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UK Human Trafficking Centre

[MR. NIGEL EVANS *IN THE CHAIR*]

2.30 pm

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr. Evans, for ensuring that we have a full hour and a half for this important debate. As this may be my last opportunity to speak about human trafficking before I leave Parliament, I thought it appropriate to assess the state of modern-day slavery in the United Kingdom, the effect of the absorption of the UK Human Trafficking Centre into the Serious Organised Crime Agency, and the need for a national human trafficking watchdog.

First, I pay tribute to the officers of the all-party group. I have been greatly supported by the three vice-Chairmen: the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Clare Short), Baroness Butler-Sloss, and the shadow Deputy Leader of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Mr. Vara). My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone), who is in the Chamber today, has played an invaluable part in the overall strategy, and I thank him for that. I also thank the shadow Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), and the shadow Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), for their kind comments.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the many Ministers who have paid tribute to my fight against modern-day slavery, including the Solicitor-General; the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport; the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell); the Minister for the Cabinet Office; the Under-Secretary of State for Health; the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland; the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Gillian Merron), who has responsibility for public health; the Minister for Children, Young People and Families; the Foreign Secretary; and the hon. Member for Nottingham, South (Alan Simpson). I must not forget the sterling work of the Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs, the right hon. Member for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz).

Everyone wants statistics. They give people a sense of bearing, as from a compass, and they feel happier when they have something against which to judge where they are. The problem is that statistics on human trafficking are difficult to come by. By their very nature, they are unreliable and problematic to read. The Home Affairs Committee's report in May 2009 stated that there are an estimated 5,000 victims in the UK, and according to the Ministry of Justice website, Home Office research estimates the total social and economic cost of trafficking in the UK at about £1 billion in 2003.

Statistics from police Operation Pentameter 2 identified 169 victims of human trafficking, 13 of whom were children; 406 suspects were arrested and 67 were charged with trafficking in human beings; 15 people were then convicted of trafficking, some with related offences; 822 premises were visited; 6,400 police intelligence reports were gathered; more than £500,000 in cash was recovered from the criminals who were arrested, and court orders placed restraining orders on criminal assets running into several millions of pounds.

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The Home Office has stated that approximately 360 children are trafficked into and within the UK each year. ECPAT UK-End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes-co-ordinates a coalition working for the protection of children's rights, including Anti-Slavery International, Jubilee Campaign, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Save the Children UK, The Children's Society, UNICEF, and World Vision UK. ECPAT, which services our all-party group, and does so very well, estimates that 60 per cent. of children rescued from traffickers later go missing from local authority care.

Between March 2003 and April 2009, the POPPY Project in London, which provides shelter to trafficked women, received 1,233 referrals of women over 18 who were acknowledged to have been trafficked. The Home Affairs Committee's report last year stated that at least 100,000 people are trafficked into and around the EU each year. There are rumours of boys moving from Russia through Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia as sex slaves, but there are no numbers. In a high security prison in Bucharest, which I recently visited, one man admitted driving a transit van weekly across the Pyrenees transporting trafficked women from Romania into Spain. He would not give me any numbers, but he did that for several years. There is a combination of anecdotal and statistical evidence, and it is not surprising that Nick Davies recently questioned the scale of human trafficking in the UK in a challenging article in *The Guardian*. The statistics are spasmodic, unreliable and unproven. Unfortunately, modern-day slavery is not tidy, visible or neatly packaged, and it is not surprising that Mr Davies's article unleashed an outburst from non-governmental organisations, sex workers, former trafficked victims, women's rights workers, officials, MPs, and so on. Everyone weighed in to complain about his views.

By its very nature, modern-day slavery is hidden. Much of it is underground, most of it goes undetected, and much of it is orchestrated by sophisticated criminal gangs whose footwork is much faster than the lumbering steps of the law. The House must not underestimate victims' very real fear of coming forward-and anyway, how do they do so? If they are sex workers, they are prisoners; if they are forced labour, they are working covertly to get rid of debt; if they are domestic slaves, they usually have their passports taken away; if they are child victims, they are usually used as Fagins by their parents or distant relatives to carry out street crime.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker), a former Home Office Minister, for pushing forward the agenda, largely single-handedly, including persuading the Prime Minister to sign and ratify the Council of Europe convention on action against trafficking in human beings, and for the creation of action plans involving 11 Departments. I am pleased to see the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Tynemouth (Mr. Campbell), in his place and about to give a powerful answer to some of my points. The Home Office has always been the lead Department in such matters, but I am sure that hon. Members will be interested to know that the Scottish Executive, the Department for International Development, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Ministry of Justice, the Attorney-General's Office, The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department

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of Health, the Department for Children, Schools and Families, the Department for Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport are all involved in trying to tackling this difficult problem.

It is important to acknowledge the Government's financial commitments. The Ministry of Justice and the Home Office awarded £3.7 million to the POPPY Project over two years, and funding for the human trafficking centre has almost doubled from £834,000 in 2007-08 to £1.7 million in £2008-9, and £1.6 million in 2009-10. However, despite those initiatives, the signing of conventions, and the involvement of 11 Departments, the problem remains as opaque as ever. Some

people say that it is getting worse. Modern-day slavery will continue while people in undeveloped countries are forced to feed the appetites of populations in developed countries.

We are witnessing a worldwide phenomenon. The largest number of children trafficked into the UK are from China and Vietnam. Many of the women trafficked into sexual slavery fly via the Netherlands from west Africa. An increasing number of victims trafficked into Spain come from south America. The French suffer from human trafficking, but do not like to admit it. Moroccans and Tunisians are viewed as illegal immigrants, rather than as people who are trafficked. As pilfering and violence become epidemic, and as the rule of law collapses in Haiti following the terrible national disaster, child trafficking will quickly emerge as children are left abandoned or orphaned, and predators move in. What is the state of play in this country?

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on this issue, as usual. On his last point, does he really fear that the children who are orphaned in Haiti will end up being trafficked? What can be done about that?

Mr. Steen: I was hoping to ask a question about that in the House this morning, but unfortunately we did not get that far. There is no doubt that during events such as tsunamis and earthquakes, children are separated from their families and parents, and sadly there will be many orphans in Haiti. It is a very poor country—one of the poorest in the world—and I cannot see that traffickers, who are predators, will fail to come forward and take children away, either from children's homes, or by deploying distant relatives who will say that they are going to care for them, but those children will never be heard of again. I wanted to ask the Prime Minister a question this morning about what is being done to alert international aid agencies to that prospect. There is no evidence for it yet, but it is inevitable, and the question is how it can be prevented, and on what scale it will take place. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention.

I was coming on to look at the situation in this country. Until the summer of 2008, it seemed that the Government were keeping up the pressure. However—and this has nothing to do with the Minister—I have a feeling that once the Council of Europe convention was ratified and implemented, that impetus might have been lost. Perhaps we need a new impetus from the Government in the dying embers of this Parliament.

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A good example is the implementation of the national referral mechanism in April 2009. In the first six months ending in September 2009, 347 people were referred as suspected victims of trafficking. There are 180 Government officials who have been specially trained as assessors. Dividing 347 by 180, we are entitled to ask what each of those officials are doing for the rest of the time when they are not looking into their two referrals. Those 180 Government officials are referred to as "competent authorities" and are tasked with the job of deciding whether any of the victims referred to them have been trafficked. I do not understand why we need 180 officials—that number could probably be cut by two thirds. Who trained them? What were they trained for, and are they the right people to do that job?

There is a bigger question about the relevance of recognising someone as a victim of trafficking, and about the authority of the competent authority. Even if an individual is recognised as trafficked, the Ministry of Justice, through the Director of Public Prosecutions, can still pursue criminal cases against them. The pattern is well established, with the Crown Prosecution Service totally ignoring, and treating as irrelevant, the decision of the competent authorities employed by the UK Border Agency and, by implication, denying the existence or legality of the Council of Europe convention.

Let us take the case of V, a Vietnamese boy who was assessed as aged 17 but who was 15 when he arrived in Britain. He was given a positive, conclusive-grounds decision in which the competent authorities identified him as a victim of trafficking. In spite of that, he was given a 45-day reflection period, as required by the Council of Europe convention, but once he had served that 45-day delay, he was sentenced. The fact that he had been subject to a decision by the competent authority, which stated that he had been trafficked, was completely irrelevant. The Crown Prosecution Service charged him with cannabis cultivation, and he was convicted at Huntingdon Crown court in August 2009.

There are many such cases; I have a number of them. I have raised the issue with the Solicitor-General and with the Director of Public Prosecutions. If somebody has been trafficked and described as such by the competent authority set up by the Government, how can they possibly be prosecuted and sentenced? The competent authority's statement that a person has been trafficked becomes an irrelevancy, because it does not have any meaning. The question then is: does it have any meaning for the Solicitor-General or the courts?

Such cases make a joke of the 45-day reflection period. What is the point of recognising individuals as victims under the national referral mechanism if criminal cases are then pursued against those same people? What is the significance of the Government signing the Council of Europe convention, if children and young people found to have been trafficked—whether Roma children or Chinese boys—are left with no emotional, psychological or practical support to help them navigate the administrative and legal nightmare of human trafficking legislation? It goes totally against the words and spirit of the convention. Not only is the national referral mechanism being side-stepped by the law, the principles in the convention of supporting, helping and advising children are being totally ignored.

The Government state that their goal is to make the UK a hostile environment for human traffickers, but they have made it a totally hostile environment for the

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victims. Domestic workers who come to the UK on diplomatic visas to work for diplomats are not able to change employers without losing their immigration status. That makes them particularly vulnerable to abuse because they have no escape route from such a situation.

Kalayaan is a London-based, well-run non-governmental organisation that supports migrant domestic workers. It reports that it refers 6.9 per cent. of the diplomatic domestic workers it encounters to the UK Human Trafficking Centre as victims of trafficking. That is compared with 0.1 per cent. of domestic workers in private households. That dramatic difference is an obvious cause for concern, and I led a delegation to the Minister for Borders and Immigration (Mr. Woolas) on 24 November last year. All the heavyweights on the issue of human trafficking were there, and the Minister buckled under the arguments. He could see no reason why the diplomatic visa should be changed so that those who were imprisoned or abused by officials in foreign embassies or delegations could escape. As it is, they cannot escape. If they do escape, they have no passport and are sent home where they came from. These people come from embassies and they are terrified about their future and the future of their families.

I would like to mention other cases, but some victim support organisations are reluctant to release information. It is hard to raise the problem with credibility when one does not have the details. Of course we want to protect the privacy of victims, but we can do that and share information at the same time. There are increasingly difficult problems in getting even the vaguest information from some of the organisations that are specifically funded by the Government to look after victims of trafficking. Will the Minister consider whether he could provide some guidance to those

organisations and suggest that acting like a guard at Fort Knox, preventing anyone from getting in, or meeting, listening to or speaking to any of the victims, is not a good way to encourage an open and transparent society?

I have a case from one such organisation, the POPPY project. It could not give me the name, or details of the courts or the police, which was not very helpful; none the less, I will relate some of the information. This case took place last November, when a referral was made to UK Human Trafficking Centre regarding 21-year-old Chloe-apparently she was 21, although I do not know whether her name was actually Chloe.

Chloe had approached the central London Sapphire unit-a police unit-having been violently raped that night. Although she did not say that she had been trafficked, it became known that her "boyfriend" had links to the sex industry. She described owing a debt of £20,000 to the people who brought her to the UK-it is clearly a case of trafficking-which she had to pay off by working in restaurants. She claimed to be very afraid of those people and appeared highly traumatised.

The police officer at the Sapphire unit picked up on the indicators and tried to access support for Chloe. They put her in emergency accommodation for that night, but were unable to accommodate or support her after that. Chloe suggested that she would be able to stay with a "friend", but it was known that the friend was involved in managing a brothel. When the police officer called the UK Human Trafficking Centre to make the referral, she was informed that as Chloe had

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been out of her exploitative situation for some time, she was not eligible to enter the national referral mechanism-one can see the bureaucracy that has built up.

The concerns are first about the UKHTC, which has been severely criticised in relation to the NRM and the many non-governmental agencies using it. That seems to be one of its weaknesses. The UKHTC, which has three staff-as opposed to the 178 or 177 in the UK Border Agency-should have recognised Chloe as an extremely vulnerable individual with immediate support needs. She had approached the police and was seeking assistance regarding the criminal justice system, support, accommodation and identification. That was last November. The date on which she escaped her exploitative situation should have had no bearing on her potential status as a victim of trafficking, and the rights and support to which she would be entitled.

Chloe clearly described several indicators of trafficking for labour exploitation, which were passed on to the UKHTC. In addition, the Sapphire officer noted several other indicators suggesting that she may also have been sexually exploited. As a potential victim of trafficking, Chloe should, at this stage, have been housed and supported appropriately, and then informed about the NRM. The significant point is that the UKHTC's refusal to refer her to the NRM effectively denied her the opportunity to access any support. As the Minister will know, the UK Border Agency deals with women from outside the EU, but it will also deal with women from inside it. Chloe probably came from an EU country, but because she was denied an NRM referral, she could not get any other support. I have a number of such cases.

What happened in this case reflects a lack of concern for the safety of the individual. The victim should be accommodated in a place of safety, and an NRM referral should then be made, if appropriate. In this case the woman was close to being returned to someone who was known to have connections with the brothel management. I would like to be more specific, and I am sorry that I cannot be, but the problems I face prevent me from saying more. However, I think that the principle is well established.

Having raised the issue of domestic slavery and the problem that one Department did not follow law under the convention even though another Department was involved, I want to come to local

authorities. Local authorities referred 57 children to the national referral mechanism last year. What happened to them? I do not know whether the Government or anybody else knows where they have gone, but I do not. Have they been assessed by the competent authorities? Who has been responsible for their welfare? Has section 55 of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009, which places a duty on the UK Border Agency to safeguard the welfare of children, made any difference? Does the Minister have any information about how section 55 is changing the conduct of the UK Border Agency? Should it change it? Does the Minister have any statistics? They are one thing we probably do not have.

I am deeply troubled that, for some reason, Britain cannot look after its own children, let alone vulnerable children from overseas. In fact, our track record on losing children in care has put us near the top of the league, and it is not the sort of league that a developed country such as Britain should even be in, let alone lead. There is a lot of shame there, which we should acknowledge and do something about.

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We know that it is impossible to find foster parents for foreign children who speak no English. We need a national campaign to find foreign language-speaking residents who are willing to foster. At the moment, the best that we can do for trafficked children is to place them in local authority child care homes, but that does not mean very much given that many of them, sadly, experience understaffing, which results in many hundreds of children escaping. Such children are not in care at all, because the homes are like an open hotel—often not a very good hotel—that they can leave whenever they like.

For that reason, I am convinced that it would make sense for every trafficked child to have a guardian ad litem appointed from the moment that they are acknowledged to be a trafficked child. Such a guardian would ensure their safety, as well as ensuring that they are not abused by the legal or administrative systems and that someone keeps an eye on their welfare. Guardians ad litem work well in Britain, their track record is good and their results are impressive. Why not use a tried-and-tested system, rather than trying to invent a new one?

If we really mean what we say and want to implement the Council of Europe convention effectively—with a bias towards victim protection—rather than create a culture of deportation, we need fewer "competent authority" officials, with different training and a different approach. Child care workers would be far preferable to UK Border Agency officials. It is therefore important that we get the national referral mechanism right and then ensure that the guardians ad litem are in place to take over.

Inevitably, a victim's first encounter with the police or border officials will affect his future outlook. Our failure to change the culture of deportation and disbelief in turn explains why our record of prosecutions and convictions of traffickers is less successful than that of countries such as Holland, Italy and Austria, where the public authorities are known to be on the side of the victims, and where victims understand that the authorities are there to help them. It is worth mentioning that the most recent uncovering, by the Austrians, of a multi-country human trafficking ring took place only because all the victims were willing to give evidence. That was an impressive outcome.

By contrast, there have been worrying reports that UK officials are not on the side of victims at all. In one case, the competent authority identified a woman—I will call her P—from India as a trafficking victim as part of Operation Tolerance Pilot, which ran from May to December 2008. The UKHTC

then informed the POPPY project that the decision was void because it had not been taken under the new national referral mechanism, and that it wanted to put her through the process again. That was despite the fact that the original decision had been issued by a Government agency. From what I have said, the Minister will understand both the appalling bureaucracy, rules and regulations and officialdom that have built up as a result of our signing the convention against human trafficking and the attitude of UK Border Agency staff.

What is to become of the UKHTC? The 35-strong, south Yorkshire-based staff will be merged into the 4,000-strong, Home Office-run Serious Organised Crime Agency, and its specific tasks will be diluted, if not

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washed away. The principle of establishing a multi-agency organisation, which would act as a central repository for all information on human trafficking and offer strategic and operational support and a 24/7 support line for advice, including on the care of victims, deserved a chance. I certainly supported the establishment of the UKHTC in Sheffield three years ago. The idea that the centre would conduct research, develop training, share best practices and develop an improved knowledge and understanding of the way in which criminal enterprises associated with human trafficking operate was perhaps somewhat over-ambitious, but its important task of co-ordinating statutory bodies, such as local authorities, the UK Border Agency and police, reflected sound thinking.

Following the centre's absorption into SOCA, however, any suggestion that it can achieve any of those objectives must be seriously questioned, and the possibility of its being independent has been shattered for ever. It will be neither independent, nor able to deliver the goods; it will be lost in a huge organisation of 4,000 staff. The Government like things bigger and centralised, which is perhaps why the UKHTC is being absorbed into SOCA and why the human trafficking team in the Met will be absorbed by the much larger clubs and vice unit. However, big does not mean better. As Schumacher said, "Small is beautiful", and I know that myself from the Schumacher college in Dartington in my constituency, which is very small and very good.

How successful has the UKHTC been? It is just over three years old. On the plus side, it is a one-stop shop for statutory agencies, local authorities, the police and the UK Border Agency. In that respect, it has proved valuable, but it has been less successful in achieving its other objectives. Nor has it been able to provide real help to the voluntary sector-it has just not had the resources. Some argue that it would be better if the Government spent £1.6 million a year funding non-governmental organisations with a proven track record in dealing with human trafficking.

The time has arrived for the UKHTC to concentrate on what it does best: co-ordinating the statutory services. For the rest, we must make better use of the voluntary sector and establish a national human trafficking watchdog-some European countries would call it a national rapporteur, but we, being English, call it a watchdog. The concept of a national watchdog goes back to the 1997 Hague declaration, which was the first international document to recommend that EU member states establish a national reporting mechanism. In this country, we report to a watchdog, but people in other European countries report to a rapporteur.

The modern-day slavery watchdog would act as a central repository for all information on human trafficking. It would be charged with collecting facts, figures and statistics, monitoring weaknesses, speaking up for NGOs, ensuring the adequacy of victim accommodation, checking that the guardian ad litem system was working properly and the like. It would contribute to a better knowledge and understanding of the root causes of trafficking, the modus operandi of traffickers and their criminal networks, and the different forms of exploitation. Indeed, a more complete picture of the extent of

the crime is precisely what we need. That would increase our knowledge and facilitate our work against this phenomenon, and we could more effectively identify victims of trafficking

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and provide appropriate support to them. A watchdog would be part of the solution, and it should be based in the Home Office, although independent of it. Its task would be to see that Government agencies deliver on outlawing human trafficking.

The police have recently recovered 15 victims of human trafficking in Northern Ireland, but we have no idea of where they fit in or of the scale of trafficking in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, although local authorities in Scotland recently referred six children to the national referral mechanism.

The UK Human Trafficking Centre will be completely absorbed into SOCA, which is exempt from freedom of information registration, because it handles security issues. I do not know whether my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green) knows that; it is a quite interesting point about SOCA—one cannot get any information out of it. What are the implications of that for reporting to Parliament?

If it is impossible for SOCA to report to Parliament, there is even more reason for us to establish an independent role for a national watchdog. The watchdog would report annually to Parliament and make recommendations on the development of national policies and action plans, without itself being a policy making agency. For example, what could be done to improve the situation regarding the confiscation of traffickers' assets that have been transferred overseas?

My private Member's Bill, the Anti-Slavery Day Bill, is to have its Second Reading on 5 February. I want to introduce a national anti-slavery day to reinforce the focus and the understanding of the general public. Such a day would continue to draw attention to the evils of human trafficking post-Wilberforce, and to how that is displaying itself in British society. An anti-slavery day would cost the taxpayer nothing, but could do a great deal of good. I hope that the Minister will say how he feels about that. I hope that all parties in Parliament will support me on 5 February and help me to get my Bill through the Commons quickly.

In summary, we need a national referral mechanism, to be administered by welfare or social workers rather than immigration officials; a guardian ad litem system for trafficked children, to support them through legal and administrative hurdles; and work permits and identity cards for victims of trafficking while they are resident in the UK, to give them the ability to work in the UK just as they do in Italy. That would encourage them to give evidence against traffickers without fear of being returned to their source country, where there would be a risk of re-trafficking. We need a national network of shelters for women and children, whatever their age, who are victims of trafficking, and a proactive and dedicated police force on human trafficking—the Pentameter initiatives were welcome and should be revived in every police force and carried out every year. We also need a national human trafficking watchdog, working with Government but independent of them; and a change in visa arrangements so that domestic workers brought into the UK to work for foreign embassy officials are free to seek other domestic work and not forced to return home. Finally, we need an annual UK national anti-slavery day, which will make sure that the crime is kept firmly on the agenda and does not get consigned to a dusty drawer.

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I hope that, when I leave the House at the general election, the work in which I have been involved will continue, in both the Commons and the Lords. I hope also that I shall be able to give service to the groups from the human trafficking foundation charity I am establishing. It is deeply depressing

that in spite of Wilberforce's achievements in outlawing slavery 203 years ago, modern-day slavery is a new canker in our midst, with human beings being degraded while society stands by and does little.

Several hon. Members *rose-*

Mr. Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I want the winding-up speeches to start at 3.30, and three hon. Members have said they want to participate, so if they divide the remaining time that will be useful.

3.3 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I shall be brief. I want to make three points. First, I echo the concerns of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) about the closure of the Metropolitan police trafficking unit. In my view, that unit has hugely improved the policing of the issue. It is a great pity that it is not to continue, and is to merge with the clubs and vice operation, which, in my experience, has put insufficient focus on the experience of the victims of the vice trade. I do not have any particular beef with the Serious Organised Crime Agency; it is a question of effectiveness and victimisation. If that mistaken decision is to be proceeded with, I urge the Minister to institute a mechanism to ensure that any new arrangement has that victim focus and does not end up in the sort of cosy arrangement that I have seen in the past in vice policing, in which the exploiters and the police come to a deal that stops the neighbourhood nuisance, but not the exploitation. That is a cause of serious anxiety.

Secondly, I want to urge on the Minister the need for a powerful information campaign about the legislation, which he helped to introduce in the House of Commons, making it an offence for any man or woman-any customer-to pay for the sexual services of someone who is forced to provide them. One of the most powerful effects of that legislation, potentially, is that it could deter customers from such behaviour, and so reduce the market for those who have been exploited, thus reducing the profits of traffickers and exploiters and the extent of exploitation. That chilling effect will not occur unless the law moves from being secret-as it largely is at present, frankly-to being publicly and widely known.

In women's lavatories there are frequently stickers on the back of the door-it is not quite the same for loo doors in the gents'-giving the local Rape Crisis telephone number, or something like that. I want every urinal to have, at eye level, something to warn chaps who are thinking of paying for sex that if they do, and do not know with absolute certainty-without any doubt in their mind-that the person who offers herself to them does so of her free will, without having been bullied into it by a pimp or trafficked, they will be committing a criminal offence and will be prosecuted. I believe that if such an approach were taken, there would be a difference to the trade. I am normally rather sceptical about Government publicity drives, but I think that the one in question could reduce crime and exploitation significantly.

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Thirdly, I want to mention the recent European Court of Human Rights decision in the case of Ms Rancheva. She had gone to Cyprus from Russia under an artiste's visa. She ended up in debt, and it seems clear to me that some people-trafficking operation was involved. She tried to leave the club that she was in, and a few days later was found dead on the pavement, after falling from a balcony. There was no criminal prosecution in connection with the events leading up to her death, but there was a prosecution under the European convention on human rights. Cyprus was found guilty of failing to protect Ms Rancheva and failing to put in place a proper framework to fight trafficking.

One issue at the heart of that seems to be that Cyprus had allowed a sex industry to flourish in a semi-public place. People who thought that they would be artistes, or performers in public clubs, were actually operating in the sex industry. It appears to me from the judgment-of course I do not know any more than is in the published press release and so on-that the margin between Ms Rancheva selling herself in prostitution and exotic dancing had been diminished, or smoothed out, to such an extent that she was in effect being prostituted. She did not want to be; she wanted to go back to Russia.

The key issue in that case is the existence and public acceptance of gross sex exploitation, at an industrial level, in which people are allowed to participate. The case of Ms Rancheva is a very strong argument for the Government to intervene in a similar activity in the UK, by which I do not mean exotic dancing, although the activity happens in the context of exotic dancing. In almost every local newspaper in the UK there is a page of advertisement for "fresh Thai girls", for example, or "new girls today". That is advertising trafficked women for men's sexual pleasure. I believe that that should be prevented. Various Ministers have sought to reach settlements with the publishers of those newspapers, so that they voluntarily stop publishing the advertisements, but guess what? They carry on, because they are a source of much profit-oh, what a surprise.

I believe that unless the UK Government take action against that type of publication, they risk, following the Rancheva judgment, being in breach of our obligations under the European convention on human rights. I urge the Minister to examine that and, if his legal advisers conclude that I am right, to introduce urgent legislation to prevent such advertising, because if these adverts run in freely available newspapers, of course people think that the work is safe and legitimate, but it is actually not safe and legitimate work. It is work that has at its heart the most grotesque exploitation.

The appalling thing about how human-trafficking for sexual exploitation works is that the degradation that trafficked women experience, and their experience of the sex industry, sometimes mean that, having escaped from it into impoverishment, isolation and loneliness, they re-enter the sex industry, in a so-called voluntary way, because it is the only way they know of generating income to survive. If women do re-enter the industry, they end up with some of the problems described by the hon. Member for Totnes, in relation to their immigration status and so on.

It seems to me that there is a duty on Government to stop providing comfort to those involved in the industrial-scale exploitation of people who, because of their

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immigration status and gender, are vulnerable to the most appalling exploitation of their human rights. There are things that we can do, and I urge the Minister to do them.

3.11 pm

Mr. Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr. Evans. I think that this is the first time you have chaired proceedings in Westminster Hall. If I may say so, you are doing it very well, sir.

It is also a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), who made, as usual, a number of powerful points on this extremely important issue. I like the phrase "industrial scale" because we have struggled hard to get that point across in the media. We are talking not about one or two people but about thousands of victims, and they are not just in Soho; they are throughout the United Kingdom.

I of course pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) for securing this important debate, but not only for that. I also pay tribute to him for how he has continually brought the issue to the attention of Parliament through his chairmanship of the all-party group on

trafficking of women and children. His leaving will be a great loss to Parliament but, in a strange way, the campaign against human trafficking will benefit because he will be able to spend much more time campaigning on the issue. I very much look forward to working with him if I am back here after the general election.

Keith Vaz (Leicester, East) (Lab): I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). When the Select Committee on Home Affairs conducted the inquiry into human trafficking, we appointed him, even though he was not a member of the Committee, as a very special adviser because of his knowledge. May I raise one point with the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone) about the merging of the UK Human Trafficking Centre with SOCA? I do not know whether he has seen the Select Committee report, "The Trade in Human Beings: Human Trafficking in the UK". SOCA is quite a new organisation and therefore ill equipped to deal with this new area of policy. Does he agree that that is a very important consideration in not merging the two organisations? Let SOCA do what SOCA is supposed to do, and let us have this independent organisation of which the hon. Member for Totnes spoke.

Mr. Bone: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's intervention. He chairs his Select Committee with great skill, especially by appointing my hon. Friend to it. The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point. I have grave doubts about the merger: I think that a loss of independence and drive will occur. However, that is not what I particularly wanted to address.

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Let me try to put this issue in context. My hon. Friend talked about modern slavery. It is modern slavery. Girls fly into Gatwick airport, coming from west Africa, thinking that they will become waitresses or work in a shop. They go through security. The people with them take the passports off them. They are then taken to the coffee lounge, where they are sold for £4,000 or £5,000. That is happening in our country, and it is happening

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because the criminals can make so much money from their crimes. In fact, they can make more money from this crime than they can from drugs. That is why there is industrial-scale trafficking. There are a number of ways in which we have to tackle the issue.

Mr. Steen: The information that I got recently, which I thought worth sharing with the House, is that more people are trafficked in the world every year than were ever in chains in the 350 years of the African slave trade.

Mr. Bone: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point; that is extraordinary. We think back to Wilberforce's time and we think that in those days people were somehow not quite as human as us, there was not quite the level of culture and people did not understand that slavery was wrong. Hang on: more people are being trafficked today than were ever in the slave trade back then.

I shall give another example of how close to home this trade is. Across the river at St. Thomas' hospital, a member of my staff observed at the sexual health clinic a young lady escaping from a trafficker, with the trafficker chasing her down the corridor. That is the hospital across the river. Obviously, I have mentioned London and the London area, but the problem is everywhere. In Northamptonshire recently, the police broke a trafficking ring and rescued two victims.

I know that the Government have done a lot in this field and that Ministers have been very helpful. I have been writing a report on the issue for the past three years, and every time I think I have finished it, some horrible new aspect of it appears, including trafficking within the United Kingdom. However, there are one or two things that I do think could be done.

The first involves what I have learned for the first time will be called the national watchdog. There has been some disagreement between my hon. Friend and me about what that should be called. He was rather in favour, being a good European, of "rapporteur". As someone who does not quite share his views on Europe, I did not think that that could possibly be acceptable to the British people and I suggested that perhaps it should be "commissioner", but what we want is a very small unit. I have been with my hon. Friend to Holland to see the Dutch rapporteur. Their office consists of two or three people and they report each year to the Parliament on the numbers. They have a statutory duty to do that. That is a check on what the Government are doing and whether things are getting better or worse. I referred to a very small unit. This is not another Conservative cost commitment. I am sure that the money can be found within the existing framework, that the cost will be much less than the cost of what is going on at the moment and that the money will be much more effective. That is one thing the Government could do to improve the situation.

The second issue is more delicate. We have very good border controls for people coming from outside the European Union, but of course people have free movement within the European Union. We are an island, so we have certain advantages. However, what happens is that people come into this country who clearly may be trafficking people, but they are not challenged because there is a fear that we might be breaking European rules. Let me give an example. I hope that people will correct me if I have got this wrong.

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I used to go to America because I had a business there, and on occasion I took with me young ladies of 16 or 17 who were trainees in the business and were going to visit our US office. On every occasion, the border agency there took those young people aside and interviewed them separately to find out whether it was a genuine visit, and that I was not trafficking them. That took half an hour. They used to take letters with them from their mothers and so on, but it was done on every occasion.

I know of an example in which a middle-aged white man brought into the country a black young lady who did not match the picture on the passport. They were not challenged. That girl was thought to have been trafficked; thankfully, she escaped. This is the sort of practical step we should try to take; it will not mean stopping everyone, but in obvious cases someone might say, "Hang on, why are those young women coming in with that man? They do not seem to be related; they do not seem to be a family." Such cases should be investigated. Those two practical things would make a huge difference.

I fully agree that all the things listed by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes should happen. However, I have another huge concern. Those trafficked into this country who are over 18 are treated better than children who have been trafficked. Those aged 16 who are trafficked into this country, forced into prostitution and then rescued will finish up in a children's home, from where the traffickers will re-traffic them. Those over 18 will probably finish up with the POPPY project, where they will be properly looked after.

I have long argued about what needs to be done. If a 16-year-old trafficked girl is found in Bournemouth, she should be moved to Manchester-or at least put somewhere completely out of range of the traffickers. There is also a strong argument for having secure homes for people who have been trafficked-not to keep the trafficked victims in but to stop the traffickers getting at them.

3.21 pm

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham) (Lab): I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) and my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), but I shall start with the

hon. Gentleman. He made a valedictory speech, but with his customary brio he only looked forward, giving a series of marching orders to my hon. Friend the Minister. I hope he will accept some of them, particularly those about not blending the specialist units into a blancmange. We have seen the equality, race relations and disability councils being turned into an amorphous pudding that is far less than the sum of its parts. What disasters can sometimes be produced by administrative tidying up.

There are aspects of this issue that we can all cover. I am very proud that it was on this Government's watch, and particularly during the last five years, that significant steps were taken. You, Mr. Evans, as a fellow delegate to the Council of Europe, will know how we all joined together to persuade the then Prime Minister, the right hon. Tony Blair, to sign and later to ratify the convention on human trafficking. Even that will only work if real effect is given to it. Next week, the Council of Europe will debate the convention, with my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull, East (Mr. Prescott), the former Deputy Prime Minister, giving an opinion on it. I look forward to hearing what he has to say.

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However, with the usual dreary penny-pinching, platitudinous approach of Whitehall, the official briefing paper for the Council of Europe delegates—you may not yet have seen it, Mr. Evans, as it arrived only today—said in effect, "Jolly good thing, but not a penny more for the experts group on action against trafficking in human beings." I most sincerely ask my hon. Friend the Minister just to find £50,000 or £100,000; if he does not want to use pounds, he could send euros. The currencies are about the same, so it will not make much difference, but we should show a token gesture of appreciation of that work.

We then come to what we can do. The speeches we have heard this afternoon are similar to those that I have heard over the last few years. We have not yet made that decisive breakthrough. Part of the problem is that there are still powerful forces in this country—I do not doubt their sincerity—who believe that there is no problem with women of almost any age above immediate post-puberty childhood selling their orifices for the sexual satisfaction of men.

The English Collective of Prostitutes makes an extremely nefarious and negative contribution to the debate. It is constantly cited on "Newsnight" or in *The Guardian* and other newspapers as some kind of expert authority on the problem. However, the collective, its supporters and spokesmen in the House and elsewhere, and those journalists who write about it, are in complete and utter denial about the extent of the problem. They fall into the trap of having a debate over statistics.

The hon. Member for Totnes made it very clear that there is no satisfactory figure. The reason for that is that we are talking about illegality; we are talking about fear; we are talking about underground problems; we are talking about trafficked girls that service men in south Yorkshire being controlled through a mobile phone by their Chinese pimp in Soho. There is no easy connection to make.

Keith Vaz: My right hon. Friend is most knowledgeable about these issues. However, are we not in danger of crossing boundaries? We are talking about human trafficking, but he wants to outlaw all prostitution. That is his position, is it not?

Mr. MacShane: My position is simple. We will stop slavery only when we stop demand for it by making it illegal. We cannot stop slavery by exhortations or books and sermons.

The Archbishop of York, Dr. John Sentamu, wrote powerfully in the *Yorkshire Post* about the problem of trafficking. I am not really in favour of men in long robes sitting in the House of Lords

in the name of a faith, but he came down to London to organise a vote on a Government Bill—he wanted to unstop the undoubted blockages in the Lords. That Bill was passed into law just before Christmas; it makes it a crime—I cannot say this often enough—to have any paid-for sex not only with trafficked women but with anyone forced or coerced into offering their sexual services.

I very much agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Slough that we need more publicity. I like to stop at Leicester Forest East motorway station, near the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for

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Leicester, East (Keith Vaz), who is Chairman of the Select Committee on Home Affairs. I stop there for breakfast early in the morning when driving to Rotherham, and often after my second cup of tea I go to the loo. It would be no bad thing if, at any height, there were reminders that if I took advantage of trafficked girls—I am sure that such services are offered in Leicester, as they are in every other city in the country—I would be committing a crime. That action could be undertaken now by the police or by local authorities.

We may have dealt with kerb crawling. We recently had the extraordinary example of a premier league football manager who was caught by *The Sun* coming out of one of those wretched industrial brothels before Christmas, but his name is not recorded because his lawyers are agitated about it. I grant that it is difficult to name him. I grant that naming and shaming may not be acceptable to many. I grant that there are many problems in that field. However, until we start the process of naming and shaming, which we have started to do with kerb crawlers, we will not start reducing the demand side. I am worried, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Slough, that the Bill that was passed by the House of Lords just before Christmas may not be made operational. There is a culture of macho-ism in the police; as a result, combating this area of crime is regarded as not being as interesting or rewarding as others.

I conclude with a reference to the anti-trafficking alliance. It promotes good literature, some of which is produced in Chinese. I have a copy here, but there is little point in reading into *Hansard*, as I do not understand Chinese. The alliance states:

"If you are a man who is about to sleep with a woman working in prostitution, think twice! She may be trafficked and you could be charged with rape."

It quotes Natalia, a Russian survivor of trafficking. She said:

"If men stopped paying for sex, if they understood and stopped there would be no trafficking, there would be no demand for girls, there would be no money in it."

I have to say to my right hon. Friend the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, for whom I have affection and respect, that he must speak up much more clearly on the demand side.

In an earlier debate, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes—if I may, I will call him my hon. Friend—who has been so shabbily treated by the press in what is his last period in the House, and the hon. Member for Wellingborough disagreed with me about the demand side issue. I hope now that we are beginning to change our minds. I thoroughly endorse all the recommendations. Given that the Home Office has undergone a complete culture change in the last couple of years and has become extraordinarily courageous under the present Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Mr. Coaker) and previous Home Secretaries, it would be exciting if it adopted one or two of the measures and then promoted them before this Parliament comes to its end.

None the less, the root cause remains demand. As long as there is demand—as long as one premier league football manager grants himself the privilege of going to a brothel and having sex with

someone who may or may not have been trafficked—we will not stop the practice. We must focus on the demand side.

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3.30 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): This has been an excellent debate with many well-informed contributions. Let me start by congratulating the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on securing the debate. It was entirely appropriate that he should use this debate—one of his last opportunities in Parliament—to raise an issue on which he has been an active and articulate advocate in the House in recent years.

Let me take the debate a little wider than the issue of the UK Human Trafficking Centre. Victims of trafficking are often viewed as possible perpetrators of immigration crime, as opposed to being, first and foremost, victims. They are unable to identify themselves as victims because of the risk of being pursued in relation to immigration matters. A number of Members, including the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), made it clear that it is difficult to get hold of accurate data on the subject, for the obvious reason that most of the problem is underground, which makes it hard to keep reliable statistics. The Home Affairs Committee's report identified that more work needed to be done by the UK Human Trafficking Centre to provide firmer information about the issue, so that all the different authorities are better placed to address the problem.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman was a member of the Committee that produced that excellent report—if we can share in the compliments. One of the points that was raised in that report was the concern that the Metropolitan police's human-trafficking unit was going to lose its funding from the Home Office. That poses a problem, particularly for London. Given that the Minister is here, is it not right that we should make a plea that some—if not all—of that funding should be restored?

Tom Brake: Clearly, the Minister has heard that plea on a number of occasions, and he has now heard it again. Given the difficulty in tackling and addressing the issue, and in identifying the number of victims, it seems a great pity to lose or dilute expertise, or to reduce the funding that is required to finance the expertise. I can see the Minister frantically scribbling away. I am sure that he is writing into his notes a commitment to providing the funding that is required, and he will shortly have the opportunity to confirm that that is the case.

Mr. Steen: Like me, the hon. Gentleman talks about statistics. The UK Human Trafficking Centre was the one place that was deputed to get statistics. It got them from local authorities and elsewhere. However, trafficking is not just about sex. Members have been talking about sex, but it is also about child trafficking, domestic slavery trafficking and debt bondage. A large number of men are involved in trafficking. The statistics were going to be brought together. The centre is only three years old, and it has gone. I know that the Minister will say that it has not gone, but in my view it will go in a few months' time. When it does, there will be no organisation in Britain deputed to get information. The very thing that we have all been requesting for years will disappear, and we will not achieve any of the things that we want to achieve.

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his pertinent and topical intervention. Again, the Minister will have heard such a view before. It is up to the

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Minister to identify who will be responsible for collecting the information and who will address the issues that the UK Human Trafficking Centre has not yet been able to address. Those issues include multi-agency working and how it will be possible to pull in not just the police but the UK Border Agency and other organisations, so that we can work collectively on this significant human tragedy,

which occurs in many of our towns and cities each day of the year. There are issues that institutions need to address. Some seek to address the issue of immigration and all its attendant problems, such as people-smuggling, rather than the special problems of trafficking.

I have very little time, so I will flag up some points to do with prevention, to which the Government should respond. The Home Affairs Committee report highlighted the fact that we have a system that conspires to allow migrants to come to the country almost with the expectation that they will not receive the minimum wage. It is almost universally understood that they will not receive it, which is an encouragement to trafficking. We often have good laws that are poorly enforced. The national minimum wage is one such example. As a number of Members have highlighted, there is not much public awareness of human trafficking for sexual purposes, child trafficking or trafficking for slave labour. I hope that the Minister will respond to the suggestion by the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) that we should ensure greater public campaigning on the issue, to make people more aware of it.

I should also like to pick up on the point that the hon. Member for Slough made about our local newspapers, which feature many columns of adverts of the kind that she mentioned. I welcome the fact that the Newsquest Media Group has agreed that it will not carry such columns. I hope that those of us who get Newsquest papers will scan the columns carefully, not only for references to ourselves as Members of Parliament, but to see whether those papers do indeed no longer carry adverts of that nature.

I have one slightly more controversial point. As there have been significant differences of opinion about the laws on prostitution, it would be right to draw attention to what the police have had to say about the difficulties in enforcing the law. I am not sure whether the Minister is in a position to give us feedback today on whether those difficulties are now perceived to be less of a problem, more of a problem or still part of a very significant issue that the police will have to address. I refer to the matter of the police being able to demonstrate whether men are able to establish beyond doubt that a woman had or had not been trafficked.

I should like to carry on at much greater length, but you will not permit me, Mr. Evans. I will therefore finish by congratulating the hon. Member for Totnes on opening this debate with his characteristic knowledge and expertise. I hope that the Minister can respond to our concerns, particularly on the issues about funding, what might come after the closure of the UK Human Trafficking Centre, and how he will ensure that we can retain and effectively use our expertise.

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Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): It is a joy to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr. Evans. Many kind things have rightly been said about my hon.

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Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). All I would add is that what he has done is an absolute model of how one can use an all-party group to shift public policy forward an inch or two. I speak as someone who is sceptical of the proliferation of all-party groups in the past few years. One's faith in the system is almost restored by what my hon. Friend and others from all parties have done.

I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone), who said that when, sadly, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes leaves the House, he will be able to devote more time and energy to the issue. I do not think that it is possible for him to devote more time and energy to it than he has done over the past few years.

Mr. Steen: You wait.

Damian Green: I hear that with some trepidation.

We all agree that human trafficking is a despicable modern slave trade; that is clearly not an issue. There might be an issue between some of us about recognising its wide nature. I appreciate the passion with which the right hon. Member for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane) and the hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) spoke about the prostitution-related element of slavery in particular. That is clearly a significant part of the problem, but it is not the whole problem. We need to take a view that encompasses child trafficking, domestic servitude, slave labour and debt bondage.

What is significant about the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes is that he pointed out many of the worst failings of the current system; I am sure that the Minister will address them all directly. It was striking that he painted such a bleak picture. I have participated in other debates such as this, having worked in the field for many years now. There was a feeling among all parties that we had moved forward significantly, having signed and ratified the convention, and that Britain was in a reasonable place on the issue. However, the picture painted by my hon. Friend is much darker and more pessimistic. If he is right—we all acknowledge that he is an expert in the field—we clearly need to give serious thought to the next steps.

My hon. Friend discussed statistics. For obvious reasons, they are difficult, but we need to start from what we know. The International Organisation for Migration reports that between 700,000 and 2 million women and children are trafficked across international borders every year. We know that 60 per cent. of illegal immigrants here in the UK arrive illegally, most carried in the backs of lorries. A Government assessment published in October 2008 estimated that 360 children are trafficked into and within the UK each year. Despite those figures, we know that only 57 under-18s, out of a total of 527 referrals, were referred last year to the national referral mechanism as suspected victims of trafficking.

3.42 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.54 pm

On resuming—

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Damian Green: As I said, only 57 of the 527 under-18s have been referred under the national referral mechanism. In the five years to 2009, 452 people were arrested for human trafficking offences, of which only 110—less than a quarter—were convicted. I am sure that the Minister shares my concern over those figures.

I visited the UK Human Trafficking Centre in Sheffield last November and it was interesting to see its work. My conclusion is that having a central point for information on trafficking has been of great value to police forces, the Crown Prosecution Service and other agencies. UKHTC demonstrates the importance of specialisation when tackling new types of crime. An important aspect of its work was international co-operation, for example, through chairing the Interpol human trafficking group.

The team at UKHTC informed me that they were having more success in prosecutions than the figures appeared to show because traffickers were being prosecuted for offences other than trafficking—the so-called Al Capone approach. The Minister is nodding enthusiastically about that. However, that gives rise to the worrying thought, identified in the Select Committee report a couple of years ago, that the CPS has problems with the drafting of current trafficking legislation. I wonder if he has anything to say about that.

As we have learned from other countries, in the run-up to the Olympics, we must pay attention to the danger that more people might be trafficked here for that period, when hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of new people will be here. Perhaps the Minister would also address that point. Although I have kinder words to say about UKHTC than my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes, the work that it does must be linked to prevention work. The Conservative party has urged the Government to focus on countries of origin. We were pleased to see mention of that in the millennium goals. However, many who work in this area, in particular the very good charity, Stop the Traffik, are concerned that campaigns are being targeted in the wrong way. Instead of specific resources being allocated for anti-trafficking campaigns, Stop the Traffik argues that Department for International Development aid campaigns should incorporate messages about trafficking. At a time of restricted public spending, that would seem to be a valid method of warning those in poorer countries of the dangers. Will the Minister consider a more inclusive approach? Is he in contact with colleagues in DFID about such matters?

The Conservative party policy document on this matter concentrated on better co-ordination between state agencies, in particular on ensuring that each police force and local authority has a strategy to deal with suspected victims of trafficking. Looking back on that, we are concerned that there appear to be problems with the national referral mechanism at a local level. Better information still needs to be provided to local authorities and police forces so that they are aware of the problem, are better able to identify victims and are more confident in using the mechanism. It is having a fairly patchy effect across the country.

Mr. Steen: The problem with the national referral mechanism and the Solicitor-General's office through the Director of Public Prosecutions is evident: someone is declared to be trafficked, and then they are prosecuted and sent to prison.

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Damian Green: That is a fair point. I would like to elaborate, but I will not, given the time that is available.

An area that is often ignored is trafficking for the purpose of forced labour. In 2008, the last year for which we have full figures, there were only four convictions for trafficking for the purpose of forced labour, despite the problems of organised immigration crime that we all know about. We believe that one failure in this field has been not cracking down on rogue employers. A lot more work ought to be done on that. We have heard warm words from a succession of Ministers, holding various portfolios, but so far there has not been much effective action.

I will move on to new measures that I would like to see. I am conscious that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes produced a full, extensive and-in some areas-expensive list of desires, outlining how he would like us to move in this area. I suspect that he produced the fullest shopping list he could in the hope that some of his requests would be picked up. He and I have had discussions in private about having a watchdog-indeed, the last time we did so, he was still agonising about how he could replace the word "rapporteur" with something else. That was clearly a matter of some controversy. I am entirely relaxed about the name, because the substance is more important.

I am not entirely convinced that setting up another unit in the Home Office is the best way forward, not least because of practical considerations. For example, we all agree that we should be most concerned about the trafficking of children, but we already have children's commissioners not just for England, but for the other nations within the United Kingdom. So in that area alone, there is clearly the capacity for serious, potentially annoying and damaging overlap between those two bodies. I am not sure that a proliferation of watchdogs is necessarily the right way forward, but I

accept his point that we need better information and statistics, so that policy can be more evidence based. Most of all, we need ministerial will to drive the matter forward. In the end, the organisational problems are secondary to the priority given to the subject in the Home Office.

I agree not just with my hon. Friend, but with the point made by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) that part of the problem is the difficulty of multi-agency working. We agree that we need a more joined-up approach and we have published a policy proposal that details a more coherent approach, not just for policing our borders, but for protecting victims and prosecuting the offenders that includes instructing immigration officials to check the date on the return ticket of the adult accompanying minors to look for discrepancies; working with the countries of origin to help reintegrate victims; preventing re-trafficking; and educating potential victims. There should also be better law enforcement to bring more traffickers and employers of forced labour to justice, and better co-operation of national authorities within Europol and Eurojust.

Mr. Steen: My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. Will border controls also be enforced in relation to people being trafficked from the European Union, because that is where there is a gap at the moment?

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Damian Green: That is where Europol is particularly important and where better use of Europol would be hugely beneficial. *[Interruption.]* I sense the discomfort of the Chair, so I will make just one more point. The most important defence we have is our borders. We want to replace ad hoc police operations with a national border police force, which would be much more effective at combating trafficking at the border. The Government's failure to tackle Britain's poorest borders has resulted in a disastrous rise not just in organised immigration crime, but in trafficking. My hon. Friend has raised a huge range of subjects, and I promise him that I will think seriously about the future arrangements that he would like to see. He has made some points about the serious problems with the current arrangements, so I will sit down and let the Minister deal with those.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Alan Campbell): This has been a thoughtful debate, which has included contributions from my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), my right hon. Friends the Members for Leicester, East (Keith Vaz)-the distinguished Chair of the Select Committee on Home Affairs-and for Rotherham (Mr. MacShane), and the hon. Members for Wellingborough (Mr. Bone), for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and for Ashford (Damian Green).

However, no one's speech has been more authoritative and welcome than that of the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), whom I congratulate on securing the debate and on his tireless work to keep this important issue on the political agenda, not least through his work as chair of the all-party group on the trafficking of women and children. I am pleased to hear that he will continue his efforts after this Government are returned following the general election and after I return to my post. I may regret having said that, but I look forward to working with him. It has been a pleasure to do so, and I am sure that my predecessors would concur with that.

Let me deal briefly with two important issues before I go on to deal with the substantive points made. The hon. Gentleman was right to raise his concerns regarding the terrible events in Haiti. I have already spoken to the Under-Secretary of State for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster), who has given a commitment to raise the matter with the necessary governmental and non-governmental agencies to see what can be done. On the question of the Olympics, again, we are aware of the potential threat. However, the Metropolitan police

service Olympic security team and the Home Office keep such work under review, which is supported by the UK Human Trafficking Centre.

We all agree that human trafficking is an appalling crime-people are treated as commodities and are exploited and traded for profit. I reiterate that the Government are committed to tackling the issue, to making the UK a hostile environment for trafficking and to identifying and protecting victims. I am genuinely sorry if the hon. Gentleman believes there has been a loss of momentum. I hope that is not the case. Outside the UK, I think there is a view that much of what we do can be held up as very good practice, but I take his point seriously.

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Throughout the debate, reference has been made to the importance of victims. Of course, the UK action plan on human trafficking, which was updated in October last year, is very much based on a victim-focused strategy and on prevention, investigation, enforcement and prosecution. That action plan also focuses on providing protection for adult and child victims.

On the issue of prosecutions, which the hon. Gentleman raised, the Crown Prosecution Service makes it clear in its guidance that victims of trafficking who have been forced to commit criminal acts should not be prosecuted if those acts are a direct result of their having been trafficked. However, such issues must, of course, be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, because blanket immunity is not necessarily offered. Many of those decisions are extremely difficult to make in practice, as is dealing with the problems surrounding victim identification. The hon. Gentleman raised the issues associated with what appear to be very young people from Vietnam often being brought over here to cultivate cannabis farms. For the people involved with making such decisions, it is extremely difficult.

At the heart of the debate is the future of the UK Human Trafficking Centre, which has played a pivotal role in tackling trafficking under the leadership of DCS Nick Kinsella. The centre was set up in late 2006 and has established itself as a good example of multi-agency working, with, importantly, a range staff from Government agencies working alongside those from the non-governmental organisation sector, who play a crucial role in many of the issues raised. On the subject of numbers, it is extremely difficult to get an estimate of the number of trafficked victims. We have given a commitment to bring forward a better estimate, particularly of those who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, and I can give a reassurance that those figures, which are being worked on as we speak, will be published very soon. However, the issue of numbers is very difficult.

On the question of statistics, the hon. Gentleman quoted the number of referrals as being 347. I want to update hon. Members by giving them the most up-to-date figure, which is 527 referrals between April and December 2009. On the issue of what appear to be relatively few convictions, the hon. Member for Ashford to some extent answered that point by saying that people who look as if they are caught up in trafficking are sometimes not charged and convicted of those offences, but of other offences, depending, of course, on where the evidence lies. UKHTC does important work with the National Policing Improvement Agency to make sure that police training is up to date. It has also worked with partners from the private sector in developing the Blue Blindfold brand, which has won a great deal of support-I believe that the hon. Member for Totnes was at the launch of that. Again, such an approach is recognised as good practice.

UKHTC also houses one of the competent authorities established as a key part of the national referral mechanism

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and is the central repository for all data on human trafficking. The hon. Gentleman raised his concerns during the debate on the Queen's Speech on 25 November and I wrote to him in December in, I hope, reassuring terms. However, I want to repeat the main point: we remain absolutely committed to the continued existence of UKHTC. The problem was that, when the centre was established, it had no legal status of its own and was hosted by South Yorkshire police, which is its current legal entity. When South Yorkshire police approached the Home Office, it was concerned that reliability issues were emerging as a result of having more to do and a higher profile.

We looked at where the best place for UKHTC would be in the future to guarantee its continuing to operate as it does now. We looked at a range of options and concluded that the Serious Organised Crime Agency is best placed for UKHTC, both for the centre and for our overall anti-trafficking efforts more generally. It is not a merger with SOCA and it will not lead to a dilution of the centre's focus on the victim-centred strategy on human trafficking.

A number of details on changing UKHTC's status are currently being discussed by SOCA and the centre, but I have made it absolutely clear that the Government expect that the identity of UKHTC will be preserved, along with its character and functions, which will include its strategic objectives, brand identity and multi-agency composition, and its close working with stakeholders. Dealing with organised immigration crime is an important part of SOCA's work, so there can be some benefit from changing UKHTC's status in that regard, but we expect that the unique role of the centre will continue, and we want to support and develop it. I hope that that will be stressed if and when the Home Affairs Committee visits SOCA.

On the national watchdog or rapporteur, we agree with the conclusions of the Home Affairs Committee, which stated in its recent report that a national rapporteur would not benefit data collection and that such an introduction would merely

"add yet another organisation to the multitude involved in analysing and combating trafficking".

We of course keep those matters under review, but we are satisfied that the current arrangements-

Mr. Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Order. We must move on to the next debate.

Mr. Steen: On a point of order, Mr. Evans. I thought that the Minister would have at least 10 minutes to speak, but he has only had nine.

Mr. Nigel Evans (in the Chair): I am afraid that Mr. Green's time was such that the Minister was left with nine minutes.

Mr. Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): It is always the Tory's fault, Mr. Evans.