

South-west Growth Charter

22 November 2016

Volume 617

9.30 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair)

Once we have heard the opening speech, I will indicate whether it is necessary to impose a time limit. Nine Members are seeking to take part in the debate, so we are probably looking at around five minutes each.

9.31 am

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the South West Charter for Growth.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger—*[Interruption.]* That is a ringing endorsement. I am delighted to have secured this opportunity to bring to Westminster the campaign for the south-west to be seen as a centre for growth. The business community in the south-west is serious about introducing a framework for growth and economic prosperity in our important and much-loved region, which is what we are here to debate today.

We do not come to the Government with a begging bowl; we come to say that this is what the south-west business community plans to do for our region. The charter is not the brainchild of local authorities, politicians or quangos; it is the voice of business expressing its positive commitment to our region and saying to Whitehall, "This is what we will do. Now, Government, please do the part that only Governments can really do, namely infrastructure. Give us the tools to do the job."

First, how do we define the south-west for the purpose of this debate? The Government usually describe the south-west as the seven counties from Land's End to Gloucester, including Bristol and Stonehenge—a wide and disparate area. Not so today: the south-west for the purpose of this debate, the summit and the charter is primarily Cornwall, of course including the Isles of Scilly—I would not want to leave them out—Devon and most of Somerset, excluding the unitary authorities to the north. In other words, we are discussing the territory of the two local enterprise partnership regions of Cornwall and Isles of Scilly and the Heart of the South West.

The charter we are presenting the Government today builds on a growth summit held at the University of Exeter on Friday 21 October 2016. The summit was the initiative of one of the largest private-sector employers in our region, Pennon Group—the owner of South West Water, Bournemouth Water and Viridor—in partnership with the *Western Morning News*, a great champion of our region. The summit brought together the main economic interests of the south-west, alongside many of the region's Members of Parliament. I am delighted that so many of my colleagues from Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, and from both sides of the House, are here today. The Opposition Members for our region are a tad depleted these days, but what Labour lacks in quantity the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) more than makes up for in quality. I am delighted to see him here today.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

You won't say that after my speech.

Mr Streeter

I probably won't. I have never agreed with a single word the right hon. Gentleman has said.

The south-west growth charter calls for a new partnership between the south-west and central Government to achieve the goals agreed at the summit, which was attended by more than 200 people, more than 40 businesses, the CBI, the region's two local enterprise partnerships, academic institutions and 14 local authorities from across the region. The summit was addressed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, who made an excellent speech that I know the Minister will replicate today. The Minister is a champion for progress, growth and prosperity. Indeed, he oozes them from every pore.

Despite our many successes and the beauty of our region, the south-west has not known the investment and prosperity of other parts of the United Kingdom in recent times—it falls below even the European Union average. What is more, the region has not always made itself heard with a clear, unified voice at Westminster, but we are open for business. We are looking for growth, and we want to build on the success of the northern powerhouse and the midlands engine. Today, we are setting out a positive vision for the south-west region.

The summit and the wider "Back the South West" campaign have shown a clear, unified business voice outlining a vision for the economic future of Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. The campaign has captured imaginations across our region and is a positive initiative from business, with strong support from local media. I always find that quoting local newspapers is a good way of getting in the local newspapers, and the front page of the *Western Morning News* on 3 October 2016 said:

"Clean beaches, sparkling seas and fresh air. The South West has it all. But while the natural beauty of the region is incomparable, its economy too often lags behind...given the tools, the South West can really fly".

That is what this debate is all about.

A key part of the "Back the South West" campaign has been about creating a south-west narrative and speaking passionately at national level about why the south-west region is a wonderful place to live, work and do business. We are all immensely proud of our region, but we face challenges, particularly in light of the forthcoming Brexit. The local enterprise partnerships in our region are already showing how well they can work together to address those challenges and take opportunities.

Infrastructure investment needs and connectivity improvements were the overriding themes of the summit. To paraphrase a politician from years ago, we want to talk about three key things today: infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. I remember going to India a few years ago with some Indian businesspeople, and they talked about the creativity of their people and all the resources and energy in that fabulous country. After the monsoons, they showed me roads that had been swept away and told me, "This is what holds us back in India. It is the infrastructure that we simply can't manage to put in place." I could say exactly the same thing about our region. All the creativity, the energy and the skills are there, but we need the infrastructure to get the job done.

We are all aware of the historical challenges in the south-west in relation to traditional infrastructure. For most of us, the key issue is the vital rail links to London and the rest of the country.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con)

I am delighted that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. We can do much more on the second rail link between Waterloo and Exeter to increase the number of trains and to add more loops so that we can get many more trains through to Exeter and further down into the west country. I would like a junction connecting the rail link to the trams at Seaton.

Mr Streeter

My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for his region, and I know he speaks to the Government. I am sure he knows that, by sheer coincidence, the Peninsula Rail Task Force's 20-year plan will be launched at 11 o'clock this morning. The plan will spell out the improvement we seek to our rail infrastructure, and it will include the measures he mentions to equip our region for the 21st century.

Road and air transport are critical too, but it is not only about traditional infrastructure; it is also about wider connectivity. Big strides have been taken as part of the Government's push to increase digital connectivity, but more needs to be done. As Bill Martin, the editor of the *Western Morning News*, has said, the south-west is known as

"the region where every telephone conversation ends with the word 'hello'."

Digital connectivity is more important than ever in this 21st-century world, so making a success of the digitally enabled economy is critical, particularly for our region where peripherality is our challenge and connectivity is the solution. Now that people can do anything from anywhere and now that we have excellent universities in our region, connecting ourselves will continue to make us the most attractive and wonderful place to live, work and raise a family.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend enormously for securing this important debate. Encompassing everything, does he agree that the south-west has been very much neglected and left out? The Government ignore us at their peril, because we could be a powerhouse not just for ourselves but for the country.

Mr Streeter

There is no question in my mind but that we have not seen the investment that we might have wanted from Governments of all colours over many years, particularly over the past 30 years. Now that we have come together to speak with a single powerful voice, I believe we will see that change. The Government are listening to us.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

On connectivity, the south-west can benefit from connectivity with the rest of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, and Northern Ireland can also gain from connectivity with the south-west. There are potential advantages for both, including in the agri-food industries, fishing and tourism. Those are three things that we could do together. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is how we should do it?

Mr Streeter

We are delighted to work with anyone, and we are always delighted to welcome tourists from Northern Ireland who come to enjoy our wonderful south-west.

The Government need to recognise that European funding has contributed greatly to digital infrastructure in the past, and that a home-grown solution must be provided for the future. We need 5G. Tourism has been a key part of the local economy for many years, but it has also meant a lot of low-paid jobs. We in the south-west have core strengths. We are home to world-class universities including Exeter, Plymouth and Falmouth, and to highly skilled workers. Our response has been for businesses, local leaders and academic institutions to create successful business clusters and networks, such as marine around Plymouth, environment around

Exeter, and aerospace and defence around Newquay. The clusters have played a key part in the hundreds of thousands of growing businesses across the aerospace, marine, technology and creative industries, helping the region attract and retain talent. However, we need to do more, and we need the infrastructure to support that growth.

We in the south-west have proved that we are successful. Pennon Group, which has taken the lead on the excellent charter, is born of the south-west and headquartered there, and operates across the whole region, in Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and now Dorset. It is one of the UK's largest listed companies. There are many other success stories, and no doubt some of my hon. Friends will mention them in a moment.

One of the Secretary of State's key messages at the summit was about devolution. I will touch on that, and I think that one or two other Members might want to mention it as well. He made it clear that if the south-west wants an ambitious devolution deal, it must accept a directly elected mayor. His argument was that in other countries in the G7, large regions, particularly around big cities, have a lot more power than we in Britain have traditionally given to regions. Too many decisions in Britain are still made in Westminster when they should be made at local level, but local power is often too fragmented. To make sensible decisions on transport, skills and infrastructure, he argued, we need much more joined-up thinking and a proper combined authority, with one elected person shouldering the accountability.

That has given our region food for thought, and discussions are ongoing, but it seems clear that if we want the devolution deal that the region needs and deserves, we must find a way to deliver a western super-mayor, a strategic leader—*[Laughter.]* Do you see what I did there? I have been working on that all night. Perhaps it is time we came together to do so. It is what the business community wants. However, there will be different views, and the conversation is ongoing.

The charter that we will deliver to Downing Street later today is not about going cap in hand to the Government; it is about saying that we in the south-west can do an awful lot for ourselves, but we need infrastructure support. The charter supports the Government's industrial strategy and sets out how the Government can work with the south-west to increase investment and opportunities for people of all ages.

In the charter, the business community outlines its commitments to the region: to collaborate for growth; to invest in a self-sustaining south-west; to invest in innovation, industry and infrastructure; to invest in productive people and retain talent within our region; to invest in our environment and share the benefits of growth. What do we want the Government to do? We want a new Government partnership with the south-west, a firm focus on south-west growth in the Government's industrial strategy and a funding road map so that the south-west can move from funding reliance to more innovative funding solutions.

We want investment in digital connectivity: ultrafast south-west, a new partnership with the private sector to deliver ultrafast south-west 5G mobile, fibre and wireless broadband to 90% of the population by 2030. We want investment in energy connectivity—switching on to opportunity—to address transmission and distribution restrictions on regional growth, to be completed by 2025, and a renewed focus by Ofgem, National Grid and Western Power Distribution. Crucially, we want investment in transport connectivity to get business moving. We want Government to back the Peninsula Rail Task Force's long-term plan for rail improvements, which will be outlined in the report published later today, and to re-affirm commitments to road improvement projects in the pipeline, including the A303, the A30, the A38 and, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) would undoubtedly agree, the A358.

As Chris Loughlin, chief executive of Pennon, said at the south-west growth summit:

"We should be able to get our voice heard. We are, after all, a political battleground. Elections are won and lost on how the south-west votes."

On that, we all agree.

The south-west charter will be delivered to Downing Street later today. The timing could not be better: it is the day before the autumn statement. The south-west has made a profound contribution to this country throughout our history, and we have some very successful businesses in the region. It is a charter for growth; more than that, it is a charter for aspiration and hope for all in the south-west, but particularly the younger generation. Tomorrow, we will look to the Chancellor to re-commit to the south-west. Leaving the EU creates uncertainty, but also opportunity. The south-west is ready to deliver in the new partnership with the Government, provided that we receive the right commitments. That is the challenge for the Minister in this debate. Hinkley Point C, the third runway at Heathrow and High Speed 2 will all have a positive impact on the south-west, but we need more, and we need more infrastructure commitments specifically for the south-west.

It is not just about the autumn statement tomorrow; we are not going away. We will look to future budgets and the UK's industrial strategy to position the south-west where it should be: not on the fringes, but at the centre of growth. Our two local enterprise partnerships are working hard together already, with valuable input from the business community, led by Pennon, to ensure that our proposals are developed. We need to add Government to that partnership.

To quote the *Western Morning News* for the third time—

Neil Parish

You should get quoted now.

Mr Streeter

It is a sure-fire thing. The *Western Morning News* said in its editorial last week:

"The government listens to those who speak loudly and logically and can make a good case. Too often, parts of the West Country have seemed to be pulling in different directions. Faced with petty rivalries, it has been easy for Ministers to dismiss the needs of our region and divert funds and support elsewhere."

Not today. Here, the south-west is speaking with a united voice, led by the region's business community and with far wider support from MPs and many in local government. There is clear momentum behind the campaign. I am delighted to throw my weight behind it, as are my colleagues from across Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, from both sides of this House. Together, we will raise south-west growth up the Government's agenda and secure our region's place in the new industrial strategy.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair)

Looking around the room at the number of Members who wish to speak, I reckon that given 10 minutes for each of the Front-Bench speakers and a couple of minutes for Mr Streeter to wind up the debate, we probably have about four minutes a head. I do not normally do this, but I will on this occasion, because this debate has clearly and rightly attracted a lot of interest from south-west Members of Parliament: I will give the list and batting order. Mr Bradshaw will speak for the Opposition next. After that, we have Oliver Colvile, Johnny Mercer, James Heapey, Kevin Foster, Sir Hugo Swire, Peter Heaton-Jones, Anne-Marie Morris and Rebecca Pow. I will not impose a time limit; I will impose a self-denying ordinance, on the understanding that those at the end may drop off the list if other colleagues are too greedy.

🕒 9.48 am

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab)

I will try to adhere to that advice, Sir Roger, but as I am the sole Opposition MP in the region that we are discussing, it will be a challenge. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this debate, which as he said is timely because the autumn statement is tomorrow, and because once again, overnight, the south-west railway has been cut off by flooding.

I do not think that anyone can criticise the document that we are debating. It is an excellent document, and no one could find fault with it. However, the regular loss of our connectivity, which has happened yet again in the last 24 hours, is a more accurate reflection of the current reality on the ground than the vision that the charter rightly sets out for the future of the south-west. As the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) said in an intervention, the reality is that we in the south-west feel neglected. When we look at all the investment going into London with Crossrail, the north of England with high-speed rail and all the other massive, multi-billion-pound infrastructure investments, we in the south-west feel like the poor relations. The electrification of the railway line to Bristol and south Wales has now been delayed, and even that will not come down to our part of the region, which needs it just as much.

We all remember the grandiose promises made before the last election. We could not move in the south-west, particularly after the Cornish rail collapse, for visiting Prime Ministers, Chancellors and Ministers promising £20 billion of investment in infrastructure in this Parliament. I remember the then Prime Minister saying that he would do whatever it took to put our infrastructure in a good condition, but we have seen very little of that investment so far. Some might even argue that those promises and all those visits helped to sweep an almost full house of Conservative MPs to power in our region, with Exeter the only surviving constituency with Opposition representation. My Conservative colleagues have a big responsibility. If I may give them a little gentle advice, at some stage they will have to play hardball with the Government and demand that the promises made to them before the election are actually fulfilled.

Rail infrastructure is not the only problem. The hon. Member for South West Devon has already mentioned broadband; our broadband roll-out in Devon and Somerset is badly behind schedule and the way it has been handled has been an absolute shambles. Broadband is vital in rural areas, particularly for our small and medium-sized enterprises. There is also an awful lot of uncertainty, as the hon. Gentleman said, about Brexit—particularly in Cornwall, given Cornwall's reliance on huge economic support from the European Union. Sectors in our region such as farming and fisheries, which are disproportionately involved and engaged in importing and exporting within the single market, face big uncertainties. Our higher education sector is very dependent on the free movement of students and academics and on all the investment that our membership of the European Union brings. All that uncertainty, combined with historic under-investment in infrastructure, raises real concerns in our region.

To add insult to injury, we have learned that our local enterprise partnership in Devon and Somerset—Heart of the South West, which the hon. Member for South West Devon mentioned—has been told that it can expect only a tiny fraction of the money that it had originally hoped to receive in the next round of development support grants. That led to an unprecedented letter, which we all signed last week, to ask the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government to think again—I cannot remember another time when every single MP in Devon and Somerset signed such a letter. As the hon. Gentleman said, it seems to be something to do with the fact that we do not have an elected mayor model; we also have a shortage of big businesses to match-fund the Government money. That is stating the bleeding obvious, because our region's strength is our small and medium-sized enterprises. We have some excellent big companies, but we do not have the large number of big companies that a northern powerhouse, or whatever, has.

I very much hope that the Chancellor's autumn statement tomorrow will reflect some of the serious concerns expressed in this debate. I also hope that the Communities Secretary will look very carefully at our letter, because there is a lot of anger about how we in the south-west have been treated, and that anger will only get worse if our next growth funding deal is even worse than we

expected or is a lot worse than the previous two. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon again on securing the debate; it is well overdue, and I hope the Government are listening. Our region must get the investment that it needs. Sadly, that has been symbolised again in the last 24 hours by its being cut off by flooding.

9.53 am

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con)

Thank you for calling me to speak in this timely debate on the south-west regional growth fund, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing it.

I have been Member of Parliament for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport for the last six and a half years. Uniquely for a Conservative constituency, it is an inner-city seat without a piece of countryside—all we have is the Ponderosa pony sanctuary and a rather muddy field. Although it has a low-wage and low-skills economy, it has a global reputation for marine science engineering research, a huge science base, two dynamic and expanding universities with more than 30,000 students and a very fine art college. I am grateful to the Government for the investment that Ministers have put into Plymouth, including the city deal in South Yard, which has also been turned into an enterprise zone. That city deal initiative will turn underused land in the dockyard into a marine industrial production campus, which will ensure that we can help the Government to deliver their industrial strategy and realise our full economic potential.

Although Plymouth's economic future looks bright, it needs real help to develop its skills base and to improve its transport infrastructure connections. Earlier this autumn, the Ministry of Defence announced that the Royal Marines would be moved from Arbroath, Taunton and Chivenor. In 2020, Plymouth will host the commemorations for Mayflower 400, to celebrate the Mayflower ship leaving to found the American colonies—we might seek to invite the President to pay a visit to Plymouth, to see for himself how wonderful it is. Mayflower 400 will provide a unique opportunity for us to run a spectacular trade fair, just months after the UK withdraws from the European Union, but Plymouth and the surrounding area will need significantly improved train and road infrastructure to deliver that. The Government are reviewing the viability of reopening Plymouth City airport, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). Later today, we will launch the Peninsula Rail Task Force report on the future of a sustainable railway line from the west country to London and the west midlands. There is also a proposal to convert the A303 and the A358 to dual carriageways.

The two local enterprise partnerships that affect Plymouth have submitted growth deal applications to continue the development of the South Yard city deal, which will create 1,500 new jobs, and the redevelopment of the railway station in my constituency. The latter is vital, because it will ensure that when American tourists visit the place that the founding fathers left from in 1620, they arrive in a dynamic city. By providing the necessary funds for the development of the railway station, the Government will help our local tourist industry; ensure that the increasing number of Royal Marines and Royal Navy sailors based in the Plymouth travel-to-work area arrive in a modern, up-to-date facility; remain good to their word by investing in modern infrastructure; support previous investments; and demonstrate that the people of Plymouth were right to elect a Conservative Government who deliver for the country and the south-west, which is playing its part in economic growth.

9.57 am

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth, Moor View) (Con)

Thank you for calling me to speak in this debate, Sir Roger. I would pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) for securing it, but time is short.

This debate is of supreme importance. I am afraid that I am going to use Plymouth as an example for the wider south-west. We all talk about investment in the south-west, but I want to put a bit of meat on the bones with some data and statistics. I know that statistics are frightening for some, but they are important.

Plymouth, like the rest of the south-west, is not talked about enough in this place, and the effects of that are clear to see. It was once an industrial powerhouse, centred on the dockyard, where tens of thousands of workers, welders, fabricators, shipbuilders and union shop stewards contributed more to the nation's security and heritage than Plymouth is ever credited with. The military commitment, although diminished in numbers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) indicated, continues to this day—but Plymouth has always been much more than a military city. The harbour was used by merchant sailors for trade routes to London and all over the world, and transatlantic liners used to depart from Millbay.

There is a feeling in the streets and communities of Plymouth today that should be expressed in this place, which is that as the nature of the modern economy has changed and the nation's focus on defence, rightly or wrongly, has declined, Plymouth has been forgotten—discarded after use. I therefore welcome the south-west growth charter, which lights a path back to a vision of better things. Hon. Members will all speak on different parts of it; in my short time, I will highlight infrastructure and Government spend in the south-west.

There is no doubt that infrastructure is the catalyst for growth. Regions in transition need a fair deal from the Government in all sectors. Every city's representatives can come to Westminster and have a moan at the Government, but I want to put some evidence on record. I know that London is different, but the transport spend in Plymouth is £219 per head, compared with £1,869 in London. The public health spend is £47 per head, compared with a national average of £63. Despite being the most deprived area in the south-west, Plymouth is also the most underfunded. Why is so much less being spent on Plymothians? It is just not acceptable.

I am going to be slightly controversial, because I have my own views on why all that has happened. I know that all my colleagues agree that one of our main jobs in this place is to make the Government work for our constituents at the personal and local level. I have my own views on how well that has been done in the past. Locally, I never cease to be surprised by the elected officials in Plymouth; the manner in which they carry on contrasts sharply with the professionalism of the council staff, who work so hard for Plymouth.

One might say that as elected officials, elections are our appraisals from our bosses—the people. For many years now, at every election, local or national, the largest party has not been Labour or the Conservatives, or even the Lib Dems; it has always been the “don't cares”—those who do not vote. The time for blaming those people for not voting has passed. It is time that we turned that argument on its head and recognised that we have to give people something to vote for, not chastise them for their lack of interest in us. Plymouth is an ambitious city, with gifted, ingenious people who can adapt to change like those in any other city, but Governments of all colours have simply not delivered for too many in our city, as evidenced in our elections.

That has to change, so what do we do? We have a unique opportunity in this Parliament: almost the entire region is represented by the Government party. The biggest, most determining factor in economic growth for a region far from economic engines such as London is transport links to enable big companies to get in and out of our region, thereby providing the skilled jobs and professional development that our ambitious and talented people deserve. We cannot, as a cohort, continue to support the Government unequivocally without genuine “spade in the ground” investment in our transport infrastructure. It is unacceptable for a region so large, diverse and productive as ours to be expected to survive on the rail link we currently have, irrespective of the Government's plans elsewhere. I strongly congratulate the peninsula Rail Task Force on its report into rectifying the situation. I urge the Prime Minister and her team to read it very carefully indeed before committing to further investment elsewhere in the country.

Politics is a team game, and it works both ways—not only from us to the Government but from the Government to us. I support the Prime Minister in everything she does, as do my colleagues, but our commitment to making the Government work for people in the south-west must trump everything else. I firmly believe that this Conservative Government have done more for our region of late than has ever been done before, but we must let it be known that if the line is crossed we will hold firm and hold together as a cohort to put our region first; otherwise, we will continue the degradation of politics that we are all so keen to avoid.

It is not all bad by any stretch. The jobs lag from a dockyard that employed 35,000 workers in its heyday, but employs 3,500 today, has been filled by enterprising, determined Plymothians who have created a buzzing local economy that just needs a bit more help from central Government. Similarly, when it comes to central Government there can be no doubt that the single biggest factor in improving the life chances of our constituents is a job, and under this Government unemployment has halved since 2010. But we must not take our foot off the gas. The south-west growth agenda is key to our prosperity.

🕒 10.02 am

James Heapey (Wells) (Con)

I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this important debate.

There are six networks that drive productivity, not only in our region but nationally, and they are the air, road, rail, broadband, mobile and energy networks. I am afraid that in the south-west there is under-investment in them all. Bristol airport, which serves the region, has been growing at a great pace in recent years, but we need to ensure that it is better connected southwards so that it can serve the region that it is intended to serve.

Road improvements are coming along nicely, but the work on the A303 and the A358 needs to happen with some urgency. We must also be aware that, as we do that work, we risk making Somerset the rock in the stream, around which the M4 and M5 to our north and west, and the A303 and A358 to our south, move quickly while Somerset remains disconnected.

I encourage the Minister to support the work of my hon. Friends the Members for Bath (Ben Howlett) and for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who are campaigning for better access to north-east Somerset from the M4 to improve connectivity in the north-east of the region, and the ongoing work to support Hinkley Point by improving junction 23 of the M5 to allow better connectivity not only to Hinkley Point but into Mendip. We must ensure that, as we improve the main roads in our region, we do not simply make Somerset the unconnected rock in the stream around which everything moves quickly.

Yesterday, our region was once again cut off. The railway line between Bristol and Taunton was under water, causing huge disruption, not only for Members of Parliament returning to the House after the weekend but for the region as a whole, which feels awfully remote when water is on the tracks and nobody can get to us. It was Dawlish before; yesterday, it was the line through Somerset.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Charlotte Leslie) is leading a debate in Westminster Hall this afternoon on the electrification of the great western railway to Bristol Temple Meads, so I shall not go into that now, other than to say that it is of course not just the electrification of those last eight miles between Bath Spa and Bristol Temple Meads that affects our region so much. Electrification is required in the Thames valley to release the rolling stock that is supposed to come from the Thames valley to serve the Bristol and Bath commuter network, which will in turn release the rolling stock that is supposed to go down to Devon and Cornwall to serve the Plymouth and Exeter networks. The delay to electrification has a real effect, not only in the west country but in the Thames valley. It is needed to increase capacity for commuters in our region. Most of all, it is a shame that the electrification of the great western railway, which we as a region thought was in the bag, now finds itself in competition with the excellent work of the Peninsula Rail Task Force.

On broadband and mobile, I absolutely agree with the growth charter that says that we must go for 90% connectivity by fibre for premises and that we should go for 5G. Let us not forget, though, that right now more than 10% of Devon and Somerset do not have access to a superfast connection at all, and much of the region has connection speeds that are down around 2 Mbps or less. Our mobile phone connectivity is improving, but there are still far too many not spots, so there is work to be done before we embark on the more ambitious targets for the future.

We are a decentralised region with no obvious economic focal point, so it follows that there is no obvious focus for energy generation. I think that, as a region, we are the nation's leader in the deployment of renewables, but we require real investment in our distribution and transmission systems to support that sort of energy system. The Minister should take note that there is also an opportunity for renewable energy, clean tech and new nuclear to be part of the industrial strategy for the south-west.

The south-west has a great deal to offer, with great universities, including the University of Bristol, the University of the West of England, the University of Bath and Bath Spa University, and great expertise, ambition and potential. We just need to be better connected by air, road, rail, fibre, mobile and electricity wire.

🕒 10.07 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing the debate. It is a perfect day for this debate—a day when we again see pictures of hanging tracks in the south-west, demonstrating how important links have been cut off. It is a delicious irony that members of the Peninsula Rail Task Force, which has been referred to a lot, had to drive to Reading last night in order to get here to present a report on rail resilience. Why did they have to drive to Reading? Because of a lack of rail resilience. On top of that, my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) and I had charming experiences yesterday: I had an 11-hour journey from Torquay to the House, and his journey was significantly longer.

We could make the debate all about rather negative descriptions of the well-known issues with our transport network, but we could also be positive about the opportunities available and what is already going on. On Thursday last week, the *Western Morning News* published an opinion piece on how the south-west should unite to build on a charter for investment and infrastructure. On the very same page there were details of the work being done by four local colleges that have come together to expand their opportunities and help to support tech businesses. The article, written by the principal of South Devon College, Stephen Criddle, gives details of the world-class high-tech and digital innovation centre being created for the photonics industry, which has a long history in Torbay.

Before I address what I think the Government should be doing, it is important to look at what we can do ourselves. We clearly need to ensure we have the skills for businesses, because there is little point in creating jobs and opportunities if we do not have people with the skills—particularly in science, technology, engineering and maths—to take them up. There are also well-known shortages of skills and professionals in our health and social care industries. We need to look at what can be done at local authority level. I welcome the fact that my local council has put £50 million into a growth fund. I must say it makes the £15 million that is potentially going to be assigned to the local enterprise partnership look rather small when Torbay Council on its own is planning a fund of around £50 million.

It is welcome that that money is being used and—without giving away some of the details that perhaps would not be appropriate to share publicly—it has been encouraging to speak with the Torbay Development Agency and the council about the ways in which some of that public investment might be used to unlock schemes that we have been waiting some time for, not least in our town centres in both Torquay and Paignton.

Transport infrastructure makes a huge difference. We have had the welcome investment of the Kingskerswell bypass, which serves my constituency and goes through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris), after the small matter of a 61-year wait since it was first proposed. That delay also brings home why it is so important that we get on with some of these projects. We have issues such as Stonehenge that are almost as long-standing. The debates around Dawlish, which began in the 1930s and were delayed by world war two, are still going. Also, once decisions are made, we need to crack on and deliver what we can.

Also, it is important not only to look at the tracks but to have trains running over them. While we are debating rail resilience, at the same time I have CrossCountry Trains trying to axe most of their services to my constituency. We need the tracks and the services running over them.

I am conscious both of the time and that other colleagues wish to speak. I hope to see more investment in broadband speeds, but the key message that I would join others in giving is that we now have a united voice in the south-west, including, to be fair, the support of our sole Opposition representative, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw). We do not have some of the petty rivalries that we saw in the past. That is why it is important for the Government to back the plans that are coming forth from the region, which will deliver not only for the south-west but for the country as a whole.

🕒 10.11 am

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this timely debate. It is the latest in a series of debates on the south-west and it is fantastic to hear so many colleagues speaking with one voice about our area.

I welcome the south-west growth charter, which originated, as we have heard, at the south west growth summit at Exeter University. I was able to attend part of that summit and I congratulate Pennon, the CBI and the *Western Morning News* on putting it together. Too often, we have not spoken as one voice in the south-west; the time to do so is now.

It is no secret that the south-west has lost out in terms of infrastructure investment in comparison with other areas. I just say gently to the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who talked about successive periods of under-funding, that he was a member of a Labour Government that did nothing for the south-west for 13 years. Nevertheless, it is true to say that during those years, and before, we have suffered from under-investment. One example is that during the past 20 years transport spending in the south-west has averaged £35 a head compared with a national average of £98 a head, which has left the region £2 billion behind other areas. That has been a wasted opportunity, considering the vast economic potential of the area.

To take my own constituency of East Devon as an example, just a week or so ago I was at Exeter science park to look at the new £97 million Met Office supercomputer, which will make Exeter and the surrounding area a world-class place to do science. There is also the brand new and growing community of Cranbrook, just near Exeter airport, which offers another fantastic opportunity for local growth. As for Exeter airport itself, I very much hope that the Chancellor will say something about air passenger duty, which discriminates against Flybe, which operates out of the airport.

The south-west has huge connectivity, not least to Northern Ireland. When I was Minister of State for Northern Ireland, I used to fly regularly from Exeter to Belfast. I must say that the south-west welcomes tourists, of course, not least—I am pleased to say that I was in some way involved with this—the First Minister of Northern Ireland, who has holidayed in Cornwall in the past few years and who enjoyed herself there very much indeed.

I welcome Government plans to dual and upgrade the A30 and the A303. This is a much-needed and overdue upgrade that should have been carried out decades ago. I regret that there is still a question over some of the funding for this project; that question needs to be urgently resolved. Personally, I am disappointed that full dualling of this stretch of the road has been ruled out. I believe that a half-baked compromise will give the impression, once again, that the south-west is forgotten when it comes to infrastructure investment.

I give wholehearted support to the work of the Peninsula Rail Task Force. We have heard about the timely announcement today; it is also an appropriate announcement, in a sense, given the problems we are experiencing today as a result of all trains from Exeter to Taunton being either delayed or cancelled. That underscores, yet again, the need for greater resilience, faster journey times, more capacity and connectivity. These are absolutely the right priorities.

I also agree with the right hon. Member for Exeter that too often over the years when we have heard about investment in the “south-west”, people are talking about Bristol. However, some of us in the Chamber mean Exeter, Plymouth, Penzance and so forth, and we would like to see some of the money that is going to the north of England to unlock the northern powerhouse and to provide HS2 being used instead for small projects in our area. For instance, I support Devon County Council’s bid to the new stations fund for a new station at Marsh Barton, in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency, which will make it much easier for constituents in East Devon and so forth to travel into and around Exeter and the surrounding area.

On broadband, we have had some leaked announcements, or some possible announcements, coming out of the autumn statement that we will have more money for connectivity and broadband. Again, we cannot argue for that too much in the south-west; it is absolutely a priority. Curiously, it is the more urban parts of East Devon, such as the Exeter suburb of Newcourt, that often have the worst internet speeds in the area, so improving connectivity and broadband is absolutely key.

As for the growth deal funding, considering the historic underfunding and the future potential of the south-west, it is disappointing—to say the least—that the provisional growth deal award is set to be so low. The Heart of the South West local enterprise partnership put together a £109 million growth deal that contained 26 projects, including investment in superfast broadband. The provisional allocation of £15 million to £20 million is nowhere near sufficient and the Government need to go away and look at this issue.

As the right hon. Member for Exeter reminded me, it was the south-west Members of Parliament who delivered a victory for the Conservative party in 2015. So, we are owed for the victory that led to the formation of a Conservative Government. We had a manifesto for the south-west and at the next election in 2020 we should feel proud to be held to account for the commitments that each and every one of us stood on. At the moment, we have made a start, but we are by no means there. Nevertheless, this debate today represents a good move in the right direction.

🕒 10:16 am

Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con)

I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this very important debate. He made a clear statement and the phrase that sprang out for me was that we do not come here today with a “begging bowl”. Indeed we do not, but, as other Members have said, it would be remiss of us if we did not point out that for many years, and under Governments of all colours, the south-west has not received its fair share of investment. We need to put that right.

The reason is that, as this charter for growth shows very clearly indeed, the south-west is a vibrant and dynamic place to do business. The south-west has a very bright economic future and that was very much the feeling at the south west growth summit on 21 October in Exeter. That is also very much the feeling in my part of the south-west—North Devon.

This issue is all about setting out how the Government can work with the region to increase investment, productivity and economic opportunities. I must stress that it is about working together; this is a partnership. In the south-west, including in North Devon, there are brilliant and resourceful businesses, public authorities and third sector organisations bursting with ideas, which make the south-west a magnet for investment. However, to release all of that potential and to make things happen, we need investment in our infrastructure, as colleagues have said only too clearly.

For me, the key is one word and that is “connectivity”. My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon and other colleagues have mentioned the roads that need to be vastly improved: the A303; the A30; and the A358. Also, I am sure that my hon. Friend also meant to mention the A361, which is the North Devon link road and the vital link between the M5 and North Devon. The former Prime Minister, David Cameron, once accused me of “banging on” about that road, which was a charge I was absolutely proud to plead guilty to. We must have investment in the North Devon link road.

Another issue is the resilience of our rail network. All the various newspapers have been mentioned—I am sure that the story is also in the *North Devon Journal* this morning—and they have pointed out that the rail links to the south-west are pretty much cut off this morning. That is something up with which we must not put.

On broadband, we hear that there is talk of investment in “hyper-speed” broadband. I have to say that in some parts of North Devon we have “no-speed” broadband at the moment. So let us at least get the car on the road before we push down the accelerator pedal.

Industrial strategy is also important. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made some very welcome remarks about industrial strategy yesterday and I hope we will hear some more about it in the autumn statement tomorrow.

It is reckoned by those who put together the south-west growth strategy that properly investing in our region’s connectivity could give gross valued-added economic benefits of £41.6 billion and create 22,000 jobs, and there could be extra economic benefits in things such as tourism and financial services of another £21 billion on top of that. It should not be a matter of whether we like the growth idea but of when we make the necessary moves to ensure that the south-west can grow in the way the document foresees. Yes, we want our fair share of Government investment, and the charter for growth shows that we are more than ready, willing and able to use that investment potentially to create a regional economy like no other. We are like a coiled spring, ready to unleash all that economic energy. I say, “Give us that chance. Northern powerhouse, you ain’t seen nothing yet”.

🕒 10.20 am

Anne Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con)

Today we ask the Government for support. We ask for support for the south-west charter for growth. We speak with one voice—businesses, politicians, the community. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said, we have huge, untapped potential. The figures need to be written in stone. The potential is there, yet we are the second-lowest funded region in the country. We could do so much better.

One of the challenges is that our economy is not well understood. People look at the south-west and think of us as a sleepy farming community or sleepy fishing community. That is completely wrong. Farming and fishing are very important. We feed the country; we have £2.7 billion turnover from our farming. As for tourism, we are the second most visited area after London, with 19% of those who come to this country coming to the south-west. So we have own powerhouse, thank you very much, but our potential must not be forgotten. Our marine sector represents a fifth of the UK’s marine sector. That is not small beer. We are a nuclear industry leader and we have the UK’s first nuclear industrial cluster. We have the brains. We have the power, and we want to be able to unleash it. In aerospace and advanced engineering we have 14 of the 15 top companies, plus 900 smaller supply chain companies. Some of the larger ones—for example, Centrax Industries and Centek Group—and some smaller ones, including Teignbridge Propellers, are in my constituency.

We are the south-west engine. We want a partnership with Government to build an industrial strategy to deliver productivity, not just for the south-west but for UK plc. We will collaborate. We will invest together. This is not just putting out a begging bowl to the Government. We will invest, train and retain. There is an increasing number of young people in our community and many young people come through our first-class education system and universities, so it simply is not true that the south-west is full of those who have retired. But we need the Government’s commitment to the south-west. We need, as my colleagues have argued, money going into road and rail. We need support for the Peninsula Rail Task Force report that will be released later today, and we must not forget the airports and the ports. They are very important.

The digital connectivity issue can never be under-estimated, and although I am sure I could spend the rest of my four minutes talking about it, the points have already been clearly made. Without mobile, without broadband, we simply cannot unleash the potential. The point about energy connectivity is right. We lead in renewables but we do not have a joined-up system, and that is preventing inward investment.

The south-west engine has the third-highest number of businesses in the UK behind London and the south-east, so we should not be underestimated. We have the most untapped potential but for that investment from the Government, and we, as local businesses, are prepared to play our part. We have huge investment potential. I echo my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon: dream on northern powerhouse, the engine is here in the south-west.

🕒 10.24 am

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con)

I feel like I ought to go like a train, Sir Roger, in the time limit, but not like the trains that were running out of the south-west yesterday, which were not going at all. I sometimes feel like I am the Boadicea of the north of the south-west region, and that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), who so gallantly brought this debate to the House, is like the Alan Sugar of the south of the region, but in between, we have a myriad of talent. We are a talented force and we are joining forces and working together for our region.

We should not be underestimated. As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) said, the south-west Conservative MPs won the election—to get political about it. There are 51 of us and we should not be underestimated. We came into this House on a manifesto promise to increase productivity in the south-west, and we are determined to do that but we cannot do it without the right framework behind us. We already have so much going in the south-west; we are achieving a lot. We have a lot of top-quality businesses and companies, but we could do more with the right framework, so I urge the Minister to listen and not to take us for granted.

One must always have a plan and a strategy, and we do. We have the south-west growth charter, and we also have our local enterprise partnerships working. We have a really solid framework from which to work. We are not working individually—although we all have our individual bids—but as a team, particularly on infrastructure and our particular asks.

In the time I have I will focus on just a couple of areas: skills and infrastructure. As I said, we already have some top-quality companies in my constituency. I must mention the Claims Consortium Group, with its Investors in People gold standard, the Ministry of Cake, Peter Brett Associates, Albert Goodman, Francis Clark, and Viridor, which is under the Pennon banner. There are so many of them, all doing great work, but they could all do more. So often, we find it difficult to attract the right talent and keep it in our region, and that is something we need to concentrate on. I applaud the Government's apprenticeship scheme—I think it will work well—but we need to work more. I have the first nuclear apprenticeship degree in my constituency, being run through Bridgwater and Taunton College, and, as has been said, we need to build on the nuclear strength we have in the south-west.

We need to build on health, aerospace, textiles and marine—the things we are really good at and strong in already—but it is important that we work with the region as part of the Government's industrial strategy. We must ensure that we do not miss out on any designations that are being handed out under the strategy outlined in the Green Paper. We need to be part of the bidding process but we need to win, and we must not be hampered if we do not happen to have signed a devolution deal yet. We are already doing good work and we must not be hampered, or even penalised.

I will just mention AgustaWestland, as many people who live in my constituency work there. I had a very good meeting with the company. It employs 17,500 people across the south-west. It particularly urges innovation and investment in science and technology, with which I think we would all agree.

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con)

Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rebecca Pow

I will give way to my hon. Friend, because the company is in his constituency.

Marcus Fysh

Yes, that is a wonderful industry and we need to focus on it and raise its skill levels. Investing in infrastructure is absolutely fundamental to what we are trying to achieve in the area.

Rebecca Pow

My hon. Friend is right. The company stressed to me that it is not just about wanting engineers to build helicopters but about attracting young people into the area to be those engineers. The industry is inspirational and is going somewhere. We need the seed-corn money from business, and grants for medium and small companies so that they can start to do research in that field. We can do that in the south-west; we can build on it and we can all take advantage of it.

I just want to throw in that we need a university. We are warm-hearted in Somerset, but we are a cold spot where academia is concerned. I would like to speak to the Minister about how we ease the numbers game so that we can apply to be a university.

I will sum up on the infrastructure note. We all agree that we have lots of ideas but the Minister needs to bring it on. We want to see the spades in the ground. I want to see the A358 come to fruition before the next election. We have to have junction 25 upgraded, we have to have the A303, and we have to have the road to Barnstaple done. They all work together. I ask the Minister to put some money back into growth deal 3. It was almost in the bag, but the bag seems to have been opened and the money has been let out. Please can we have that, devolution or no devolution?

We can do it in the south-west. Give us the tools and we will deliver, but do not destroy our beautiful environments at the same time. We are a spectacularly stunning region. We can make the economy work but we can also make it work in a glorious environment.

🕒 10.30 am

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) on securing this debate. Owing to lack of time, I will not be able to reflect on all hon. Members' contributions, which were extremely powerful in sending a message—I am sure the Minister received it—about the importance of the south-west and industry in the south-west. I want to reassure the hon. Gentleman that I do not see the south-west as a sleepy area. I am an MP for the north-east, which some may think is as far away from the south-west as one can get geographically, but in the north-east we are very fond of and admire the south-west. We share a history of mining and agriculture, as well as railways and great engineers, as other Members have mentioned.

The south-west has huge success stories, from the scientists of the Eden project to the engineers of the SC Group and AgustaWestland and the wine producers of the Campbell Valley. We would see such projects thrive if the Government sought fully to unleash the capabilities of all the regions of our United Kingdom. The charter for growth is a key step in achieving that. It is an opportunity for the Government to deliver on their promises, as has been pointed out by hon. Members, particularly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw).

We could say that, before the election, the Conservative party issued letters of promise for investment in the south-west to be redeemed after the election, but they have yet to be redeemed, as is clear from the contributions so far. I look forward to the Minister setting out how he will make right on the promises so freely given before the election.

Mr Bradshaw

One of the welcome differences with the current Prime Minister was an apparent willingness to invest more in infrastructure based on borrowing, which had been a long-time Labour policy. Does my hon. Friend agree that tomorrow will be a test of whether she was serious about that?

Chi Onwurah

I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. It is absolutely clear that the economic failure of the previous Government to recognise the importance of counter-cyclical state investment has been rejected—in words at least—by the current Government. We will see tomorrow whether that rejection is made solid.

The previous Government's abolition of the regional development agencies, which supported growth outside London, exacerbated the problem. Growth in the regions of the UK, particularly the south-west, faced economic hardship from austerity, particularly in the way in which it drained demand and reduced income for those in the public and private sectors. The Government have an opportunity to address those failings. I understand the sense of disappointment expressed by many MPs about the current indications that the local LEP will be materially disadvantaged in terms of regional funding because it does not have an elected mayor model. Now is the time for the Government to show they recognise that regions can achieve greatly without necessarily having a big man, a mayor, to meet the Government's requirements.

The need for the charter is urgent. The south-west received €1.5 billion from the European structural funds throughout the 2014 to 2020 funding cycle and that stimulates development in the region. In fact, the south-west received the second highest amount of money from the European Union, second only to nearby Wales. Business in the area must be concerned about the Government's toxic combination of indecision, doubt and confusion about Brexit. A commitment to a growth charter would be the first step in providing some answers for companies in the south-west.

Investment in physical infrastructure is one of the very important points in the charter. I must say I admire and respect the south-western Members of Parliament for making it to Parliament today, given the extraordinary lengths that some had to go to to make the journey from the south-west. For proper investment, we need long-term patient funding rather than the current short-term free market approach. For example, as has been mentioned, the A303, A30 and A358 corridor between Taunton, Honiton and Amesbury is key to reducing journey times to markets, promoting the inward investment that will help make the south-west's economy more self-sustaining, as well as strengthening the already vibrant tourism in the area.

As hon. Members have said, rail links are equally important. The 20-year plan will bring jobs and growth to the region, as well as faster connections to the London airports. Businesses in the south-west should have better access to Bristol, London and the midlands, as well as to Heathrow and Gatwick. Rail links are key not just to link the south-west to other English economic hubs, but to support British industry and manufacturing. This investment should be brought forward and considered a priority. How will the Minister ensure that the Infrastructure Commission is independent and fully funded to make the much needed investment in our regional infrastructure?

However, physical infrastructure is not the whole story. As Member after Member has pointed out, in the face of the fourth industrial revolution, digital connectivity is just as important, so the plan for an ultra-fast south-west is welcome. The Labour Government left office with fully costed plans for universal broadband by 2012. As has been said today, we still have many businesses and individuals who cannot even get access to broadband speeds of 2 megabits, never mind the ultra-high speed mentioned in the announcements made today; and the universal service obligation is still four years away.

The European Union investment that was so welcome in Cornwall will not be available post-Brexit, and yet Ofcom researchers showed that in rural areas 48% of premises are unable to receive speeds above 10 megabits. I look forward to the Minister saying specifically how his Government will invest in rural broadband.

James Heappey

The shadow Minister is obviously aware of the speech delivered by the then Prime Minister and Chancellor in January last year setting out the long-term economic plan for our region. Her speech today has reflected that Conservative vision for our region. Should we assume she supports it?

Chi Onwurah

I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I support regional economies that are strong and sustainable, where investment is in people, skills and infrastructure. I support economies that deliver high-quality jobs that enable his constituents to make plans for their own futures, rather than being at the whim of short-term, zero-hour, low-skill, low-value jobs. That is the vision for the future economy of the south-west, and indeed for the country, that I wholeheartedly support.

I look forward to the Minister setting out exactly what his industrial strategy is. The Prime Minister has created a Department with industrial strategy in its title—I have yet to hear what the strategy is. The Prime Minister's speech yesterday did not set out how the Government will, for example crowd in investment from the private sector in innovation, new opportunities and skills. As a Member of Parliament for the north-east, I too regret the skills brain drain from our regions to the capital because of its stronger economy.

I particularly look forward to the Minister setting out how the Government's industrial strategy is not simply an ever-growing reduction in corporation tax but one that takes our whole country with it to invest in increased industry, shifting the centre of gravity away from London to support our great regions, such as the south-west. The south-west growth charter is to be welcomed. I look forward to the Minister demonstrating that he will support its implementation.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair)

Order. Before I call the Minister, due to the incredible self-discipline exercised by colleagues, we have a reasonable amount of time. I congratulate you all on achieving that. We have called 13 Members in one form or another in addition to the Front-Bench spokespeople. I regard that as exceptional. Without wishing to incite insurrection, that does mean that the Minister will therefore probably be able to take interventions and still allow time for Mr Streeter to respond at the end of the debate.

🕒 10.41 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman)

Thank you, Sir Roger, for that incendiary opening remark. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and it is an absolute delight to take part in such a generally wise, good-natured, warm and constructive debate. It is a particular delight for me to look round Westminster Hall and see the serried ranks of Conservative MPs from the south-west, and even the conservative Member from the Opposition, the excellent right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), who in so many ways shares so many of our inclinations.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter) for calling this debate on a very important area and set of issues. We have already heard reference to Boadicea and Sir Alan Sugar from my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), but I like to think of my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon as a kind of Abraham—a patriarch of the south-west, bringing his wisdom to bear and providing moral and spiritual, as well as parliamentary, leadership.

We have heard some excellent contributions. Not everyone is still in their place for reasons we perfectly understand. I have heard strong support for the area, the skills and the genius of the south-west; concern about infrastructure and connectivity; recognition of the Government's achievements to date; and a desire for Government to step forward and do more. I will not run through all of the excellent contributions we have heard, Sir Roger. It is testimony to your brilliant chairmanship that the imposition of a self-denying ordinance, an interesting contradiction in terms, has had the excellent effect of enlisting so many outstanding and brief contributions.

Let me just point to one or two wider considerations in response to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and pick out some aspects of the industrial strategy, before turning to where we are with the south-west. It is fair to say that there is not a Member of this House who does not believe in the importance of economic growth. If there are any, let us invite them to consider the alternative, which is not only painful but regressive. Economic growth is a very important part of our lives and is likely to always remain so. It is also important to attend to the kind of growth that that implies, which is not always the same. We have seen boom and bust over the last few years nationally and that is not attractive. What we are looking for, and what I know colleagues across the south-west are looking for, is a sustainable basis for long-term economic development—and rightly so. That must be development that enhances the genius of the people involved to create higher productivity and greater real wealth.

If we look at the industrial strategy, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central suggested that somehow it is some great failure. The Government have talked about industrial strategy almost continuously since they were appointed and are undertaking a very careful, considered process of framing a consultation document to be launched in the next few weeks, which will invite every section of our society, not just businesses and corporations, to contribute and reflect on what could be the source of that long-term economic growth.

Rebecca Pow

On my point about AgustaWestland and other businesses, will the Minister ensure that we are investing enough money in business-oriented innovation and science, so that we can build a solid future, not a one-off industrial strategy, for our young people in particular?

Jesse Norman

It would, I think, be injudicious of me to anticipate announcements to be made over the next few days and, in some cases, already trailed. There has certainly been widespread speculation in the press about great support for research and innovation, including the development and technology side of the equation. We have already seen that. The structure of the Government being focused on trying to concert better relationships between sources of research, be they industrial or commercial, and the development and commercialisation of those technologies, makes that very clear. We will see a lot more of that over the next few weeks.

Mr Bradshaw

The Minister talks about the Government bringing forward a consultation document. We do not need a consultation document. That is what Governments say when they are going to do absolutely nothing and kick something into the long grass. Clear and specific promises were made by the Conservative party in the run-up to the last general election, with money behind them, which all the Conservative MPs speaking in the debate today have referenced. When will those promises be delivered? Where is the plan to deliver them?

Jesse Norman

I detect a slight faux indignation on the other side, and I am sorry about that. The industrial strategy of this country is a serious, long-term matter. It needs to be agreed in a bipartisan spirit. It needs to include the whole country, including the devolved Administrations and nations. It is not something to be decided and cut off. That, if I may say, is an expression of Blairite, Napoleonic Government. We are looking for a consensus and a stable basis for future development, which can be shared by all and can survive a change of Government—it is essentially long term in character.

An industrial strategy has been attempted at various points in our past in this country, not always with great success. In the 1940s and 1950s, we had models of industrialisation based on the armed forces and people in Whitehall yanking levers that steered the ship of state. We had the corporatism of the 1970s. I suspect that we are looking to something somewhat different. If hon. Members doubt the necessity, let me remind them of two things. First, those who say they do not have an industrial strategy almost invariably have one without knowing it. Secondly, no company or charitable organisation would dream of attempting to take money from investors or donors and use it over a period of time without having a strategy for how to do so. Nor should the Government.

Neil Parish

I am encouraged by that, but is part of the strategy broadband? When we talk about superfast and extra-superfast, can we make sure that the rural areas of this country are connected with some form of broadband?

Jesse Norman

As my hon. Friend understands, I am not the Minister for Culture, Media and Sport. He also knows that when I was Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I took an active interest in that issue, and we commissioned a very reputable report from a group of academics and industry experts, which found, among other things, that BT Openreach was under-investing in its network by hundreds of millions of pounds a year. It was accretive to investors and was not down to its cost of capital. I do not want to speculate on the reasons for that, but its effect has been massively to penalise people—particularly those in rural areas. I am sure my hon. Friend supports today's announcement of a new fund to support other players in fibre through balance sheet-matched funding, which will enable fibre roll-out, particularly in rural and suburban areas, to proceed much faster than hitherto. That is a very welcome development.

James Heapey

The Minister is being very generous in giving way, and I am grateful. The long-term economic plan, to which I referred during the shadow Minister's speech, was delivered 18 months or so ago. In its analysis of the region's infrastructure and our sectoral opportunities, it is not a thousand miles away from an industrial strategy. Will the Minister commit to making that long-term economic plan, which was delivered by the previous Prime Minister and Chancellor, the foundation for his industrial strategy for our region? Our region widely welcomed it at the ballot box.

Jesse Norman

The idea is not to slow the process of investment—as has been recognised today, there has been considerable investment across the south-west, in the form of city deals, enterprise zones, expansions and local growth funding—but to incorporate it within a more nuanced national consensus about what the future will look like, out of which we should get a shared view of how the south-west and other parts of the economy can grow.

I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the Prime Minister's early words: she pointed out that there are no privileged areas of the country. Some might have had deals in the past, on the basis of areas coming together, but that model can be embraced by everyone. One of the interesting things about this debate is that the unity of Members of Parliament is so evident, but it is not absolutely evident