

[Madam Deputy Speaker]

written to me in the Chair to update me on the situation, in case I need to raise it with Mr Speaker. I hope that that deals with the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Hammersmith (Mr Slaughter).

Firearms Control

[Relevant document: *The Third Report of the Home Affairs Committee, Session 2010-11, on Firearms Control, HC 447.*]

6.22 pm

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice (Nick Herbert): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of firearms control.

I believe that I speak for the whole House when I say that as we start this debate on firearms control today, our thoughts remain with the family and friends of the victims and all those who had to deal with—and are still dealing with—the consequences of the shootings in Cumbria in June, and in Northumbria in July. Those events shocked the nation. Twelve men and women were murdered, and 11 were injured by Derrick Bird in Cumbria. One man was killed and two people were injured by Raoul Moat in Northumbria. Today's debate fulfils an earlier Government commitment to discuss firearms control in the House in the light of this summer's tragic events. Although I appreciate that there may be some concern that this debate has not been held until now, I am sure that hon. Members agree that one advantage in doing so is that we now have both the independent Association of Chief Police Officers review and the Select Committee on Home Affairs report on firearms control, which has been published only today, to inform us.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): Given that the Home Affairs Committee report was published only this morning, given that we are on a one-line Whip, given that the Chamber is empty and given that Westminster itself is effectively empty, why have the Government deliberately chosen to debate this issue—an issue that I know the Minister is sincerely concerned about—on today of all days?

Nick Herbert: The hon. Gentleman knows that we were committed to holding this debate. We particularly wanted to hold it in Government time, even though there were a number of opportunities to hold it in other time. We wanted to wait for the outcome of the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry, which has reported only today, and we did not want to wait any longer, so there was a difficult balance to strike. However, I assure him that we will listen carefully to the views expressed on both sides in this debate as we consider the issues, including what he says and what his constituents say. I hope that he knows that we have made every attempt to listen carefully to the views of local people who were affected by those incidents, as well as the views of the wider public and of hon. Members.

Indeed, a number of Ministers have visited the communities affected by those events, and we fully appreciate the impact that they have had on the people who live and work in those areas. The Prime Minister and the Home Secretary visited Cumbria in the immediate aftermath of the shootings. I was able to visit and meet some of those affected, along with the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), in late August. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) made a similar visit last week, and he also visited

Northumbria in the wake of those shootings. I want to express my admiration for the local communities who were forced to react to those horrific incidents, and who did so with such courage and dignity. Both the Under-Secretary and I have met PC David Rathbone on different occasions, the officer who was blinded after being shot by Raoul Moat. We were deeply impressed by his courage and his stoicism. Indeed, I am sure that the whole House wishes to pay tribute to the police officers in Cumbria and Northumbria who had to respond, in many cases unarmed, to the events as they unfolded.

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend recognise that although plenty of people in Rothbury—where people were in fear for a long time because of the presence of the gunman—are astonished that he was able to be in possession of firearms, equally, there are many people who, while sharing that astonishment, believe that those who genuinely use firearms for sporting purposes, in a proper, licensed manner, should not be penalised for the behaviour of that terrifying man?

Nick Herbert: I agree with my right hon. Friend's sentiments. It appears that the weapons used by Raoul Moat were unlawfully obtained, unlike those used by Derrick Bird. Later, I shall underline the importance of ensuring a proportionate response to such incidents while nevertheless recognising that some areas might need a tightening up of controls, albeit one that recognises the legitimate needs and recreations of those living in the countryside or elsewhere who take part in such sporting activities.

Tony Cunningham (Workington) (Lab): The Minister has quite rightly paid tribute to the police. Will he also join me in paying tribute to the civil nuclear police, who played such a sterling and difficult role in those terrible times that we all went through?

Nick Herbert: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me the opportunity to do that. One of the things that was impressed on me when I visited Cumbria and received a briefing from the chief constable of the Cumbrian constabulary and his team was the role that the police at Sellafield—the civil nuclear constabulary—played in helping to respond quickly to the events as they unfolded. I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Copeland and my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith), who have admirably provided a voice to their constituents. I know that in tight-knit communities, the effects of such events have been all the greater. The hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend have shown great leadership in their communities, particularly in Cumbria, where so many people lost their lives.

Although the police investigation in Cumbria is ongoing, and inquests in both Cumbria and Northumbria are yet to be held, a review carried out by assistant chief constable Adrian Whiting, chair of the ACPO firearms and explosives working group, recently reported its findings. Mr Whiting has extensive knowledge of the subject matter, and we are grateful to him for his report. The review considered whether the decisions made and actions taken in granting and renewing the firearms and shotgun certificates issued to Derrick Bird were appropriate, or whether any actions could have been taken to prevent the tragedy from occurring. Mr Whiting found that the

decisions made and actions taken by the constabulary on firearms licensing were reasonable. Mr Whiting did not identify any immediate changes to legislation that would have prevented those offences. However, he did suggest a number of general improvements that he thought might improve public safety. Those included a number of suggestions that have been taken up by the Home Affairs Committee, to which I shall refer later.

It is clear that, following two events of this scale, lessons must be learned to ensure that, wherever possible, action is taken to help prevent such crimes from occurring again. It is crucial that proper controls are placed on those individuals who seek to own a firearm. However, it is also important to acknowledge, when discussing this issue, that licensed firearms are only one side of the debate. It is generally acknowledged that the vast majority of guns used in crime are illegally held.

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): My right hon. Friend raises an important aspect of the debate in mentioning the difference between weapons that are lawfully owned and those that are not. I want to quote page 10 of the Select Committee report, which states:

“There is a lack of data in the public domain showing the extent to which legally-owned firearms are used in gun crime, partly because it is difficult to collect accurate data”—

because the gun is not always left at the scene of the crime —

“and partly because the Home Office does not routinely publish the data that it does collect.”

May I invite my right hon. Friend to reconsider this, and to put into the public domain more information about whether the firearms used in such events are legally or illegally held?

Nick Herbert: Of course we will consider all the recommendations in the Select Committee report carefully. We are also considering very carefully the question of what data the Home Office should collect. We need to strike the right balance between imposing ever more onerous conditions on local police forces and ensuring that the necessary data are collected centrally, and we will have more to say about that in due course. I certainly take my hon. Friend's point on board, however.

Much of the harm caused to our communities by firearms is caused by those who are not licensed to own a gun. The Government attach great importance to tackling the problem of illegal firearms, and we will continue to work to ensure that whatever measures necessary are taken to cut the use of illegal firearms in criminal activity. By setting up the national crime agency, we will be introducing a body that will build on the Serious Organised Crime Agency and that will be empowered, in partnerships with police forces, to target the types of serious crime that frequently involve illegal firearms and to eliminate them from our communities. Combining early intervention work with tough enforcement, and empowering local communities to prevent the spread of violence, will be crucial. This area of work will be informed by the Government's new crime strategy, which will be published shortly.

It is important, however, to emphasise that gun crime thankfully remains relatively rare in this country. Provisional data indicate that firearm offences accounted for just 0.2% of all recorded crime in 2009-10, and that figure

[Nick Herbert]

has been going down. However, that still equates to nearly 8,000 recorded offences. Gun crime causes significant and lasting harm to individuals, families and communities, and, however small the number of incidents that occur in the context of the overall number of crimes, the impact of these incidents must never be underestimated. Thirty-nine lives were lost to gun crime last year, and there were 336 serious injuries. That is unacceptable, and we must work to bring the numbers down.

Mr Reed: Between 1997 and 2008-09, 742 people were murdered with firearms in this country. Given that it was the atrocities in Scotland in March 1996 that led to the last meaningful review of gun ownership legislation, and in the light of the events of this year, does the Minister agree that Parliament now needs to change and tighten the gun laws in this country?

Nick Herbert: I certainly agree that it is necessary to review the gun laws, as the Home Affairs Committee has done, and to consider whether sensible measures might be taken to improve them and, in specific areas, tighten them. I am not sure whether I agree with the hon. Gentleman's implication that there needs to be a wholesale change in our gun laws that would restrict the legitimate ownership of guns, because most incidents relate to illegal ownership, and I believe that that is where we need to focus our enforcement activity.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister knows that a review by the Select Committee is not the same as a Government review of this matter. What are the Government doing?

Nick Herbert: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, we have said that we will take on board the Select Committee's recommendations, which were published only today, and that we are considering the matter very carefully. I will speak in a moment about a measure that has already been introduced, and I will give a broad indication of an early response to the Select Committee report. There has also been a review by the Association of Chief Police Officers. The Government have certainly responded to the incidents that have taken place in Cumbria and Northumbria, but I believe that we are doing so in a careful and considered manner.

Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): A resident of Northampton to whom I am particularly devoted is my aunt, Diana Ellis, and she has always said, "If it is not broken, don't fix it." Will my right hon. Friend reassure her, and many hundreds of thousands of other people in this country, that Her Majesty's Government will not act in a knee-jerk fashion on this matter and further increase the legislative burden?

Nick Herbert: Yes, I will reassure my hon. Friend of that. We will carefully consider the recommendations put forward by the Select Committee and others, and we will take action where we judge it necessary and proportionate, and where it will help to secure public safety. We will not, however, produce a knee-jerk response to these events. Indeed, the fact that the Government have not done so, and that we are nevertheless considering the issues carefully and with an open mind, has been generally welcomed throughout the country.

Mr Reed: Can we please now dispense with the notion of a knee-jerk response? It is six months since the events in my constituency, and we have now had the very thorough and considered report from the Association of Chief Police Officers and the excellent work of the Home Affairs Select Committee. The notion of a knee-jerk response now is just not applicable.

Nick Herbert: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees, however, that it is fair for the Government to look at the Home Affairs Committee's report, which was published only today, and to consider it carefully. When I referred to a knee-jerk response, what I meant was that it would be wrong to rule in or out without further consideration anything that the Select Committee has recommended. It is right that we should consider these issues carefully, and he will see that there are areas in which we believe action should be taken.

Brandon Lewis (Great Yarmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important to take the time to review all the reports, including today's report from the Home Affairs Committee, carefully and to ensure that any formal response by the Government does not criminalise, either by implication or in reality, the hundreds of thousands of people who use firearms totally legally for sporting purposes and the industries that feed off them? Does he agree that we must not run the risk of those people and those industries being criminalised, even by implication, and that we must focus of the illegal use of firearms?

Nick Herbert: Again, I accept my hon. Friend's counsel. We intend to strike a proper and proportionate balance here, and we will respond in a timely fashion to the Select Committee's report. We will then come forward with any specific proposals.

It is frequently said that we have some of the toughest gun controls in the world. Firearms control in this country has a long history and has evolved gradually, with frequent tightening of the legislation by Parliament. The first British firearms controls were introduced by the Vagrancy Act 1824. Firearms certificates have been required since 1920, and shotguns have required a certificate since 1967. There have since been amendments to the Firearms Act 1968, which sets out the framework for today's legislation, in response to the shootings in Hungerford in 1987 and in Dunblane in 1996, banning semi-automatic weapons and handguns respectively. I think that right hon. and hon. Members on both sides would agree that the system has been made progressively tougher. In its current state, it places tight restrictions on individuals who wish to own a gun. Guns are used legitimately for pest-control and sporting purposes, and the Government certainly do not believe that such activities should be curtailed provided that there are proper controls, but it is of course right to keep those controls under review and, in particular, to reconsider them in the light of recent incidents.

Mr Ellwood: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his generosity in giving way.

The debate is entitled "Firearms Control". It deals with a wide variety of guns and their use. I invite my right hon. Friend to consider the use and legality of handguns. As he has said, they were made illegal following

a disaster, but given that we are to host the Olympic games, we are in the embarrassing position of having to send a British Olympic shooting team abroad to train. I have been in touch with my right hon. Friend about the issue, and I feel that it should be examined. We need cognitive legislation, such as the new Bill, rather than an outright ban.

Nick Herbert: My hon. Friend has illustrated the importance of striking the right balance. We all understand why the action was taken in response to the dreadful Dunblane incident in 1997. However, the issue of competitive shooting at the Olympics has been raised with the Minister for Sport and the Olympics, who I am sure would be happy to discuss it with my hon. Friend.

The Government welcome the timely report on firearms control that was published today by the Home Affairs Committee. I thank the Committee, under the chairmanship of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), for its work on the issue. As I have said, we will consider its recommendations carefully, not least in the light of today's debate. The House will understand that it would not be right for me to respond in detail today, but I want deal with three key points.

First, the Committee recommended that the Government should codify and simplify the laws relating to firearm ownership. As I made clear when I mentioned the history of firearms legislation, those laws are widely dispersed across different Acts of Parliament. Furthermore, they are very complex. I believe that the issue would benefit from further attention, and we will therefore consider that recommendation carefully.

Secondly, the Committee recommended tighter restrictions on the granting of firearms licences to individuals who have engaged in criminal activity. That concern clearly arose from the shootings in Cumbria, and I raised it with the chief constable myself when I visited the area in August. There may be an opportunity for careful adjustment, but that will depend on the nature of the offence. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire), will listen carefully to what is said in the debate and will use it to inform any future decisions. However, we welcome the Committee's recommendation.

Thirdly, the Committee raised the issue of the age at which an individual is permitted to shoot. I understand why that issue has been raised, but I think it important to appreciate that many young people enjoy shooting in a safe and responsible manner. Assistant Chief Constable Adrian Whiting told the Committee:

"The evidence in relation to young people shooting does not give any cause for concern".

We will of course consider the Committee's response in full, but it is important for legislative changes to be proportionate.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Nick Herbert: Of course I give way to the Chairman of the Select Committee.

Keith Vaz: We published our report only 18 hours ago, so I do not expect the Minister to respond to each and every one of its 22 recommendations, but the fact

that he has picked up those three points makes it clear that the Government understand the nature of the inquiry and the need for further consideration of the recommendations. Can he give me an idea—without necessarily specifying a month—of the approximate time within which the Government will respond to the report?

Nick Herbert: My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary tells me that he is going to say "two months" in his winding-up speech. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman considers that a suitable period within which to respond to such a sensitive issue.

The issue of the mental health of applicants for firearm and shotgun certificates has also been raised. As the Committee has noted, it has now been agreed between the British Medical Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers that the police will notify a GP of the grant and renewal of a firearm and/or shotgun certificate. The implementation of that arrangement is being sought within the next six months. In essence, the process will involve a system of notification by way of a standard letter, which means that GPs will be in a position to alert the police if they have any concerns. The police will then be able to request a medical report under the procedures mentioned at the start of the debate. I believe that that is a welcome move. There will be further discussions in due course about the possibility of placing a marker on computerised medical records to create a more enduring record of which patients own a firearm.

I believe that that development indicates that the authorities have been able to take sensible steps to improve the operation of firearms laws in the light of public concern. However, I agree with the Select Committee's suggestion that requiring firearms applicants to undergo a compulsory medical check would be costly and would be regarded as disproportionate.

Overall, the Committee's contribution to an ongoing subject of consideration is very useful, and we will consider it fully before deciding on our final course of action. As we consider our response, it will be important to provide an opportunity for wider engagement with the issues, and we will announce shortly how we will ensure that it is provided.

Mike Weatherley (Hove) (Con): Will the Minister also consider instances where sentencing may have been too lenient? I understand that the sentence for illegal handling of firearms is five years' imprisonment and that the sentence for an aggravated offence is seven years, but that that is rarely upheld in the courts. Will the Minister consider whether we can strengthen the position by increasing the sentence, if it does not constitute a sufficient deterrent?

Nick Herbert: I think that I am right in saying that such sentences have been toughened considerably in recent years. As my hon. Friend knows, we recently published a Green Paper on sentencing. There will be an opportunity to respond to it, and he will be welcome to do so. We will, of course, consider further representations about the levels of offences, but I think that this is a question of enforcement as much as penalties.

Sir Alan Beith: Is the Minister satisfied that the arrangements that have been discussed with the BMA

[*Sir Alan Beith*]

will extend to encouraging GPs to report cases in which a personality disorder of some kind is apparent? Such a disorder might not be a treatable mental illness, but it might be a pretty clear indicator that someone should not be in possession of firearms.

Nick Herbert: I agree. It is important for GPs, who will be in the best position to raise concerns, to use the system of notification in a way that ensures that such issues can be taken into account by the police.

It is absolutely right, in the wake of such major incidents as were experienced in Cumbria and Northumbria, to reconsider the legislation that controls firearm ownership in this country, but we must also ensure that our response is considered, proportionate and evidence-led. As the Prime Minister said shortly after the shootings:

“we should not leap to knee-jerk conclusions on what should be done on the regulatory front... You can’t legislate to stop a switch flicking in someone’s head and this sort of dreadful action taking place.”

Public safety will always be our watchword, and if there is a clear need to make specific changes to legislation, we will not hesitate to present proposals. We remain committed to considering the present range of firearms controls in a measured way.

I look forward to what I am sure will be a thoughtful and constructive debate on this important and sensitive subject. We will listen carefully to points raised by all Members this evening, and we will use them to in shaping our response to such incidents.

6.49 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): May I begin by echoing the Minister’s comments about the victims and their families who were caught up in the dreadful events over the summer in Cumbria and Northumbria, and by paying tribute to the wider communities in those areas who went through very distressing and upsetting times? I also commend the work of the emergency services, not only when the events took place, but in the following weeks and months. In particular, I pay tribute to David Rathband, who was so tragically injured by Moat in the Northumbria shootings.

Tony Cunningham: My hon. Friend rightly pays tribute to the emergency services, but will she also pay tribute to the Churches in my area? The people at that time needed a lot of spiritual support. It was offered by the Churches, and I thought they did a fantastic job.

Diana Johnson: I am very happy to pay tribute to the Churches, and I also know that my hon. Friend spent a great deal of time working with the communities and making sure that the families and victims had everything they needed.

This debate is timely. The Select Committee on Home Affairs report on firearms control was published at one minute past midnight. It examines in detail whether, in the light of the dreadful events in Cumbria and Northumbria earlier in the year, we need to change our firearms legislation. We must remember, of course, that not all the reports on the events in Cumbria and Northumbria are available. Although we have had less than 12 hours to consider the Committee’s findings and recommendations, it will be useful for us now to start to

set out some initial thoughts about the report and to raise some of the issues that will certainly impact on this policy area in the weeks and months to come.

Having read the report this morning, I commend it as excellent. The Committee undertook extensive deliberations and produced some thoughtful recommendations. I appreciate that the Government will wish to consider them carefully before responding fully in due course. I also note the strong feeling on both sides of the firearms control debate, and I thank those groups and organisations who have provided helpful and thorough briefing material. We should also note that changes to firearms control legislation are often a result of tragic events such as Hungerford and Dunblane. This is clearly a very sensitive issue.

I read with great care the report of the debate on the Cumbrian shootings that was held in the House at the instigation of my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed). He has been unanimously praised for the leadership he showed in his community both at the time and since. I pay tribute to him as well, and to other hon. Members from that area whom I know also worked tirelessly at that time. I took particular note of my hon. Friend’s comments about reviewing firearms control in the wake of the tragedy in his constituency. He felt that we should not have a knee-jerk reaction, and that it was important to collect all the facts and consider all the evidence before reaching conclusions. That is the right approach. There is agreement across the political spectrum that there must be mature consideration of the key issues in respect of firearms control. My hon. Friend also made telling remarks about the media, and their portrayal of what had happened in his community. The Select Committee also commented on that.

Unfortunately, my hon. Friend has had to leave the debate early tonight, and he has made clear his concerns about its being scheduled just a few days before the House rises for Christmas. It should also be noted that he is on paternity leave at the moment, but he felt so strongly about this issue that he made a special effort to come to the House. I know he will look to the Government to respond to the Select Committee’s recommendations by way of an oral statement in the House—rather than a written statement—so that there can be further debate on these issues.

Let me say a little about the historical context to our debate. Since the 1920s, we have used legislation to control firearms. That is now set out in 34 pieces of legislation. The main one is the Firearms Act 1968, which, as the Minister said, has been amended many times. It is widely agreed that we now have some of the strictest gun controls in the world.

Shotguns are used for pest control, game shooting and target shooting. There are 1,366,082 shotguns in England and Wales, held on 574,946 certificates. Applications are made under section 2 of the 1968 Act. There are also 138,728 firearms certificates, which cover 435,383 guns in England and Wales, including barrels and sound moderators. The majority are sporting rifles that are used for pest control, deer stalking and target shooting. The application process for firearms, under section 1 of the Act, is different.

We must recognise the important role of shooting as a legitimate recreational activity in this country. In 2005, the Labour party set out its charter for shooting, which recognised that there was no connection between

legitimate sporting shooting and gun crime. We also know that the sport of shooting is a £1.6 billion industry, in which 70,000 people are employed in full-time jobs. I note from the Select Committee report that it, too, recognises that thousands of people use firearms in recreation and in their employment, and that it in no way wishes to restrict such activity. However, it is always helpful to test the effectiveness of firearms control and review current thinking on it.

After the shootings by Derrick Bird on 2 June, when he killed 12 people and injured a further 11, the Association of Chief Police Officers was asked to produce a report, as Derrick Bird was in lawful possession of firearms. The report's remit was to look both at that specific case and any wider issues. It was produced by the ACPO lead on firearms licensing and chair of the ACPO firearms and explosives licensing working group, Assistant Chief Constable Adrian Whiting, and was published on 2 November.

The report made three key recommendations. First, it recommended the establishment of formal links between GPs, mental health services and police forces to enable medical professionals to alert the police if they have concerns regarding certificate holders. Secondly, it said the cost of any GP report should be borne by the applicant. Thirdly, it recommended that formal approaches should be made to members of an applicant's family at the grant and renewal of the certificate. It is clearly very helpful to have this report as a further source of information for the Select Committee and the Government to reflect upon.

Let me now address a few of the specific recommendations in the Select Committee report. First, on the role of GPs and their involvement with firearms control, the Committee welcomed the recent agreement between ACPO and the British Medical Association that the police will alert GPs to every new and renewal licence application. That is an important step in ensuring that the licensing authority receives accurate medical information about applicants. It carries on some of the work started under the previous Labour Government, and we support the change.

It is interesting to note that an applicant may also approach their GP as a person of good character to act as a referee or counter-signatory for a certificate application. If a GP becomes worried about his patient, the BMA has issued guidance that doctors should

"be prepared to breach confidence and inform the appropriate authorities if necessary."

That is very important in respect of those who have held licences for some time.

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady not agree that what she has just said might put off a legitimate holder of a certificate who feels that their health might be, for whatever reason, deteriorating from going to their GP at all, because they might believe that their certificate would be in jeopardy? That would constitute a substantial danger not only to the public, but to that person's health.

Diana Johnson: Those points were aired at the Select Committee. I know the BMA has taken a certain view, and it has decided on giving this particular advice to their GPs. However, I will have a little more to say about GPs and the people who go to see them more regularly.

The view was also presented to the Select Committee that the medical records of firearm certificate holders should be tagged. That would enable a GP who becomes concerned about a person's health to notify the authorities. The Select Committee rejected that approach. The Information Commissioner's Office raised concerns about the effect of tagged medical records, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation believes that this would create a further burden on GPs, and GPs were concerned about the issue of liability.

Mr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree with the following comments by Dr John Canning, who is a general practitioner in Middlesbrough and the chairman of the British Medical Association's professional fees committee? He said:

"As a GP, I can give no judgment to someone's fitness to hold a weapon, particularly forecasting the future. What I can do is provide factual evidence about the past. It is impossible, and I have spoken to other colleagues in specialities such as psychiatry who say equally that it is impossible to predict the future."

Diana Johnson: Clearly, the decision about whether a certificate should be issued rests finally with the police. The information that GPs can provide should be factual and based on what they know.

Some 93% of shooters are male, the majority being over the age of 40. That group does not go to their GP as often as they perhaps should, so the opportunity to identify problems may be limited; it has been made clear that Derrick Bird had little contact with his GP. In addition, the Independent Police Complaints Commission has identified only six individuals a year where involvement with a medical practitioner might have had an effect in notifying the authorities that there was a problem. So this issue has to be kept under review in the weeks and months to come.

The law relating to young people and firearms control is complicated and, at times, confusing. Members of the public who read the report will raise an eyebrow when they see that 26 10-year-olds currently hold shotgun licences. The report by ACPO did not examine the age at which a certificate can be issued to a young person, as that was not relevant to the events in Cumbria, nor did this give ACPO any particular concern when considering the wider issues. However, the report referred to inconsistencies that could be addressed on some issues—for example, the definition of an "occupier" in relation to the supervision of a young person. The Committee commented on the need for a review of the minimum age limits on the use of firearms and the eligibility for firearms certificates, with the aim of reducing the inconsistency and complexity associated with the use of firearms by children.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady raises an interesting point about the age at which people should be exposed or given access to weapons. I have had the opportunity to work with some youngsters who, in a different world, would not get to see these weapons. They would see them on telly and in video games, and they would consider them as trophies—the bits of kit that youngsters need to have. By allowing such youngsters to use these weapons in a safe environment and exposing them to how they work, they gain respect for these weapons and their air of mystery is removed. Does she agree that more such education is required, so that the youth of

[Mr Ellwood]

today are allowed to understand the importance and danger of these weapons and the respect that they must give them?

Diana Johnson: I hope that the Government will consider that very point when they consider the Committee's recommendations. We need to wait to see how they will respond to the issue. Interestingly, the Police Minister talked about the need for a proportionate response and recognised that young people are involved in many positive activities involving shooting, for example, through the Scout Association, which holds an annual rifle competition. In addition, the use of target shooting activities is increasing in the schools sector, Sport England provides funding for shooting and the activity is also recognised by the Duke of Edinburgh's scheme.

Let me now deal with the recommendation relating to criminal activity. Concerns have been raised that people with criminal convictions have been able to obtain certificates. It appears that people with suspended sentences are not prevented from obtaining a certificate, and the Committee agreed that that needs to be examined. The Committee also recommended that those who receive shorter custodial sentences should not be allowed to possess firearms, and we agree that that should be considered seriously by the Government. The Committee also noted that police licensing officers are now encouraged to take into account intelligence about criminal behaviour that has not resulted in convictions, as well as convictions resulting in non-custodial sentences, when considering whether to grant a licence. The Committee felt that it must be made explicit in police guidance that officers are expected to take such behaviour extremely seriously, particularly in cases of bind-overs, arrests and police call-outs for domestic violence, and that accumulation of convictions should also be carefully examined.

That leads me to the recommendation about the further consultation that should be undertaken when an application is made for a shotgun or firearm licence. The Committee suggested a requirement to consult the domestic partners of applicants on whether to grant a licence in order to try to identify whether there are domestic issues of which a firearms licensing officer should be aware. I noted when I read the report that the Committee was particularly concerned about the use of firearms in domestic violence incidents. Evidence was given to the Committee about a system introduced in Canada, whereby the current spouse or recent ex-spouse is required to sign the application form of any individual applying for a firearms licence. Any failure to do so prompts an additional level of investigation by the registering authorities. Since the system was introduced the gun murder rate of women has reduced by 40%. The ACPO lead has also said that adults in a domestic relationship should be inquired of when an application is made for a firearm or shotgun. The Opposition believe that this recommendation merits serious consideration by the Government, and I was particularly pleased that the Police Minister talked about examining the matter and making careful adjustments, where appropriate.

The Committee recommended that fees should be raised to cover the costs of licensing to ensure that funding cuts do not jeopardise the rigour of the licensing

process. We know that police forces are facing 20% cuts to their budgets over the coming years. Clearly this type of work is one of those areas that the report by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs was referring to when it said that although only 11% of police officers were available to the public, 89% were performing important work on behalf of the public, and I am sure that the Police Minister will agree that dealing with firearms licensing falls into that category.

Tony Cunningham: My hon. Friend will be very much aware that Cumbria police authority will be announcing strict and deep cuts. I hope that she agrees that one of the cuts that we do not want is in the number of officers dealing with firearms licensing.

Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Shooting organisations have already expressed concern about the impact of spending cuts on the rigour of the licensing process and they worry that they are going to see an erosion of the number—at least—of firearms inquiry officers and firearms licensing managers. The organisations gave evidence to the Committee suggesting that the consistency, quality, efficacy and general speed of licensing may well suffer. Those concerns were shared by Mr Whiting, who told the Committee that he had already had to recommend to chief officers that things such as home visits, which are part of our national policy on both grant and renewal, are conducted in person. A number of forces conduct these cases by telephone and, and sometimes, by post. He is concerned that such arrangements will be placed under increasing pressure in the forthcoming climate in which policing will operate. He does not foresee a wholesale collapse, but he did say that there is a risk of erosion in respect of some of the practices that are currently recommended. Such important work will need to be protected and the Committee has highlighted one way of doing this: by increasing fees.

Discussion was also had about the need to iron out the bulge in renewals, which has come about through the implementation of previous legislation. The suggestion is to extend the life of a proportion of certificates over the course of a number of renewal cycles. We understand that police representatives have made proposals on how such a system might operate, with estimated savings of £2 million, which have not, thus far, been taken up. The Opposition feel that an opportunity to make savings in this way is one that the Government should consider urgently.

The report also addressed air weapons offences. The Committee recognised that airguns do not require licences yet cause a great many problems for communities. There is legislation governing their use which the Committee feels could be better enforced, and the Opposition would also support better enforcement.

As for the recommendation on legislation on firearms control, it is accepted that there is a great deal of such legislation. The Committee calls for a simplified, clear and consistent approach. One suggestion would be to have one type of certification for all firearms. The Committee recommends pursuing stronger provisions for section 1 applications, but that will obviously be a matter for the Government to consider.

Interestingly, the Committee also cites the experience in the US of the application process for handguns in Washington DC, and that seems to be far more

comprehensive in its approach, requiring fingerprints and compulsory training. It is interesting that the Prime Minister says that he will give careful consideration to the possible consolidation of legislation. The Committee's recommendations included regulations for miniature rifle ranges and the report identified problems with deactivated and replica guns, too. The Committee rejected the idea of a reduction from five-year certificates to two.

In conclusion, the report is well-researched and takes a sensible approach. It contains a sensible analysis of what is working well and of what possible changes need to be considered. I look forward to the Government's response and, linked to this, their publication of their crime prevention strategy. I reiterate that I hope we will be able to keep to the timetable of two months for the Government's full response and that an oral statement on this important issue will be made in the House so that there will be an opportunity for all hon. Members to question the Government on their approach to the report's recommendations.

7.11 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): The events earlier this year in which two gunmen took the lives of 13 other people using shotguns were deeply tragic. The public interest in the two cases and the questions asked about the efficacy of our gun laws are certainly understandable, and I therefore welcome this debate. I also welcome the publication of the Home Affairs Committee's report, although I cannot say that I agree with all its recommendations.

Seneca the younger once said,

"quemadmodum gladius neminem occidit, occidentis telum est"
or

"a sword never kills anybody, it is merely a tool in the killer's hand".

Almost 2,000 years later, the satirical Welsh rap group Goldie Lookin' Chain brought the message up to date with their 2004 hit "Guns don't kill people, rappers do"—and Chris Moyles took it even further with, "Guns don't kill people, rabbits do". Please be assured that I do not highlight the lyric as a slur on the rapping community, but rather in support of the message of the song, which is that each holder of a gun is responsible for its mode of use.

In this country, by and large, we have not historically seen widespread gun ownership, or indeed gun crime. As is the case under the American constitution, we originally had the right to bear arms, but that right was overturned by the Firearms Act 1920. Unlike our American cousins, however, the public have shown little appetite for domestic gun ownership—long may that continue—other than for use a countryside management tool or among interest groups who use firearms in their leisure and sporting time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) has already mentioned page 10 of the report and the disproportionate focus on those who legally hold firearms as opposed to those who hold them illegally. In paragraph 12, on page 58, the Committee refers to the fact that there is no evidence of "an increase in misuse of lethal firearms"

since the last review of holding the licence renewal period at five years rather than two. I am not suggesting that there has been a knee-jerk reaction, but that shows

that we need to continue to be measured. I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Minister said that he would do that.

Firearm control has been considered repeatedly for more than 100 years. The Pistols Act 1903 regulated the sale of pistols and later Acts placed conditions on the ownership of firearms—such as the need to apply for a certificate to own a firearm or shotgun. The Firearms Act 1968 forms the basis for our gun laws and has been amended 34 times since then, creating the confusing and complex system to which the Committee referred.

Shotguns were used by both Moat and Bird, the perpetrators of the crimes that took place earlier this year, and the latter was licensed to own his. Incidentally, in an interview given to the BBC, one of Bird's victims who survived the incident, himself a shotgun owner, described the current gun laws as "rigorous", an opinion shared by the independent inquiry into the incident. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister also said:

"You can't legislate to stop a switch flicking in someone's head".

Perhaps he, too, had been listening to Goldie Lookin' Chain, but he was absolutely right. It appears—this seems to be the general consensus among those involved in the case—that no rule, regulation or more fierce application of the current processes would necessarily have prevented the tragedy.

It should be remembered that, although we share with many of our neighbours in Europe and the Commonwealth a comparatively low rate of gun homicide, we also have some of the most stringent gun laws in the world. A balance must be struck between legitimate use and safeguarding the public. I am not convinced that ever tighter regulation is likely to prevent each and every death caused by firearms, whether intentional or accidental, but it could prevent law-abiding, responsible citizens from using firearms in a legitimate, socially acceptable manner.

This morning the Home Affairs Committee released its report on firearms control. I agree with its conclusion that the legal construct of the various laws is rather complex and confusing. It recommends codification and simplification of the law, so that firearms owners and the police are clear about the circumstances of ownership and responsibilities. I welcome the proposals to try to simplify the law. I also welcome the potential inquiry into creating a single licensing system for section 1 firearms and shotguns.

In considering the role of GPs in the issuing of licences, I am not suggesting that simplification should be used as an excuse further to tighten already stringent regulation. The move to involve GPs in the process of awarding firearms certificates seems to be little more—dare I say it—than an exercise in bureaucracy. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr Offord) has said, there is strong evidence to suggest that one cannot necessarily predict somebody's future capacity in terms of owning a firearm.

Firearms are used in 6% of homicides, and known licensed firearms are used in 0.6%, so the move to include GPs is quite interesting. The idea of tagging medical records has already been described as potentially draconian, particularly in the light of fears about the security of NHS medical records. I join the Committee in dismissing calls for mandatory medical checks, because

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

we cannot look into the future, and because of the guidance that has been given, which I thought was stronger than that. I thought that GPs were already obliged to notify the police of people in their practices who are potential threats to the community. As the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) said, there was no suggestion that Mr Bird had recently seen his GP, and there were only six people in a year with whom such checks by a GP might have had an effect.

Let me turn now to employment in the sector. If we choose to go down the route of investigating a simplification of the law, it is imperative that any changes proposed have at their heart ring-fencing the rights of legitimate users, as those people play an important economic and social part in our communities. In September 2004, a report was undertaken on behalf of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, the Country Land and Business Association and the Countryside Alliance in association with the Game Conservancy Trust, entitled "The Economic and Environmental Impact of Sporting Shooting". It found that some 70,000 people are employed by the sport shooting industry, and in my area, the east of England, £140 million was brought into the economy through the sport. Indeed, seven constituents wrote to me about this matter and told me how they wanted to be able to continue shooting, seeing it as valuable as pest control and also as a sport that they enjoy.

Nationwide, shooting is worth a total of £1.6 billion. That does not take into account other forms of shooting such as shooting in gun clubs, which are also popular, and serve a social as well as an economic purpose. Felixstowe rifle club, for example, was first formed in 1900. More than 100 years later, it is still going strong and has formed links with a number of local charities and local schools. It offers lessons to a number of local children as part of the Duke of Edinburgh award, and is one of only a few clubs in the country that caters for blind shooters, which is interesting.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I am sure that my hon. Friend is aware that Suffolk has the lowest recorded level of gun crime in the United Kingdom. Does she agree that that is in spite of the fact that we have 97,000 licences for shotguns and firearms in the east of England, which suggests that the focus should be on dealing with unlicensed shotguns rather than licensed guns?

Dr Coffey: I could not agree more strongly with my hon. Friend and neighbour. That message is reinforced not only by my constituents who have contacted me but by patrons of my local, who are all regular shooters and wish not to be demonised for being so.

Felixstowe rifle club is one of many that had to adapt to the 1997 ban on handguns, which seems to have put an end to the sport of pistol shooting but done little to prevent the use of handguns in crime. Although legitimate handgun owners have given up their weapons, criminals show no sign of abating their use of them: in 1980 handguns were used in 529 robberies, and by 2008 the number had risen to 2,565 cases—down from a peak of 3,544 cases in 1992. In 2008 handguns were involved in 28 of the 39 firearms-related homicides that year—almost three quarters of all murders perpetrated using a gun. In contrast, only seven involved a shotgun and three a

rifle. Rather than spending our time and energies picking off legitimate owners as easy targets—I include young people in that—we should be grappling with the more difficult, but much more important, question of how to tackle the criminal fraternity on the illegitimate use and manufacture of guns.

Young people have been mentioned, and although there is no connection with the recent incidents I take this opportunity to remind the House that 10 years ago the Government of the time said there should be no ban, and no minimum age for the issuing of licences, because supervised shooting is an important way of encouraging young people to use weapons appropriately.

The use of illegal handguns in our inner cities to commit crimes, including murder, has gone relatively unreported by the media, who seem happy to focus more on anomalous cases than on the real problem at hand. Some 55% of all firearm offences occur in just three police areas—the Metropolitan, Greater Manchester and West Midlands areas—and many involve handguns. Given that those weapons are already illegal, I reiterate that we should not legislate further to ensure tighter control of weapons but should ask ourselves, as has been mentioned in relation to air rifles, how we can better enforce current laws.

I hope that the planned introduction of a dedicated border police force will bring material results in reducing the smuggling of illegal weapons into England. I understand that there is a problem with the smuggling of illegal weapons, particularly from eastern Europe, but we also need to tackle the illegitimate use of guns already on our shores and the ability of criminals to manufacture guns by adapting decommissioned or other guns. This, in all likelihood, requires not the introduction of new laws or regulations but a range of measures and enforcement by the police.

With gun and knife amnesties our police forces have done good work in attempting to clear those weapons from our streets and take them out of the hands of youngsters who feel that they need to carry a knife to feel safe. Amnesties have taken place across the country and should continue; indeed, I call on people in my constituency and elsewhere who hold a gun in their house to ask themselves whether they still need it. However, it is equally important to look into the causes of gun crimes. What makes somebody pick up a gun or a knife before they leave the house, and what can we do to persuade them that they do not need to purchase an illegal weapon, let alone use it?

It seems to be an increasing feature of gang culture to use or brandish a firearm or to kill somebody with one as a way of going up the respect agenda. We need to cut that out of our culture, and I welcome some of the work that has been done on that.

Simon Hart: My hon. Friend made an interesting point about whether young people should be allowed to access weapons at an early age. Is she aware of any evidence to suggest that having access to firearms when young leads to illegal use of them later in life?

Dr Coffey: I am not aware of any evidence whatever on that. Across our country, organisations such as gun clubs and the combined cadet force are often where youngsters first come into contact with weapons and are taught to use them appropriately. I am concerned

that the inappropriate and illegal use of illegal weapons is a growing phenomenon, perhaps in gang culture, but I do not equate the two.

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I met Wiltshire army cadets this week, and they made big play of the fact that the respect for weapons is taught. That should be taken into consideration.

Dr Coffey: I support that view. Two of the schools that I attended had cadet forces and it was seen as a privilege, which was not handed out lightly, to fire such weapons.

I conclude by reminding hon. Members that we are not in this House to turn the entire population of Great Britain into criminals one interest group at a time. Knee-jerk legislation might make great headlines but it does not necessarily solve the problem. It does nothing to allow innocent lawful people to go about their daily business, and it certainly does not stamp out all criminality. I therefore encourage the Government to consider the different proposals seriously but not necessarily to say that regulating or making more laws is the appropriate reaction to the cry that more must be done. Let, instead, the legacy of these tragic deaths be a catalyst for a renewed attempt to focus on our existing laws, to elucidate the real causes of gun crime and to tackle criminals, not the innocent.

7.26 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). I am afraid that I do not have her command of Latin or popular music, but I listened with great interest to what she said. Judging by the number of Members present, I am sure that others will make an equally important contribution to this very important debate.

It is not often that on the very same day that Parliament produces a report the Government hold a debate on the same subject. I have not experienced this kind of choreography before, but I am delighted that they have chosen to have this debate so soon after the Select Committee on Home Affairs published its report. I confess that when the Committee heard about the debate being held on 20 December, we worked very hard to make sure that our report was ready for the House to consider, because it would have been rather odd to have published it after the debate. I know that some who represent constituencies in the relevant area have had concerns about the timing of the debate, but the Government pledged to hold it by a certain time and they have kept their promise—obviously, they could not hold it tomorrow because of the winter Adjournment debate.

The debate gives us an opportunity to consider what has happened in this tragic year in which so many communities were touched by the violence of Raoul Moat and Derrick Bird. It is right that the Minister began and the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), completed the sequence of paying tribute to all those who have been involved in this matter, including the emergency services and the relatives who gave evidence to our Committee in such a passionate and eloquent way.

This is a debate that we would rather not have, as we would rather consider these matters when there had not been a tragedy of this kind. However, the Committee's report was not—I hate to use this word and everyone says that we should not use it—a knee-jerk reaction. We were keen not to react in that way and we wanted to review the previous Select Committee report on this subject, which was 10 years ago. It was appropriate to reconsider the issue and to draw on the terrible experiences of Cumbria and Northumbria.

Tony Cunningham: I should like to pay tribute to all the emergency services, but specifically to the health workers who suffered as a result of the shootings in west Cumbria. Perhaps hon. Members can imagine dealing with the consequences of shotgun wounds and bullet wounds: it must have been absolutely horrific, traumatic and terribly difficult for the doctors and nurses to deal with. I wanted to put on the record my tribute to their work.

Keith Vaz: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to do so. In an emergency of this kind, many people are involved in alleviating the pain and distress of members of the local community—the list is endless. I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cunningham), to the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) and to my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), who wanted to stay for the entire debate but had a long-standing commitment that he could not break. The debate was scheduled after that commitment was made. We all remember the way in which my hon. Friends the Members for Copeland and for Workington and others represented the views of their constituents day after day on a 24-hour basis, and we all hope that we will never be in that situation in our own constituencies.

This is, in a sense, a House of Commons day. There was not a single area of disagreement between the two Front-Bench teams. There are points that Members in all parts of the House will want to emphasise, but there is agreement that we should look carefully at the reports that have been produced. I pay tribute to members of the Select Committee. Again, I apologise on their behalf. Most of them very much wanted to be present for the debate today but the severe weather and constituency commitments have prevented them from attending. They worked hard to make this a unanimous report where consensus was the order of the day. The report is not intended to have a go at any group in society.

I knew very little about firearms when I began the inquiry. That is why I was delighted to be involved in it—not delighted for the reasons that I mentioned, but pleased to gain some expertise in an area that I know nothing about. As Members of Parliament, we are supposed to be experts on everything, and it is not often that we say we know nothing about a subject. However, I knew nothing about firearms. The nearest I had got to a firearm was a water pistol when I was much younger.

I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) who was extremely helpful to the Committee in a number of ways and to me personally. We asked that firearms be brought into the Committee so that we could look at the various types. Sometimes it is difficult for lay members—I am a lay member—to understand the difference between a

[Keith Vaz]

section I firearm, a shotgun, a pistol and an air weapon. The hon. Gentleman arranged for that to happen. I thank the Serjeant at Arms and the Deputy Serjeant at Arms for allowing us to bring the weapons into the Committee. I think we gave them a bit of a fright when the firearms came in, but it was important for us to look at them.

I valued immensely my visit to Bisley, where I met so many talented individuals who had represented our country in shooting at the highest level and had won gold medals at the recent Commonwealth games. They were not bulky men with big muscles, though there were some of those about—not members of the Committee. Some were women, who had shot so successfully. One of them hung all four of her gold medals around her neck. I no longer need to be convinced of the importance of the sport. When we look at the figures, showing the hundreds of thousands who apply for a licence in good faith, with excellent characters, and get their licences, we know that we must be careful if we try to change the law.

That is not what the Committee suggested to any great extent. Like the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal, we suggested measures that we think can improve the situation. Hindsight is a wonderful gift and none of us possesses it. We do not know what is going to happen in the future. It is terribly difficult for the Government of the day, having had so many difficulties to deal with in the events that took place in Cumbria and Northumberland, and to call it right. If anything happens in the future, and the odds are that it will—the evidence before us suggested that it will happen at some stage—we do not want people to be blamed for having failed to take action.

Some of our proposals are direct recommendations: we made 22 recommendations. Some are an invitation to the Government to consult further—for example, on the age at which children may apply for a licence. I was confused about that, as were the Clerks and members of the Committee. Therefore, for the convenience of the House, we set out the current law in a table that appears on page 42 of the report.

As the table shows, it is possible to apply for a licence for a shotgun at any age, but for a section I firearm, one can apply only from the age of 14. One may use a shotgun under supervision at any age, but, for a section I firearm, in certain circumstances, it is from the age of 14 with a certificate. To be in possession of a firearm unsupervised, the minimum age is 15 for a shotgun and 14 for a section I firearm. To purchase or hire a firearm and/or ammunition, the age is the same—18.

We did not suggest an age to the Government. We recommended that the Government look at the various ages. They may decide that there is no empirical evidence that a change is needed. However, we suggested a number of areas for consideration: the age at which an individual is permitted to shoot under supervision in the controlled environment of a shooting range, the age at which an individual is permitted to shoot under supervision outside such a controlled environment, and the age at which an individual is permitted to shoot unsupervised.

No age is specified in the report, although Mr Whiting said when I pressed him that he thought it should be 10. That was under pressure from the Chairman seeking to

get him to alight on a particular figure. I was very surprised that there were 26 children aged 10 who had shotguns, even though I have a 15-year-old son who is in the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme. When he heard that I would be speaking about the subject, he said, "You're not going to ban us from doing this, are you?" I said, "I'm not going to ban you from doing anything, apart from being on the computer for too long."

We have asked the Government to consider the question of age. The hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal need not fear. We are not coming to a conclusion; we are just saying that the matter requires further thought.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I heard the right hon. Gentleman this morning on Radio 4 on this subject. It was not clear from his response why he felt the need for a review. He did not seem to be suggesting that there was any particular problem in respect of the age at which children could hold a licence or could shoot.

Keith Vaz: I was trying to hedge a little because we have our personal views based on our interest in the subject, but the Committee as a whole took no view. I think it was right not to take a view because we had not taken a huge amount of evidence on the age limits. We therefore did not want to interfere with the current arrangements. We thought further examination was merited. As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am not an expert on these matters so it came as a surprise to me that children as young as 10 were able to shoot. It had to be explained to me at Bisley what they were all up to and that they were doing it for a purpose. I understood much better when I had heard that.

Mr Ellwood: The right hon. Gentleman's report raises a number of issues, and this one is worth looking into in more detail. More information is required if we are to dabble with the numbers. It is clear that people cannot own ammunition until they are a lot older. It is clear that they cannot even use a weapon unless they are supervised or of a certain age. By discussing the ages, we are getting into semantics and away from questions about when the gun will be used and in what context. We are talking about the age of 10, when children cannot even buy ammunition or use it unless they are supervised.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Gentleman is right. That is why we batted the issue over to the Government for them to look at. I know that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) is the parent of two very young children, because they are regulars at the Westminster kids club party. Any parent would be concerned if they were not in the know about what is going on. We are not saying, "Let's make it 10." Let us consider the issues and let the Government perhaps come back with a view in the two-month timetable that they have given themselves.

My second point is about the 34 pieces of legislation covering this area of policy. It is a no-brainer that we need to consolidate. We need to make sure that the police and those responsible for holding such firearms know the law, which needs to be clear, so that nobody is

under any misapprehension. That is why clarity of law and consistency are extremely important, and that is an easy one for the Government, as the Minister hinted in his very careful speech from the Dispatch Box.

There was a debate in the Committee about the role of GPs, but we concluded that we can live with the reasonable deal struck between the British Medical Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers—and therefore the Home Office. We should not try to interfere in the judgment of a general practitioner. Let the general practitioner alert the authorities if he or she feels that it has to be done. GPs will be very careful when they write their references or provide any information to those making such decisions, because they will not want to make mistakes. They also have a duty of confidentiality, however. The Committee was reluctant to intervene on that duty, but we felt it necessary to bring it to the attention of GPs themselves, if they needed reminding, because they have a crucial role in ensuring that proper consideration is given when licences are granted.

Tony Cunningham: Before my right hon. Friend concludes, will he comment on the Committee's report concerning the media? My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed) was extremely disturbed by the way in which the media covered the terrible shootings in west Cumbria.

Keith Vaz: Yes, we considered that issue in the inquiry, and it is in the report, although I cannot remember the exact paragraph. With such tragic events, the media tend to go to the scene, and there is 24-hour coverage, which understandably upsets local residents. One witness, it might have been Professor Shepherd or the witness from the health authority—

Tony Cunningham: Professor Ashton

Keith Vaz: Professor Ashton, I thank my hon. Friend. Professor Ashton said that the constant media coverage might encourage others to do the same, so one has to be very careful not to glamorise what happens.

The report has a section on key facts, and I shall read just a couple. The most recent figures show that there are 138,728 firearm certificates, covering 435,000 firearms, and 574,946 shotgun certificates, covering 1.366 million shotguns. That is a huge number, but the number of cases, tragic though they are, in which legally held firearms have resulted in homicide, deaths or injuries, is very small indeed. That is not to excuse the number or to say it is not important, but it needs to be seen in proportion to the number of guns that are about.

So the Committee has not sought to condemn or criticise; all it has sought to do unanimously is to make suggestions, so that, by closing the loopholes and ironing out the creases, our already tough law becomes not necessarily tougher, but slightly better. It is up to the Government to adopt the measures that we suggest. They have given themselves a two-month timetable, for which I am most grateful, and we look forward to re-examining the issue.

We have decided to publish our recommendations in a grid on our website—we decided to do that after the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) left the Committee—and, as soon as the Government meet those recommendations, we give them

a tick. So far, in our three reports, we have totalled about 60 recommendations, and there are 22 in the report before us. We look forward to ticking as many as possible. If we cannot tick them, and if the Government have a better measure to put in place, we will give them the credit they deserve. The Minister and the Government have handled the matter sensitively and carefully and the Opposition Front Benchers have dealt with it in an equally proper way. This is the House at its best, and I hope that the debate continues along those lines.

7.45 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I welcome the opportunity for this debate today. I suspect that whatever day the Government had chosen, some hon. Members might have felt it inappropriate, but the fact that the debate is taking place today has not stopped us from having a well-informed discussion with Members who clearly have an interest in the subject. I welcome also the fact that the matter is under active consideration by the Government.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and, indeed, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), who, as the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North has said, have given the matter mature consideration. The whole debate has been approached in a consensual and mature manner.

I further welcome the Committee revisiting the report from 10 years ago. One of the Committee's strengths is that it revisits reports and checks whether recommendations have been implemented. I also welcome the recent innovation of placing recommendations on the website, so that we can see what progress is made against them. Whether the Government see the 66 recommendations in the last three reports as separate targets, I do not know, but, given that the Government are duty-bound to respond to the Committee's reports, it might be appropriate for them to respond to the recommendations as well.

It is perfectly appropriate and right that, after the tragic incidents involving Derrick Bird and Raoul Moat, the House should consider our gun control laws and approach the issue in a suitably sombre and non-political atmosphere. We owe that to the families, who suffered so grievously from those senseless murders, and to the emergency services, who had to deal with those matters on the day and in the aftermath. It is incumbent on us to propose solutions that reduce risks not only effectively, but proportionately, and we must rely on policies with a sound evidence base. So, we, as a House and as a Government, should propose solutions that identify the differences between and risks associated with legal and illegal firearms.

On illegal firearms, I am sure that there is a consensus in the House that the current Government, just like the previous Government, must maintain pressure on those who import and convert weapons, and on the gangs that use weapons. As the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal has said, we need to rely on the border force to try to intercept weapons as they come into the country. We also need to rely on the national crime agency, when it is set up, to deal with what is a national issue, and we need to ensure that the duty of co-operation that will be

[Tom Brake]

placed on the elected police and crime commissioners operates effectively, so that they can deal collectively with a matter of national importance.

On legal firearms, Members have quoted some of the statistics. According to the briefing that Members have received from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation, it is difficult to demonstrate a relationship between gun crime and legitimate gun ownership. The association provides statistics showing that, for instance, in Scotland in 2005–06, although gun crime fell by 6%, and was 28% lower than nine years previously, there was an increase in privately owned firearms, the number of which was at a five-year high in that country. So, there does not appear to be a correlation between gun crime and legitimate gun ownership, and the association provides a number of other statistics to support that contention. Indeed, handguns were banned following Dunblane, but they continue to be regularly used and are the weapon of choice in gun crime.

One should not draw any rapid conclusions about how to address the issue of gun crime through the licensing of legal weapons. We have heard the comments of the right hon. Member for Leicester East, the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, on the subject of young people and shooting, and I understand why his Committee called for the review. I, too, am surprised about the different age groups and about the issues on access to guns and ammunition and when someone needs to be supervised and when they do not. Therefore, it is perfectly right for him to pass the buck to the Government, which is something the Committee rarely does. He did not quite use that phrase, but I think he was quite happy to hand over responsibility for that review to the Government. I can see the need to do so, although I am not sure whether he has identified a particular problem that requires such a review to be undertaken.

On legal firearms, there is the matter of the number of firearms on private premises. Hon. Members will know that the British Shooting Sport Council does not consider the number of guns held by an individual to be an issue. That therefore does not necessarily need to be considered when discussing gun controls, particularly in relation to legal firearms. When dealing with that issue, it is essential that we rely on the evidence of what the risks are and how they can be addressed. I want to draw Members' attention to a couple of the Home Affairs Committee's recommendations, which warrant further investigation. The right hon. Gentleman has referred to the 34 laws. I am sure it would be of great advantage to clarify or simplify that matter. There should be tighter restrictions and clearer guidance to the police on the granting of firearms and shotgun licences to individuals who have engaged in criminal activity. Again, the Government should consider more carefully whether people subject to suspended sentences should be allowed to hold firearms.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North, raised a strong point about the need for greater consultation with domestic partners, both current and ex-partners. That matter is certainly worthy of Government investigation, as is the greater enforcement of air weapon offences. The media have also been drawn into the matter as a result of how they sensationalise these crimes. In passing, I shall refer to a

case that involves Newsquest. That organisation has done some good work on, for example, ensuring that there are no sex ads in its newspapers. However, I regret that in relation to a murder—not a gun-related murder—in my constituency, it has pursued a particular case again and again. The victim's family are suffering the consequences because, any time there is a development in the case, it gets covered locally and the family, who want to put the matter behind them, see it constantly reported on the front pages of the paper. Clearly, that may currently and in the future affect all the families involved in the Cumbrian incident and, indeed, the incidents involving Raoul Moat. The media should carefully consider that matter themselves and take appropriate action.

The final thing that I want to mention about the Select Committee report is the fact that, interestingly, it did not recommend centralising gun storage. In the Select Committee's view, there were perhaps advantages in having gun storage located in different places, rather than in a central point. If guns were located in a central point, it could be more attractive to someone who wanted to get hold of a large number of guns in one location. Will the Minister say whether he has received representations from any organisations or individuals on changes proposed by arm's length management organisations? An ALMO in my area, Sutton Housing Partnership, has introduced a policy of not allowing people to store guns in their properties, because it is concerned about those guns getting into illegal hands. However, the evidence that we have before us perhaps suggests that, in some respects, those guns might be safer there than they would be if they were all located in one particular point. When the Minister responds, I hope he will discuss that point.

It is clearly right that, as the House—and, indeed, the Select Committee—addresses these issues, we consider the risks associated with illegal and legal firearms. Collectively, we should formulate a response that addresses those issues and ensures that the families affected by these tragedies can see that the Government have responded proportionately. The Government need to take measures that reduce the risk of similar incidents occurring in the future, without having an undue impact on a sport that millions of people enjoy. Indeed, my wife enjoyed the sport of shooting when she was a teenager. We do not want to have a disproportionate impact on a fraternity who pursue a sport in a perfectly legal fashion. When the Minister responds, I hope that he will take on board those two, at times, conflicting considerations. It is the Government's responsibility to ensure that both those matters are addressed in a proportionate manner.

7.56 pm

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): Every year, deaths from gunshot wounds are an all-too-common occurrence in our country, as a result of homicide and suicide. Before this debate, I read a report prepared by the Gun Control Network, which monitors the firearms incidents that take place in our country. That report makes for shocking reading.

In one month alone—November—the Gun Control Network has highlighted huge numbers of firearms incidents. They include seven fatal shootings, five of which were apparent homicides—three in north London and two in the west midlands. In London, two men died after a double shooting in Islington and another victim

died when he was shot in a car in Finchley. In the west midlands, a man was shot dead in a house in Bilston and a man whose body was found in Smethwick had died from a gunshot wound to the head.

Two apparent suicides were also reported for that month. A man is thought to have taken his own life after he was seen in a street in Ashington, Northumberland with a gun, and a man was found dead at his stables near Rosewell, Midlothian in a suspected shotgun suicide. Thirteen other victims were shot—five with airguns and imitation weapons. A teenager was shot in Croydon and two men suffered leg injuries when they were shot in Clapham. In Merseyside, a man was shot in the legs in a street in Huyton. A victim was shot in the stomach with a shotgun in Croxteth and a man was shot in the leg in Stockbridge village. In south Yorkshire, a man sustained a minor injury when a shotgun was fired through the window of a house in Totley, Sheffield.

Five other people were hit by pellets from ball-bearing guns or air guns. In Shropshire, a boy was struck by a pellet from a ball-bearing gun in Oswestry and a cyclist was shot in the head with an airgun in Arleston. In south Yorkshire, a jeweller in Rotherham was shot in the face by an armed robber with a ball-bearing gun, and in Suffolk a woman and a teenager were struck in the head by airgun pellets on the same street but in separate attacks in Lowestoft. A man was shot in the hand by police in Copthorne, West Sussex. He was later charged with possession of an imitation firearm with intent to cause fear of violence.

I make this point because the pro-gun lobby likes to imply that people who take part in so-called legitimate shooting activities are extremely responsible. We have heard a lot of talk about knee-jerk reactions, but whenever there is an appalling incident such as the one in Cumbria, there is always a knee-jerk reaction from the pro-gun lobby. The House should consider the sobering thought that back in 1987, when Michael Ryan was indulging in a massacre in Hungerford, killing 17 people and injuring 15 others, Thomas Hamilton was seen to be a fit and proper person to hold a firearms certificate. Yet we know the tragic consequences in 1996 in Dnblane, where Thomas Hamilton killed 18 people and injured 15 others. When Thomas Hamilton was indulging in that killing spree, Derrick Bird in Cumbria was deemed a fit and proper person to hold a firearms certificate, and we know what happened earlier this year when 12 people were killed and 11 were seriously injured.

In my view, the country would be a far better place if guns were completely banned and nobody was allowed to own them. I recognise that that might be a step too far at this stage, but it is essential that this Parliament takes action to address the gun culture in our country. It is a frightening statistic that almost 5,000 young people—5,000 children—hold a firearms certificate. What kind of message is that sending out to the country at large? I am a councillor in Derby as well as a Member of Parliament. In a park in Normanton in Derby, there was a tragic and fatal incident in which a young man of 15 years of age was shot dead with a gun. I accept that that gun was obtained illegally. However, when the law of the land allows 5,000 children legitimately to hold a firearms certificate, it sends a very bad signal.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) has pointed out, there are 34 separate pieces of firearms legislation. The time is

long overdue for a new, simpler, unified piece of legislation covering the ownership of firearms. As I have said, I would like to see a complete ban on guns, although I accept that that will not happen in the foreseeable future. However, it is appropriate to ban the private storage of firearms in people's own homes. I cannot see how anybody in this House can legitimately argue that somebody should be able to store firearms in their own home. Why is that necessary? There is no foolproof method of dealing with this other than a complete ban on firearms, but taking them out of people's homes would be a huge step in the right direction towards preventing the sorts of appalling massacres that we have seen in Hungerford, Dunblane and Cumbria.

That is one of the measures that I would like to see, but we could go further. The hon. Member for Carinathen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) has referred to the notion that a person who has a firearms certificate might be deterred from seeing their GP, if they felt that that GP could report them to the police as not being a fit and proper person to continue to hold a firearms certificate. However, there is a way round that: a mandatory, annual medical test to check on individuals who hold firearms certificates would ensure that they are mentally capable and fit and proper people to continue to do so. That measure would get over the problem that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

Other hon. Members have referred to the Prime Minister's comments in the wake of the Cumbrian shooting, when he said that nobody can "stop a switch flicking in someone's head".

Adopting the approach that I am suggesting would not be foolproof but it would be a considerable step forward in preventing the sorts of terrible incidents that we have seen. I urge the Minister to take it on board and respond to it appropriately.

The Association of Chief Police Officers has considered this issue and has made a number of recommendations, including the involvement of the medical profession through allowing police to see the medical details of applicants and permitting a formal approach to applicants' families to ensure that they are happy for their family member to obtain a firearms certificate. That would be a huge step forward. We need, as a Parliament, to take appropriate steps. In the past, we have taken measures that clearly have not gone far enough, and we need to go considerably further. I accept that these measures need to be proportionate, but how do we judge what is proportionate when we see the number of innocent lives that have been lost as a result of people who have held firearms legitimately and then, through the inadequacy of our legislation, been able to go on a killing spree? I hope that the Minister will deal with those points.

We need to take more robust measures in relation to the illegal ownership of firearms. I would not allow children to have firearms certificates at all, but addressing the age at which young people are able to do so would be a good step in the right direction in terms of the signal it sends. We also need to look at other measures that we can take by working with young people and supporting youth organisations, which do some excellent work in bringing home to young people the consequences of gun crime. That would prevent more tragic incidents such as the one that occurred in the ward that I represent in Derby, where Kadeem Blackwood, a young man of 15 years of age, had his life tragically cut short. We have

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to empower youth organisations to enable the sort of educative work that would help to turn young people away from firearms.

Keith Vaz: I, too, was concerned about this when I began the inquiry. My hon. Friend has spoken very passionately about these matters. Does he not accept, however, that it would be very odd if we did not allow people the chance to enjoy their sport in a shooting range, in properly controlled circumstances with a proper licence?

Chris Williamson: My own view is that I would ban guns, and there would not be shooting ranges because people would not have guns. However, at the end of the day, politics is the art of the possible. If we could have the properly controlled circumstances that my right hon. Friend has mentioned but also, within that context, prevent people from having private storage of firearms in their own homes, that would deal with his point and also prevent the potential for the sorts of terrible massacres we have seen in some parts of the country.

Mr Offord: Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he wants images of weapons to be banned, for example in rap music, which we heard about earlier, and in American TV and big screen movies? That is where young people—particularly those in the urban environment that he is focusing on—see the images and glamorisation of such crimes and tragic deaths.

Chris Williamson: I agree that the violent images that we see on our screens and the references to weapons in rap music do not help. However, I do not think that that sufficiently explains why young people use guns to the extent that they do these days. That is why it is so important that we give the necessary resources not just to the police, but to youth organisations that turn young people away from firearms and make them realise the consequences of using firearms. There are consequences not only for the victims of firearms incidents, but for the lives of those who use them. The life of the young man who killed the teenager in my constituency, and that of his family, has been destroyed as a result of that incident.

Simon Hart: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in the absence of a total ban, there is evidence to suggest that when people are given responsible access to firearms at an early age, under proper supervision, it reduces the chance that they will end up in the terrible circumstances that he has described? Instead of it being a negative, it is a positive. The Home Affairs Committee and others have pointed to plenty of examples that suggest that it is a good thing.

Chris Williamson: I am not sure that I accept the hon. Gentleman's analysis. I certainly do not accept the point with regard to young people, or any people, using firearms to shoot live quarry. Perhaps using firearms in a shooting range is a different matter, but I am not sure that I agree.

Mr Alan Campbell (Tynemouth) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful, brave and challenging speech, which is important in this debate. However, I do not agree with many of his conclusions. My constituency

was the scene of a gun rampage less than 20 years ago. A number of residents who were affected by it were appalled recently when a sports shop decided to sell guns. I must say that it does so in a safe and controlled environment, with regular checks by the police. Does my hon. Friend agree that residents should have a greater say, perhaps through the planning process, over whether such shops should be allowed to set up in the high street?

Chris Williamson: My hon. Friend makes a pertinent point. I hope that the Localism Bill, which was published last week and which will give local residents greater power over planning matters, will enable what he has described. We need to take account of local people's views on such matters. Many opinion polls find that many people find the gun culture in our country utterly repugnant and unacceptable. Frankly, I think that people find it an affront to decency when such shops crop up on our high streets.

I hope that the Government will take on board the recommendations of the Home Affairs Committee, and that they will take my comments seriously. I accept that I take an absolutist position on this issue, but I recognise that short of taking an absolutist stance, the Government can go further. In my view, the Government have a moral obligation to go further to prevent incidents such as those in Hungerford, Dunblane and Cumbria from ever happening again in our country.

8.14 pm

Mr Tobias Ellwood (Bournemouth East) (Con): It is a pleasure and an honour to participate in this important debate and to follow the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) who, if nothing else, has reminded us why it is important to have a proper, thorough debate on this issue, rather than to jump to conclusions before we know all the details and understand the ramifications of any legislation that we wish to make.

I will begin with a declaration of interest. In the armed forces, I shot a number of weapons avidly. I am involved with the training of the Olympic pistol team and am vice-president of the British Shooting Sports Council, which is an umbrella organisation that deals with a number of associations from across the board in the shooting fraternity.

This debate was always going to focus on the three huge tragedies that have affected British society and, indeed, Parliament—the Hungerford, Dunblane and Cumbria shootings. I hope that I speak for all hon. Members in saying that our thoughts go out to the families whose lives remain shattered by those unprecedented events. Those events are as shocking as they are unprecedented. The responsibility of dissecting what went wrong is enormous. It involves not only helping the victims' families to come to terms with the events and to seek justice, but recommending changes to the law that might prevent similar incidents.

I am pleased that there was a delay after the Cumbria shootings in which to take stock and regroup before debating or deciding on firm legislation. The legislation will therefore be based not on passion, but on logic. There is a desire to act swiftly, but we must also act soberly. Given that we can see such tragic images unfolding in real time, thanks to 24-hour television, it is understandable

that the majority of people, and indeed journalists, were horrified by the events that we saw and called immediately for tougher action.

I gently remind the House that it is not only such massacres that we must consider. Gun crime, in one form or another, is committed in every hour of every day, sometimes with tragic results. Those events do not take place in the media limelight or on our television sets, but they do shatter the lives of the individuals who are affected in exactly the same way. When we debate the major issue of firearms control, we must not let the issues become polarised by looking simply at the major tragic events.

The world of legal gun ownership and use, and the laws that govern it are extremely complex. On the whole, it operates with the high level of responsibility that society expects. As has been said, 34 Acts of Parliament relate to firearms. I was pleased that in the report, the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) called for some kind of consolidation of that legislation. The Prime Minister has made it clear that it is not possible to legislate to stop a switch being turned in somebody's head, but we can make it easier for those who have to use the legislation to operate in this environment.

We cannot un-invent the weapon. It has legitimate uses in the rural community, in sports, including Olympic sports, and in law and order. However, weapons can and do fall into the wrong hands. The bullet may be the cause of death, but it is the owner's finger that is guilty of causing harm. Our job here in Parliament is to ensure that the public are properly protected. There must be a balance in law between our being a fair society and allowing legal gun ownership, and ensuring that guns do not fall into the wrong hands.

The hon. Member for Derby North spoke at some length about wanting to ban guns entirely. I hope he did not wish to mislead the House by saying that he was calling for children not to have access to guns and that it was ridiculous that children could have a licence at the age of 10. He knows that a child cannot be in possession of any weapon unsupervised while under 14, or under 15 in the case of a shotgun. We have to keep the full context of the law in perspective, and that is why the debate is important.

Chris Williamson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree, though, that at the age of 14, an individual is a child and not fully aware of the consequences of the use of a firearm? Does he agree that if we are still to have guns in society, some consideration should be given to increasing the age at which an individual can have a firearms certificate, perhaps to 18, when they are an adult?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman puts his point on the record, but what is the consequence of making weapons illegal? It makes them a trophy, a gang culture accessory and an object of desire for certain people. Introducing people to a wide variety of guns at a very young age takes the mystery out of the weapon and teaches them respect. The Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme, the Scouts and the cadets operate guns. I would like to see statistics on the respect or otherwise that people gain by being exposed to guns at an early age. If we had that, the hon. Gentleman would then be in a commanding position to say whether the current situation worked, and we could move forward from there.

Chris Williamson: I think the hon. Gentleman is conflating two issues. Young people involved in gang culture already see the illegal ownership of firearms as a badge of honour, and regrettably they are all too willing to use them. That is a separate matter from my point, which is that allowing young people to have a firearms certificate sends the inappropriate signal that it is legitimate for them to have firearms at their disposal. That is why it is important that we empower youth organisations to deal with the illegal ownership and use of firearms by young people in gangs.

Mr Ellwood: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman, and I would encourage him to go out and speak to the clubs and so on that participate in shooting. I have been involved in initiatives that take people from the gang culture, but who have yet to be exposed to guns and the world of crime, to a range so that they can understand what happens there. That teaches them some respect for the weapons that they have previously seen in video games or on television and thought they wanted. If he sees such initiatives, he might come back to the House with a very different view.

Justin Tomlinson: On youth engagement, surely the best thing to do is to involve sports clubs, the Army Cadet Force and other proper organisations that can provide respect for weapons and hands-on knowledge, rather than some do-gooding youth worker saying, "Just don't do it."

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point, and I look forward to his speech, which I hope will elaborate on that point.

I welcome the general thrust of the Home Affairs Committee's report, which states:

"We do not believe that a total outright ban on ownership and use of section 1 firearms and shotguns would be a proportionate response to the risks posed by these weapons."

I fully agree with that, and we should bear it in mind that only one in every 330 crimes involves a gun. If we exclude air weapons, firearms offences decreased by 17% in 2008-09, the last year for which figures are available.

I have huge concerns about the data that are available. The hon. Member for Derby North rattled off a series of horrible events, but he did not once say whether the weapons involved were illegal. In the key facts section on page 3 of the Committee's report, there is a long list of facts and figures about crimes, but again there is no indication of whether the guns used were illegal or legal. It would be a lot easier for us to debate the matter in detail and with understanding if we had that information.

Mr Offord: Is my hon. Friend aware that the shooting in Finchley that the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) mentioned was actually a gangland hit? I do not believe that the person involved held the firearm legally, but even if they did, that crime did not just occur because firearms are legal.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. As I said in an intervention, the Home Office does not collect or produce such data. The situation is tougher because the perpetrator of the crime does not conveniently leave their weapon at the scene, but nevertheless, statistics

[Mr Ellwood]

that differentiate the use of illegal and legal weapons would be helpful, as the hon. Member for Derby North said.

I am concerned about the data. There were 14,250 recorded offences, but we do not know how many involved the use of illegal guns. There is some breakdown analysis, because some categories of weapons are illegal, such as handguns—there were 4,275 incidents involving handguns and all those are illegal. Imitation weapons are not totally illegal, because they are used on TV sets and so forth, but they can be altered. We do not know how many are illegal. Those data would be helpful when we debate the Government's recommendations.

Paragraph 14 on page 10 of the report states:

"There is a lack of data in the public domain showing the extent to which legally-owned firearms are used in gun crime".

I hope the Minister can qualify that in his summation. Can such statistics be made public? In its evidence to the Committee, the Home Office states that

"the evidence suggests that the vast majority of crimes involving firearms are carried out with illegally-held guns".

Parliament has a duty not to throw the net of legislation across the entire gun community in the hope of pulling up some illegal weapons.

Hon. Members have pointed out the contribution that legal shooting activities make in our country. More than 1 million people participate in one form of shooting or another—whether for game, clay pigeon or targets. That makes a huge impact on the economy. The industry is worth more than £1 billion and involves the equivalent of 70,000 full-time jobs.

A recent Cambridge study showed that two thirds of the shooting community is also involved with the management and conservation of our countryside. The industry is therefore not simply about using guns and weapons, but about a relationship with the areas in which shooting takes place. Around £250 million a year is spent by those involved with gun communities. That goes towards the habitat and wildlife management of those areas.

The importance of exposure to weapons at an early age was mentioned. I hope that we agree on that now. Such exposure takes the mystery and glamour out of the weapon. That is recognised by the Government, because Sport England invests heavily to try to take out that mystery, so that people are not encouraged to get hold of an illegal weapon just to be part of a gang.

There is too much legislation, going back to the Firearms Act 1968. Firearms are also an aspect of the Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 and of subsequent violent crime legislation. When there is a big terrorist explosion in the UK, there is a desire for the Government to be seen to do something and for them to look strong on the day, but I am pleased that we have taken a slower approach towards firearms legislation.

It would be useful for the Minister and the Committee to qualify the role of general practitioners. I agree that a relationship between the police and GPs should be developed when the police are deciding whether to award a licence, but should a certificate be granted before or after a GP assessment? The Association of Chief Police Officers report states that we should go further and suggests some form of tagging, but that would be a step too far.

The report suggests tighter restrictions and better guidance in the granting of firearms and shotgun licences to individuals who have engaged in criminal activity already. Does the Minister believe that those serving suspended sentences should qualify for a firearms or weapons certificate?

There is also the need to consider previous un-convicted behaviour. This is when the police are allowed to consider evidence and information on their database that do not form part of a criminal conviction. This gets a bit blurred, however, so I think that the Minister needs to be clear on whether such evidence or intelligence can be taken into consideration. Furthermore, the idea of consulting domestic partners and ex-spouses is moving us into another blurred area. If the person is an ex-spouse, it suggests that things have not gone too merrily. Would an ex-spouse really want to help his or her former partner? Again we are getting into a blurred area that could be prone to abuse.

I was interested to read what has been learned from practices in America, where they have a two-year licence instead of a five-year approach. Fingerprints have to be submitted, and there must be an hour of firearms training along with further registration every three years. Is the Minister aware of what America and other countries are doing, and could we learn anything from them?

One of my biggest concerns, however, is about the blending of licences issued under section 1 of the Firearms Act 1968 and shotgun licences. This is not a sensible move. The present system of shotgun licensing is more effective and efficient because it focuses on the person, not the firearm, whereas with section 1 firearm licences, a lot of time is wasted on the minutiae of the firearm type, calibre and whether the person should hold one. I shall give some examples of where section 1 licences might not work: a vermin controller would have to go through a huge amount of red tape, at great cost to himself and the police, just to swap a .22 inch rifle for another; or a deerstalker changing his weapon of choice from a .308 inch rifle to a .270 inch rifle would have to go through the entire process from the start. That would apply to any change from one calibre to another. It does not make sense. However, one section of the 1968 Act requires that good reasons be given and conditions set, and I believe that that should remain in place.

My next concern is about paragraph 84 of the report, which deals with current police guidance on firearms legislation. The guidance is out of date. Lord Cullen's report on Dunblane suggested that better training must be put in place for our police, but there is still no standard training on firearms certification in the UK. That must definitely change. This also relates to the point about the Olympics that I mentioned in an intervention. This is an example—I look to the hon. Member for Derby North—of legislation being hammered through this place at a rate of knots that did not serve this country well. Yes, a handgun was used in that horrible massacre, but there are ways to prevent handguns from being used by the general population. For example, they could be held and stored in armouries and taken out only by professionals. That would mean that people could still use them. It would also mean that our Olympic team could train in the UK. That would be a sensible approach to the use of handguns on which the Minister knows that I have been lobbying hard.

Chris Williamson: If the hon. Gentleman believes it appropriate to store handguns in a secure armoury, would he agree that it would be appropriate to store all firearms in a secure armoury in a similar way?

Mr Ellwood: That is exactly how this debate should proceed. I am saying that on this issue, about which I have endeavoured to learn a lot, it makes sense to allow handguns to be used in the UK, if they are kept under lock and key and if appropriate measures are put in place, such as a requirement that the safe be opened by three key owners. That would make sense. If the hon. Gentleman would like to roll that out further, he could put forward that proposal. The point that I am making, however, is that because of the legislation handguns were made illegal, yet there is now more handgun crime and it is the one area that is growing.

Mr Offord: In addition to the number of handguns held illegally, is my hon. Friend aware that between 1997 and 2006—since the legislation was introduced—the number of offences increased?

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes my point, which is why it is important to debate such matters thoroughly before we jump to a conclusion that we believe will satisfy the nation's appetite and anger. That is our role; it is what Parliament must do. This place operates badly when we rush through legislation, a point reflected in the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 and other examples.

My final observation on the detail is about the proposals on the clarification of the age. There is no point in going into that further, but just to elaborate, no one under the age of 14 can own any form of weapon. They may be able to have a piece of paper saying that they have a certificate, but they cannot use a weapon unsupervised. That is a sensible way forward.

My penultimate point—a point made in an earlier intervention—is about the Press Complaints Commission. There is no need for me to dwell on this, but hon. Members will be aware that my family have endured our own tragedy, with the loss of my brother in a terrorist attack. When it happened we were deluged by the media, which is exactly what happened in Dunblane, in Cumbria, and so forth. The media pile in with such an intense and relentless level of intrusion that it really becomes an invasion, and this at a time when people feel at their most vulnerable. I spoke to those at the Press Complaints Commission, which has a process to deal with the problem. Unfortunately, they are not the people whom those affected would naturally want to phone up when such things happen. However, it is important to send out the message that when such events take place, the media have a responsibility to act responsibly—and not as they do at the moment, which is very invasively indeed—and to give people the space to manage their grief.

To conclude, firearms are part of the dangerous and complex world that we live in. However, we ignore at our peril the growth of gun crime on our streets. We cannot wish away the problem by legislating against those who use guns responsibly. It is the duty of the Government and Parliament to ensure that we carefully monitor what is happening on our streets, in our society and in our communities. It is also important to have that balance of legislation, so that we support those who want to use guns and weapons legally, and deny

those who want to use them illegally. I very much welcome this debate, and I am delighted to have had the opportunity to speak in it. I look forward to hearing the Minister's concluding remarks and to our being able to debate the legislation when it comes through in, I understand, the spring.

8.37 pm

Simon Hart (Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire) (Con): Let me start by associating myself with the comments of many right hon. and hon. Members about the dreadful incidents in Cumbria and other places. I was present at the June Westminster Hall debate introduced by the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed). As a proud representative of a rural area, I can only think in horror of the effect that such an incident would have on my community. Everything that I say should be understood in that context.

Since that time there have been some encouraging signs of an emerging consensus, among organisations and authorities, on what would be a proper, responsible, measured and proportionate way forward. Like other speakers, I would like to dwell on just three aspects of that, which are the availability of firearms to young people, the use of medical records in the application process, and the thorny issue of what constitutes a proper form of certification.

I shall start by establishing some context. One passage in the Home Affairs Committee report states:

“Certainly licensed firearms do not appear to be used in the majority of cases.”

That, I would suggest, is something of an understatement. I was pleased that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Chairman of the Committee, clarified that point earlier this evening. However, he did not go as far as the Committee did in April 2000, in its second report of that Session, which said:

“A common theme to many submissions is that illegally held weapons pose a far greater danger to public safety than those which are held in conformity with the present controls...it is clear that those determined to live outside the law are unlikely to respect the law's requirements when they wish to acquire or use a weapon.”

Other Members have mentioned the way in which the law has performed in certain areas. It will come as no surprise to them that 52% of firearms offences in 2008-09 were committed with handguns, which were of course prohibited in 1997. That illustrates the point that both the Select Committee reports have made, albeit with a different emphasis.

The Committee went on to say:

“The proportion of licence holders who use their guns in crime is tiny”,

and added:

“Many representations were made to us...about the legitimate enjoyment of shooting...and the wider benefits that shooting brings to the UK economy.”

Other speakers have touched on that point today, but it is fair to re-emphasise that there are different approaches to firearms in urban and rural areas. In rural areas they are seen more as an essential tool of the trade than they might be in other parts of the UK. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who is not in her place, spoke of the Opposition's recognition that 70,000 jobs were associated with the

[Simon Hart]

shooting industry—if I can call it that—and the fact that the industry injects £1.6 billion into the economy. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) also said that £250 million is devoted to wildlife and habitat management. That is a significant industry; to put it in context, it is not dissimilar in size to the UK film industry.

I want to dwell first on the issue of young people. Paragraph 7.7 of the Home Office's "Firearms Law: Guidance to the Police 2002" is no doubt familiar to many. It states:

"It is in the interests of safety that a young person who is to handle firearms should be properly taught at a relatively early age."

Others have expanded on that, including Assistant Chief Constable Adrian Whiting, as the Minister said in his opening remarks. I can see no evidence—emerging or otherwise—to suggest that young people who have access to firearms pose any danger whatever to society; in fact, quite the opposite. It is well within the capability of parents to make sensible and responsible decisions about the activities of their children. They do so pretty effectively every day of the week, and this is no different. There is simply no evidence to suggest that we should conjure up theories that would have a long-term downstream impact on shooting in the UK.

In case that is not sufficient evidence, I will quote a comment made at the weekend by Anita North, the Commonwealth games 2010 gold medallist and record holder, who said:

"People choose their sport at a young age. We have some extremely talented shooters in the GB team who started in their early teens. If they hadn't been able to get involved so young, they might now be taking part in some other sport rather than winning medals for shooting."

I shall turn now to the contentious issue of medical records, and start by taking careful note of the Information Commissioner's concerns about the security of data on the names and addresses of certificate holders. Large numbers of individuals within medical practices could have access to this sensitive material, the leaking of which could pose a significant risk. There is therefore legitimate concern about the proportionality of this measure. The Independent Police Complaints Commission could identify only six cases in which medical involvement at the granting or renewal stage of a licence might have made a contribution to the prevention of crime.

As we have heard, some medical practitioners—not many, but some—are unfavourably disposed to firearms ownership, meaning that licence holders might not visit their GP when they need to. A GP wrote to me only this weekend to say:

"our overriding duty is to our patients, to give them the best advice and guard the confidences they give us. A patient is not going to tell me things if I am going to pass information on to the authorities. We are the guardians of the patient's confidence, not agents of the state".

That position is reflected not only by the GP who bothered to get in touch with me but by many others across the country who have been in touch with other hon. Members.

Chris Williamson: Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the tragic massacres that took place in Hungerford, Dunblane and Cumbria could have been avoided if

Michael Ryan, Thomas Hamilton and Derrick Bird been subject to a medical examination resulting in their firearms certificates being removed and their guns taken away from them?

Simon Hart: Let repeat what I said to the hon. Gentleman in an earlier intervention. The fact is that there are individuals who may be perfectly healthy and competent when they apply for and are granted certificates, but in subsequent years may feel that their health is changing in a way that poses a potential threat to the ownership of their certificates, and as a result may feel fearful about approaching their GP in case their circumstances are changed forcibly. That is not good either for their health or for public safety. I understand why the hon. Gentleman has made his point, but sadly, I do not think that there is any evidence to suggest that the outcome would have been any different if different measures had been in place at that time.

Chris Williamson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Simon Hart: I will, but that is not an indication—

Chris Williamson: I thank the hon. Gentleman—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Two Members cannot be on their feet at the same time. Is the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) giving way?

Simon Hart: Yes, of course.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Chris Williamson.

Chris Williamson: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I thank the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire for giving way.

I think that the hon. Gentleman's argument reinforces my own point. Does he agree that rather than a voluntary arrangement—which I acknowledge could deter people from going to their GP for fear of losing their firearms certificate in the circumstances that he has outlined—there should be a mandatory test, perhaps annually? If he does not agree, will he explain why?

Simon Hart: I apologise for the earlier exchange, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

My answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is no. I will give my reasons for that answer in due course. I think that it is quite difficult to come up with a concept that would appeal to those who, like the hon. Gentleman, start from the absolutist position—which he is perfectly entitled to take—that nothing short of a total ban on all forms of firearms, whatever their purpose, is acceptable. However, I shall do my best in the few moments that I have left.

Let me try to nail the theory that consulting the spouse, or ex-spouse, of a certificate applicant or holder is somehow in the interests of safety. I cannot think of a more divisive and potentially litigious proposition. Some of the healthiest marriages and family arrangements are based on strong disagreement about almost every important issue, and arrangements of that kind often survive rather longer than others. On a flippant level, I think that such consultation would be a ridiculous intrusion into the way in which people conduct their lives. On a more serious level, I think that in acrimonious circumstances in which a marriage fell apart, the idea

that an offended ex-spouse, male or female, should have a say in the future enjoyment of his or her partner is ludicrous. I have read, seen and heard no evidence suggesting for one minute that that would have contributed greatly to a lessening of the chance of serious crime involving shotguns or firearms. The idea that we can expect spouses to become moral adjudicators on applications is clearly nonsense.

Finally, let me deal with the difficult question of certification. Here, the devil really is in the detail. I may have got this wrong—I am sure that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) will put me right if I have—but it seems to me that there is an implication that it would improve the position if the baseline criterion for applications for shotgun certificates were aligned with that applying to section 1 firearms. I cannot imagine that it is being suggested that the opposite should be the case, so I assume that the criterion for all shotgun certificate applications would rise to the section 1 level. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), I can see why that might be attractive on the face of it, but I feel that it could be devastating to the shooting and gun trade in the United Kingdom. Let me quote at this point: “It would be one thing for a person to require good reason to hold a certificate for a shotgun (i.e. a reversal of the current burden of proof whereby the Chief Officer shall not grant a shot gun certificate if he is satisfied that there is no good reason), but quite another to require good reason to possess each and every shotgun, as is currently the case with rifles.”

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) picked up on that, and put it rather more succinctly than I have managed. With this change in circumstances would come all sorts of requirements at variation stage, some of which are practically deliverable but some of which would impose an extraordinary burden, both financial and otherwise, on the already hard-pressed police force. If we consider the sheer number of shotguns in legitimate hands—they outnumber section 1 firearms by about five to one, I think—we see that the burden that we would be putting on firearms officers and the police force in general is huge. The Select Committee is not as clear as it might be about precisely what the implications are, but perhaps that could be clarified.

All reasonable people will have looked on with horror as the various disasters we are discussing unfolded, most recently those in June and July, and they would accept that some consolidation of the existing legislation is an acceptable and sensible way forward. However, it does not necessarily follow that that consolidation should result in wholesale changes, as there is no evidence to suggest that such changes, had they been made earlier, would have altered the tragic events that took place.

I agree with many other Members that evidence and principle must be the two foundations of any changes made by this or any other Government. Of course the efforts of the enforcement agencies and the Government should principally be directed at the eradication of gun crime, rather than unnecessarily penalising legitimate firearms owners. Sadly, so far as I can see, none of the proposals in the Select Committee report would have altered the outcome of the events that we have discussed this evening.

Apart, perhaps—although I doubt it—from the unlikely and absolutist solution suggested by the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson), no system is going to be 100% watertight. I suggest that the consolidation approach is the best way of establishing a proper balance between the legitimate interests of users—whether recreational users or those who use weapons as part of the nuts and bolts of their daily job—and the legitimate safety concerns. A consolidation would achieve that without compromising the coalition’s unequivocal commitment not to introduce legislation that unnecessarily impacts on people’s daily existence so that they are unable to conduct their businesses or live their lives free from state interference. If the coalition can get us to that stage, and not be too distracted by some of the eye-catching but—I venture to say—dangerous suggestions we have heard this evening, that would be a not unreasonable place to reach.

8.53 pm

Heather Wheeler (South Derbyshire) (Con): It has been a pleasure to sit through the entire debate, and I look forward to hearing the closing speeches from the respective Front Benches. I come to this debate as a holder of a shotgun licence and the owner of a shotgun. I am also very proud that we in South Derbyshire have one of the finest rifle clubs, at Swadlincote, and excellent cadet forces and shooting clubs at Newton Solney, a parish for which I am still a councillor.

We have fantastic shoots in South Derbyshire that are very important to the local economy, and it is interesting to note the juxtaposition between people who handle guns and those such as my good friend the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson). There could not be a more obvious distinction between a city dweller and somebody who is proud to live in the countryside.

Chris Williamson: Just for the record, I grew up in the countryside and am very familiar with it, and I regularly walk in the beautiful Derbyshire countryside, so it is not legitimate, worthy or in any way relevant to suggest that I do not understand the firearms issue because I happen to live in the city at the moment.

Heather Wheeler: You have put that on the record, sir. Interestingly, I recall that we went through great angst last time around with a report produced when Sir Ivan Lawrence was Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee. That report created huge ructions in the shooting community because of the resulting legislation, which is why tonight’s debate is important. I commend the current Chairman of the Select Committee, because the 22 recommendations are very fair. They contain nuances, which I am sure the Government will examine for the next two months, and the consultation will go on from there. My abiding feeling is that I do not believe that there will be a knee-jerk reaction to anything.

One of the dreadful phrases I use is, “We mustn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater.” But shooting is an extremely important part of our economy and our sporting heritage, and I believe that we will do extremely well in the Olympics: all that must not be sucked into the great concern we have when a few people involve themselves in tragic incidents. It is absolutely frightening that the pressure and power groups almost seem to be trying to put down great history, important parts of the

[Heather Wheeler]

economy and the sporting tradition of this country. None of that must change because of tragic incidents that take place in this country.

I, too, agree that it would be very worrying if the different types of licences were put together—even if there were to be a part A licence and a part B licence—because confusion would arise, even for the police, who deal with this on a day-to-day basis. May I put on the record how excellently the Derbyshire police force handles licensing arrangements? I can tell the Minister that the force gets it; Derbyshire's police absolutely understand the difference between the different types of certificates. We ought to leave it with the professionals, and we ought not to dabble any further.

8.57 pm

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler), who talks from her own experience of holding a shotgun licence, and the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart). Given that more than 700 people have died as a result of gunshot injuries and gun crime over the past 13 years, it is a great tragedy that we are having this debate only because it takes something such as the terrible events in Cumbria to bring this issue to the attention of the House. The work that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) has done with the Committee on this matter is greatly to his credit and is very valuable.

However, we need to highlight a few key issues and strands. First, the distinction has not always been made clearly in this debate between gun crimes perpetrated by people who were holding illegal weapons and those who hold legal weapons. Many of those 742 gun crime deaths were caused by people holding illegal weapons and not by people who have legal gun licences. I made the point in an intervention that Suffolk has the lowest rate of gun crime in the UK—we are very proud of that, notwithstanding those incidents involving air rifles in Lowestoft mentioned by the hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson)—yet 97,000 gun licences are held by those in the east of England, which is a very high level. That shows that there is not necessarily a causal effect between owning a gun licence and committing a gun crime. We know that gun crimes tend to happen in deprived urban areas, where those who commit crime do not hold gun licences. The key thing is to draw that distinction, because if we are to legislate on this issue, we must ensure that it is effective and addresses the key areas.

One thing we must do is to broaden out this debate. It is about firearms control, not just the terrible events in Cumbria, Hungerford or Dunblane. We need to ensure that the legislation and recommendations passed in this House will make things better. It is very difficult, because we have not heard any conclusive evidence this evening that changing the legislation to deal with licensed firearms will make any significant difference.

We know that there are issues with tackling the gun culture in our inner cities. In dealing with that culture, we need to stop the illegal trafficking of guns in this

country and the police need to deal with that trade effectively, including on our borders. In some inner cities, however, dealing with education in schools, particularly in deprived areas, and the police working with communities to highlight the problems of gun crime would be a far more effective way of dealing with illegally committed acts and with communities where there are problems with gun crime. In many rural communities, however, people hold gun licences and are very law abiding. Earlier in the debate I talked about Suffolk, where people use guns for pest control. I do not shoot—I have no interest in shooting—but we must accept that the number of law-abiding citizens who do not commit crime and who do not have any interest in misusing their guns, use guns for sport and for pest control. We must accept that legislation must be effective and targeted on the causes of illegal gun crime in this country. It should not be focused on a knee-jerk reaction to one or two terrible events that results in banning guns for those who use them for legitimate, law-abiding sport or pest control reasons.

Based on my experience as a doctor, I want to pick up on the issue of medical practitioners. Would it necessarily be useful for medical practitioners to have to tick a box every year for the 97,000 people in the east of England who have gun licences? Is it important that those medical practitioners should be consulted annually? Far too often in my professional life, I saw the pointless forms we had to fill in. We ticked the boxes but it did not improve patient care or make things any safer. It is important that we do not stigmatise people with mental health conditions. People are perfectly competent and able to make informed choices. They are not necessarily going to be more likely to run off and commit a gun crime than someone who does not have a mental health condition. We need to be careful not to draw that stigma into the debate. To be perfectly frank, a piece of paper signed on one day of the year does not necessarily mean that in three, six or nine months, that person will not have seen their mental state deteriorate considerably. Ticking a box does not mean that we will make things any safer, and the case has not been proven.

We know that when medical practitioners have a serious concern about the conduct of a patient—for example, a fear that a patient is a paedophile or the knowledge that a patient might be a danger to themselves or to the public—they take it into their own hands to breach medical confidentiality. There are many such cases. They breach medical confidentiality because the duty to society is greater than the duty of confidentiality. We have to trust them—we should not put an onerous burden on medical practitioners that will not necessarily be effective.

Simon Hart: If there was a situation in which my hon. Friend was required to make such observations and somehow failed to pick up on a patient's mental health, which led to a dreadful tragedy, what would be the legal and professional implications for his trade?

Dr Poulter: There is always a blame culture, and we would have to be careful that a simple form that a doctor had to sign on one day of the year could not be used as a sledgehammer to hit that doctor or medical practitioner over the head later on because somebody perpetrated a bad act. As I have said, and as I think my

hon. Friend accepted in making his point, someone's mental state can deteriorate quickly—a switch can be flicked in someone's mind and it is impossible to legislate for that. Simply involving a doctor in this process will not make that any less possible.

It is not only with gun crime that a switch can be flicked in that way, as we saw in north Wales with the Peter Moore case. In 1995, he killed four men with a knife in a random rampage. It is not just with gun crime that people temporarily lose control and go on a rampage—it happens with other weapons. In America there have been cases with samurai swords. We have to be careful not to legislate on the basis of one or two terrible tragedies, such as that in Cumbria. That is an important point for the House to consider.

Sir Alan Beith: I am interested in this argument and I agree that a box-ticking exercise is no use, but GPs in rural communities will often be aware if patients are gun licence holders and might well pass on information if they are seriously concerned. The question is what to do in urban communities in which GPs might be unaware who is a gun licence holder. As my hon. Friend says, the problem is often the illicit gun holder who does not have a licence anyway.

Dr Poulter: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point. Let us consider how effective that piece of paper—that box-ticking exercise—would be in an urban community. The turnover of patients in most GP practices in areas such as Camberwell, where I was a medical student, is a third of patients every year. Therefore, such a measure might not work because, with such a high turnover, it is not easy to keep track of patients who move and migrate around London and fall in and out of registers. As my right hon. Friend said, the people we are dealing with in urban areas are not those with licences but those who possess handguns illegally. Community engagement and education in schools is so important in addressing those issues.

We have had a very good debate and I will not talk for much longer. Members need to ask whether further legislation that would give doctors more onerous responsibilities to fill out forms, and that would make it more difficult for people to have gun licences, would make anybody safer. I think the answer is conclusively no. We cannot legislate for terrible tragedies such as that in Cumbria. Unfortunately, they will happen no matter what we do. It is easy, as the right hon. Member for Leicester East said, for us and the media to get the retrospectoscope out and judge things retrospectively in the hysteria of political debate. We need to legislate for the reality, which is that law-abiding gun owners who have a licence do not tend to misuse them. For the reasons I have given, I do not think that there is a conclusive case for strengthening the legislation.

9.8 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Like everyone who has taken part in the debate, I want to express my sympathies for those who were involved in the incidents in Cumbria and Northumberland, particularly David Rathband, the police officer who was blinded by Raoul Moat. I join others in paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Sir Alan Beith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Tony Cumberham).

In making their interventions, they showed how these events have affected their constituents and made a significant contribution to the debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), the Chair of the Select Committee, told us that the Committee had made every effort to publish the report in time for today's debate, so we are extremely grateful for the hard work that members of the Committee have done on behalf of the House in order to inform the debate. It is a shame that it is taking place on a day when there is a one-line Whip and the weather is so inclement that undoubtedly some Members who would have wanted to be present cannot be here. My hon. Friend the Member for Copeland was unavoidably taken away. I know he was extremely disappointed not to be able to participate in the debate.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East emphasised the need to avoid regulation that would put our sports people who take part in firearms events at a disadvantage. He highlighted the issues surrounding the various age limits relating to guns. In order to save time, I shall not read them out from the table on page 42, as he did. As my right hon. Friend pointed out, these have been batted over to the Government to consider and we look forward to their response to the anomalies identified by the Select Committee.

We look forward, too, to the codification of the 34 pieces of legislation that have been introduced over the past century to regulate guns in the UK. My right hon. Friend referred to the need for GPs to recognise their crucial role in alerting police to the potential dangers posed by some of their patients who have gun licences.

The hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) compared the attitudes of people in the USA with those of people in the UK, highlighting the fact that there was little appetite among people in the UK for owning guns. They do not have the same attitude as people in the USA to the right to own a gun. She said that changes to gun control would not have stopped the incidents in Cumbria or Northumberland, and questioned the need to regulate further, but she called for action on criminal behaviour, an issue highlighted in the Select Committee report.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) called for an evidence-based approach to making changes and stressed the need for any changes to be proportionate. He wanted the issue of imports to be addressed and spoke of the potential role of elected police commissioners in future in tackling gun crime. He, too, cautioned against regulating in a way that would impact on sport, which was a regular feature of the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) was a major dissenting voice in the debate. He gave figures for November which showed a large number of incidents involving firearms to support his case for stricter regulation. His preference was for a complete ban on gun ownership, but he recognised that that view might not command a majority in the House. He urged the Government to look at the recommendations of the Select Committee and to regulate more stringently in future. He also called for a mandatory annual medical test and a complete ban on guns being stored in homes.

[Clive Efford]

The hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) reminded us that gun crime takes place all too frequently in our society and that our job as legislators is to protect the public. He called for more data to be collected by the police on whether guns used in crimes were legal or illegal. Again, that is an issue referred to in the Select Committee report. He mentioned the important role of sports people in wildlife conservation, a theme picked up by the hon. Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart), who referred to the vital role and the money invested by people involved in gun sports in wildlife conservation and husbandry. He also expressed concerns for the future of firearms sport, as did many Members hon. Members, and he was concerned to ensure that GPs do not become agents of the state who are required to breach patient confidentiality in passing information to the police.

The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler) paid tribute to the Swadlincote gun club and cited the importance of shoots to her local economy. I have never held a gun, let alone fired one, apart from an air rifle that somebody else owned when I was young, but I had a friend who managed a shoot, and we had interesting conversations about the investment and contribution that shoots make to local economies, so I have nothing but respect for people in that industry. The hon. Lady opposed the recommendation of a single licence, but she commended Derbyshire police on their handling of the licensing process.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) laid claim to the lowest rate of gun crime in the country and questioned whether evidence showed that changes to gun regulations would make a difference. He, too, said that we need to focus on and target illegal gun crime, and he referred, from his professional experience, to the danger of stigmatising people with mental health conditions and breaching patient confidentiality.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), who opened the debate for the Opposition, made a number of points. She mentioned the considerable possible savings from staggering the renewal of existing licences and dealing with the bulge in renewals that the introduction of previous legislation caused. We will be interested to see the Government's response to that. She also wanted the Government to respond to the Committee's 22 recommendations, and they say that they will do so within two months. Given the importance of the issue, we would also like confirmation that they will do so on the Floor of the House in the form of an oral statement.

Keith Vaz: First, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on his long-overdue elevation to the Front Bench? Some of us have already received e-mails following the publication of various reports, and this is a debate that should include the public. We as parliamentarians need to have the final say, but it would be worthy of us to allow a more general debate on some of the issues.

Clive Efford: I could not agree more. The wider public—in particular, those communities directly affected by such incidents—will want to respond to the recommendations of my right hon. Friend's Committee, and to have some input into the Government's response.

Mr Ellwood: It has been made clear that we cannot legislate against another attack. Sadly, there is likely to be another attack such as Dunblane or Cumbria, and indeed another terrorist attack. The purpose of us—of this place—is to ensure that we have the correct legislation, and interestingly the Committee Chairman admitted that his knowledge of firearms extended only to carrying a water pistol. Does the hon. Gentleman agree, therefore, that, unless we have a cognitive, sober and detailed debate to ensure that we understand the full issue, our decisions in this place will not be made on solid grounds?

Clive Efford: I agree. The Committee Chairman made that point himself, noting that he and members of the Committee had gone to great lengths to understand a great deal, had been educated and had even had their views changed on certain aspects of what I would call the legitimate firearms industry and legitimate firearms sport. It is important that people are well informed when they legislate, whether on guns or anything else. That is the logical thing to expect of people involved in passing legislation.

The Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice, the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) made a number of commitments on the recommendations. He said that the Government would consider reviewing convictions in terms of the renewal or revocation of licences. On additional regulation, we would not want the police to spend more time enforcing regulations on the legal ownership of arms at the expense of dealing with the illegal use of arms. In addition, the police should be identifying and following up cases where we might want to call into question someone's ownership of a licence, rather than investing a great deal of time in renewals. That is why the Select Committee recommends that, rather than having a renewal period of every two years, the existing five-year period should be retained.

The Minister also indicated that he would consider the issues surrounding ages and the recording of what types of weapons have been used and whether they are legal or illegal. During the debate, several hon. Members referred to the need for there to be a crime reduction strategy to tackle wider illegal activities—for example, the issues surrounding the illegal drug trafficking industry, organised violent crime and the use of weapons in domestic violence incidents. All those matters were referred to by the Select Committee and we would like to see them mentioned in the Government's response.

Many hon. Members have said that we must not have a knee-jerk reaction, and I think we would all agree that if one legislates in haste, one repents at leisure. However, we should remember that individuals such as Derrick Bird had legal access to firearms and therefore it is absolutely right for the Select Committee and the House to review the laws on the licensing of guns.

The report makes it clear that we have the tightest regulations on the licensing of firearms anywhere in the world and that we have a relatively low level of gun crime, despite all the serious incidents there have been. The report concludes that legal firearms do not appear to be used in the majority of cases where weapons are discharged or used in crimes. In legislating, we should prioritise public safety. If we introduce regulations, they should not harm the future of the legal use of weapons in the pursuit of sport but, where necessary, we should legislate to protect the public.

9.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (James Brokenshire): I congratulate the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) on his promotion to the Front Bench and wish him well in his new role. This has been an interesting and well-informed debate, which has highlighted some of the themes that emerge when considering the difficult and, at times, emotive issue of the control of firearms.

People who possess firearms legally usually conduct themselves safely and conscientiously and are among the first to condemn the criminal misuse of firearms. However, following the tragic events in Cumbria and Northumbria, there has been a ready recognition of the need for a debate about firearms laws and licensing. At the outset, I pay tribute to all those who have been touched by those desperately sad events—the families of those who have lost loved ones; the victims who have survived such traumatic incidents; and the police, the emergency services and other organisations, such as church groups, that have been involved in all those incidents. Our thoughts and prayers are particularly with the families and those who have been touched by this in some way.

During the debate, there have been calls for consideration of the issues to be thorough, proportionate and having due regard to informed opinion on what, as we have heard, is undoubtedly a complex and emotive subject. We have had an interesting and wide-ranging debate that has met all those considerations. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice said in his opening remarks, the Government are very much in listening mode, and today's debate has been invaluable in setting out the main issues and the arguments for and against particular changes to the law. We will reflect carefully on everything that has been said and wish to take into account any other views from interested parties before deciding what further measures might be needed to improve public safety.

We have already taken delivery of Assistant Chief Constable Whiting's useful and informative peer review of the tragic shootings in Cumbria, and we have also seen the report by Assistant Chief Constable Sue Fish on behalf of ACPO's criminal use of firearms group. I have met them both since the publication of their reports and discussed with them in detail their recommendations.

In the course of the next two months, we will respond to the recommendations made by the Home Affairs Committee, which has just reported on its own investigation into whether there is a need for changes to the way in which firearm and shotgun certificates are issued, monitored or reviewed as a means of preventing gun violence. We will consider that carefully. As part of that, we will also consider the need for a broader debate and consideration. The Government will seek to strike a balance in ensuring that our controls are targeted fairly and proportionately.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Copeland (Mr Reed), who has been unable to be here today for reasons that I fully recognise. I am sure that he will want to be part of the continuing considerations and discussions on this important and sensitive issue. We will seek to continue bilateral discussions with him as matters progress.

I will seek to reply to a number of the points made during this wide-ranging and interesting debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey)

made a well-informed, thoughtful contribution that highlighted many of the themes that come through in Assistant Chief Constable Whiting's review, as well as the need to grapple equally with the criminal issues and those of the law, which I will reflect on in later comments. As the Chair of the Select Committee has said, those of us with a non-classical education have also been educated in the use of Latin.

I thank the Chair and his Committee for their very helpful and informative report and pay tribute to the detailed and careful examination that they have conducted. I will respond in slightly further detail on the issues relating to age and to the role of doctors, but let me deal now with changes to the law and consolidation. As I said to the Select Committee when I appeared before it to give evidence on this specific point, I recognise that there are two potential themes. The law itself is complex, but so is the way in which it is interspersed in several different pieces of legislation. I therefore hear the calls for consolidation as well as simplification.

We will have to consider the matter carefully, because, as I said to the Select Committee, when one starts to change the law, new avenues for legal challenge can be opened, and there is a lack of certainty attached to new legislation. We will carefully consider the points that have been raised by the Select Committee, and in the interim we will consider the need for revised Home Office guidance to present the existing legislation as clearly and simply as possible. This matter has been raised by other hon. Members, ACPO and other interested parties, and we will consider their points in detail.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) highlighted the important contribution of firearms in sport, and thereby raised the broader context in which we must consider this issue. He raised a specific issue about arm's length management organisations in social housing. I have not received any representations on that point, but perhaps there are specific issues with regard to landlords and tenants that fall outside the issues that we have been debating. I am willing to consider any specific points that he subsequently wants to raise.

Tom Brake: Does the Minister have a ministerial view, or a personal view, on whether it is appropriate for an ALMO or a council to introduce a ban on the possession at home of legally held firearms?

James Brokenshire: There may be matters relating to landlords and tenants. We must consider carefully the issue of storage, as the Home Affairs Committee has done. I am happy to reflect on that matter further, but we must be careful and cautious so that we do not impose restrictions without properly considering their implications. Such restrictions might create more risk, rather than reducing the risk. However, he has fairly highlighted the issue.

The hon. Member for Derby North (Chris Williamson) described the shocking impact of gun crime by highlighting specific examples and issues. This will always be an emotive issue, on which there are strongly held views, and I thank him for bringing that context to this evening's proceedings. He wanted further clarification on GPs, and I will come to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) discussed the Olympics, which is a matter

[James Brokenshire]

that we have corresponded on and discussed. I have inquired of the Minister for Sport and the Olympics whether the existing restrictions are hampering preparations for the 2012 games, and I am advised that they are not. We will review the arrangements post-2012 to consider whether further changes are required.

Mr Ellwood: Only those who have been selected for the squad have been given licences to participate in training in the UK. Will the Minister consider the long term and the legacy of the Olympics? Looking forward to the next games, we will still need to be able to train in the UK.

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend feels strongly about sporting development. As I have said, we have considered the matter with Ministers at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and they are satisfied with the current arrangements. We will continue to keep the matter under review after the Olympics.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire (Simon Hart) highlighted the issue of shotguns and the different regime of section 1 licences. That point was taken up by my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Heather Wheeler). The issue is complex, and we are examining the overlap and the common test of fitness for purpose. A Home Office working group, which includes representatives of the police and shooting interest groups, is working to devise a single application form. That group will look into the feasibility of a single certificate, too, but we recognise the complexity of the arguments involved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen West and South Pembrokeshire has said, the devil is in the detail.

It was instructive to hear the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) on the need for a broader debate on firearms control, and I agree with him. It was equally interesting to hear about his experiences as a doctor.

A number of matters will require further examination and consideration, as the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee indicated. Some may require legislation, but we might be able to deal with some in other ways. On that point, doctors have an important role to play and we welcome the agreement between the British Medical Association and the Association of Chief Police Officers that the police will notify a GP of the grant or renewal of a firearms or shotgun certificate. They are seeking to implement the arrangement within six months, and in essence it will involve a system of notification by way of a standard letter. That will mean that GPs are in a position to alert the police if they have concerns, and the police will then be able to request a medical report under the procedures that normally apply to licensing.

ACPO will now draw up a more detailed paper on the matter, and the BMA will produce guidance for doctors. The system is a welcome step forward, and there will be further discussions about the possibility of placing a marker on computerised medical records to create a more enduring record of which patients own a firearm. A number of privacy and other issues mean that that requires detailed consideration, but I welcome the steps that have been taken thus far.

On the matter of age, it is important to remember that the police grant a certificate only if they are satisfied that a gun can be held safely and without risk to the public. That means that a young person is subject to the same checks regarding suitability, storage and so on as an adult. In such cases, it is usual that the young person's parents or another responsible adult will supervise them and take responsibility for the weapon when it is not in use. As my right hon. Friend the Minister for Policing and Criminal Justice said earlier, the Government believe that it is important to focus on whether shooting activities are conducted safely and responsibly. We have received no evidence to date that there has been any misuse as a result of the existing provisions, but we will reflect on the concerns that have been raised both in the Home Affairs Committee's report and in the debate today.

There is much for the Government to take away from today's debate. We will genuinely reflect on what has been said, along with the other sources of evidence and opinions. The focus of this evening's debate has largely been on the legal holding of weapons, but we recognise the important contribution of the National Ballistics Intelligence Service, which has done extraordinarily good work in setting out the intelligence picture on the illegal use of weapons. We are also looking to strengthen the approach to serious organised crime through the creation of the national crime agency, which will be an important step forward in bearing down on such crime. We will also deal with the criminal gangs that often sit behind the use of illegal weapons and the sad tragedies that affect many of our communities.

We will form a view on what more might be done not only to help prevent further tragedies, such as those in Cumbria and Northumbria, but to ensure that we have effective and proportionate firearms controls. Although we have stringent firearms controls—Assistant Chief Constable Whiting has said that they are "robust"—we keep them under review and are prepared to tighten them further if necessary. The Home Affairs Committee's report, the input of ACPO and others and the points made in today's debate are important contributions in that regard, and all options are open for discussion.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of firearms control.

Business without Debate

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Mr David Anderson be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Barry Gardiner be added. – (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

PETITION

Feed-in Tariffs

9.40 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I present this petition on behalf of my constituent, Mr Savile Burdett, of Axminster in Devon. He is petitioning the House to ask the Secretary of State to amend existing legislation in December 2010 so that photovoltaic solar collection systems may be installed by any householder