East): I am Abbie Armstrong from North Tyneside.

We have just been told that we are more diverse than the adult Parliament here. The Parliament that makes all our decisions for us is less diverse than us, in a world full of huge change and difference that affects us the most and that we care about possibly the most out of everyone here.

Women were not allowed to vote until 100 years ago. Why now, in 2018, are we not allowed to vote? We are sitting in the House of Commons and we are still not given a decision on who we put here—who our MP is. As has been said, we can have sex with our MP but we

cannot decide who they are. Does that not sound absolutely absurd to everyone here? I remind you all that an incredible 1 million young people voted in Make Your Mark this year, and none of them yet have the right to vote for their MP. If we can vote in Make Your Mark and decide on the issues to debate today, why can't we decide on our MPs? Why can't we decide on issues that affect us more than ever in the current political climate?

A wise man, Abraham Lincoln, once said:

“The ballot is stronger than the bullet.”

Why are we not paying attention to the young people who constantly strive for change? Why is this issue one of our campaigns for the third or fourth year, yet things have still not changed for us? Why do we sit here and nothing changes? I urge you all to vote for this motion again. Please. If we do not argue for the vote, who will give it to us? We are the only people who can make this difference, so please vote for votes at 16 today. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Abbie, for another fine and impassioned speech. Who from the West Midlands wants to take part?

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: By the way, I want to mention Alex's speech, which I have already commended. He made a little joke at his own expense when he said that, whether we believe it or not, he is 14. Can I just say to Alex that there is nothing wrong with being short? [*Applause.*] Alex, as our little secret—this is just between us, you understand—I speak from personal experience of 55 years of being short. We may be short, but we may consider ourselves to be perfectly formed. We are also environmentally friendly, because we don't take up much space. We short people should stick together.

Ashley Moran (West Midlands): In Stoke-on-Trent we had a turnout of only 63% at the 2015 election, which was one of the lowest in the country. When I asked my MP why that was, she told me that the people she had spoken to had said that they were not educated enough to know about how to vote. Votes at 16 would help that. The majority of 16-year-olds are still in education, so in the months leading up to an election, in class and in school, they would be talking about who they were going to vote for and about what voting meant for them. Votes at 16 is a great policy, and it cannot be denied that it is the most important one that we will talk about today. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Ashley; that was passionately believed and brilliantly delivered. We have time for one last Back-Bench speaker in the debate, and that person should come from the East Midlands.

Tom Finlayson (East Midlands): The only thing worse than no vote is an ignorant vote. Good-quality political education is vital for schoolchildren. With or without votes at 16, teaching young people the basics of our Parliament is the most important thing that schools can do. The right to vote is a powerful right, and one that we currently do not teach young people to use correctly. With great power comes great responsibility. If we are to put forward votes at 16, we must also put forward a worthwhile curriculum for life—not the tokenistic, box-ticking one currently used in schools, but a well-rounded, informative education that will prepare us for voting at 16. Thank you for listening.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Now, to wind up the debate from the Front Bench, I call Zaghham Farhan from the West Midlands.

Zaghham Farhan (West Midlands): Aayubowan, everyone. Just last year, in my three-piece suit, I stood up on the Back Benches and asked the Youth Parliament once again to become the wind beneath the wings of the votes at 16 campaign. My fellow MYPs, we are here again. Votes at 16, the issue that continues to define the Youth Parliament, today appears on the Order Paper for the fourth time in five years. This is something that we as the Youth Parliament and the young people of Britain continually vote as one of the top issues on the Make Your Mark ballot.

Why is this, my friends? Could it possibly be that this is something the young people of Britain wholeheartedly want? Therefore, as responsible representatives of at least 1,111,586 young people, we need to think very carefully about the direction we steer ourselves in.

We have argued in this very place many a time that this country, which allows a 16-year-old to work, pay taxes and get married, should allow them a say in their future and the ability to vote in all elections and referendums. We have also heard many times before that the Youth Parliament, the youth who vote for us and those who take part in the Make Your Mark ballot are testament to the fact that the young people of today are engaged, interested and most definitely worthy of the vote. We have heard how Scotland has achieved this and how 75% of Scottish 16 and 17-year-olds turned out to vote in 2014.

Today, my fellow MYPs have suggested that we may be known and judged for the consequences of not having made votes at 16 possible for future generations. We may be remembered as those who gave up and failed

when we were almost there. But we have also heard that the Youth Parliament has campaigned and campaigned and campaigned, and yet has still not jumped that final hurdle. Would it be just for us to continue wasting our time on something that we know is simply not attainable? Would it not be better for us to focus on an issue that is brand new and to really achieve something? So do we say we have failed? No. We have led only two campaigns that did not work, and the most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time—or should we say that 12 months is not enough to make this campaign work and focus on something else?

Remember, MYPs, that voting for votes at 16 will not impede the chances of three of the other issues. Votes at 16 is a UK-wide issue, so it is only up against equal pay for equal work to be the campaign. Each one of us can make a difference and together we make change. Without a struggle, there can be no progress and things always seem impossible until they are done. As Barack Obama once said:

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time.”

We are the people who must continue to fight, we are the people with the power to vote for this issue and, my friends, we are the people who can lower the voting age to 16. I leave you with one simple message: be the change you want to see in the world.

Mr Speaker: What a terrific conclusion to our first debate. Thank you. I know that we are running behind schedule, but never mind; we will get there in the end.

The Youth Parliament will now consider the second motion of the day—tackling homelessness. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. To move the motion, I call and invite you enthusiastically to welcome, from the South West of England, Hannah Powell.

Tackling Homelessness

12.17 pm

Hannah Powell (South West): The motion is as follows:

Every person should have a place to live and the opportunity to live comfortably. Let's make it happen and put a stop to homelessness.

It is estimated that around 86,000 young people in the UK approached their local authority for help with housing in 2016-17. Of these, 58% did not receive a statutory housing duty or any prevention or relief support. However, these figures only refer to those who were able to ask for help. Much of youth homelessness is hidden, through sofa-surfing or hostel living, making it nearly impossible to truly gauge just how many young people will be without safe accommodation this winter.

There are many paths that lead to homelessness, including mental health issues, domestic abuse or difficulty finding a job or a house. Austerity politics has led to millions of pounds-worth of cuts to the services that are there to keep us safe. Mental health services? Cut. Housing benefits for under-35s? Cut. Education funding? Cut. Council funding that provides local services, resources and help? Cut. By 2015, almost a third of people in the UK aged under 18 were at risk of poverty. There is no longer a safety net. Where can we go when our homes are unsafe? Where is the support for the LGBT+ youths who are kicked out of their homes? Where is the support for victims of domestic violence fleeing their homes?

Research has found that an average of three people have died on UK streets every week since October 2017. The UK Government have pledged to end homelessness, and it is our duty to hold them to that promise. We need to show them that we will not stand by while our generation die on the streets. It is easy to put a barrier between yourself and the person curled up in a ragged sleeping bag on the corner of the road. It is easy to believe that you could never be in that situation. It is easy to stop seeing these people as human beings.

Tackling youth homelessness will be a strong national campaign with transformative potential. We can make a difference to legislation, funding and real people's lives. Although the far-reaching and nuanced nature of this campaign may seem unrealistic to achieve, this actually means that it can be tailored to each community's needs. We, the Youth Parliament, can unite our Government, councils, charities and communities through this campaign.

How can we, as elected representatives, claim to care about our constituents if we do not campaign for the most basic of human rights? How can we put another campaign over the lives of these vulnerable people? The lack of stability—the lack of somewhere safe and warm to sleep or to call your own—puts people at massive risk of mental and physical illnesses, as well as violence, especially knife crime. To get a job, regardless of pay, you need an address. To register to vote, whether you are 16 or not, you need an address. If we as a Youth Parliament really care about equality and making a difference, then we need to tackle youth homelessness—now, before it is too late. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Hannah, you deserve that reception. What a wonderfully commanding and authoritative speech that was, delivered with real poise, conviction

and assurance. Nobody can ever take it away from you that you have done something very, very special. I say, by the way, to all of you who speak today: for goodness' sake make sure you put it on your CV. It is part of your track record, and it will be part of what is of interest to universities and employers in the future, because it marks you out from people who have not done what you are having the opportunity to do today. Hannah, thank you. Now, to oppose the motion, I am going to call, and ask you equally enthusiastically to welcome, Busayo Oyedoyin.

Busayo Oyedoyin (London): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Nah big man ting. Big up London. Big up Hackney—yeah yeah.

As Hannah said, there are 86,000 young people in immediate risk of not having a place to call home. The reality is that every single young person in this room can become a part of this statistic. One day we can own our home; the next day we can lose it. No one is exempt from becoming homeless. As we can see, 120,017 young people voted for this issue to be tackled, and I agree with them. Ayeeee Busayo, wagwaan? Swear you are supposed to be arguing against homelessness? MYPs, of course we should fight for young people living in temporary accommodation, the young girl who jumps from hostel to hostel and the young boy who sleeps rough on the cold streets. But we should not even allow our young people to be in that position where they do not have a place to call home and an address to call their own. We must tackle the root cause.

Not only does Hannah recognise this, the Government do, too, and have made prevention the heart and first pillar of their £1.2 billion strategy to combat rough sleeping. Our strong and stable Prime Minister herself said that she is determined to tackle the complex underlying causes that lead to homelessness. So MYPs, with the Prime Minister being determined and investing billions, will campaigning about homelessness be a valuable use of our time and resources when austerity has taken away our youth services and when she has not tackled votes at 16? The Government have also created a positive pathway model that tackles the root cause: 80% of local authorities that use it have reported significant improvements, and it has been so successful that the Welsh Government have created a model of their own.

So, my friends, instead of focusing our attention on an issue that the Government are already making progress on, we should focus on what I, alongside 196,897 young people, believe is the most urgent issue—knife crime. Our Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has promised to prioritise safety and have fewer young people's lives ruined by knife crime, but he has not delivered. MYPs, please tell me why thousands of lives, including my own, have been deeply affected by witnessing violent acts like knife crime?

Knife crime is a contagious disease that is rapidly spreading not only around our capital, but around our country. Parents are burying their own children year after year. Young people are being exposed to increasing levels of violence, and first-hand exposure to violence breeds even more violence. We have seen a 56.9% increase in knife crime between 2014 and 2018. But, Mr Speaker, this statistic does not take into consideration the parents, the teachers, the friends and the community who all have to come to terms with the death of their loved

ones. Like homelessness, understanding the causes of the issue and working to prevent it must be at the heart of the Government's serious violence strategy. It's time for a long-term holistic solution to knife crime. It's time for us to rise up—rise up—and take a shot at making it our national campaign to end the pain our young people feel.

So, MYPs, evidently the Government recognise that several young people not having a place to call home is a serious issue and have made significant steps to tackle this. However, what they truly fail to recognise is that attending funerals and saying the letters "RIP" has become the norm for several young people. So MYPs, let's be the ones to open their eyes and make them realise that our lives are not to be taken for granted.

Mr Speaker: Busayo, thank you for that really terrific, rip-roaring speech to get us under way. The two of you have got us under way fantastically in this debate. I am now looking to call a contributor from Wales.

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: I would like to hear from the young woman with the burgundy top and black jacket.

Lauren Grindlay (Wales): The rise of homelessness is a crisis that will not be stopped until we change the stigma around homelessness and what causes people to be without shelter. Veterans, past police officers and youth are just some of this nation's homeless. They are people who have either put their life on the line for us or just wanted to succeed. Without the UK Youth Parliament's support, the homeless crisis will continue to increase and they will not be able to fulfil their dreams and begin to start their lives again.

Homelessness was voted third in priority in my constituency of Torfaen. I believe this is because we are taught that homeless men and women should help themselves. It should be seen as our problem. If this was chosen as our national campaign, it would publicise the need for our help and that we, as youth, can help. One in 200 people are homeless. This will only increase if we do not start multiplying and bettering our current support systems. Many veterans would not be homeless if they had access to constant, free and specific support. Some people just do not know where to turn, and with more charities we can change that and give them better solutions.

"Seen but not heard" is a phrase used in various situations, including commenting on homeless people. This is the demoralising attitude that causes many homeless not to speak up and to accept their unfortunate circumstances. This must change. This issue being chosen for our campaign would say, on youth's part, that we do understand their need for support and that we are dedicating our time to change the country's current attitude.

Hundreds of thousands of homeless people want jobs and to get off the streets, so why aren't we helping them? Recently, several news stories have been published saying how homeless men and women are giving their precious few pounds, which they could use to buy food, to young men and women to use to call a taxi or to get a train home. A story that stuck with me was one that detailed how a homeless man offered a young lady a share of his blanket due to the brisk weather she was waiting in. He certainly did not have to do that, considering

that was all he had. If they can give what little they have so willingly, why can't we give them something so simple as our vote?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Who have we got wanting to take part in this debate from Scotland?

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: I will take this gentleman. By the way, people should not stand again if they have already spoken. I don't think you have, have you? No. I just mention now that if you have spoken once I think, in the spirit of fairness, that is enough. Let us hear from you, sir. We look forward to it.

Sasha Brydon (Scotland): Comrades, this motion does not go far enough whatsoever. Homelessness will not be ended by appealing to MPs when a large proportion of MPs are themselves landlords and have a vested interest in keeping houses empty, instead of letting people stay at a reduced price. Housing should be brought into public ownership and into the hands of the people, not left in the hands of landlords who maintain a system where there exist more people-less homes than homeless people. Everybody needs a home; nobody needs a property portfolio.

Mr Speaker: Very succinct. Thank you very much indeed.

Isabella Wolday-Myers (London): I am from the London borough of Islington, and I am truly ashamed to watch, year on year, as more and more homeless people are forced on to our streets. Since 2010, homelessness has increased in the UK by 159%, and in December 2017, 78,000 households and 120,000 children were homeless. The Government have an unacceptable, complacent attitude towards reducing homelessness, and concessions are not enough. This is our responsibility. As Hannah said, 86,000 young people ask for help for homelessness every year. It is time for us truly to stand up and fight for those who cannot, and I urge the House to vote to tackle homelessness.

Cormac Savage (Northern Ireland): I am the Member of the Youth Parliament for South Down on the wonderful island of Ireland. To be homeless is something that most of us will only ever have to imagine, and most of us can only ever attempt to fathom the struggle of sleeping rough. For us truly to comprehend the horrors that rough sleepers in our society endure every day, we need look no further than the stories of homeless women. Yes, Mr Speaker, the patriarchy still exists, even when we consider homelessness.

Although the conditions that all rough sleepers endure are simply despicable, the circumstances for women are sickening and an indictment of multiple aspects of our society regarding something that is often perceived as a male issue. Women's Aid, a charity that does fantastic work to support vulnerable women, has reported that one in 10 of the rough sleepers it has supported this year were sleeping rough after fleeing domestic abuse. Studies have shown that 56% of homeless women have been subjected to the horror of rape. How can that happen? It makes my blood boil. How can people prey on the most vulnerable in our society for their own

gratification? It is our job as the voice of youth—the voice of the future—to stand up for those women and proclaim for all those in positions of authority to hear that this cannot, will not and must not go on.

This is not a problem that will eradicate itself. Homelessness has increased by one third in the past five years in the north of Ireland, and is showing no signs of stopping. Just in September, a rough sleeper in Belfast—a Belfast woman—was moved to a park in the suburbs to accommodate a cultural festival in the city centre. That is not the support that the vulnerable in our society need from their Government. It is my belief that this motion has significance not simply in the battle to put an end to homelessness and rough sleeping, but also in the eternal march for true equality. How can we claim to live in an egalitarian society when 3 million of our citizens are considered homeless? It is blatant injustice.

I stand here as a young man who is proud to describe himself as not only an egalitarian, but specifically as a feminist. The facts on homelessness demonstrate that, in the year 2018, there is still a need to fight for equality for all, even on the basis of gender. This is a society where women forced to sleep on the street hide from those who can give them help because they believe that, according to one rough sleeper, “If we don’t, we’re gonna get raped, kicked, beat.” Today, I call on the House to stand up for the 3 million concealed homeless people living in Britain, some of them our constituents who have elected us, and for those who have fallen through the cracks in a truly broken system. I call on you all to stand up to injustice and inequality, and to tackle homelessness once and for all by voting to support this motion. Go raibh míle maith agat—thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That was a spectacular speech. There is a premium upon time. I am keen to accommodate as many as I possibly can. If there is any scope for people to shave speeches—that is not directed at any one individual—to make them slightly shorter that would be great. I will do what I can. I want to call somebody from the north-west of England.

Gabriella Lawless (North West): A lot of what I was going to say has already been said, but there is one big issue that has not been mentioned—two words: universal credit. What a wonderful thing this is! Many of you might not know what it is. It is a benefit that combines six in one, and it is a shambles.

Universal credit is the worst thing that could have happened to this country. I know this because I am on it. As someone who struggles with mental health issues, I cannot work in an environment because it causes me far too much stress. This means that I have to live on just over £200 for the entire month, including rent and learning to drive. That is not enough to live on.

As a result, people have to go to food banks and they have to take out payday loans with massive APR rates. People get into debt from such a young age because we cannot afford our living expenses, and the Government are failing lower income families. It is a shambles. People need to be helped and supported. They need to be signposted to citizens advice bureaux and charities that can help them with finances. That is of dire importance because this is the start of how people end up homeless—universal credit.

Mr Speaker: Thank you not just for saying what you believe, which we expect everybody here to do, but for your character, integrity and bravery in speaking movingly about your own experience. You know what the reaction to that was, so thank you. That is appreciated, and it is hugely respected.

Now I would like, if possible, to hear from a contributor from Yorkshire and Humberside.

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: The first person I saw was the young woman there. Thank you.

Scarlett Rowland (Yorkshire and Humber): One basic human right is for everyone to be able to live in a safe environment where they are protected from even something as simple as rain and from other things that may harm them. So why are we letting people, who may have just had a bad time in life, live on the streets? They may have lost their job and had their house repossessed through no fault of their own, apart from their company failing. Why are we letting them be hurt and abused just because of something that was not their fault?

I have seen people teach their kids that people who live on the streets do not do well in life, but that is not the case. A lot of the time, as Gabriella Lawless said in relation to universal credit, it is not their fault. They have been forced to live on such a small amount of money a week that they are forced to live in harsh conditions.

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: Now what about a speaker from the south-east of England? The young gentleman there has been leaping to his feet with alacrity and ambition for some time. He has been very patient, so let us hear from the fella.

Leo Buckley (South East): I would like to thank Mr Speaker for his excellent contribution as Speaker over the years. I think the entire House agrees with that sentiment.

Mr Speaker: I will put you on my Christmas card list. [*Laughter.*]

Leo Buckley: Homelessness is a big problem. It is a problem that stems from poverty, under-privilege and massive cuts to budgets. I reminded of the royal wedding at Windsor, where the homeless were cleared from the streets in order for there to be better publicity and photographs.

Over the past decade in Britain, the number of people dying cold and alone on the streets of what considers itself to be one of the most civilised countries on the planet has doubled. This is not acceptable, but voting for this motion is not the answer. We can only ever hope to change something, especially on the scope and scale of homelessness, when there is real political will, but currently in the establishment there is not that will.

Honourable Members, I have a vision of the Youth Parliament in 20 years still being a patronised talking shop unable to have any real, genuine impact on the issues we care about, such as homelessness. In Saudi Arabia, there is a women’s assembly that can advise the Government. Does anyone listen to them? I think you know the answer. Unless we have a say in referendums and elections—unless we have the vote—we will continue to be ignored by the political establishment. Take Brexit.

Young people, who stand to lose £30,000 each from Brexit, will be relied upon to use their creative energies to rescue the economy and pay for the pensions of all those people, half a century older than them, who voted for Brexit.

The only way we can ever hope to have our views and opinions on the issues that matter, such as homelessness, expressed and acted upon is if we have the vote. It is a truism, honourable Members, that young people are more optimistic than the old, but the fact is our economy is in trouble and the environment is in extreme danger. Our planet is dominated by elites characterised by greed and cynicism. They are not going to change things. The 21st century will need the energy, optimism and honesty of the young if anyone is to make it to the 22nd century. To do anything, we must first have votes at 16, and I urge you to vote for that motion.

Several MYPs rose—

The Speaker: Thank you. Forgive me—we are hearing some quite outstanding speeches, and I know this is very difficult, notably for those with prepared speeches—but we are desperately constrained by time, so it would help if people now, as we get towards the end of the debate, could contribute for just a minute or so. I am looking for a contributor from the East of England.

Ethan Barnett (East of England): It is amazing that this motion has come forward, because there is still a stigma around the homeless. We think of a homeless person as someone old and maybe a bit shabby who has lost their job and been hit by the financial crisis, but that is not the case any more. More and more young people are hitting the streets and flying under the radar, because they see being homeless as something shameful. We must make sure it does not continue. I urge you to vote for this motion. Being homeless has a detrimental effect on a person's health. It must not continue. It is amazing that this motion has come forward. Do not waste this opportunity to vote for the motion.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Does anybody from Army Welfare Services/British Forces, Germany wish to contribute to this debate? It is not obligatory—there will be chances in other debates—but I am trying to give everyone a chance in each debate. No, no one wishes to speak at this time. In that case, I am looking for a contributor from the West Midlands.

Mariam Sohail (West Midlands): My name is Mariam Sohail and I am from Walsall, and that's not in Poland, guys—to use the same cheesy joke I used last time.

When we talk about homelessness, we tend to talk about figures and statistics and say things such as “research shows that” and “this study demonstrates”, but we are not talking about percentages; we are talking about real people's lives—lives being denied their right and access to an abode. They are not percentages. The scale of youth homelessness is underestimated, yet the implications for individuals are significantly more severe. MYPs, it is critical that we do not lose anyone under the radar and let their existence become just another statistic.

As members of the Youth Parliament, we should take responsibility for this issue by investing our time and resources and by making this our campaign for the next 12 months. We can give ownership of rights and access to those who need it most.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Now, what about the south-west of England? I will take the young woman at the back in the white top. Yes, your good self.

Amira Nandhla (South West): With at least 8,000 people forced to sleep rough in England on any one night, change cannot come soon enough. In one of the wealthiest countries in the world, rough sleeping is an unacceptable injustice that damages and destroys thousands of lives each year, and it results from policy choices by this and previous Governments.

In many ways, the current Government's strategy is a significant step forward towards its goal of ending rough sleeping by 2027. It recognises the importance of preventing rough sleeping from happening in the first place, and putting interventions in place to rapidly rehouse those who end up having to face life on the streets. However, if we are to end rough sleeping in this country, the Government must tackle the root causes of the issue and, ultimately, must look to end all forms of homelessness.

The solutions are clear. To truly end the worst forms of homelessness, the Government must set out a bold, cross-departmental plan that does not shy away from the real causes of homelessness, such as severe shortages of social housing and welfare cuts. The Government must take steps to significantly increase the supply of social housing, as well as ensuring that the welfare system covers the real cost of renting. There are also Government policies that act as barriers to solving homelessness for migrants. That must be undone if we are to end all forms of homelessness for good.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. Now, who have we got from the north-east of England? Yes, this gentleman here. A most magnificent suit you are wearing, sir, if I may congratulate you upon it—and even if I may not, I am going to do so anyway.

Sam Ivory (North East): I would like to reiterate something that was mentioned by my north-east compatriot earlier today. We can only imagine what it would like to be homeless—but I do not think I can even do that. The pain and suffering that those who are homeless must go through every day, knowing that they do not have one place where they can stay and just live, is something that I cannot imagine, and my heart goes out to anyone who has ever been close to that feeling.

It is not even just people living on the streets. It is people who do not have a home: couch surfers, those who have to live in hostels, those who have to live in hotels. Anything that does not involve you having a permanent residence limits you in so many ways. Almost everything that we talk about today, almost everything that is in our UKYP manifesto and everything that we strive to do is affected by homelessness, even involvement in our very own Parliament and very own UKYP. I feel that it would be very difficult for anyone homeless to get the opportunity to do what we are doing now. We must feel grateful and thankful that we are here, and grateful and thankful for the life that we live. We want to give this opportunity to as many young people as possible, and to do that, we must pass this motion.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I think that the next speaker will have to be the final contributor from the Back Benches. I am looking for a speaker from the east midlands.

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: The first person I saw in this wonderful triumvirate was the person furthest from me. You need not look round; it is your good self. Let us hear from you.

Sophie-Mai Whitby (East Midlands): Homelessness is, of course, something that affects many people all over the UK. However, it does not only affect people living on the street or rough sleepers; it affects people in unsafe accommodation, people going from sofa to sofa each night. These people are constantly overlooked, as they are out of sight and out of mind.

This is something that we, as MYPs, can change. We can raise awareness of the issue and bring light to all kinds of homelessness that exist in the UK at present. The more awareness is raised, the more difference we can make. That is something that we can realistically achieve, so I urge you all to vote for the motion.

Mr Speaker: To conclude this, our second debate, I call, again from the East Midlands, Simran Sangherra.

Ms Simran Sangherra (East Midlands): Let's tackle homelessness. This is a new campaign for our UK Youth Parliament. Better support for those who are homeless and better services for those at risk of becoming homeless, these are the ultimate goals of this campaign. This is not a quick win; this is a long-term goal that, with persistence, resilience and compassion foremost, will produce positive outcomes. If we choose this campaign, we will be a body of people further pushing for change in how society responds to extreme inequality. Let's tackle homelessness.

This is a serious and growing issue facing people in the UK, and only with a collective approach to tackling the root causes of homelessness will something change. This campaign affects all young people at risk of becoming homeless, so let's tackle homelessness.

But we have seen arguments in the Chamber today about how mental health should be our priority campaign, as this may have the knock-on effect of helping to

decrease homelessness, and that only through improving early-help mental health services will we be a step closer to tackling some of the root causes of homelessness. So let's tackle homelessness.

But when we see that knife crime is a crisis throughout our cities, should we not be campaigning on that instead, as it is such a dangerous problem to be left unaddressed? Let's tackle homelessness.

This is a campaign to press decision makers to prevent homelessness through an effective welfare safety net, more appropriate and affordable housing, and effective mental health services for all those who need them. The limited existing mediation services are seen as stigmatising, and they should be available for those at risk of becoming homeless, especially young people. Let's tackle homelessness.

Is this really achievable for us? Is it far too much for us, as the Youth Parliament, to achieve something within 12 months? When we see that rough sleeping has more than doubled and that the hidden homeless are estimated to be 140,000, it is difficult to accept that this problem could be ignored. Just because of the challenges that we may face, we cannot continue without addressing homelessness. Austerity measures since 2010 are seen as a reason behind this rise, as we have seen how pressures have affected public services such as the NHS. School leavers, in particular, and those on the lowest incomes are inevitable factors in increasing homelessness.

Can we make a difference in reducing homelessness? MYPs, I call on you today to consider whether we can actually tackle the root causes and not just simply hack at the branches. Let's tackle homelessness.

Mr Speaker: Simran, how apposite it is to have a principled and uplifting conclusion to what has been another superb debate.

The Youth Parliament will now consider the third motion of the day, and the last of the morning session. I call, and invite you enthusiastically to welcome, from the North West of England, Jessica Leigh. [*Applause.*]

Equal Pay, Equal Work

12.53 pm

Jessica Leigh (North West): The motion is as follows:

Give young people the same amount of pay, if they are doing the same work as adults in the same job.

Thank you, Mr Speaker. Imagine you and a colleague are staff in the same café. You have trained your colleague to do the job for the past six months, teaching them everything they need to know to thrive and succeed like you are but, when comparing payslips, your friend is earning £3,000 more than you. Why? Because they are 25 and you are 17. Experience has nothing to do with it: you are being exploited because of your age. That is the reality for far too many.

At 18 years old you are legally classed as an adult. You can finally vote, marry, fight for your country, stand to be an MP or even be Prime Minister, but you are not entitled to a living wage.

The society we live in not only adheres to but embraces the very principle of equal pay for equal work when it comes to gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability, yet young people are left behind. Surely this is blatant hypocrisy. We often hear that under-25s do not need money, as they have no mortgages and have the support of the bank of mum and dad, but many young people live independent lives—some are parents; some are carers—and we do not always have a support network around us.

Youth homelessness is very much an issue in our society. As we have just heard, 86,000 young people are homeless or at risk of being so. That is nearly 300 times the number of us who are here today. We have to ask ourselves what leads to homelessness and what leads to knife crime. Young people have been led down those paths because they had no other choice. To tackle a problem, do we not first have to go to the root cause: young people not being able to earn enough to live? Is the wage gap the first ripple that causes this ocean of problems?

Of course, we have to consider the economic impact of the motion. Will businesses stop hiring young people? In 1970, many thought exactly the same when women won equal pay, and guess what? Businesses did not collapse and females still got hired. As in 1970, financial adjustments may be needed, but should we deny a person their rights just because they are difficult to fulfil? That has never stopped this UK Youth Parliament campaigning on something we have believed in before, so why should it now?

Ultimately, equal pay is not a privilege but a right. If this Government truly want a better Britain for everyone and to end austerity, it starts with putting young people at the very heart of Britain; it starts with giving the generation of tomorrow a fairer start in life. Young people may make up only 26% of the population today, but we are 100% of the future. Thank you. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Jessica, that was a speech both passionate and remarkable. I hope I do not overuse those words, but I use them with real feeling. It was an exceptional contribution—quite exceptional.

To oppose the motion—and I ask you equally enthusiastically to welcome her—I call Alannah White.

Alannah White (Yorkshire and Humber): I apologise if my speech starts in a similar way to Jess's, but picture this: you are a young person under the age of 18—not too hard for most of the people in this room to imagine—and suddenly, for whatever reason, you have become your family's main breadwinner. You get a job and are being paid £4.20 an hour—the national minimum wage for under-18s. Everything is fine until you receive your first pay cheque and realise that your co-worker is being paid £3.63 an hour more than you for the same job, simply because they are over 25 and you are not. You are outraged. Surely, you think, in a supposedly democratic society, you should be getting paid £7.83 an hour just like your co-worker—equal pay for equal work.

You see people arguing against this, claiming that young people are incapable, but you know that the vast majority of workers who are under 25 are just as capable and hard-working as those who are over 25. In principle, I would agree with you, but the reality of the situation is this: achieving equal pay for equal work is economically very challenging, as well as dismissing the expertise of independent advisers.

The main incentive for an employer to hire someone under 25 instead of someone over 25 is that they can pay the younger person less. Equalising pay for all workers would take away that main incentive, essentially pricing young people out of the labour market. After all, if an employer was choosing between a 25-year-old with seven years' experience and a 16-year-old with no experience who they would have to pay the same, why would they choose the younger person? Although the wages might not be as good as many would like, I would much rather they stayed in this tiered system with some of us having jobs, than to equalise pay and risk massive unemployment among young people. I am sure that most of you would agree with me there.

One argument made for this motion compared the struggle women went through to achieve the semblance of equal pay we have now to this struggle for equal pay across ages. I remind MYPs that you will grow out of being under 25, but we do not grow out of being women, and that is where the difference lies.

I would like to let you know about an independent group called the Low Pay Commission. It was founded in 1997 and is independent of the Government. It monitors the minimum wage and aims to ensure that all age groups can live on the wages they receive. The commission helped to create the National Minimum Wage Act 1998—the first one—and in 2004 it achieved a national minimum wage for 16 and 17-year-olds. The commission researches and publishes a report on wages annually, and the Government have historically followed its advice, raising the pay depending on the report's recommendations. The relationship the commission has with the Government provides attention and independent lobbying that some of the other issues being debated today do not get.

Lastly, as has been found by the Equality and Human Rights Commission and the Office for National Statistics, we do not even have equal pay across genders and ethnic groups, so how can we expect equal pay across ages? My fellow MYPs, I urge you to vote for one of the other motions, if not because of equal pay's economic faults, to ensure that those other issues can have the kind of attention that our pay cheques already get from the Low Pay Commission.

Mr Speaker: Alannah, thank you for the clarity and skill with which you have just spoken to us. Members of the Youth Parliament, I am afraid that I am advised that there is not much leeway at the other end of the day. I am here all day anyway, but I appreciate that people have trains to catch, flights to get on and so on. You also need to have lunch, and that is important. I am therefore looking to finish this debate absolutely no later than 1.20 pm. Please do not take this the wrong way, but we now do not have time for Back-Bench speeches of two and three minutes. I am looking to try to get each region in, so I am looking for people who are going to contribute for a minute and summarise the thrust of what they believe on this matter of great principle. I look forward, first, to hearing a brief speech from somebody from Wales.

Thomas Vaughan-Jones (Wales): I do not believe that equal pay for equal work should be in our manifesto. Why are we concentrating on equal pay when the homeless cannot even get jobs because they have no address? I am going to cut straight to the point: 86,000 people in the UK are homeless. There are people willing to give up room in their homes for homeless people. Last year, 4,800 people in England were rough sleeping, 345 of whom were from Wales. Did you know that one in 200 people in the UK are homeless? Do you want to give equal pay for equal work, or do you want to give work to the homeless?

Fatima Bari (Scotland): If adults and young people are paid the same, employers may not want to employ young people, simply because of experience; if they can have a 30-year-old instead of a 16-year-old, they will go for the 30-year-old. I hope MYPs seriously consider this motion and opt for more pressing issues, such as mental health, which affects us all, not just a specific amount of people, or knife crime, which is another big issue that will probably affect most of us in this Chamber.

Annabel Barker-Lomax (South East): Today, we see young people suffering greatly financially, with 24% of them constantly in debt and 47% of them constantly struggling, running out of cash before the end of each month. As it is, young people struggle to balance school and job. We should not be mistaken: the jobs young people are holding down are hardly glamorous; they are working on shop floors, waiting tables and serving customers in retail. They take these jobs out of necessity.

All too often, the hours that young people have to work when trying to hold down a job, simply to gain the money that they need for themselves, hinders their ability to receive a full education and to invest in themselves and their interests. I therefore feel that, by giving young people equal pay, which as we have established simply gives them parity with those doing equal work, we not only address the point of principal injustice but also give the 40% of young people working today the ability to invest in themselves and their lives, at such a founding point in their lives as their youth, and not to have to suffer because of it. Let us seek justice for young people. Let us vote for equal work, equal pay.

Mr Speaker: I remind everyone to say who they are, because the keepers of the *Official Report* need to record your names. Let us have a contributor from Northern Ireland.

Conor Boyle (Northern Ireland): I am Conor Boyle, from Newry and Armagh. Given that both the first speakers opened with “Imagine”, I hate to add to the John Lennon chorus, but I will start in the same way. However, I will not say, “Imagine there’s no future”, so it’s fine.

Imagine being a teacher who has worked for 10 years. You print all the extra worksheets and notes for your students, to ensure that each of them understands what they are learning. You stay behind after school and give each of your students the attention that they deserve. You are among the last to leave the car park at night. You put that effort in. However, if a new teacher who is yet to prove themselves walks in the door and is paid the exact same sum of money as you, would it give you any incentive to work, especially given that, in many cases, the more experienced of the two teachers will mentor the younger of the two?

Imagine being a nurse. You have been in the job a long time and have made your way up the pay bands. You go that extra mile to brighten the lives of the suffering children on your ward. You are trying to sustain your family, but when the hospital asks you to do an extra shift, you stay on and do it. What happens if a younger nurse who is yet to prove themselves were to walk in the door and be paid the exact same as you? Would it give you any incentive to go that extra mile and put in that hard work?

In the system proposed by this motion, it would be impossible to find a substantive reason for why anybody would continue to put effort in. If, as the motion argues, nobody should be paid more than a young person because of their experience, answer me this: why would anyone, in all good faith, bother to work hard? In that scenario, pay for young people seems to be based not on ability or merit but on age. That is a disgrace. We instead need employment practices that value merit, ability and qualifications, not the fact that someone is young.

Mr Speaker: What about the north-west of England?

Several MYPs *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Somebody is waving at me, frantically in fact. Your moment has arrived.

Megan Dwyer (North West): I am Megan Dwyer, from Sefton. I am passionate about this issue for many reasons, although I have obviously had to shave down what I wanted to say.

I heard some people ask earlier why an employer would hire a 17-year-old instead of a 25-year-old. After all, the 25-year-old will realistically have eight or nine years’ more experience than the 17-year-old. What about jobs that do not require experience? I worked for a short period of time in Greggs—I am a proper northerner—and all training was given to us, so why would they require so much experience? Why should an employer hire a 17-year-old over a 25-year-old? Maybe the employer should value the young person’s integrity, skills, experience and passions. We cannot just look at age; everyone is unique.

“The bank of mum and dad” is a phrase I hear a lot. As a proud care leaver who tries to be as independent as possible, I cannot rely on the bank of mum and dad. I do not want to rely on the bank of anyone, only on my

bank. I have to earn my own money. I am doing three A-levels, and it is not worth me giving up time I could spend on my studies to work for £4.20 an hour. That is pocket money.

Mr Speaker: That was a truly splendid speech. Who do we have from the north-east of England? *[Interruption.]* You are sort of dancing; you are doing a kind of Theresa May jive. *[Laughter.]*

Esther Kirk (North East): Equal pay for equal work sounds so simple and logical, so why are we not seeing it? What makes a young person—just look around the Chamber, because it could be any of us—so different from a 25-year-old who seemingly has more experience? Don't we all need experience? Looking for work experience is hard enough, let alone trying to find a job, so we need some sort of grounding to help get us there. Equal pay for equal work, to me, is an incentive for young people to work. We hear it said that equal pay would bring the economy down, but surely it would provide young people with an incentive to get a job and do something.

We are not just doing A-levels; we are getting real-life experience and a whole view of the world. The idea that we will just be paid a little bit less—"We are just young people, so hey ho."—does not work anymore. Equal pay would eventually boost the economy, so it would give back. Young people would then have an incentive to go into work and to work harder. Equal pay for equal work is not just about people saying, "Oh, we'll just pay young people less," because in the long term it would help not just young people, but the economy.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Now, what about a speaker from London?

Arnav Upadaya (London): When we turn 16 we gain many of the responsibilities of an adult, and when we turn 18 we become an adult and gain all the responsibilities, and one of those is paying taxes. Without equal pay, we cannot pay them, so we will go into severe debt. That really disincentivises young people from working, as they believe they will get nowhere. They might not even be able to recover from that debt. It could ruin their lives. They could become homeless as a result. I believe that we need equal pay to ensure that homelessness stops. That links to other points that we need.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. What about the East of England?

Jordhi Nullatamby (East of England): Our Government stand silent when it comes to paying under-18s equal pay for equal work. With more and more young people signing up for part-time work, it makes no sense for us to be paid less. We are being discriminated against purely on the basis of age. The problem with being paid a lesser amount is that we are viewed as lesser. The current system assumes that your work contribution suddenly becomes more value, more meaningful and worth greater pay as soon as you turn 18 and become a legal adult. But that creates a fundamentally unequal system, and one that perpetuates the idea that the only legal way to pay young people is by exploiting them for their cheap labour.

No one can deny this level of systemic injustice that young people up and down the country, in our regions and communities, are having to bear. I truly believe that our Youth Parliament is the force for change on this

issue. I believe that we can truly push forward a campaign that encourages our Government and our employers to pay young people what they are entitled to.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Does a representative of Army Welfare Services/British Forces Overseas who has not yet spoken wish to contribute to the debate? You do, and you shall, and we look forward to hearing from you.

Harrison Smith (Army Welfare Services/British Forces, Germany): The amount you are paid for the work you do should be based not on age, background or anything else, but on skill level and efficiency. If a young person can do the same job as an older person, and at the same skill level, why can they not receive the same pay? If they can work at the same speed and do the same hours as older people, they deserve the same pay. If we want the UK to be an equal society, we should start with the basics in order to achieve the larger goal. Voting for equal pay could have a knock-on effect on homelessness, as many people are homeless because they had a job but were paid less for it than someone older. They don't want to work as hard as the older person but receive less pay, so they have less money to survive on, which has further effects on their entire lives.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Who have we got representing the South West?

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, let us take the gentleman with the flowery shirt in the penultimate row from the back.

Jack Horder (South West): I am from South Devon. I believe in the same pay for the same job. It is not as if a loaf of bread is cheaper for a younger worker just because they earn less. That does not make sense to me or my constituents. If you can pay one group of the population less for the same work, why hire the more expensive group of workers? Try substituting the word "young" with "migrants"; how does the question sound now?

Mr Speaker: That was a very powerful contribution. We now need to hear a contributor from the East Midlands.

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, I call the person I saw first, with the red dress.

Florence Orchard (East Midlands): I am from Nottinghamshire. When discussing this campaign point, it is vital to recall that it is proposed as the UK-wide campaign. Therefore, we will only be choosing between votes at 16 and equal pay for equal work. Homelessness, mental health and knife crime are devolved issues, so we will be voting for them in a different category. Both these issues—equal pay for equal work, and votes at 16—are of massive importance, otherwise we would not even be here discussing them.

The impassioned speeches in the first debate highlighted the desire for votes at 16, but I urge you all to step back from the excitement of the prospect at voting two years

earlier and consider the fact that we could do more with equal pay for equal work. Although Government legislation would definitely fast-track this campaign, we would not be limited by it. We could have discussions with the employers themselves and highlight our argument, as well as lobbying our MPs and our local councils, which is what we would be limited to if we chose the votes at 16 campaign. I have experienced this, having done that campaign for two years now. I urge you all to vote for a fresh and exciting campaign with enormous potential. I urge you all to vote for equal pay for equal work.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Now, who do we have from the West Midlands?

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: You leapt to your feet, sir; let us hear you.

James Callaghan (West Midlands): My name is James Callaghan—yes, that is actually my real name—and I am from Dudley. It is my second year doing this and I now have actually been called to speak.

Anyone who is currently in employment will surely agree that wages at the moment are absolutely ridiculous. There are two phrases that are constantly passed around. The first is the minimum wage; for some reason employers are looking to see how low they can get your wage before it becomes illegal. The second is the national living wage. How is a national living wage of £4.20 acceptable? It should be a wage that people can live on by themselves in their own home and their own community from the age that they are allowed to leave home—whether they are 18, 25 or 60.

I am going to come off script now, because everything I have written down has already been said. I will talk from what is stored in my memory. My father was a teacher of 20 years. If people do not know already, there is an upper pay scale in teaching. That is a brilliant system. It means that people are paid not by how old they are, but by how many years they have been in the system. If you have been in the system for a year, you are on pay scale 1; as the time you have been in the system goes up, you go up to pay scale 2. Is not that how all jobs should work? The more skilled you are and the better you work, the more you should be paid.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Friends, I think that the next contribution will have to be the last Back-Bench speech, but it will mean that every part of the country represented here has been heard in this debate, as in the others. I will call a contributor from Yorkshire and Humberside.

Eden Maia Shackleton (Yorkshire and Humber): This motion is certainly admirable in its notion of promoting equality. However, we must consider that doing this may cause possible detriment to the employment rates of young people. Eradicating one of the most significant incentives of employers to recruit young people means that there is a strong possibility that employment rates will fall dramatically. Therefore, it is important to consider that this motion may have the stark opposite result of its intention, and we should rather be looking to vote for something else that would not bring dramatic detriment to our economy.

Mr Speaker: Thank you—and, given the time pressure, thank you for speaking so pithily. That is very much appreciated.

I mentioned earlier, friends, the presence of a champion of her constituents and of the cause of the fight against knife crime, Vicky Foxcroft. I am proud now to mention the presence in the Chamber of one of the first BAME elected Members of this House—the Member of Parliament, for 31 years now, for her Hackney North and Stoke Newington constituents, currently the shadow Home Secretary and someone who, for decades, because it is in her DNA and her motive force for coming into public life, has been a voice for the voiceless. Please welcome, here in support of all of you—of the UK Youth Parliament—the shadow Home Secretary, the Member of Parliament for Hackney North and Stoke Newington. I am referring, of course, to Diane Abbott. *[Applause.]* Thank you for being here, Diane—that is typical of you, and it is appreciated.

To conclude the debate, I call, and invite you again enthusiastically to welcome, Chloe Whyte, from central Scotland. *[Applause.]*

Chloe Whyte (Scotland): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I would like to believe that not a single person here would think of paying a colleague less than their counterparts because of their religion, race or ability. That is not what our nation stands for. So why do we think it is acceptable to pay less to those with another protected characteristic—age?

Let us look at what has been said so far. On the one hand, my fellow MYPs have argued that raising the young people's minimum wage—when they do the most overtime in this day and age, by the way—would crash our already fragile economy. Young people are valuable in our current job market when they are cheaper to hire and willing to take on literally anything to avoid that cycle of needing experience to get a job but a job to get experience. If we remove the incentive for businesses to hire them, we could indirectly cause a rise in unemployment for our constituents, especially when an equal wage would mean leaving young people to compete against more experienced, more qualified and, in the words of a former minister for the Cabinet Office, “more productive” adults. However, is that really the case? Are our generation too lazy to be deserving of equal treatment? Because looking around at the 300 faces in front of me, who have gathered more than a million consultations ahead of today's debate, I would be pretty keen to see his sources that prove young people are less productive than our peers.

The unemployment rate for young people is at a record low since 2010. We do not know whether or not an equal wage would affect this and make it worse. Putting experience and qualifications to one side, favouring one person over another for the price above their head, is not a working economy in action, but outright discrimination. The number of grey hairs on your head does not matter when you are applying to work in Greggs or Primark.

Let us not forget that unlike with the other campaign choices, the minimum wage Act affects every single young person in this room. When a quarter of young people in England and Wales have to borrow to make ends meet, maintenance grants have disappeared, and

most benefits do not even cover those under the age of 18 desperately trying to provide for themselves and their family, continuing to allow young people to be treated like second-class citizens is an insult to our values at UKYP. But equality for all cannot be achieved overnight. We have seen with campaigns like votes at 16 that getting the Government to acknowledge the rights of young people can be a slow and tedious process.

Equal pay would be a long-term ambition, and it may not fit within the timeframe of one year, but there are smaller goals we could achieve that are just as important—for example, educating teens on their rights in the workplace. The real question is this: would equal pay best be left to local UKYP work while we look at the urgent problem of knife crime or homelessness? Because regardless of our opinion on it, there is a minimum wage Act in place for a reason, which has been justified by those in power. There is not, and never has been, a justifiable reason for a child to die on our streets.

Your choices are clear today. We can choose a campaign focused on legislative change for every young person in this room, or one carried by emotional weight that already has the attention of our national press. Either way, one thing is for certain; young people are our nation's future. Let us tell the Government to start treating us that way.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Chloe. That concludes the morning session of our sitting, and you did so with terrific aplomb. I hope you all agree that it has been a really rip-roaring series of debates, characterised by superb contributions both in content and in the passion and insistence of your delivery.

The Youth Parliament will now adjourn until 1.50 pm. I know that is tight, but let us try to work to that schedule because we have two important debates, and votes and so forth, this afternoon. Thank you for the magnificence of this morning's proceedings. I invite you all now to go to Westminster Hall for lunch.

1.25 pm

Sitting suspended.

1.54 pm

Sitting resumed.

Mr Speaker: Members of the Youth Parliament, I know you have not had very long, but I hope you have at least had some lunch and that you can keep going on adrenalin, as well as the sense that you are part of something really big and important here, and have got terrific energy.

Mental Health

Mr Speaker: The Youth Parliament will now consider the fourth motion of the day. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. To move the motion, I call—and I ask you again enthusiastically to welcome—Victor Ciunca from Wales.

1.55 pm

Victor Ciunca (Wales): The motion is as follows:

Mental health services should be improved with young people's help; and should be available in schools.

For the past five years, mental health has been a priority of young people across the UK. It has constantly been on the Make Your Mark ballot, and this year is no different. It is clear that we need to keep campaigning to improve and maintain the mental health services that we as young people need. Mental health problems such as depression, stress, and anxiety affect one in 10 young people. Some 50% of mental illnesses are established by the age of 14, yet 70% of young people who are mentally ill have not received appropriate and timely intervention. Those staggering percentages make me wish that adults could understand that we have problems too! Mental health must be treated just like physical health, or with even greater importance. Adults see and react to our physical problems, but they do not recognise our fragile minds or our broken hearts.

Signs of mental illness—unlike bruises and broken bones—are not always visible. Last week in the autumn Budget, the Government pledged £2 billion to mental health services, including a focus on services for children and young people. Ladies and gentlemen, we must ensure that that funding is utilised effectively and that our voices are heard. Having support in schools could help youths to overcome those difficult teenage issues. We can feel misunderstood, unhappy and uncertain, and it can be difficult for us to talk about our feelings. Mental health problems are a disease that should be treated by a specialist in paediatric psychiatry, because all teenagers are different. We live more emotionally and there are things like exams. A young person with poor mental health will go on to become an adult with poor mental health, and they will continue to require support and services.

Ladies and gentlemen, I ask you once again not to forget that your mental health is a priority. Your happiness is essential. Your self-care is a necessity. We need to stand together to make sure our voices are heard, regardless of where we live, be that Wales, England, Scotland or Northern Ireland. In our roles as representatives, it is our duty to advocate for young people so that absolutely no one suffers in silence. We need a high-quality mental health service at nationwide level, which is accessible to all quickly and easily. We need all young people to feel that they have been heard. Together we can do this! Vote for your mental status. Va multumesc pentru atentie acordata. Diolch am wrando—thank you for listening! *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: What a terrific opening to this afternoon's proceedings—quite outstanding, Victor. Thank you very much, and I hope you can tell the esteem in which you are held by your fellow Members of the Youth Parliament.

I now invite you to welcome enthusiastically Niesha Kelly from Northern Ireland, who will speak in opposition to the motion.

Ms Niesha Kelly (Northern Ireland): Is mise Niesha Ó Ceallaigh. MYPs, fellow colleagues, friends and, of course, comrades, when I first got allocated this speech I thought, “How on earth can I possibly speak against this motion?”, but then in an instant my beliefs, passions and motives to stand up to injustice came together as one and made me think about not necessarily opposing the motion on mental health, but instead about enhancing it into something extraordinary for the future generation—our generation.

Mental health is so important, yet so personal to every individual on earth. It should not and will not be brushed under the carpet, as if it does not exist. All of us sitting here today and in the past have proved that mental health is not just “overreacting”, because we have stepped up. We stepped up to the plate by making it the No. 1 national campaign in 2017; we made the politicians listen to what some of them are failing to promise us; and we have had our voices heard. We have certainly and deservedly raised awareness of the mental health campaign, and we should be extremely proud of that.

No one can ever be in denial about the importance of mental health, but it is all about how we approach the cause instead of just the broad issue. What are the deep-rooted problems that are causing mental health suffering? I can tell you this: the education system is minute by minute deteriorating the confidence, ability and identity of our young people. We are characterised into smart and stupid, academic and not academic, and successes and failures. But who are the education authority to label what is intelligent and what is not? Our system preaches about reflecting your ability, yet we are all put into the exact same examination process, regardless of individual learning status, all for grades on a piece of paper. Our true abilities are being forgotten about and forced out of our identities.

We need to stop stigmatising young people who aren't in education as “burn-outs”, because these people who are finding a different path to success will gain success. But what relevance has this to mental health? A study showed that 60% of young people in education have higher stress related to the pressure to succeed. We are being bombarded with unnecessary pressures and stress. If we have a system that requires so much money for mental health assistance, then there is something clearly wrong with the system. We should not be in this situation in the first place. Our appearance in schools is put as a priority over our wellbeing, which again damages our mental health when we are being dehumanised into all looking like the definition of “prestigious”, just to suit the school's desired image.

Look around us: an incredibly diverse room and nation of young people. Where I live, in a small town called Ballymena, being diverse leads to being bullied. Systems such as conversion therapy still exist and are indoctrinating the minds of young people and making them question themselves. These systems are not freedom of speech, but a scapegoat for hate crime. We need to combat these bigoted groups, to give our young people the freedom and the respect they are entitled to. Let's

challenge our Government—well, that's if the Northern Ireland Assembly can establish what a government is. [*Applause.*] Cheers.

MYPs, take a hard look at this campaign. We don't always need money, but we need to take justice into our own hands and look at how our communities respect and treat each other. Challenge your perception on what is right and wrong in our world. Our young people deserve justice, so let's fight to give them that justice together. Let's not fight for this motion, but instead fight the deeper individual cause that will deliver long-term peace, acceptance and a happy wellbeing for the future generation—our generation.

Mr Speaker: Wow. One mesmerising speech followed by another mesmerising speech. The debate really is of quite exceptional quality. We do now need extremely brief speeches, I am afraid, because we have to try to get back on track. If people could confine themselves to a minute of encapsulating what they want to say that would be terrifically helpful. I am looking at this point, my friends, for a contribution from a representative of the east midlands. Hands up from the east midlands. We look forward to hearing from you.

Chandler Wilson (East Midlands): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am Chandler Wilson, I use they-them pronouns and I am from Nottinghamshire. Thank you for allowing me to be the first trans person in a wheelchair to address this House. It is an absolute honour. [*Applause.*]

Mental health is a subject close to my heart, as I have had eight inpatient admissions in my lifetime. Throughout all of them I have faced extreme transphobia. I have been “dead named” in front of other patients. Staff refused to accept the change to my name, which I had done by deed poll. They also refused to use my correct pronouns. The new local child and adolescent mental health services unit is not wheelchair accessible. I could not transfer to the bed safely and I could not wash. At one point, I was left in bed for three weeks because they refused to let me bring in my wheelchair when my chronic pain flared up. For me, this is a huge problem. When people in minorities face such discrimination in the health service, we cannot call it a mental health service.

My other concern is the fact that cannabis is still an illegal substance and yet does wonders for mental health. It is what keeps me out of hospital. I have not been in hospital for six months purely because I have been able to use cannabis. To get proper change, to save the health care system money and to ensure an adequate mental health system, we need to legalise cannabis. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: The thanks are from us to you. Thank you very much indeed. I am now looking for a contributor from Wales.

Ushenka Rajapakse (Wales): My name is Ushenka Rajapakse and I represent the Vale of Glamorgan.

In March 2017, there were 34,700 offences involving a knife or sharp instrument in England and Wales. Between 2002 and 2013, 18,220 people with mental health problems took their own lives in the UK. Just like knife crime, mental illness takes so many lives and affects so many families. Emotional ill health is just as

important as physical because it can take away as many lives. Statistics show that a lot of people in Wales are suffering with mental ill health compared to the number of those affected by knife crime. South Wales and Gwent police forces, which cover Wales's three biggest cities, recorded 742 serious crimes involving knives in the last financial year, whereas mental health problems affect one in four children. To put that into perspective, 25% of you will be struggling with a mental illness by the time you reach adulthood.

One of the most shocking and saddening statistics I have found is that one in 10 people believe that people with a mental illness are less trustworthy than people without one. I do not believe this at all, because I do not believe that mental illness is a grounds for judging a person's morality. That there is still such a stigma around mental illness shows how much we need to improve the education system. The issue of mental health is also important because it unites young people and adults in a way that others, such as votes at 16 and equal pay for equal work, do not. It could unite and build a bridge between us and the adults in the UK.

Lucy Penman (Scotland): My name is Lucy Penman and I am from Mid-Scotland and Fife.

MYPs, it is clear from this debate that the campaign for improving young people's mental health is needed now. For too long have we not paid enough attention to young people's mental health, one of the biggest issues facing our generation. Today in the UK, 75% of young people who have had a mental health problem are not receiving treatment, and 51% of our generation are embarrassed to talk about mental health. It is apparent from these statistics that mental health services and the stigma surrounding the issue across the UK must be changed for the better.

We cannot let our families, friends and colleagues continue on this journey with little or no support from ourselves, our education systems or the Government. In Scotland last year, children and adolescent mental health services did not meet their target of seeing 90% of patients within 18 weeks. This is another shocking statistic, and the fact that we, the representatives of young people, allow it to happen is despicable. We should be working towards making a positive change to mental health. With this, I urge you to vote for this campaign and bring effective change to our curriculum in respect of an issue that dominates the lives of young people.

Mr Speaker: I hope that you are proud, because you should be very proud indeed.

Who have we got from the south-east of England? A woman who has just leapt to her feet with alacrity. I thought you were going to fly into the air like a rocket!

Rachel Grimer James (South East): In the UK, we are all very privileged to live in this representative democracy. In my hands I hold the book of Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman".

As the MYP for Milton Keynes North, I want to give some quotes from my constituents.

"There is not enough awareness or help for young people...not enough support for young people in schools...people with mental health issues are treated as if it is a choice or they are told just to pull themselves together."

I urge my fellow members of the UK Youth Parliament to represent the people who they are meant to represent.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Rachel. Now, what about Yorkshire and Humber? The first person whom I saw leap to his feet is the gentleman there. Yes, indeed, sir.

Ben Miller (Yorkshire and Humber): I am the MYP for Calderdale.

We have heard it all before: just because you cannot see it does not mean it is not there. But think about it this way: just because you cannot see it does not mean that we can ignore and completely overlook this crucial topic, which affects countless young people all over the UK. Just think about that for a moment.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. What about the north-west of England? Let us hear from you.

William Powell (North West): I represent the passionate young people of Wigan and Leigh.

One in four people in the UK will be affected by a mental health condition in their lifetimes. Do you realise that that means almost every single household has some sort of connection with a mental illness?

Mental health issues present a rising tide. They do not discriminate according to age, gender or ethnicity, and they present a continuum of challenge, from anxiety and depression to serious breakdown and suicidal tendencies. Mental illness can be a battle; I am sure no one can deny that. I am sure we all know people who suffer from some form of mental illness, and I know from my experience that many of those people are brave, because there is nothing worse than waking up and fighting a war inside your head.

Despite a much wider public acceptance and acknowledgement of mental health issues, for much of the time those issues are still being kept secret, or not even discovered. That is the most harrowing bit. Young people are suffering in silence while the world changes around them, and too many of them feel isolated and unable to speak out. It is our job to be that voice: as has been said, the voice of the voiceless.

If we can help young people now, we can help them to secure the best possible opportunity to succeed in later life. We must work together to stop stereotypical judgments, and to stop stigma. More important, we can help people to get the support that they need. We must lobby for more investment in child and adolescent mental health services, and sustain awareness of an illness that is so close to each and every one of us. There are more people affected than we realise.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. Now, my friends, what about the south-west of England? Let us take the young woman in the penultimate row from the back.

Safiyah Asharaf (South West): In 2016-17, the funding of NHS mental health trusts in England rose by less than 2.5%, far less than the funding of any physical health areas. That has forced approximately 20,000 people below the age of 18 to attend A&E so that they can access some form of mental health treatment. Recent figures have suggested that 10% of children in the UK aged between five and 16 have some form of mental illness, with the average wait to be treated being 10 years.

These statistics cannot be ignored. Improving mental health services should unquestionably be our campaign in 2019.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much. What about a speaker from London?

Ms Emily Warnham (London): I am from Bromley. Every person in this room will know at least one person who has been affected by mental health issues and has probably been failed by mental health services. With more pressures than ever before on young people, with exam pressures and social media, mental health is becoming an even greater issue, but this rise in mental health problems has come alongside a decrease in support and funding for support services.

Mental health issues affect every aspect of a young person's life, and campaigning on mental health would allow us to make a real impact for the very people we represent. As a Youth Parliament, we could use the platform we have been elected to hold to put pressure on our Government and to hold them to account, locally and nationally, to ensure there is adequate funding for services and, further, that the services being provided are adequate. If we neglect this issue, we neglect our young people, we neglect our constituents and we neglect our own peers and friends.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That is very powerful. Do we have a would-be speaker for the West Midlands? Sir, again I thought you were going to be a rocket. Let's hear from you.

Mr Mawgan Stinchcombe (West Midlands): Hello. I am from Warwickshire, and I am here to argue against the motion for reasons that are very complex. I would argue that we are neglecting our young people if we do not argue for those who have assisted us so much. I speak, of course, about educators. There is a mental health crisis, true, among young people, but equally, there is one among educators. According to Leeds Beckett University, half of all educators in the United Kingdom have a diagnosable psychological condition linked to anxiety, stress or depression.

Some teachers come from backgrounds of poor mental health, and they have added stress due to our education system. As three quarters of the people who were interviewed said that their condition had a detrimental effect on students, I argue that if we do not, for once, pay attention to teachers' mental health, it will have a detrimental effect on students everywhere, including ourselves.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed. We will have time in a moment for two very short contributions from the Back Benches before we have the wind-up speech.

Throughout the day, I have referenced colleagues who have made the effort to be here, and I want to extend—and I know you will want to extend—a particularly warm welcome to someone who is not exactly short of things to do.

You heard from the Prime Minister this morning, and this afternoon I want to welcome, and I ask you to welcome, somebody I have known throughout my 21 years in this House, whose constituency I have visited and whom I have come to know very well. He is passionate about young people, and he says what he means and

means what he says—that is what people always say they want in their politicians. Please welcome, with warmth and enthusiasm, the Leader of the Opposition, Jeremy Corbyn. [*Applause.*] Jeremy, thank you. It is typical of you to make the effort to be here and show your support for this Parliament. It is greatly appreciated.

I do not know whether we have time, but I am going to make time for a very brief contribution from a representative of the East of England.

Lauren Wilson (East of England): I am a Member of the Youth Parliament for East Suffolk.

Did you know that 70% of people on earth will go through mental ill health alone? Mental ill health is terrible with help, and going through it alone can really affect people now and forever. This needs to change. Just think: 70% of people go through it alone. They have no one by their side—no counsellors, no assistance, no access to services and, most importantly, no one by their side to help them and guide them along the way. We need to stop people going through mental ill health and going through it alone. We, as MYPs, need to vote so that young people are not alone. This is a very pertinent issue that we need to tackle and solve in any way we can.

Some 70% of people are alone and suffer in silence with no voice. The change I would like to see is for people to work together to end the stigma that has made too many people suffer behind closed doors. I would like mental health to be spoken about more in schools to raise awareness. A young person may not even know that their problem is categorised under mental health. We can change that. Some 70% of young people go through mental ill health alone. We can change that.

Mr Speaker: My friends, I ask you to welcome with great enthusiasm the concluding speaker from the South East of England who will wind up the debate, Eleanor Burnaby-Rouse.

Ms Eleanor Burnaby-Rouse (South East): Last week in the autumn Budget, we were presented with the news that an extra £2 billion of funding will go towards mental health services, including services for young people. It is undeniable that that is a good thing, but this news, combined with the fact that we have had mental health as our campaign before, may lead many to question whether we should even consider it as our campaign for 2019. However, we should not use funding announcements and previous campaign attempts as an excuse to pack up our campaigning and move on to a topic we have not explored before.

If anything, now is the ideal time to consider mental health for our devolved campaign. As we move on from raising awareness, this campaign could be about actively working with decision makers to ensure that our mental health services are best suited to us as young people and provide us with the most support. After all, surely it is better to make sure that we are involved in influencing services for the benefit of young people, rather than sitting on the sideline and letting these changes happen to us without our input.

In this debate, we have been encouraged to think about the underlying issues that contribute to mental ill health, such as how we are tested in schools. We also know that services are running at capacity. In July this

year, there were a record 409,356 active referrals in England concerning mental health for children under the age of 19, of which 55,750 were new referrals, according to NHS figures. I think we can all agree, including you, Mr Speaker, and our esteemed guests such as Mr Corbyn and Diane Abbott, that those figures are absolutely shocking and that we need to work on this. More needs to be done to ensure that earlier support and intervention are provided so that young people do not suffer through a battle with their own mind.

There are organisations that are already trying to tackle this issue by building emotional resilience and wellbeing among young people, such as HeadStart. HeadStart is currently available in only six local areas in the UK. It is funded by the Big Lottery Fund as a five-year programme, meaning that it is scheduled to end in 2021. I have personally been able to see the effectiveness of projects such as HeadStart, as it runs in my local area in Kent. Such projects are supporting young people with their emotional wellbeing by providing training and resources to teachers so that they can provide support, as well as directly talking to and helping young people to tackle stress and build up resilience. Put simply, such organisations are key forms of early prevention of mental ill health, but the short-term nature of their funding means their impact is limited, as they are simply unable to reach all the young people who may need their support—they are not even available to young people in many parts of the country.

With the announcement of funding last week, we need our influence to work to support smaller organisations and projects that already help young people with their mental health in a more sustainable, long-term way that reduces the chances of people having to seek help in the future. When voting later today, I ask everyone in the Chamber to consider the significance of mental health and how poor mental health has the ability to impact on every one of us. We can stand up and fight for our vision, dreams and goals of having a healthy mind, or we can stand back and hope our minds are in safe hands when new facilities and resources are introduced without our input. MYPs, that decision is up to you.

Mr Speaker: Eleanor, thank you for speaking to us with such passion, force and conviction. Believe me, I have noticed, as other colleagues will have done, the far greater frequency with which this issue is raised in Parliament, by Members on both sides of the House; I have heard Jeremy raise it from the Front Bench in

questioning the Prime Minister, and I have heard Government Members raise it. It is right that we should be reminded, not least by young people here today and on other occasions, of the premium we should attach to this too long overlooked and underrated issue. It is magnificent that you have spoken in the way you have and that so many people have contributed to such effect.

Just before we proceed to the next debate, and consistent with my referring to people, I just want to mention someone from the Royal Society of Biology who is in the Under Gallery and who pointed out to me a few moments ago that the Science and Technology Committee will be discussing mental health next week. He is a friend of Parliament and indeed of young people—I am referring to Stephen Benn. Anybody who knows me knows that I regularly highlight examples of brilliant parliamentarians, from both sides of the Chamber. In speeches around the country, I often refer to my friend Ken Clarke, the Father of the House and one of the great parliamentarians of his generation. On the Labour Benches, Tony Benn, who sadly passed away in early 2014, spent nearly half a century as a Member of Parliament, standing up and fighting for what he believed. I used to tease Tony, whom I hugely admired, by rather pathetically and inadequately imitating him; he had the most extraordinarily resonant and memorable voice. In later years, towards the end of his life, I heard him several times, in several places, deliver the same very short and telling speech, with which Stephen, his brother Hilary and all the family will be well familiar. Remember this because it matters. Tony used to say, “Whenever I meet anybody with power, I always ask that person five questions. What power have you got? Who gave it to you? In whose interests do you exercise it? To whom are you accountable? And how can we get rid of you?” Those are very powerful words; Tony knew the importance of bottom-up pressure. Sadly, he is not with us now, but he believed in young people and he certainly believed in the Youth Parliament. I remember him once saying to me, “You know, John, the only purpose of the old is to offer encouragement to the young.” That is a magnificent mindset. So, Stephen, thank you for being with us and, through you, thanks for all he did. [*Applause.*]

The Youth Parliament will now consider the fifth and final motion of the day on “Put an end to Knife Crime”. The full motion is printed on the Order Paper. To move the motion, please welcome, from the East of England, Imogen White. [*Applause.*]

Put an end to Knife Crime

2.29 pm

Imogen White (East of England): The motion is as follows:

Too many young people's lives are lost to knife crime; the Government need to do more to help the knife crime epidemic.

Hundreds upon thousands of young people are living on a knife edge, fearing for their lives and turning to a violent weapon just to feel safe in their local communities. Nearly three years ago to the day, after buying a bar of chocolate at my local shop, I walked home through a police cordon. A young man had been stabbed in the next road. I am lucky that my link to this issue is relatively distant—but it is still significant. I do not live in London, Birmingham, Manchester or Liverpool. I live in a small, leafy village in the home counties. This issue is not exclusive to densely populated inner cities but affects every single one of us and our constituents.

I still recall the fear I felt that night three years ago. It is the same fear that led to nearly 200,000 young people putting a cross in the box to vote for this motion, and that same fear is leading to more and more young people carrying a knife just to feel safe. The knife crime epidemic is crippling our nation, changing our perception of what it is to feel safe and unnecessarily taking too many young lives. We simply cannot allow this to continue.

The lives of young people who carry knives are being put at risk. That is obvious. But what about the ripple effect on the many more young people affected by these horrific stabbings and their friends, their cousins and their siblings? As it stands, all young people are at risk, and the catastrophic effects last a lifetime. As Members of the Youth Parliament, we have a duty to those young people who voted to end knife crime. Current approaches, such as the increased use of stops and searches, have clearly not addressed the issue. We must campaign to ensure that our Government focus resources on mental and physical health, education, youth services, social media and community outreach, to treat this as a public health issue. Let us finally remove the fear factor. We need to vote for this motion, campaign to end knife crime and prevent any more young lives from being unnecessarily taken.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Imogen. To oppose the motion, from the north-east of England, I urge, exhort and plead with you to enthusiastically welcome Kellen Hadfield. [*Applause.*]

Kellen Hadfield (North East): I represent the young people of the mighty Redcar in the north-east of England. I thank each and every one of them for giving me the opportunity to be here today.

Knife crime—a stand-alone campaign or part of a much bigger issue? While I of course commend the motion, which topped this year's Make Your Mark ballot, I believe that it fails to recognise that knife crime is part of a much bigger issue: gang crime. One in 10 to 15-year-olds know a member of a street gang, and one in 100 are members of one. These gang members are more than five and a half times more likely to carry a knife than their non-gang-member counterparts. Clearly, if the motion were to truly succeed, it would require

tough action on gang membership, as well as measures such as limiting advertising, education and providing role models, as the motion suggests.

Both the Youth Parliament and the Government agree that ending the knife crime epidemic requires work across education, health, youth services, victim services and housing, as well as policing and law enforcement. Could a Youth Parliament campaign on this part of so broad an issue really solve it in a year? Or would it be like attempting to empty a running bath with an egg cup? It is my belief that knife crime is simply part of an issue too broad and complex to be the Youth Parliament's campaign.

Furthermore, over the past year the Government have announced several policies that will go some way towards achieving our goal of ending knife crime. For example, the motion calls on the Government to categorise knife crime as a public health issue, but in April it was announced that the Government would take a public health approach. The Home Office announced a serious violence strategy, including £11 million for an early intervention youth fund, and a further £1 million to support community groups and charities working with young people affected by, or at risk of, knife crime. In June the Government introduced the Offensive Weapons Bill, which will restrict the sale of bladed articles and make it an offence to carry a knife in any educational institution.

We must remember that combating knife crime is already part of the Youth Parliament's manifesto. Of course it is something we believe in, but it is not necessarily the right choice for our campaign. Of course we want to end knife crime, and of course we want to end gang crime, but given that the issue is receiving more media attention than ever before, and given that the Government are clearly aware of it, would this really be the right campaign for the Youth Parliament? Let us get behind the Government on this issue and stand with them. Let us focus our campaign on another issue.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Kellen. We are now looking for short, sharp speeches. Who have we got from the North West of England who wants to contribute?

Elle Walsh (North West): Taz, JayJay, Jim, Ashley—the names of just a few of the young people who have been stabbed to death in Blackburn with Darwen. Why today do the young people of my constituency feel that it is not safe to walk down the street alone without carrying a knife? We need to raise awareness of this, not just make it a public health issue. We need to teach people through the curriculum for life the repercussions of carrying knives.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. What about the south-west of England?

Will Daniel (South West): Coming from the west country, this might seem like an alien issue that few people have experience of, but any issue that affects the health and wellbeing of the young people of Great Britain in this way deserves to be our campaign. If you come from an unaffected area, as I do, you can still work on the campaign to ensure that this epidemic spreads no further than it has already. So please vote for this motion and help make society safer for your constituents.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. What willing contributors do we have from the south-east of England? Ah, we are overcome with excitement—veritably fizzing.

Kathryn Brooks (South East): Since the beginning of this month alone, three boys between the ages of 15 and 17 have been stabbed to death, which is simply unacceptable. We need to create safe spaces for young people to meet, rather than street corners or takeaways, where knife crime might thrive. Having more youth clubs in local communities could mean the difference between whether or not young lives are put at risk, since they would have somewhere to go. Let us tackle this issue head-on so that no more young people are put in danger.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. What about someone from Yorkshire and Humber?

Arqam Al-Hadeed (Yorkshire and Humber): MYPs, it is fair enough that we can gather in this Chamber and report these statistics, but I believe that our job is to do more than that. We must go out there and speak to our young constituents, who have put their faith in us by electing us as their representatives.

Let me share with this House the tragedy of my young constituent Iffy. After talking with his close friends, I have found that Iffy was a peaceful, calm and intelligent 16-year-old. Unfortunately, he became a victim of knife violence after being stabbed in the heart by a 16-year-old and left to suffer on the streets of Harehills, where he later passed away. This is Iffy, who had a bright future ahead of him. This is Iffy, who could have helped his community.

How many more people need to be stabbed for this Government to realise the need to put appropriate measures in place? Instead of the number of police officers on our streets increasing, it has dropped 15% since 2010. MYPs, that is over 21,000 fewer police officers on our streets, protecting our youth and communities. But we can still do a lot. We must inform those individuals who believe that they are safer carrying a knife. Indeed, they are not. By carrying a knife, they are putting their lives—and, most importantly, the lives of others—in danger.

I will end on the following note for the young people who are watching us today: let us invest in our future. Britain needs you alive, so please do not carry a knife.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Who wants to contribute from Wales?

Several MYPs *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I call the young woman next to the woman with the Welsh flag; forgive me, it is very difficult to call everybody.

Charley Oliver-Holland (Wales): Diolch yn fawr, Mr Speaker. I represent Monmouthshire in south Wales.

Did you know that knives are the most common weapons used in the killings of young people? The youth of the UK are suffering day in, day out because nothing is being done about this. Knife crime and other related forms of gang violence are increasing year by

year. In this year's Make Your Mark ballot in my constituency, knife crime was voted one of the top three priority issues. Given that there were only 25 reported incidents of knife crime in Monmouthshire in 2017, this suggests that even if young people are not directly affected by the issue, they are definitely frightened by the idea.

Knife crime is ruining and killing hundreds of innocent young lives every year—lives filled with a mountain of potential for the future. The potential to be an amazing politician like Jeremy, a teacher or an inventor is taken away instantly by another person, with one horrendous mistake. It would be insane to suggest that the life of a young person is not a priority issue. Imagine if that were your own brother, sister or cousin. We urgently need to put an end to this outrage to protect our country.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Do we have a would-be speaker from Northern Ireland?

Thomas Doris (Northern Ireland): I am from Mid Ulster. I cannot deny that the number of reported cases of knife crime has actually decreased across Northern Ireland, even though it has skyrocketed across England. However, that does not take into consideration instances of young people performing acts involving crimes that are not officially reported to the police, such as bringing knives into school to intimidate young people. This issue can bring untold grief to many young people. Isolated cases also exist where young people, for whatever reason, are stabbed; knives are used against them to harm and even kill them. The key problem regarding knife crime is that there is never one solution, because it is caused by a combination of factors. This is not just a single issue that we can fire money at in the hope of fixing it. If you want to solve knife crime, you first have to eradicate poverty because, in my opinion, that is the key cause of knife crime.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Who do we have from London?

Ciya Vyas (London): I am from the London Borough of Hounslow.

At the start of our journey together as MYPs, I introduced a motion on adopting a public health approach to knife crime, and have been delighted to see so many MYPs from around the UK moving their own motions and campaigning hard on this issue. Young people in my borough, as well as many other MYPs sat around me, have been involved in supporting the work of the Youth Violence Commission and the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, and it was great to see the Make Your Mark result mentioned in this very Chamber last week.

Talking of Make Your Mark—wow, we did it! We got 1.1 million votes and the biggest mandate we have ever had. Every young person in this Chamber and all the youth workers up there in the Gallery deserve to be proud of themselves.

What did those 1.1 million young people tell us? More young people voted for this issue than any other. More English regions made it their top issue than any other, and it topped the vote in the top four local areas by percentage turnout—including Hounslow, obviously. If there is a will for change on this issue among young

people, there is a political will for change here at Westminster. Whether we see the need for a violence reduction unit and a public health approach, as pioneered so successfully in Scotland and endorsed here by London's Mayor, or the Home Secretary's recent proposals to increase levels of stop-and-search, this debate is happening now, and we cannot neglect our duty to bring young people's voices into it.

If we are to have a policy in this country that can robustly protect young people from knife crime while reflecting our rightful freedoms, and can provide a scientific, evidence-based reduction in violence while not failing to understand youth violence in the wider context of race, class and austerity, we need to make young people's voice heard, and the best way to do this is to make this issue our national campaign.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. Now, the north-east of England. Yes, your good self—you were very quick of the mark.

Leah Shazhad (Northumberland): First, I would like to challenge a common misconception about stop-and-searches. Although stop-and-searches are now being increased by many police forces, they were originally asked to decrease them, which was when knife crime started to increase drastically. I am not going to stand here and tell you that knife crime has not risen; it has, and you cannot dispute it. In fact, incidents of knife crime have shot up by almost a third in the north-east.

But I am still going to ask you not to vote for this to be our national campaign. I know how you are all looking at me and I can hear all the whispers, but I want you to allow me to offer you a comparison. Despite the increase in knife crime, the number of offences in the north-east is smaller than in many other parts of the country. There were 38 offences for every 100,000 in the region, compared with 51 in the north-west, 64 in Yorkshire, and 137 in London. According to Northumbria police, most of the increases can be attributed to better recording methods and the fact that officers are now recording as crimes some incidents that would not have been crimes in the past. In Northumbria, we have had more bike deaths reported between September 2017 and August 2018. London accounts for roughly 15% of the population in the UK but it also accounts for 28% of the latest rise in knife crime, and more than a third of all the children or teens killed by knife in 2017.

As much as I love the over-inflated, manipulated and anecdotal evidence provided by the media, which is intended to scare us into believing that this is a problem in every region across the UK, and that the situation is the same as in London in every region, which it is not, I would like you instead to vote for something that can be represented in every region.

Mr Speaker: That was a very succinct summary—thank you very much indeed. We have time for one more contributor from Scotland.

Josh Kennedy (Scotland): Knife crime is increasingly becoming an epidemic of our generation. From London to Glasgow, knife crime often dominates the news. My area has not gone unharmed, with the media dubbing one weekend in late September the "Paisley murder bloodbath". Renfrewshire, my home, and its next-door neighbour,

Inverclyde, have been named as the worst areas in the country in terms of homicide, which is heavily related to knife crime—so much so that 4.3 people per 100,000 have been affected, topping the likes of New York City.

The reeking stench that is knife crime has engrained itself into society, and it is about damn time that we did something about it. It is frankly an utter farce that so little is being done to tackle this key issue. We need to stand up and be heard, in turn lobbying our decision makers to take action, before more our friends, families and loved ones are hurt.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. A speaker from the east midlands—who have we got? The gentleman right at the front. Please say who you are, and really speak up so everybody can hear what you have to say. We want to hear you.

Louis Milligan (East Midlands): I am Louis Milligan, an MYP for South Derbyshire. I think knife crime should not be a thing. Say someone is out at an event on their own—you, your child, your mum, your dad, or someone in your family—if they are stabbed, you will not find out because they are on their own. There is a borderline for knife crime, so I say no to knife crime and yes to a country with no knife crime.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I am trying to squeeze in as many people as possible. Who have we got from the east of England? The woman with the red top.

Isabel Bottley (East of England): I am an MYP for Essex. I want to touch briefly on a recent victim. On 5 November, in Tulse Hill in London, a boy named John, aged 16, fell as Britain's 250th knife crime victim of the year. To reiterate, he died in the street later that night. I want to highlight that, at 16, that boy was the same age as myself and perhaps many others in this Chamber, and that is no age for a life to be taken. An even more shocking fact is that the youngest recent knife crime victim was aged 13.

There is a terrifying epidemic spreading throughout London, paralysing youth with fear. There is fear going to school and leaving school—it has been branded the "stabbing hour"—and fear about going to the park or even leaving their own street. In February, 250 knives were seized within one week—a week—of which 183 were from teens, who were arrested for carrying knives. We ask the question: why carry? To quote a boy, aged 15, from south-east London, "Boys carry blades because they want protection from each other." What kind of society are we living in where people have to carry knives because they want protection from each other?

Sadiq Khan recently said that solving the issue of knife crime will take a decade. What will happen in that decade? That is a known uncertainty, and we all know that this is an issue that will not solve itself over time. So I urge you today to seek change, and to vote for this momentous issue, which goes from region to region—from Bedford to Great Yarmouth, and from areas of London to Manchester and to Wales. It will not affect every single person intimately, but it will affect us in some way. We are speaking about votes at 16 today, but how can we vote for a Government who are struggling to protect us?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I want to hear a contribution from the west midlands.

Several MYPs rose—

Mr Speaker: This is an extraordinary state of affairs. You are all so keen. I tell you what: two of you can have a minute each, but it has to be a minute each. Is that a deal? Yes.

Awez Khan (West Midlands): I am from Birmingham. For 11 years now, I have known this one boy, and I call him my right hand man, my brother. Recently, unfortunately, he was stabbed and killed. When he passed away, the general question I asked everyone involved in gangs in the area I live in—I live in a very poor and socially deprived area—was, “Why do you get involved?” The simple answer of a lot of them is that they have no other way. They have no hope, no aspirations and no other option really. They have a lack of opportunity and a lack of hope in them.

When he passed away, a lot of these gang members did put down the thing, and when I put myself forward and talked to them as an MYP from that kind of area and knowing the types of people involved in knives, guns and gang crime in general, they all told me the same thing: when you have hope and aspiration in yourself, you know what you are doing, and with that opportunity in society you will be fine. Unfortunately, there is unequal opportunity for everyone in society, and due to that a lot of people just automatically go into gang life and a lifestyle that is not what they want. We should put forward this motion to give equal opportunity to everyone in society.

Claudia Rea (West Midlands): Do you know that you are five times more likely to be stabbed by the knife that you are carrying than by one carried by someone else? Did you know that 10 months into 2018 we had already topped the amount of knife crime in 2017? The fact that people are so scared of today’s society that they have to carry a weapon with them in the 21st century is appalling and needs to be dealt with. I believe that a way to solve that problem is through a word that begins with E, ends with N and has nine letters—education. By teaching young people about the dangers of carrying a knife we will go a step further in minimising the amount of innocent lives that are taken on our streets. I urge you to vote for this motion this afternoon.

Mr Speaker: The last contributor I will call is from the south-east. He has been gesticulating at me with some intensity and persistence for a considerable period of time. Others have done that as well, and before I call him I wish to say—this happens every year—that I am sorry that I cannot call each and every one of you to speak. I would love to do that but there just is not time—that is the worst thing, and I think about it endlessly, but we cannot hear from everybody and I am very apologetic. There is no agenda to stop people speaking, it is just that time is our problem. I have tried to ensure a decent gender balance—we have monitored that throughout—and that we have heard from every part of the country and the constituent nations of the United Kingdom. With that, and with my tendering of apologies, let us hear from our friend from the south-east of England.

Athian Akec (London): I am from the London borough of Camden. The impact of knife crime on individuals is undeniable, and while politicians wish to police their

way out of a knife crime epidemic, it is simply not possible. We must focus on the root causes of knife crime: poverty, inequality, austerity and a lack of opportunity. We must petition the Government to put reason over rhetoric, compassion over indifference, and equality over austerity. As knife crime claims more lives in our country, never has so much been lost by so many because of the indecision of so few. We must stand for lives above knives, and we must put knife crime first. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I hope you will agree, my friends, that that truly was worth waiting for. Jeremy Corbyn is about to travel outside London, but he has just said to me that this is the best informed Parliament he has witnessed. *[Applause.]*

We now come to the Front-Bench winding-up speech for our final debate, so to conclude, from the West Midlands, please give a very warm and enthusiastic welcome to Haroon Irshad.

Haroon Irshad (West Midlands): Shukriya, Mr Speaker, Assalamu Alaikum to all that inhabit this famous room for changing democracy, and to my fellow MYPs. I would like to dedicate this speech to those who have fallen victim to knife crime across the UK. We look at knife crime as a threat to our society, and rightly so. Young people’s lives are on the line as we walk about in major cities such as Manchester, my very own Birmingham, and the city we are in today—London. We have heard about the efforts being made by Government, charities and campaigns to begin to tackle knife crime, with initiatives such as the knife bins in Erdington, Birmingham, while also highlighting the campaign “No Knives, Better Lives”. We have heard that the Government have allocated £1 million for community groups and £10 million for an early action fund to begin to tackle knife crime, but is this enough when we are still having our lives stolen from us because of a household object?

It is important that we recognise that knife crime is just one branch of gang crime culture in the UK. Gangs are formed when a vast number of lower class, deprived young people are left with nothing else to do and nowhere to go; where money is diminished and where all hope is lost. Gangs are a representation of a never-ending snowball effect which rolls on, grows bigger and sucks young people into a spiralling vortex of committing violent crimes, so you’d better believe that I think gangs are a hammering threat to us as young people.

I will be the first to hold my hand up and say that violence will never stop, but it must be suppressed for the betterment of our young people, with violence being varied and targeted. In the west midlands, there are 25 gun crimes per 100,000 people, which is higher than in London. We have seen a 40% rise in hate crime from 2016 to 2018, with 52% of it aimed at Muslims. In Derry, Northern Ireland, in the week of the troubles 74 petrol bombs were thrown at police in one night. I warn you, MYPs, there is more to stats than meets the eye.

This is an opportunity for us to use our influence as youth representatives to encourage decision makers to open their eyes and look at what is harming our society: the long-term factors, such as the impact that cuts to youth services have had on youth violence is quite damning to see in urban areas. You are not going to

believe I'm going to say this, but the idea of "clout"—how people rate you through the actions you perform in a gang, as well as scoreboards on pavements and in alleyways for the amount of people you have stabbed—is abhorrent and needs to be tackled on the ground and at its roots, in its immediacy. I dedicate this speech to those who have fallen victim to knife crime and gang crime.

As we move to the end of this enriched day of debating, it is crucial for us to remember our roles as representatives of our local areas. Tackling knife crime is the No. 1 issue from the Make Your Mark ballot. As we've heard, it is an epidemic plaguing young people's lives. This is our chance to stand up and change democracy. We have the perfect opportunity to do so as we go to vote. So today, my fellow MYPs, we are left with the keys to saving the lives of hundreds and thousands of young people! What more is there left to say?

Mr Speaker: Haroon, thank you for completing the debate with pizzazz, gusto and your very own personal supply of electricity. I think we are extremely appreciative of what you have done. I am appreciative, and I know my parliamentary colleagues are appreciative, of all the contributions we have heard today, which have been stunningly good. They have been stunningly good partly because of the quality of the delivery, but above all because of the content and the nature of the message. It is palpably clear—it is undeniably obvious—that the speeches have been authentic. People have spoken both from head and from heart. That, frankly, is what makes a great contribution to public debate.

My friends, the Youth Parliament will now vote on which of the five subjects debated today it will select as its two national campaign issues for 2019. In the Lobby, my friends, you will be given two ballot papers: one white paper for the two reserved or UK-wide subjects; and one green paper for the three devolved, for today's purposes, England-only subjects. You should place an "x" in the box next to the subject for which you would like to vote on each ballot paper and hand the completed ballot papers to the Doorkeepers in the Lobby. Afterwards, please return to your place in the Chamber.

Those of you on my right should leave the Chamber by the door behind me and turn left into the Aye Lobby behind you. Those on my left should leave by the doors at the far end and turn left into the No Lobby behind you. Members of House of Commons staff will be on hand to assist you. Friends and colleagues, I am pleased to advise you that the Division Lobbies are now open. See you ere long.

3.5 pm

Division.

Anniversary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act

3.20 pm

Mr Speaker: Friends, I hope that you can give a simple answer to this question, and I hope that the answer is yes. Have you all voted?

Members of the Youth Parliament: Yes.

Mr Speaker: Good, thank you. Members of the Youth Parliament will now make speeches on the anniversary of the 1918 Representation of the People Act. First, please welcome, from the East Midlands, Molly Lambert.

Molly Lambert (East Midlands): I really wanted to make a joke about dancing up here like Theresa—thank you for stealing that!

I would like to start my speech by asking anyone here who identifies as a woman to raise their hand. I would like you to look around and notice that if we were sat here 100 years ago, more than half of this room would be empty simply because the people currently occupying the seats are women. That is why, as a woman, I am so thankful for being here, for being listened to and for being free to choose a career, a partner, my place in society—all things that I would not have the opportunity to do if it were not for the work of the suffragettes of the past. While they were campaigning only for the vote, to them—and to me—it was more than that. The vote was power; it was freedom.

Since that time, the purpose of feminism has become misunderstood in today's society. I have often heard people say, "Feminism isn't needed because we have equality." However, the fact that according to Girls Not Brides one in five young women is married off as a child bride and the fact that women around the world are still denied access to education simply because they are women show that we still need feminism.

What I am saying relates to the Representation of the People Act 1918 because the suffragettes dedicated themselves to fighting for equality—equality that is still lacking all over the world. We must reclaim feminism and use it to make positive, effective, needed change, because that is what feminism is. We need to make change like the suffragettes did. We need to reclaim it for the millions of women out there who cannot be heard because they are being silenced. We are not being silenced; we have a voice, so why aren't we making any noise.

I could have stood up here and simply said thank you to the wonderful people who won some women the right to vote, but I believe that they would have much preferred me to stand here and tell you to go out and keep fighting for women less fortunate than ourselves. Thank yous don't cause change; actions do. Actions are the greatest thank you we can give the women who enabled me to stand here today and be listened to. With that, thank you for listening to me.

Mr Speaker: Molly, thank you for a poignant and truly beautiful speech, which I think will linger in the memories of all present for a long time to come. You absolutely lived up to the occasion, and you can be very proud of that.

Rachel Ojo (East of England): The Representation of the People Act 1918 was the beginning of the inclusion of women in our political system. It changed the mindsets of people at the time and meant that women were one step closer in their struggle for equality. I strongly believe that this event should be celebrated, in order to highlight the political injustices that women once endured. It pains me to know that other women in the past did not have a say in who governed the country and in issues that affected them. I am passionate about the rights of women, and I hold this Act in high regard as the beginning of a new democratic era.

The women of Essex played their part in the campaign for votes for women. Sisters Dorothea and Madeline Rock from Ingatestone both joined the Women's Social and Political Union. In 1911, both were sentenced for smashing windows. In a newspaper account, one of the sisters stated:

"This thing is not done as wanton damage—we have done it as a protest against being deprived of the vote."

The alderman in charge was unmoved, saying the women must be "either criminals or lunatics" and giving them imprisonment with hard labour. They both went on to make a difference; they both went on to speak at suffragette meetings in Essex and continue till this day to be an inspiration to many women. They are an inspiration for women like me and others in this Chamber today.

Is it too much to ask for women to have the same rights as men? As a Youth Parliament, we must continue to work towards a goal where everyone and anyone knows the importance and power held in every single vote.

Mr Speaker: Rachel, thank you very much indeed. I hope you enjoyed giving that speech as much as Members of the Youth Parliament and the wider audience will have enjoyed hearing it.

Sururah Ibrahim (London): It has been 100 years, 100 fruitful years of fighting for justice, but it has been 105 years since Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King's horse with courage in her heart, passion flowing through her veins and justice in her mind. I am proud to say that Emily was born in south-east London, on 11 October 1872. She refused to accept the way of a male-dominated society and so she gained a first-class degree from Oxford University even though women were not allowed to gain degrees at the time. In 1906, she joined the Women's Social and Political Union, founded by Emmeline Pankhurst, and she was the suffragette famously known for hiding in the broom cupboard during the night of the 1911 census. In that way, she was able to record her address as being the House of Commons on the night of the 1911 census. Emmeline Pankhurst wrote in her book that Emily decided that only the loss of her life would put an end to the intolerable treatment of women. So Emily Wilding Davison threw herself under the King's horse with courage in her heart, passion flowing through her veins and justice in her mind. Her headstone reads "Deeds not words". It has been 100 years, 100 fruitful years of fighting for justice, but it has been 105 years since Emily Wilding Davison showed us that deeds, not words, will put an end to the intolerable treatment of women.

Mr Speaker: Wow. That was some moving and charismatic speech. Sururah, thank you very much indeed.

Samah Khalil (North West): It has been 100 years since all men and some women were given the right to vote. The 1918 Act was the first step towards women's voices being heard. It paved the way for the Representation of the People (Equal Franchise) Act 1928 some 10 years later, which gave women the vote on equal terms as men. As a woman speaking in the Houses of Parliament 100 years on from that first Act in 1918, I cannot help but feel indebted to those women who fought so hard not only for their voices to be heard but for the voices of all women to be recognised.

A major group crucial in that fight for the right to vote was the Women's Social and Political Union, more commonly known as the suffragettes. The 1901 petition for the vote, signed by almost 30,000 working women in the north-west's textile mills, inspired the formation of the WSPU in Manchester in 1903, and the organisation was fundamental in the fight for women's rights.

The first London branch was formed on the docks of Canning Town by a suffragette from my home town of Oldham. Her name was Annie Kenney. Her impact was so great that my local MP, Jim McMahon, has been working tirelessly towards placing a statue of her in our town centre. Annie Kenney's political activism started much like my own: in Oldham, and with the belief that it does not matter where you come from, so long as you know that what you are fighting for is right; and that it does not matter how much resistance there may be, so long as you are willing to keep defending your cause and to never give up.

Annie Kenney went above and beyond to ensure that we live in a fair, democratic society, where, regardless of gender, we have an equal say, an equal voice and an equal influence in decision making. One hundred years on, here I am, still grateful to those women and what they achieved, but also determined, as they would want, never to become complacent and never to forget that their fight is far from over. I know women—friends—who still, even today, struggle to speak out. The legacy of women such as Annie Kenney and the Pankhursts reminds us of the importance of equality. It is their dedication to deeds, not words, that we must all remember, not only as elected representatives of young people but as the force for change.

We have a duty to hold ourselves and our adult leaders to account, to ensure that they fulfil the deeds that they promise, in order to create a better future. A future where the voice of young people in our democracy is no longer frowned upon or laughed at, as women were back then, but the norm in a fair, democratic society. We can do this. We will do this. To my fellow MYPs: no more words, just deeds. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Samah. This really is the highlight of the year, is it not? It is a wonderful and awe-inspiring occasion, and I regard witnessing the progress of this Parliament as a great privilege. I welcome, and ask you all to welcome, from Northern Ireland, our next speaker, Anna McElhinny.

Anna McElhinny (Northern Ireland): Look at our leaders across the UK: Arlene Foster in Northern Ireland, Nicola Sturgeon in Scotland, Theresa May here in London and, of course, Carwyn Jones in Wales. Three quarters of the leaders of our nations are women. It is almost unthinkable that, 100 years ago, these women would not even have been able to vote, let alone lead some of the biggest parties in UK politics.

The first suffrage society in Ireland was the North of Ireland Women's Suffrage Society, formed in 1872 by Isabella Tod, a Scotswoman who had been educated at home by her mother, who was from County Monaghan. In 1909, it changed its name to the Irish Women's Suffrage Society, and in 1912 it carried out the first recorded suffrage militant act in Ireland, with its members smashing the windows of the General Post Office in Belfast.

Suffrage movements in Ireland did not receive the same amount of attention as in the rest of the UK, mainly because of a little thing called the Home Rule movement. However, votes for women was an issue that crossed the divide between unionists and nationalists at the time—something that our politicians in Northern Ireland today could probably learn a little something from.

Mr Speaker: Thank you, Anna. We should all remember those words; I hope that we will. Next, from Scotland, please welcome Abigail Wallace.

Abigail Wallace (Scotland): I want to speak to you today about an inspiring woman who was one of the leaders of the suffrage cause in Scotland in the early 20th century. Elsie Inglis is well known as one of the first female doctors in Scotland, but Elsie's other claim to fame is that she also campaigned for women to gain the right to vote.

When people think about the fight for women's votes, many think first of the suffragettes, but there was more than one side to the suffrage movement. Elsie, as a suffragist, believed that the fight for women's votes could and should be peaceful and democratic. She was the secretary of the Scottish Federation of Women's Suffrage Societies. She worked tirelessly for the suffrage cause, speaking at up to four meetings a week across Scotland.

When the first world war arrived, Elsie offered to set up hospitals staffed by qualified women, but in response the War Office told her to go home and sit still. As you can guess, Elsie did not go home and sit still. Instead, she set up a field hospital staffed entirely by women, which helped save hundreds of soldiers' lives. This reinforced the suffragists' message that women were equally as valuable to society as men, and thus deserved the same voting rights.

In summary, Elsie was a smart, driven, formidable and inspiring woman, and few people made a greater contribution to the women's suffrage movement in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: Abigail, thank you for that. Next, from the South East of England, please welcome Ijeoma Ogbuju.

Ijeoma Ogbuju (South East): Crazy, determined, too emotional, fighters, dangerous, powerful—just some of the words used to describe the suffragettes in the 1900s. But the one word that I would use to describe them is fearless. Despite initially not knowing what the consequences of their actions might be—imprisonment, sexual assault or even, for some, death—they still chose to fight endlessly for women's right to vote.

Emmeline Pankhurst, a famous suffragette, once said:

"We are here, not because we are law breakers; we are here in our efforts to become law-makers."

Born on 14 July 1858, Emmeline Pankhurst never truly imagined that she would go on to help create a movement so big that young people like me would continue to

remember and celebrate it for years to come. In 1908 she and her two daughters founded the Women's Social and Political Union, a militant-orientated group fighting to give British women the right to vote. However, the road to achieving this was not an easy one. Emmeline was arrested many times, and even spent time in prison. However, she used the imprisonment to her advantage, by exposing the terrible treatment she received, which gained her media coverage and support from viewers and readers alike.

Suffragettes like Emmeline Pankhurst have not only given young women like me the chance to vote in local and national elections, but inspired us to never give up fighting for the things that we all believe in. I turned 18 this year and gained the right to vote—a right that I will never, ever take for granted. I ask you all to join me in never, ever taking for granted our right to vote. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. How powerful that message is, about remembering that you have that right to vote. I do not say use or lose it, but in once sense it is true that you either use it or you lose it—not in the sense that it is taken away from you, but in the sense that if you do not use it, you are losing the chance to shape and configure events. I always find it frustrating if people say, "Oh, no, I'm not bothered. I don't think I shall take the trouble to vote," when you think of the struggles that people went through to get the vote and when you reflect on the fact that there are still huge numbers of people around the world who do not have the right to vote. I would go so far as to say that we have no moral right whatever to treat our right to vote with flippancy and we have every moral obligation to treat it with respect. Let us now hear from Alana-Millie Penney, from the South West.

Alana-Millie Penney (South West): This is an original poem about how imprisoned suffragette women chose to endure a hunger strike while in Exeter Prison, rather than to take the easy option of a fine:

"The judge gave us two options,
Prison or a fine
We chose prison,
Lock us up, we shout!

Behind cold metal bars we stand,
Caged like animals in a circus.
Summoning our ideas,
Dreaming of the havoc we can cause.
We have to rebel,
I call for a hunger strike.

Nine o'clock,
Twelve o'clock,
Five o'clock,
All the meals left untasted.
"Will you not reconsider?"
"No!"
Only the press were willing to be fed.

Two days passed.
They refused to let us die,
Too bad for their name.
Force won.

Our determination to withstand the pain,
Was lost to power.
Deprived jaws are prised apart,
Heads seized and bodies held down.
Strangers fingers trying to locate a gap,
Waiting for the inevitable surrender.

Trembling with fear,
The steel instrument was pressed against my bleeding gums.
My are jaws wrenched apart,
A rubber tube thrust down my throat.
I was unconscious of anything but a mad revolt of struggling.
'That's all'

Gasping for breath and sobbing convulsively.
My only thought being that I had to withstand days more of
this torment.

Bloody, bruised and broken,
We were empty.

As exhausted as we are,
We leave our barred confinement filled with more passion than
ever

The fires of hell are burning, no one can stop us now
It's a fierce war that will be celebrated by generations to come.

We are determined!
We are powerful!
We...are the women of the world!"

Mr Speaker: Alana, thank you warmly. The penultimate contributor, who comes from the West Midlands, and whom I want you enthusiastically to welcome, is Mahfuza Khandokar. [*Applause.*]

Mahfuza Khandokar (West Midlands): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

"On Saturday afternoon the wardress forced me onto the bed and two doctors came in. While I was held down a nasal tube was inserted. It is two yards long, with a funnel at the end... The end is put up the right and left nostril on alternative days. The sensation is most painful—the drums of the ears seem to be bursting and there is a horrible pain in the throat and the breast. The tube is pushed down 20 inches... The one holding the funnel end pours the liquid down."

That was part of the account of Mary Leigh, a suffragette from Manchester who was sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment after conducting a roof-top protest at Bingley Hall, Birmingham on 22 September 1909, where the Prime Minister of the time was addressing a meeting from which all women had been excluded. Leigh's graphic account of the horrors of forced feeding was published while she was still in prison, and with the fear that she might die and become a martyr, it was decided to release her. However, only a few days after that, she ended up in prison again elsewhere for another act of defiance against the unfair voting system.

She was just one woman: one woman among countless others who were all equally as important as each other, and who were all stuck in this continuous cycle of fighting for women's right to vote—until 6 February 1918, when the Representation of the People Act was passed, reforming the electoral system in Great Britain and Ireland. Finally they knew their breaths had not been wasted.

Mr Speaker: Mahfuza, thank you for that. The final speech before our closing statements comes from a representative from Yorkshire and Humber. Please welcome Sylvia Cullen. [*Applause.*]

Sylvia Cullen (Yorkshire and Humber): A hundred and one years ago, I, as a young woman, would have been virtually voiceless. I would have been property, belonging to my father or husband. I would have been a commodity used only to cook, clean, and raise children. The idea that one day I would work, own a company or sit in a Youth Parliament such as the one we all sit in would be ridiculed. However, a monumental change was on the horizon.

When, 100 years ago, the patriarchal society of the time decided to give women the vote, they were opening the doors to a wave of change. Women now had to be listened to. Our opinions were now valid and important because we were now within the electorate and therefore of equal value to the men who had dominated our lives for so long. As is the case with all societal change, the battle was won, but the war is still continuing. Nevertheless, the long-running tradition of silencing women was changing, and with it came a revolution like nothing ever seen before. The voice of the woman rang out. Kept down for too long, we rose and we shone.

The battle for equality, both politically and societally, continues both for men and women, and we must continue to fight and campaign until all are freed from prejudice based purely on gender. But to the women who gave their lives and freedoms so that I may stand here today, equal to the men who surround me, I say thank you from the bottom of my heart. Your courage, initiative and drive gave me the freedom to stand and address this assembly today, and for that I am eternally indebted. I am named after suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst, and I can think of no better legacy to try to follow. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: What a wonderful culmination of a sequence of closing speeches by Youth Parliamentarians, which I sense had a real resonance with everybody here present and with very, very large numbers of people, including all those who voted in the Make Your Mark ballot around the country. It really is a most fitting and heartwarming conclusion to the Youth Parliament part of our proceedings, which is of course overwhelmingly the most important part. Thank you, again, each of you who has just delivered that exceptional speech for delivering it, both in terms of your content and the obvious sincerity with which you articulated it.

Now, I hope, as we approach the closing speeches of the whole day, you will give a very, very warm welcome to the shadow Leader of the House of Commons, Valerie Vaz. [*Applause.*]

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you; I am going to take you on the campaign trail.

Mr Speaker, thank you very much for chairing these debates and for your commitment in ensuring that the Youth Parliament can be heard. You have made an incredible innovation in this place, and we thank you, all of us, from the bottom of our hearts, don't we? [*Applause.*] If Mr Speaker had not done that, we would not be celebrating 10 years of the Youth Parliament.

I have some other thanks to make. Thank you to the British Youth Council and to your teachers, supporters, mentors and families—all up there in the Gallery. Shall we say thank you? [*Applause.*] I thank everyone here in Parliament: the Serjeant at Arms, Phil and his team, the police, the Education Service and Jessica Taylor, our photographer, who silently goes about her work making historical documents. Of course, I also thank you, the honourable Members of the Youth Parliament. You have worked hard to come to this place. For some of you, it may just be for one day, but for others, it may be your future place of work.

Just as you heard from the Prime Minister this morning, welcoming you to this place, the Leader of the Opposition, who was in the Chamber to listen to your top debate, wants me to read out a message. He said:

“It was a privilege to join you earlier, and to be able to watch the very high standard of discussion in your debate on knife crime. This is such an important subject which must be seriously tackled by our society so we can end a scourge that is taking the lives of too many people.

The strength of the UK Youth Parliament is its celebration of democratic principles—the permanent right of all of us to be able to decide our own collective future, chose our representatives, and pick our leaders. We also get to sack them too, if we wish.”

He said that. [*Laughter.*] He went on:

“That matters because the great changes in history have always come from below. Real change happens when people come together and demand it—it is almost never handed down from leaders above.

This year celebrates 100 years since the first women in the UK were able to vote—something which was only won by protest, struggle, and women demanding an equal voice in Parliament. Yet after all these years, we are still fighting for equality, and still fighting for genuinely equal rights for all.

I have always believed that the people who make the best decisions are those who are directly affected by, or directly involved in, the question at hand. It is absolutely right that young people, such as all of you, are given this platform to speak for yourselves about the issues you care about.

After all, politics is about getting stuck in, and speaking up for the causes you believe in.

Rt Hon. Jeremy Corbyn MP
Leader of HM Opposition.”

Through Make Your Mark, over 1.1 million young people between the ages of 11 and 18 voted to highlight the scourge of knife crime. There has been a 16% increase on the previous year, with the highest number of knife crimes since 2011. We need to find out the causes of why someone feels the need to take a life and why those young lives are lost. They are doing that in Glasgow, and the Mayor of London is committed to doing the same. Vicky Foxcroft, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford, works every day to find a reason. She is sorry she cannot be here, but she is delayed in her constituency.

On your second topic, there are now more referrals to child and adolescent mental health services, at about 186 a day. The Public Accounts Committee has recently held an inquiry into children’s mental health, and we await its report. Last year, Tracey Crouch, the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford was here, and she knows the effect of the scourge of gambling on mental health and wants to stop it now.

On your third topic, yes, you should be paid the same for the same work as everybody else. Today, we do not celebrate but we remember Equal Pay Day. That is the day from which—from now—until the end of the year women do their work for free, because we are not paid

the same as men, and this in the year that we celebrate 100 years of some women getting the vote. There is also the injustice to the WASPI women.

Your fourth topic is that when there are homes standing empty there should not be homelessness, and of course we agree with votes at 16.

Democracy is only safe when we show up, and you showed up today to debate these important issues, just as other young people have shown up around the world. Tabata Amaral de Pontes is 24 years old and has been elected to the lower House in Brazil. She was here yesterday as one of the Women of the World MPs. Emma González showed up when her friends were gunned down, and she founded Never Again and the March for our Lives. Young people from a school in Brent showed up yesterday, demanding a real living wage for cleaners at football games. The suffragettes and the suffragists showed up, as did the young men who lost their lives so that we could be here today. They showed up for us and fought in two world wars, and we remember them 100 years after the end of the first world war.

I saw the installation “Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red” at the Tower of London, which commemorated the start of the first world war. That is the title of a poem by an unknown soldier from that war, and 888,246 ceramic red poppies represented British and colonial soldiers who lost their lives. The arts play an important part in helping us to understand the world. I was lucky enough to go to the Royal Albert Hall last Tuesday for the Music for Youth Proms. It was great to see the recorder, xylophone and brass bands, and for the first time, a 21-year-old, Peter Morgan, composed the finale. He called it “Let’s Get Together”, which is what you have done today—you have got together, to debate and to find a solution.

You did not denigrate each other but you debated the issues, and that is something we can learn from you. Make sure you report back for Parliament Week next week in your school, organise a debate on one of your topics, hear the voices of your colleagues, and write to your MP and say you want a debate. Last week, I asked for one of your topics to be debated in Parliament. Why not start an online petition? You need only 100,000 signatures, and it will have to be debated in Westminster Hall. Honourable Members of the Youth Parliament, you seized the day; you showed up. Thank you for gracing Parliament with your dignity, eloquence and passion. [*Applause.*]

Mr Speaker: Valerie, thank you from the bottom of my heart—I think the reaction shows what colleagues and Members of the Youth Parliament thought of what you had to say, and it was hugely appreciated. I will now ask you to welcome a speaker from the Government Benches who is with us today. Andrew Bowie was elected in 2017 as Member of Parliament for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine. From my recollection of the date of the 2017 general election, I think that he stood for election 17 months ago yesterday on 8 June 2017, and was returned to that constituency. He currently serves as Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. Andrew has been with us throughout the day. He has made the commitment; we are delighted to have him here; and we look forward to what he has to say.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine): I am called last to speak again, Mr Speaker—it happens every time.

Good afternoon MYPs, and what a huge pleasure it is to be here with you today for the 18th Youth Parliament, and the 10th held in the House of Commons. It is great to see the House full of so many young people—it makes a change, I assure you. I am very glad that Mr Speaker and Valerie have remained in their places because I am not quite ready to be the Father of the House just yet, although I would be if they had not. I am not ashamed to say that I fervently hope that one day in the not-too-distant future, I might be able to turn to the Government Benches behind me and see such a diverse and representative group of elected parliamentarians looking back at me. It is fantastic to see.

May I just say before I go what a day today has been? What a privilege to sit in the Under-Gallery at the back of the Chamber and hear so many passionate, enthusiastic, well informed and, most importantly in Mr Speaker's eyes, concise speeches. Mr Speaker, I am sure you would agree with me that I and my colleagues could take some lessons on that—and probably on how to conduct ourselves in this Chamber, but I will move swiftly on.

We have heard speeches on so many issues that, as the Leader of the House said first thing this morning, are important not just to young people but to our whole country: homelessness, equal pay for equal work, mental health, knife crime and votes at 16. What today has demonstrated, and what you have all demonstrated beyond any doubt, is that a person's age has absolutely no bearing on their skill, their talent, their wisdom or their ability to make a concise political argument.

I am here today in my role as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. One of the great things about working for the Department, besides the free FA Cup tickets, is that it is the Department responsible for youth policy and Youth Voice. That means that the Minister for Sport and Civil Society, my boss, and I, get to engage with and speak to young people the length and breadth of the country, as I am so pleased to do today. The new Minister, Mims Davies, would genuinely have loved to be here today. I pass on her best wishes to you all. Unfortunately, she had prior engagements as she only got appointed last Tuesday, so I'm afraid you got the poor substitute. I will, of course, pass on to her just how inspirational and informative today's sitting has been. She and I look forward to working with you all in the coming months and years.

I congratulate you all on your achievements today, and on your work on Make Your Mark, which I was amazed to hear this morning got over 1 million votes. Every MP knows just how nerve-racking standing up and speaking in this place can be—although, I have to say, if any of you are as nervous as I was back in June 2017, you are hiding it incredibly well. Most of all, I have been struck by the variety of the debates and the differing opinions on display. What today has demonstrated beyond any doubt—this is a point that I have made time and time again since I got involved in politics after I left the Navy quite a few years ago now—is that young people are not some strange homogeneous group who think the same, speak the same and look the same. Young people represent every idea, every view and every section of society at large. You lot just do it with a lot more enthusiasm than us cynical grown-ups.

So many of you have shared moving stories on how the issues of knife crime and mental health have affected your peers and communities. I want to thank you for being brave enough to come here to this place and to speak up on what can be emotionally difficult subjects. I want you to know that we are listening to your concerns and that the Government understand the importance of hearing directly from you. The Minister believes it is absolutely essential that the Government engage meaningfully with young people and listen to your voices in policy making. Your work through the UK Youth Parliament is one way we support Youth Voice, but we are delighted to be expanding our Youth Voice policy work in the coming months.

In the civil society strategy, which was published in the summer, we announced three new Youth Voice projects that will involve young people directly in policy decision making. We will be providing opportunities for young people to get involved in developing youth policies through two new Youth Voice groups and a digital youth engagement project. These will enable young people to co-create and evaluate projects across government. We want these groups to really—like, really this time—get involved in policy process to ensure that young people are able to have a say in policies which affect them.

In wider youth policy, we are committed to creating more social action opportunities for young people through the #iwill campaign and fund—and no, I did not have to write out the word “hashtag”—and the National Citizen Service, which I sincerely hope will one day be available across all the United Kingdom, including Scotland. DCMS, and indeed the wider Government, would love to see even more young people getting involved in their communities and making social action a habit for life.

I would like to end with some thank yous. First, I would like to thank all of you for your hard work in this year's Make Your Mark ballot and in setting a new record. It is genuinely outstanding to have engaged over 1.1 million young people in the ballot. That really shows how Make Your Mark is a great example of democracy in action. Breaking the million mark would not have been possible without all your efforts to promote the ballot in your local communities and among your peers.

I would also like to thank Jo Hobbs and everyone at the British Youth Council. Your support for young people is truly valued, and we recognise your work to support Youth Voice at all levels around the UK. Everybody in this Chamber, please join me in a humongous round of applause for everyone involved at the BYC. *[Applause.]*

Of course, I have to thank the staff, the Serjeant at Arms, the police and you, Mr Speaker. Without you and your commitment to the UK Youth Parliament, your commitment to the young people of this country and your genuine commitment to making our democracy more accessible to all, this important day would be nothing like it is. For your steadfast support and commitment to it and all its Members over the last 10 years—and for your enduring commitment to the House and British democracy in general—all of us say thank you. *[Applause.]*

MYPs, it has been a huge honour to address and listen to you this afternoon, but before I finish I want to go back to the very beginning of today and the words of Ali Raja, one of the MYPs for London. It is so apt that this meeting takes place but two days before Remembrance

Sunday. We should never forget that the only reason we are able to sit here today, the only reason we are able to debate, challenge each other and question how our country is run—the only reason democracy exists at all it—is because young men, and more recently young women, many of them the same age as people in the Chamber today, were willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice and defend democracy so that we might live in peace and freedom. I can think of no better tribute to them, on this special weekend, than to have this House, the mother of Parliaments, packed to the rafters with passionate, enthusiastic voices for change, espousing views of all kinds, from a whole new generation. So keep it up, keep going, never let up, and never let that passionate, burning flame—that desire to change this country and this world for the better—go out. Thank you very much. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Andrew, thank you very warmly indeed for that. You can see how well it went down with everyone here present. It was hugely appreciated. I want now to call Marcus Dyke from London.

Marcus Dyke (London): Members of the Youth Parliament, it has been a long day, so I will keep this short. We have had many thank yous already from Members of Parliament.

First, well done! Make Your Mark has finally reached over 1.1 million young people. It is phenomenal: the highest number of votes ever in Make Your Mark. Now, if that's not making history, I don't know what is. That is what we have achieved in the last year, but we have also today looked back over the last 100 years to the Representation of the People Act 1918.

I come now to the most important part of my speech: the thank yous. I thank all the unsung heroes without whom we would not be here today. First, can we give a huge heartfelt round of applause to the House of Commons staff, particularly Phil Howse, the Principal Doorkeeper, and everyone at the UK Parliament's education and engagement team? *[Applause.]* Let us also thank the British Youth Council, without which we would not have a UK Youth Parliament, and the amazing team of dedicated and enthusiastic staff and volunteers who are 100% committed to championing and supporting the voices of young people.

Today, we have been joined by some of the most inspirational politicians of the 21st century. Can we give a very special tribute to the Leader of the House of Commons, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), whose support throughout the years has been invaluable not only to Members of the Youth Parliament but to all young people across the UK? Providing young people with such a bespoke opportunity is truly amazing. I am honoured to be working alongside the people who make this happen.

We cannot forget either the House of Commons Library; the shadow Leader of the House, Valerie Vaz MP; Wes Streeting MP; Andrew Bowie MP, the Parliamentary Private Secretary at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport; and the former Minister for Civil Society, Tracey Crouch MP, who has been a fantastic advocate for Youth Voice. She built it into the core of the civil society strategy. On behalf of the UK Youth Parliament, I would like to welcome the new Minister, Mims Davies MP, who we look forward

to working with to ensure that young people's views are at the heart of all Government decisions that affect the lives of young people. *[Applause.]*

Of course, I also thank all Members of the Youth Parliament, and all Members of Parliament in the UK who have supported us throughout the year and have joined us today.

That is almost everyone, but, before I forget, there is one man who really is a true inspiration to all of us: a man who never fails to amuse, and a man who is at the heart of UK democracy. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for all that you do, not just for Parliament, but for the Youth Parliament as well. Thank you for your ongoing support, both inside these four walls and, indeed, outside.

Now, everyone, it is that time of year again when we depart from the Chamber, make our way back to our constituencies, and work tirelessly with our local politicians and local authorities to provide young people with the opportunity to make change. Whether your main focus is going to be knife crime, mental health, or any other issue raised in the Make Your Mark consultation, from me, good luck.

Members of Parliament, Members of the Youth Parliament, Mr Speaker, British Youth Council, youth workers, the House of Commons: thank you for your ongoing support for Make Your Mark and everything that the UK Youth Parliament does. I hope you will all join me in a massive round of applause for every single person who has ever given support for the Youth Parliament. Thank you! *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Marcus, thank you for that. You have thanked everybody, and in some style. In a moment I will announce the results of the vote, but before I do, I want to remind people—the British Youth Council support workers, parliamentary staff and guests—of the need for the return of their votes for the Paul Boskett memorial awards. Those votes must be returned, I believe, to British Youth Council staff. Please do so, because the awards are enormously important to their beneficiaries, and as our—your—testament to the legacy of the very remarkable man that Paul Boskett was: somebody who championed you and stood up for you. It is our duty and privilege to remember him, and to preserve his legacy.

I now have the results of the votes. In respect of the reserved UK-wide issue, there were four spoilt ballot papers, and the votes cast were as follows. "Tackling Homelessness", 33 votes; "Mental Health", 107 votes; "Put an end to Knife Crime", 115 votes. *[Applause.]* So "Put an end to Knife Crime" is your UK-wide campaign for the year. Thank you for voting, and for what you have said during the debates.

So far as the other choice is concerned—and that is the non-reserved matter—there were two options. The votes on the yellow ballot paper were as follows. "Equal Pay, Equal Work", 110 votes; "Votes at 16", 143 votes. *[Applause.]*

You have made your choice. Your challenge is to make a success of it, and I hope you feel strengthened, buttressed, reinforced, energised by your efforts today, and by the support you have received, to redouble your efforts and to ensure that your campaigns prevail, that you achieve your objectives and that your policy priorities become those of the Government, of Parliament and of the country as a whole.

[Mr Speaker]

We are, indeed, drawing to a close. It has been for me the most enormous honour and privilege to chair these proceedings for the 10th successive year. In going to your annual conference, I have always said that I will come every year, but not as a picket, and I do not want to be an unwelcome attendee or a kind of nuisance bystander; I will come to your annual sitting in the summer of next year if, and only if, you want me to do so. From my point of view, it is a tonic, a fillip and a feature of the annual political and parliamentary calendar to which I enormously look forward, as everybody who knows me, is around me, works with me or is part of my family is all too well aware.

There are some things, forgive me, that I want to say. I know we have had thank yous expressed, and beautifully, by Marcus and by so many other people—wonderfully by Andrew, by Valerie and, this morning, by Wes and by the Leader of the House of Commons herself, Andrea Leadsom—but let me just underline this first point. Thank you to everyone who has translated from conception to execution the annual sitting of the UK Youth Parliament here on the green leather Benches in the Chamber of the House of Commons. That has taken forethought, application, persistence, teamwork, resource and resolve, but I hope you will agree that it has been hugely worth it.

I thanked your support workers earlier, and I thank those who have encouraged you within your families or your communities. I underline in triplicate the thanks that have rightly been expressed, of which I personally am extraordinarily appreciative, to all those in the service of the House of Commons who have made today a great success. We should never take it for granted.

I went to a farewell dinner the other day for somebody in the sports world who is just stepping down from a key role, and he gave a speech after dinner and, absolutely rightly, he remembered to thank everyone who had helped him do his job that much more effectively. I want to thank Phil Howse and his team of Doorkeepers, because they do a magnificent, unfussy but unstinting and unfailingly effective and supportive job. Phil, thank you to you and your team. [Applause.]

Thank you to our Serjeant at Arms, the person responsible for security in this Chamber—Mohammed Kamal El-Hajji. I must admit that I am proud to say, and I hope he is not embarrassed, that I appointed this great man to his role. He does a wonderful job, and he is unfailingly supportive of me and of all my colleagues. Mohammed, well done, stay strong at all times, and thank you. [Applause.]

Thank you to our young, upcoming, superb team of Clerks at the Table. [Applause.] They are always efficient; they have a terrific grasp of procedure; and these are the people who have usually made the career choice to serve Parliament behind the scenes, which is rather analogous to the way in which people make a choice to serve as civil servant in Government Departments, doing precious, invaluable and frankly indispensable work, but not seeking the limelight. What they have done is very important.

Of course, thank you, I say very publicly, to my team. I have been supported today here in the Chamber by Peter Barratt, who has been Speaker's Secretary for the last seven and a half years, and has been with me in the Speaker's Office throughout my tenure of nine years and four months to date. Peter has been supported

today, as he is supported always, by Ian Davis, the Assistant Secretary. He has been in that role, if memory serves, also for the last seven and a half years, and before that served in the Speaker's Office, as he has done throughout my tenure. Just as he and Peter served my predecessor, they have served me. They do a brilliant job.

Alongside them, there is a team back in the office beavering away working on other projects, all hands to the pump, to enable me to do that much better a job and to enable the function of the House to be efficiently served. I also want to mention my media adviser and communications officer, who is a tremendous support and deploys her skill, patience and wise counsel to try to help me. She has been here throughout the day and I am hosting an event this evening in Speaker's House, at which Jackie will be there to support me. In appreciation of Peter Barratt, Ian Davis and Jackie Storer, please put your hands together. [Applause.]

My friends, congratulations to you. It has been said many a time and often in the course of today's proceedings, but it bears brief repetition: congratulations on being you. [Applause.] Congratulations on being authentic. Congratulations on the hard work you have undertaken. Congratulations on saying what you mean and meaning what you say, and on standing up for the principles, the causes and the communities in which you believe.

Congratulations, as was rightly said by Andrew, Valerie and so many others today, on being the richly diverse and representative institution that you are, as the United Kingdom Youth Parliament, in terms of female representation, in terms of BAME representation, in terms of accommodating and giving voice and encouragement to people with disabilities, and in terms of championing almost effortlessly and without fuss those amongst your number from the LGBT community. I wish that that could be the norm; unexceptionable, scarcely requiring to be commented upon; as understood, unremarkable and unfazing for everybody as the passage of the seasons. If only we could get to that point where people remember that very simple, elementary, unarguable concept of equality of esteem; of treating all equally; of doing as you would be done by. It is not, frankly, very complicated, but it is a huge tribute to the UK Youth Parliament that the elder generation must follow where you lead.

Congratulations to you on all of that as well as on the quality of your contributions, the vision that you have for your country, the empathy you display with each other and, as has just been said, on one other thing. Today, without exception, you have all played the ball, not the man or the woman. You have made the arguments. You have differed, but you have not insulted. You have argued, but you have not cursed. You have clashed, but you have not abused. You have not even resisted the temptation to indulge in ad hominem personal attacks; I just do not think that the idea has occurred to you. That basic notion that you can disagree agreeably seems to be part of the DNA of the UK Youth Parliament, and three cheers to you for that. That, frankly, is as it should be.

I have told previous incarnations of the UK Youth Parliament this story, so forgive me and excuse me if you have heard me say it before, but it happens to have the advantage of being true, so I do not tire of repeating it. When I became Speaker and decided that I would chair the Youth Parliament for the reasons that I gave at the start of the day—I thought I would enjoy it, but I also wanted to show my respect—a senior Member of

the House, who has subsequently retired, came up to me puce, florid of face, almost inadvertently spitting at me, and said that he had heard that I was proposing to chair the proceedings of the UK Youth Parliament. I confirmed that that was indeed my plan, and he said, "I don't know whether you can recall"—I could hardly not recall—"that I am very profoundly opposed to the UK Youth Parliament coming to sit in the Chamber of the House of Commons to conduct their debates." I said, "Yes, I am well aware of that, and I don't knock you for holding that view, but the House has voted."

I admit that I was a Back Bencher at the time and had voted for the UK Youth Parliament to hold its debates. The retired Member then said, "More's the pity"—or words to that effect—and said, "But my particular objection, Mr Speaker, is that you apparently intend to confer the legitimacy of your office upon these proceedings, which I believe will be an abject failure—a complete disaster." I said, "I totally disagree with you about that, but why do you think that it will be a disaster?" Do you know what he said? He said, "Mr Speaker, I know what I am talking about. I have been here for a very long time and, with respect, very considerably longer than you, Mr Speaker." I then said, "I know that. I know exactly when you came into the House of Commons, but my point is this: what is your argument?" He said to me, "You mark my words, Mr Speaker. If those young people come to speak in the Chamber of the House of Commons, as apparently seems destined to happen, reinforced by you as Speaker—our Speaker—sitting in the Chair, then, at the very least, chewing gum will be left all over the Chamber."

Becoming even angrier, he said, "And you mark my words. At the worst, pen knives will be used, and damage will be inflicted upon these Benches which I love." So, I said to him, "I respect your right to hold your view and your candour in telling me directly, but I completely disagree. It is a monstrous calumny on the young people," and I made three predictions to him. Prediction one was that the Members of the Youth Parliament will be proud to come, prediction two was that they will speak well, and prediction three, as I said to him, was, "They will behave a damn sight better than we do." [Applause.] I am proud to say, not because it reflects well on me—it is not about me—but because it reflects so well on you, that, as you can tell, I was right on all three counts. You are proud to come, you speak well and you behave much better than we do.

I want you to know that, from whatever walk of life or community you come, you have a chance to make a difference. Do not let anyone tell you that you cannot. Some of you may come from fortunate backgrounds; some of you may come from more challenged situations, with less resource at your disposal. You can do it. I do not say that I come from a background of extreme poverty, but I am a state school boy. I do not have private wealth. My kids go to state schools. I depend upon and revere public services; I do not go private. I was determined to get into Parliament to fight for what I believed in and so can you—and so should you.

Remember that, in seeking to do so, it is not just about inspiration—talent, an important ingredient though that is—but perspiration. It is about indefatigability. It is about having a never-say-die attitude. It is about refusing to lose. It is about insisting on prevailing in the end. As Winston Churchill used to rather bluntly put it,

in times of adversity, when things look tough and you are not sure you will succeed, "KBO: keep bugging on". That, frankly, is what you have to do.

The Leader of the House quite rightly referred this morning to the excoriating criticism of this place in recent times, on the grounds of bullying and harassment. She underlined her determination to change this workplace for the better. I agree absolutely with that, and I have made clear very publicly my belief that we have to meet the highest standards. That means that there has to be independence in determining how we behave and where responsibility lies, ensuring that people can feel secure and confident of redress when insulted or abused.

I think it is quite important to emphasise that, as Speaker of the House of Commons, I have some powers in the Chamber but I do not control everything that goes on across the whole parliamentary estate; I am not a chief executive. The House of Commons Commission is not my board. The Commons are not my shareholders. Rather, I am, if I may put it this way, chief cheerleader for necessary, desired and often overdue change. I have tried to bring about change to humanise this place, installing a nursery in place of the shooting gallery and introducing an education centre that will allow 100,000 young people to come to this place to learn about the journey from 800 years ago to the rights and representation that we enjoy today. I have tried to make the staff profile of this place more diverse. I have supported the workplace equality networks.

Change is not a fact or an isolated instance, or a single high-falutin' initiative. Change is a process, not an event. It takes time, and it has to be committed to in order to be delivered. Above all, it requires people not pointing fingers at each other but working with each other. I ask you to accept, in listening to everything you have said and observing how you have behaved and recognising what values you hold dear, that none of you needs to doubt for one moment my utter commitment to continuing to champion the necessary and, as required, wholesale change in culture in Parliament for the better. I will do my bit, and I hope and am confident that others will do theirs.

All I do know is that, whatever else I have done so far in my tenure as Speaker—there are some important events ahead, and I look forward to continuing in my role in overseeing and exercising my judgment in relation to those—there will be nothing that I will ever be able to look back on and claim I enjoyed more than chairing the proceedings of the UK Youth Parliament, visiting your annual conference, going to schools, meeting young people, talking to them, being questioned by them and hearing from them; being set an example by our most spectacular young people, which Valerie and I and others should all seek to emulate. It is a privilege. With that, notwithstanding your remarkable courtesy and forbearance, my friends, you will be delighted to know that my speech is definitively at an end. [Applause.]

Thank you. I hope to see you soon. There is the great Peter Barratt—I was talking about him a few moments ago—who has served me so loyally for so long. I will conclude with the words I utter many times each day, notably at the conclusion of proceedings, in wishing you a safe journey home and a great weekend: order, order.

Youth Parliament adjourned at 4.36 pm.

