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Public Forest Estate (England)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): I have to inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.13 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House believes that the Government's intention in the Public Bodies Bill to sell off up to 100 per cent. of England's public forestry estate is fundamentally unsound; notes that over 225,000 people have signed a petition against such a sell-off; recognises the valuable role that the Forestry Commission and England's forests have made to increasing woodland biodiversity and public access, with 40 million visits a year; further recognises that the total subsidy to the Forestry Commission has reduced from 35 per cent. of income in 2003-04 to 14 per cent. of income in 2010-11; further notes that the value of the ecosystems services provided by England's public forest estate is estimated to be £680 million a year; notes that the value of such services could increase substantially in the future through the transition to a low carbon economy as a carbon market emerges; notes that the public forest estate has been retained in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; and calls on the Government to rethink its decision on the sale of England's public forest estate in order to protect it for future generations.

The countryside is on the move against the Tory-led Government's plans to privatise England's forests. People are furious about this environmental vandalism. The Government's impact assessment shows us that it is economic madness, too. The Government are carrying out a hatchet job that destroys the funding model which has protected England's forests for nearly

100 years. If the commercial timberlands are sold, the ancient woodlands starve. The true value of England's forests cannot be measured by the price that the Government will get from selling them.

Bob Russell (Colchester) (LD): Will the hon. Lady inform the House when she first discovered that the last Labour Government sold by stealth thousands of acres of forestry land?

Mary Creagh: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has raised that issue, because we can put paid to the lies about it. Under the last Labour Government, there was a net sale of 4,000 hectares in England. We sold 9,000 hectares and bought 5,000 hectares. We expanded community access to the forests. The money was recycled back into the forests, and did not go to the Treasury.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend confirm that the policy of the last Labour Government involved selling off some woodland and reinvesting the proceeds in areas such as mine to create woodland in urban areas such as the Mersey forest?

Mary Creagh: I am delighted by my hon. Friend's mention of the Mersey forest, where 1 million trees were planted in and around her constituency.

How did the Government get this so wrong? Over the summer, the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs rolled up her sleeves and took the axe to her own Department. She cut the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs by 30%-the biggest cut of any spending Department. There are cuts to flood defence schemes, and nature reserves are next

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on the transfer list. England's forests were slipped into the Public Bodies Bill in the bonfire of the quangos. However, she was seeking not a bonfire of the quangos, but the power to sell off all England's forests.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mr James Paice): If the hon. Lady is so opposed to this Government taking the powers in the Public Bodies Bill, why do the Labour-led Welsh Assembly Government want the same powers?

Mary Creagh: The right hon. Gentleman makes a point about the future- [*Interruption.*] My question back to him is what is happening to the future of forestry in this country under his Government? If they take the heart out of the Forestry Commission model-take away what is happening in Scotland and Wales-they will effectively destroy the system that has protected the national forests for 100 years.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend said that England is on the march. Wales is on the march as well, going by the number of Welsh people who have written in to safeguard England's forests. However, they do not just visit those forests. To answer the Minister of State, the Welsh Assembly Government want the powers to safeguard Welsh forests against this very measure. They fear that Welsh forests will be rolled into the Bill that has been mentioned.

Mary Creagh: The Public Bodies Bill, which was introduced in the Lords in October, gives the Government the power to sell the lot-1,500 woods and 258,000 hectares. It is the biggest change in England's land ownership since the second world war. This is not the first time that the Tories have sold England's forests. After introducing the Forestry Act 1981, they sold off 72,500 hectares in three years. Let their actions then stand as a warning to us today.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I declare a passing interest: my wife was born in the Forest of Dean and my constituency town takes its name from the old Lyme forest along the Cheshire and Staffordshire border. Does my hon. Friend agree that the strand that links this policy with all the other policies for which there is no public mandate is the pretence that debt and borrowing are worse than was expected before the election? Does she agree that that is a pretence and that it does not justify this further act of public vandalism?

Mary Creagh: Absolutely; I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that point.

Let us look at the maths. The Forestry Commission costs each of us 30p a year. Our ancient trees, worshipped by our ancestors as a source of food, fuel and shelter, will go in this sale of the century. The Secretary of State wants to finish a task that proved too much even for Mrs Thatcher.

Mr Paice: How many acres of ancient trees?

Mary Creagh: The Minister asks how many acres of ancient trees we have. The answer is that he does not know, because I met Forestry Commission officials this morning, and they told me that the mapping tool that the Government are using has excluded sites of special

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scientific interest. [*Interruption.*] The Minister should perhaps talk to his staff a little more. I have been talking to a lot of them, and I have not met a single one who supports his plans.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend refers to the countryside being on the march. Is she aware that in Islington South, where we have the smallest amount of green space in the whole of England, I have had 323 letters on this issue? They are our trees too.

Mary Creagh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Perhaps I should have said that the country is on the march.

The Secretary of State did not reckon on the campaigns against these plans, both national and local, which have united people from across the political spectrum. Some 360,000 people have signed the "Save our Forests" petition—the largest public protest since the Government were elected.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that Lloyd George, who set up the Forestry Commission in the previous Tory-Liberal Government in 1919, would turn in his grave at the thought that this coalition was selling off England's forests and leaving only Wales and Scotland to manage and own our public land and forests?

Mary Creagh: I am sure he would be spinning in his grave.

I turn to the consultation document that the Government published last week. I have read it, unlike many Government Members, and it rewards reading. It raises more questions than it answers. There are a lot of warm words in it about communities instead of the Forestry Commission managing forests, yet on page 33 there is a harsh reality:

"Any sale would be at the open market value".

Forests currently sell for between £3,000 and £6,000 a hectare. I will give way to any Government Member whose community can afford to compete with the private sector to buy up thousands of acres of woodland. [Hon. Members: "Come on!"] No takers?

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con) *rose* -

Mary Creagh: Oh, we have one!

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Lady for her challenge. It is not in my constituency, but the community did indeed come together to purchase Bradfield woods.

Mary Creagh: My question is this: was it at full open market value? That is the question to which we shall return.

Page 13 of the consultation document contains more warm words about public access. However, although the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, introduced by a Labour Government, provides pedestrian access to 90% of the freehold area of the public forest estate, 20% of the estate is leasehold, so CROW rights there depend on the lease. The document warns:

"So-called 'higher rights', such as cycling and horse riding, have not been dedicated."

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Ministers talk of conditions in leases, but if they lease land for 150 years, who will enforce the leases a century from now? The public forest estate makes up 18% of the woodland in England but accounts for nearly half the publicly accessible woodland. That tells us all that we need to know about public access to private woodlands.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Does the hon. Lady think that the Woodland Trust and the National Trust will or will not be able to compete in the free market to purchase important forests?

Mary Creagh: The National Trust has come out this morning and said that the Government's plans are absolutely no way to manage the public forest estate-I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman has seen the news today-and the Woodland Trust has a big petition on its website saying, "Save our forests". He needs to look at what they are saying. They will not pay their members' subscriptions to the Treasury to buy something that we already own.

Hugh Bayley (York Central) (Lab): Literally hundreds of my constituents have written to me saying that something must be done to stop the sale. On Saturday week I am holding a public meeting to discuss-*[Interruption.]* The Minister of State may laugh, but we will be discussing how they can respond to his consultation. Will my hon. Friend come to York on that day to meet people and hear what they have to say?

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that invitation. I shall certainly make the journey to York to hear what his constituents have to say, and I hope that Ministers go out and listen to what the country has to say on the matter.

Paul Maynard (Blackpool North and Cleveleys) (Con): The hon. Lady mentioned the Woodland Trust. Does she agree with its chief executive, who told Radio 4 last week that:

"Public ownership is not delivering full protection...it is not as simple as saying that public ownership is better"?

Does she agree that different forests need different types of ownership structure?

Mary Creagh: Different forests are already under different sorts of ownership-the public forest estate makes up 18% of England's woodlands. The question is what the nation values and for what we are prepared to pay.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Oxleas wood in my constituency is a sight of special scientific interest and has a great deal of biodiversity. It is small wonder that those on the Government Benches understand nothing about biodiversity, because under the previous Tory Government we came together and fought to save Oxley woods from a six-lane motorway that they wanted to build. We did not succeed by buying the woods, but would it not be invidious if the only way to stop such development under this rotten coalition was people subscribing to buy them?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend makes a very interesting point and brings us back to the question of money.

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Who will pay to look after England's forests? Page 17 of the consultation document has many warm words on the English woodland grant scheme. It says that any new owners could apply to create new woodlands and to care for existing ones. However, that document must be read in conjunction with a much more serious one-the impact assessment, page 39 of which states that payments under the woodland grant scheme

"may not be sufficient to secure the level of public goods currently provided on the PFE."

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady makes some good points. Does she agree that this Government could learn lessons from the mistakes of the previous

Government, of whom she was a member? Rigg wood in my constituency was sold off under the Labour Government, and as a result, public access has now been restricted. Would it be right for this Government to think carefully about how we protect public access to our forests, whether publicly owned or otherwise, given that her Government failed so badly?

Mary Creagh: Let us go back to the numbers. We sold off 9,000 hectares and bought 5,000. The Government whom he supports-I am grateful that he is backing our campaign on this issue-will sell off more land in the next year than the previous Labour Government sold off in 13 years, and they will do so without giving any guarantees whatever on public access. Government Members should think on that and reflect on the 40,000 hectares that are going in the sale of the century.

Page 18 of the consultation document states that

"significantly increasing woodland cover across the UK would be a cost-effective way to help with both climate change mitigation and adaptation."

When I met Forestry Commission staff, they told me that they estimated that the future value of biomass and wind power on the public forest estate could be as much as £75 million a year. Perhaps Government Members can tell the House how the sell-off will increase tree planting if there are not enough grants to go around.

I recently met free miners and verderers from the Forest of Dean. They told me that it costs £500,000 to look after their forest, and that it brings £100 million to the rural economy. They want their questions answered. Who will run the forest? What would happen if the much-vaunted charitable trust collapses? How would their commoners' rights be protected in any transfer? The New Forest costs the Forestry Commission £2.9 million to run. How will that money be raised in perpetuity? I shall answer that question for the House: the money will be raised through increasing parking charges, by closing toilets and by reducing spending on wildlife management. That is not my view, but the view expressed in the Forestry Commission's staff consultation, which was published today and which lays everything out for us in black and white.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Forestry Commission currently manages all our forests to the Forest Stewardship Council standard, which is well above the base legal level, and does so at a cost of about 30p a year to each of us, which is a pretty good bargain.

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Mary Creagh: That is a very interesting point and one that I was going to make later. As the hon. Lady has raised it, however, I will address it now. All the timber is responsibly produced, but in an answer on 17 January, the Minister of State said:

"Certification under the UK Woodland Assurance Standard is voluntary and this will be a decision for the new owners of woodland...The consultation...will include proposals on how certification might be maintained."-[*Official Report*, 17 January 2011; Vol. 521, c. 471W.]

Mr Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There are no car parking charges in the New Forest, but there are car parking charges in plenty of other Forestry Commission forests. It is entirely a local matter.

Mary Creagh: I am interested that the Prime Minister's Parliamentary Private Secretary-who has been writing some interesting blogs about strawberry jam and other matters-is perhaps feeling the pressure from his local community on this issue- [*Interruption.*] Do wooden pips and strawberry jam ring any bells? That is a sign of someone who is under a great deal of pressure. One thing that we can guarantee the hon. Gentleman's constituents is that if this sale goes ahead, they will be paying for car parking.

Several hon. Members *rose* -

Mary Creagh: I wish to make a little more progress, and then I will give way.

Page 20 of the document talks about experience from other countries and cites the privatisation of forests in Russia and central Africa, and the need to tailor our approach to the national context. I am still trying to work out-perhaps the Secretary of State will be able to tell us in her speech-in what ways England's national context is similar to that of Russia or the Democratic Republic of Congo, whose economy has been shattered by seven years of war and where one in five children die before their fifth birthday- [*Interruption.*] It is a country that I have visited and about which I care a great deal. I care about the natural timber resources of the Congo and I know that the Government give money to protect them, but the Congo is not the model that we should use as an excuse for privatising our forests.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): Is not the point that many of us would be happy to chain ourselves to trees and forests, but not to the structure and jobs of the Forestry Commission?

Mary Creagh: I do not know what the hon. Gentleman has got against those dedicated public servants, but when I met them they were very concerned about the 270 jobs that will go instantly in the Forestry Commission and about how woodland will be managed with 25% fewer staff. They were concerned about how national diseases, such as sudden oak death, will be managed and about the loss of a critical mass of expertise from the Forestry Commission. The hon. Gentleman derides that concern as if it were all about jobs for the boys and girls. It is not: those workers care about the forests, which is more than can be said for the Conservatives.

Mark Lazarowicz (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that we are talking about the jobs of those who work for the Forestry Commission. Although

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we are talking about forests in England, jobs throughout the UK are at risk. There are several hundred staff at the former UK headquarters in Edinburgh, many of whom live in my constituency and are very worried about the future. They have told me that between 400 and 600 jobs in Scotland depend on the link with the English Forestry Commission and they are very worried about the future because of the Government's proposals.

Mary Creagh: Yes, we risk a cross-infection of job losses across the Forestry Commission estate with these proposals.

It is not only Forestry Commission staff who are worried. David Sulman, executive director of the UK Forest Products Association, called the proposals

"a recipe for disaster. If these leasing plans go ahead, thousands of jobs in the forestry and forest products sector will be put in jeopardy; many businesses could be starved of their wood supply and would face closure as a consequence."

There is no plan for rural jobs and growth here.

The consultation is full of holes. The Government talk about the big society, but the Forestry Commission and its communities are the big society. The Department's impact assessment shows that the costs will outweigh the benefits. There is no mandate for this. The coalition agreement promised

"measures to...promote green spaces and wildlife corridors in order to halt the loss of habitats and restore biodiversity."

How will these sales achieve that?

Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend have any idea what would happen to partnerships such as the Capital Woodlands project, which cares for biodiversity and conservation in the urban areas of London? More than 300 of my constituents from the inner city have written to express their concern about the wider issues that she has described, but also about those precious green spaces in the capital.

Mary Creagh: My right hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of woodland in the capital, which is something that the Labour Government sought to extend. Also, it is important that people

living in cities have the enjoyment of woodlands and access to forests. How do the sales achieve that? What has happened to the Government's woodland strategy?

What role can a broken-up forest play in carbon capture and storage? The answer is on page 51 of the closely-read impact assessment, which says:

"The co-ordinated approach to implementing adaptation measures across the public forest estate would be put at risk through large-scale changes in ownership."

However, we need to step back from the Public Bodies Bill and the full sell-off and look at what is happening in England's forests right now. Ministers can sell off 15% of English woodland without any change to the law. *[Interruption.]* The Under-Secretary says from a seated position that that is why we did it. I have already explained how much was sold under the Labour Government; I want now to come to what will be sold by him. In our 13 years in government, we sold just 4,000 hectares net, reinvesting the proceeds into forestry.

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The Secretary of State told the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in November that she and her Ministers had already factored in £74.5 million of sales under existing laws. However, she gave no guarantees that the money would flow back to the Forestry Commission. Indeed she was at pains to point out that

"it would be perfectly possible for us to use the proceeds from sales of these assets towards increasing the capital available for flood defences".

We need to step back a minute. She has cut the flood defence budget by 27% and wants to sell off our forests to make up the shortfall that she has imposed. That does not strike me as any way to run a Department.

Mr Mark Spencer (Sherwood) (Con): If the model that the hon. Lady is talking about is so impressive, does she advocate using public money to purchase private sector woods back into the public sector?

Mary Creagh: That is indeed what has happened. *[Interruption.]* Yes, it has happened in the past. Why the shock? Some people cannot manage the timber or the forest. Forests cost money to run, so what the Forestry Commission does is advise the private sector on how best to manage them. I do not see any problem in that.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Surely what the thousands of people who are contacting MPs about this matter are concerned about is not the public sector buying out private forests, but private developers preventing their families from using them, as the Secretary of State says her children were able to use them. Those developers will build golf courses, luxury chalets and adventure parks on those forests. What is proposed is an excuse for private developers to deprive everyone else.

Mary Creagh: That is a good point, well made.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): People care about our forests in this country. What we all want is a more diverse forest, with the old English oaks alongside other trees, but that is very expensive to achieve, so yes, I want a Forestry Commission that buys more land and turns it into diverse forest. What we have with commercial interests is a drive always to plant fir, to secure quick commercial returns.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend raises a key point. Much of the timber stock that is now ready for felling is being felled by the Forestry Commission, which is replanting it with broadleaf native English oak, ash and beech. If we sell off the timber stock, we lose the chance to change the shape and structure of the forests. Next year, with the sale of 10,000 hectares, this Government will sell more in one year than Labour sold in 13 years in government, and they will do the same for each of the following years. The holdings could include sites in national parks-I hope that Members from Exmoor are listening-community forests, areas of outstanding natural beauty, or sites of special scientific interest.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I hope that the hon. Lady will not seek to mislead either the House or the nation. Does she not accept that we have one of the toughest regulatory regimes in the world? It

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is not possible to fell a mature tree in this country without a felling licence, and part of the conditions for such a licence is nearly always that a new tree must be planted, and very often a broadleaf tree.

Mary Creagh: The hon. Gentleman is quite right; and who oversees felling licences? It is the Forestry Commission, which the Government are cutting by 25%.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Does it not surprise my hon. Friend that the Government appear to have made no mention of our much-loved national parks in relation to this issue, despite the fact that some of our best forestry land, including Grizedale and the New Forest, is in national parks?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I think that the reason is that the Government are planning the transfer of nature reserves away from Natural England, and planning changes to the governance of the national parks. Those changes are coming down the tracks, and those on the Government Benches would do well to heed them now so that they are not caught napping next time.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I want to raise the issue of the public perception of the plans, and to read out what my constituent, Lindsey Page, has told me. She says:

"I have heard the argument that if a forest area is sold off then there will be safeguards written into the contract of sale that should safeguard the access, but I don't believe such contracts are enforceable."

Does not that go to the heart of the matter? The public have no faith that there will be adequate safeguards.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Interventions need to be brief.

Mary Creagh: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

My hon. Friend's point goes to the heart of the matter. The only legally enforceable rights are public access rights guaranteed under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The introduction of further "higher rights" would require changes to primary legislation. *[Interruption.]* Who will enforce the leases in 150 years' time? It is certain that none of us will be around to remember this debate at that time.

Who will benefit from the sales? The Confederation of Forest Industries' website says that the price of commercial forests rose

"138% since 2002, which equates to a 17% average annual growth over the period".

So the forests that the Tories sold off in the 1980s and '90s have trebled or quadrupled in value. Where is the public benefit from those increased land values? There is none. Forestry land is exempt from inheritance tax after two years, and timber sales have no income tax or capital gains tax. When we sell our forests, the taxpayer loses many times over.

"Private companies buying 75-year rights to woodland would naturally seek to maximise returns from timber extraction"-

[Interruption.] The Minister should allow me to finish my quote before chuntering; I think that he is going to like it:

"There is no sign that the consequences for conservation, recreation and tourism have been properly weighed up in these plans. The Government is using 'slash and burn' tactics".

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Those are not my words; that was a press release from the current Chief Secretary to the Treasury in January 2009, when a similar plan was proposed by the Scottish Government. I do not see the right hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Danny Alexander) in the Chamber today.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I should like to draw my hon. Friend's attention to a quote:

"Liberal Democrats believe that the SNP are in a real way threatening to destroy rural Scotland through this hugely flawed proposal and are prepared to sell off the family silver for what amounts to a very small, one off sum of money."

Will she join me and the Liberal Democrats in their "Save our Forests!" campaign?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. For some reason, the photograph of the Chief Secretary to the Treasury with a "Save our Forests!" sign has disappeared from the Liberal Democrats' website. If anyone can find it, please will they e-mail it to me?

Anas Sarwar (Glasgow Central) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share the anger of thousands of people across the country at the double-dealing of the Liberal Democrats, who say one thing in their campaign leaflets and their pictures, but do the opposite in government? Is it not the case that, on this issue, they cannot see the wood for the fees?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is taking all my lines. How can the Liberal Democrats fight forestry sell-offs in Scotland, yet vote for them here in the Lobby tonight? We can answer that question: they are just doing on the national stage what they have always done on the local stage.

Mr Paice: When the hon. Lady provides the House with quotes, it would be useful if she properly attributed them in the context of the events that they addressed. She referred to the current Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but is she not aware that what he said was in response to the then Scottish Government's proposals? Is she not aware that we are proposing not 75-year leases, but 150-year leases? Most importantly, is she not aware that under the Scottish national land use scheme- *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Minister, you must be brief. I think we have got the point.

Mr Paice *rose- [Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Mr Paice *rose-*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Minister, you will resume your seat now. Thank you. I am on my feet and I have already said that interventions must be brief. That applies to everyone, including Front-Bench Members. This is a very important debate and many Members wish to contribute to it.

Mary Creagh: I missed some of what the Minister said, but I do not understand how his offering leases of 150 years is somehow better than the Scottish Government offering a 75-year lease.

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We in the Labour party are proud of our record on forestry. We gave people the right to roam; we established two national parks; we replanted coalfield sites and landfill sites; and we brought trees closer to cities for all to enjoy. We planted 2 million trees in Warrington, 2 million in St Helens and 1 million each in Ellesmere Port, Moseley and Wigan.

The United Nations has announced 2011 as the international year of forestry. The Government have chosen a very strange way of marking it. The countryside is walking, cycling and riding against this Government's plans to privatise England's forests. People are furious at this

environmental vandalism. We plant a tree to remember our loved ones, to mark an event, to leave a gift for those who come after us. The Forestry Commission costs each of us 30p a year. That is 30p to preserve our shared history, our cherished ancient oaks, ash and beech-sold for 30 pieces of silver! The Government's plans will destroy the funding model that has protected England's forests for nearly 100 years. If we sell the commercial timber lands, we starve the ancient woodlands. That is the simple equation and the fundamental fallacy at the heart of the Government's proposals. The true value of our forests will never be reflected in the price the Government get from selling them.

4.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mrs Caroline Spelman): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to the end of the Question and add:

"deplores the actions of the previous administration in selling off 25,000 acres of public forestry estate with wholly inadequate protections; notes that the previous administration sought to go even further in finding ways to exploit the forestry estate for commercial gain as recently as 2009; welcomes the consultation proposals to guarantee the future protection of heritage forests by offering them charitable trust status; supports the consultation proposals for robust access and public benefit conditions that will be put in place through lease conditions, including access rights for cyclists and horse-riders; believes the leasehold conditions regarding biodiversity and wildlife conservation will safeguard significant important environmental benefits; sees these proposals as important in resolving the conflict of interest whereby the Forestry Commission is the regulator of the timber sector whilst being the largest operator in the England timber market; considers that debate on the future of the forest estate ought to be conducted on the basis of the facts of the Government's proposals; and believes that under these proposals people will continue to enjoy the access and benefits they currently have from the woodlands of England."

Clearly, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) has not read our consultation document. For example, sites of special scientific interest are included, and there were many other inaccuracies in her speech. At least we now have an opportunity to nail some of myths that have been peddled on this issue. Of course it is an important function of Her Majesty's Opposition to hold the Government to account, but they should do so on the basis of facts, not fiction. Let us start, then, with some plain facts about our proposals.

First, we are consulting on proposals to create a new heritage forest status, whereby our most precious national assets are given over to charitable trusts, giving them far greater protection and financial security than they have ever had. Secondly, we propose to uprate massively

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protections for public access and other public benefits by replacing the freehold sales that took place under the last Government and moving instead to leaseholds that provide better protection for access and other public benefits.

Several hon. Members *rose* -

Mrs Spelman: I will give way, but I have listened to a lot of myths, so let me set the record straight first.

Thirdly, we propose to give community groups and civic organisations the opportunity to own or manage their local forests if they wish-and why should they not have this opportunity? Fourthly, we are opening up the commercial functions of the Forestry Commission to other operators on a leasehold basis so that their commercial potential is realised alongside the need to protect public benefits.

Angela Smith *rose*-

Hugh Bayley *rose*-

Mrs Spelman: I will give way in a minute.

Fifthly, we are refocusing the work of the Forestry Commission so that rather than devoting expertise and resources to commercial activities that should not be performed by Government, it can focus on conducting research on combating the challenges of new tree diseases, maintaining and enforcing access rights, providing expert advice, giving grants, and discharging its duty as a regulator.

Angela Smith: Will the right hon. Lady add to that list of facts an agreement on the part of the Government to guarantee the current permissive access provisions granted by the Forestry Commission on its lands?

Mrs Spelman: Permissive rights apply to 2,000 hectares of the public forest estate, which itself accounts for 18% of the woodland cover of the country.

Hugh Bayley: Talking of facts, I have here a parliamentary answer given to me by a former forests Minister in 1996. It records that under the previous Conservative Government 209,956 hectares of Forestry Commission land were sold. What proportion of that retained public access, what proportion went to community trusts, and what proportion of the new sales will go to such trusts?

Mrs Spelman: In 1996 I was not a Member of Parliament. I am dealing with a new policy, and that, it seems, is what Opposition Members are opposing.

What is most saddening about the debate is that rather than setting out her reasons for opposing our measures, the hon. Member for Wakefield insisted on sowing further misinformation and fear about what we are consulting on.

Several hon. Members *rose* -

Mrs Spelman: I will give way in a minute.

The hon. Lady claimed that we were planning to sell the forests for short-term gain. In fact, we are proposing to end the last Government's policy of selling land and replace it with a leasing policy, specifically to secure

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access to rights for all-including horse riders, cyclists and other recreational users. The hon. Lady claimed that that was environmental vandalism. In fact, we are introducing more environmental safeguards than existed before. We are providing a once-in-a-generation opportunity to accelerate the recovery of plantations on ancient woodland sites, and enforcing replanting in other woodlands.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mrs Spelman: In a minute.

The Forestry Commission was previously commended for the restoration of ancient woodland sites. It pledged to restore 20,000 hectares of plantations on such sites; it has managed to restore just 2,000 hectares. I have a greater ambition in regard to the restoration and enhancement of biodiversity than the last Government ever entertained.

Mr Sheerman: The right hon. Lady produced some very well-crafted words in an earlier paragraph. She referred to an "opportunity" to acquire land. If there is a competition between a private buyer and a community interest, will preference be given to the community buyer, or will it all be decided on the basis of price?

Mrs Spelman: Oh, dear: yet another Opposition Member has not actually read the consultation document, which states explicitly that the community will be given preference. Of course people must be given preference when it comes to the woodlands near which they live.

Tony Baldry (Banbury) (Con): Is it not clear from the demeanour of Opposition Members that this is an Opposition knockabout day? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that there will be a three-month consultation period? May we hope that during those three months Ministers will be prepared to listen to serious representations from people who have read the consultation paper and will respond on the basis of facts rather than Opposition knockabout myths?

Mrs Spelman: As always, my hon. Friend makes a sensible intervention, pointing out that we are still in the first week of a 12-week consultation. To be kind to Labour Members, a lot of their questions arise from reading media reports, and they would do well to read the consultation document.

The hon. Member for Wakefield claims that people are going to turn up at their local woods only to find them locked up and gated off. The case to which her party leader has consistently referred—that of Rigg wood—has also been mentioned in this debate, but in fact that wood was put up for sale by her Government in April 2010. So perhaps she would like to go to Grizedale to explain to the people of Rigg wood what happened as a result of what her Government did. We, on the other hand, will be guaranteeing access and public benefit rights through the terms of the leases.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I believe that many people have read the consultation document and have understood the Government's proposal. Taking the Government at face value on this consultation, if a vast majority of people oppose this proposal, will the Government accede to their wishes?

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Mrs Spelman: I have made it very clear that this is a genuine consultation. It is written in an open manner and does not contain leading questions. It invites the hon. Gentleman's community—his local groups and community groups—to have, for the first time, an opportunity to be involved in the ownership of the woodlands. I suggest that he talks to them about that.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will my right hon. Friend give a guarantee this afternoon that any sale or lease will have cast-iron legal safeguards for all existing rights of way? Will she go further than that by publishing what those rights of way are before a lease or sale takes place, so that local groups will know for evermore what rights they have over their forests?

Mrs Spelman: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance, because we live in age of transparency and that is what community groups have every right to expect.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Further to the point about a consultation, would my right hon. Friend care to reassure the House that the Public Bodies Bill seeks to establish enabling powers, rather than duties, and that that will fundamentally enshrine the opportunities proposed in the consultation, not force things through?

Mrs Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, because it is important to note that when we published the consultation document on 27 January it was accompanied by a written ministerial statement. If Members would like to read it in conjunction with the consultation document, they will find an assurance on this point. We will introduce a general duty for Ministers

"to have regard to the maintenance of public benefits when exercising"

the forestry-related powers and the powers in the Public Bodies Bill. *[Interruption.]* I am sure that Labour Members would be interested to know what those additional powers of protection are, as they have been making a lot of noise about this.

Secondly, the statement mentions

"exempting the most iconic heritage forests from the full range of options so that"—
they—

"could only be transferred to a charitable organisation or remain in public ownership". -
[*Official Report*, 27 January 2011; Vol. 522, c. 17WS.]

That is far more protection than currently exists. If the Labour party would stop holding up the business in the other place, we might get those amendments on the statute book.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I read this document-"Operational Efficiency Programme: Asset Portfolio", which was published by the previous Government just months before the election-and discovered, on page 54, an explicit reference to the case for the "long-term lease" of the public forestry estate. What about this document-the "Operational Efficiency Programme: final report"? It states clearly that "greater commercial benefit" could be obtained from the public forest estate. And what about this document-"A Strategy for England's Trees, Woods and Forests"-published by none other than the right hon. Member for South Shields (David

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Miliband) when he was the Environment Secretary? It makes the case for local communities actively participating in the ownership and management of the public forest estate. Does that not lay completely bare the hypocrisy of the position now being taken by the Opposition? Their synthetic outrage cannot disguise the fact that they already had the public forest estate well and truly in their sights, so let us have no more of this self-righteous indignation.

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady acknowledge that those options were ruled out of consideration and dismissed? They were dismissed for two very good reasons-first, because they did not add up economically or against cost-benefit analysis, and secondly, because they would not have been accepted by the great British public.

Mrs Spelman: And the hon. Gentleman's party was not accepted by the great British public as being fit to govern this country for the time being.

Tim Farron: Taking my right hon. Friend back to Rigg wood and giving reassurance to local populations, our experience with the sale of Rigg wood makes us extremely nervous about the lack of clarity about whether forests within national parks such as the Lake District count as heritage woodland. Will she agree that national park woodlands should all be considered as heritage, and should not be leased or sold?

Mrs Spelman: The consultation document sets out different categories of forest and woodland, because the public forest estate is very diverse. The Forestry Commission has published a set of criteria in relation to sales. There is a consultation and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman should make representations as part of that consultation about the category he wants included under the definition of heritage.

Tessa Munt (Wells) (LD): As the right hon. Lady will know, I have been very disappointed that some 100,000 acres is not covered by the consultation that started last Thursday. Will she guarantee for my constituents that the land for sale or lease in that 100,000 acres will be subject to absolute guarantees on protecting and enhancing biodiversity, on maintaining, protecting and improving public access for recreation and leisure, on ensuring the continued and increasing role of woodlands in climate change mitigation-

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. Goodness me. I would like Members to make their interventions brief, and not take the opportunity of an intervention to make their speech. I call the Secretary of State.

Mrs Spelman: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I can assure the hon. Member for Wells (Tessa Munt) that there are statutory requirements for biodiversity. Planned sales under the spending review-plans that are published-will have greater protection than was afforded under the previous Government. Our objective in the amendment to the Public Bodies Bill is to make sure that we increase protection for access and other public benefits.

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Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that a similar approach to hers on commercial forests has been extremely successful in New Zealand? The huge Kaingaroa forest-717,000 acres-is now out of Government hands, the land belongs to the Maoris and commercial organisations are doing the trees, with enhanced biodiversity.

Mrs Spelman: My hon. Friend's helpful intervention gives me the opportunity to advise Labour Members that, while the hon. Member for Wakefield made selective choices of countries that

have explored other models of ownership and management that involve their local communities, the largest worked examples in the consultation document pertain to Queensland and to New Zealand.

Several hon. Members *rose* -

Mrs Spelman: I would like to make progress.

Now we have some of the facts on the record, perhaps we can have a rather more honest debate about the consultation. Let us recall why the Forestry Commission came about. It was established after the first world war to reduce our reliance on imported timber. Timber was vital-for example, as pit props-at a time when state ownership was the orthodoxy. It was felt that state supply of timber was essential. At the time, timber covered just 5% of the land under the public forest estate, and even over the long period in which the Forestry Commission has been in operation, that has increased to only 8%.

Ninety years later, things have changed. The Forestry Commission still has a role of supplying timber to industry, but the reality is that it accounts for less than 5% of the timber used in England. To be clear, the state is running timber supplies, yet 95% of the timber used is from outside England. That cannot be sustainable.

On top of that, the public forest estate in England operated at a net loss of £16 million last year. If we are to carry on maintaining our forests as we currently do-and in fact improve them, which is what we want to do, so that they have greater biodiversity and environmental value-we need to think about better ways of doing this and invite other organisations to come in and look at how we can put it on a better footing. That, frankly, is no bad thing, not least because the lease terms will secure access and benefits. Does it really have to be the state's role to sell Christmas trees? I know that the Opposition have taken a lurch to the left, but are they really suggesting that supplying Christmas trees, hosting music concerts and running log cabins should be national industries?

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Public consultations under the Labour Government used to be a complete and utter sham. Can my right hon. Friend give us an assurance that, if the majority of respondents to the consultation express concerns about the policy, she will listen?

Mrs Spelman: Of course I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I was very frustrated during 13 years of opposition by the sham nature of Government consultations. Let us not forget that we are talking about less than 18% of England's woodland cover.

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Members will know that the vast majority of our woodlands are not in state ownership, but are still offering outstanding recreational and environmental value. Some are community woodlands. Some are held by organisations such as the National Trust. Some are held by charities. *[Interruption.]* And yes, many are held by individuals, from farmers to philanthropists. In my view, Opposition scaremongering has been such that they owe a great many of those people an apology for characterising them as being so disinterested in the public benefit. I can only say that I am glad that I am not so cynical about society; it must be a very miserable approach to life.

Stephen Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay) (LD): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the concern in all parts of the House and in all parts of the country is real? Will she acknowledge that it is genuine concern? Will she agree to meet with me and other Liberal Democrat Members to talk about those concerns?

Mrs Spelman: The concern has in large part been whipped up on the back of ludicrous speculation in the media. I am confident that, when our constituents have the opportunity to read the consultation document, we will have a much more meaningful discussion about the best way to protect our heritage, woodlands and forest, but of course I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Some of the woodlands that we are discussing will be viable and some will not, but I can give the House this assurance: there will be no change in the status of woodland sites unless we

are convinced that the access right and public benefits have been protected, and that those wanting to own or manage have the ability to do so. We will not accept second best on that.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that there would be no transfer of woodland unless the protections that she has just mentioned can be put in place. Is she aware that not an hour ago, in Committee Room 18, Simon Hodgson, chief executive of the Forestry Commission, advised the all-party parliamentary conservation and wildlife group that it would not be possible to insist that the same management regime conducted by the Forestry Commission to protect biodiversity would be passed on to any new owner?

Mrs Spelman: Simon Hodgson is not the chief executive of the Forestry Commission, he is wrong and his fears are misplaced.

The difference in expressions of interest is perfectly logical because of the diversity in our woodland. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. We will look at what works best for each individual site. Our mixed model approach considers what works best for the different woodlands and how we can apply it in a way that gives greater public benefit.

Our proposals will mean that the nationally important heritage forests will continue to be managed for the benefit of the nation. By pursuing charitable ownership for our most valued heritage sites—for example, the New Forest and the Forest of Dean—the Government are making it clear that they are not for sale. They are secure for future generations to enjoy, and we will give that force of law with amendments to the Public Bodies Bill.

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Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I was interested to hear that my right hon. Friend said that no organisation would be allowed to take over one of those forests unless it was capable of running it. She has heard already the figure of £2.9 million, which is the deficit cost to the Forestry Commission from running the New Forest. What sort of charity would be able to shoulder that deficit?

Mrs Spelman: I can give my hon. Friend the same assurance as I have given the National Trust, the Woodland Trust and any new trust that would like to manage our heritage forests for us: we do not expect them to do it for nothing. Let us look at the model of British Waterways. Our canal network is to be moved into the hands of a mutual trust. Obviously, the Government will continue providing running costs to that trust because we understand that it cannot manage the network for nothing.

Mr Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The public care about one thing. As a result of these plans, will public access be increased or reduced?

Mrs Spelman: I think I have said this, but for the avoidance of doubt, public access and other public benefits will be improved and enhanced as a result of the proposals that we set out in our consultation document.

Having exposed the fact that the previous Government indeed looked at disposal of the public forest estate, I would like the Opposition to hear—*[Interruption.]* I would like them all to listen. That would be a start. I would like them to hear clearly why it is important to give the opportunity for the heritage forests to pass into the hands of charitable trusts. What we have seen from the evidence of documents from the previous Government is that the forests run the risk of successive Governments continually coming back to the question of how they should be owned and managed. Putting them safely in the hands of charitable trusts, as we propose to do, will mean that they will continue to be managed for the benefit of the nation. Their enhanced status in the hands of charitable trusts will put them beyond the reach of Whitehall politics once and for all.

Sir Peter Soulsby (Leicester South) (Lab): In practice, would not trusts and charitable organisations be absolutely crazy to take on the burden of the New forest, for example? How could they possibly expect to have the fundraising capacity to meet the ongoing costs of managing it appropriately, particularly given the Government's expectation, clearly stated in

their consultation paper, that such gifts to those organisations should move towards self-reliance? They would be crazy to take that on in such circumstances.

Mrs Spelman: The hon. Gentleman clearly was not listening to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). We have made it clear that we would not expect charitable trusts to take these on without the running costs, so the hon. Gentleman's fear is unfounded. Some smaller, local areas of woodland might fall into heritage status, but for those that do not, we are consulting on whether to offer them to local community groups or charities to take over first and foremost. If no local groups or charities want to take on the leasehold and no suitable

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buyer with a credible access and environmental protection plan comes forward, the woodland will simply remain in public ownership.

As I have said, for sites that are predominantly commercial in nature, we propose offering long leases with conditions attached. To be clear, there will be no one-size-fits-all approach, no land grabs and no fire sale. Instead, there will be a thoughtful, detailed, long-term programme of reviewing the estate, potentially over 10 years. There will be no rush; it is more important to get this right. We will look at how to improve the rate of recovery of plantations on ancient woodland sites, thereby enhancing biodiversity.

We will look at how the Forestry Commission can work with communities to help them to bid for local woodlands and at how we can actively improve access rights. I am thinking in particular of how we can access resource improvements for people with disabilities. We will look at how we can enable groups who run woodlands to draw down environmental grants in a way that the Forestry Commission currently cannot.

Those are all things that the Forestry Commission, with its expertise and dedication, is perfectly well placed to do. It is where it will really add value. If Members were to ask someone from the Forestry Commission whether they would rather be working with communities to help in the recovery of ancient woodland sites, or shrink-wrapping Christmas trees, what do they think they would say?

Julie Hilling (Bolton West) (Lab): Even if community groups could afford to purchase woodland, why should they if it is already in public ownership? It is rather like a thief stealing a car and then offering to sell it back.

Mrs Spelman: As I have tried to point out, and as evidenced in the documents prepared by the previous Government, the fact of the matter is that as long as there are no opportunities for communities in respect of the public forest estate, there is a risk in Whitehall politics. The point about giving the community that lives nearest the forest that opportunity is that they are the most likely to protect it in perpetuity.

This is a really exciting opportunity for our woodlands. We share completely the desire of those who love to walk, cycle, ride, kayak or go ape in our woodlands. I have children and know what a lifeline woodlands are in the long summer holidays. I am certainly not going to deny others the respite that those woodlands gave me, not now and not for future generations. I want to see whether we can improve on the status quo. I want many people to be engaged in the consultation, and I mean genuinely engaged by the facts, not the fiction. This is an opportunity to do things better. If access rights, public benefits and environmental protections are not the same or better, we will not make any changes. I believe that they can be better, that they should be better and that the consultation points the way to making them better.

5.19 pm

Huw Irranca-Davies (Ogmore) (Lab): I do not know where to start. When I was in the position-

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Madam Deputy Speaker (Dawn Primarolo): Order. My apologies to the hon. Gentleman. Before he starts, I thought it might be a good time to remind Members that, on this debate as well, there is a time limit of six minutes, and it is from now. So, Huw Irranca-Davies, you have six minutes from now.

Huw Irranca-Davies: A second start. Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker.

When I was in the privileged position of being the Minister for Marine and Natural Environment at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, one thing stood out about DEFRA: all the staff, agencies, green organisations and third sector organisations believed that they were on a mission in terms of the natural environment. We created national parks, protected wildlife, tackled wildlife crime, worked internationally to protect biodiversity and we increased access to the countryside and the quality of our uplands and seas. We also looked after the forests and promoted more woodland coverage, making steady strides to increase our poor showing among European nations.

I do not honestly believe that anybody from DEFRA, the Forestry Commission, Natural England or a host of other organisations, whose staff deeply care emotionally and intellectually about our woodlands and our natural environment, genuinely supports the policy. I do not believe that the Minister's heart is in it; that might be the same for the Secretary of State, truth to be told. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) does not support it.

Interestingly, however, the hon. Gentleman does not have a say. He has most of my old responsibilities as a Minister for the environment, but with one hugely noticeable exception: forestry. Why? He still covers, as I did, everything else in the natural environment, but forestry has disappeared from the environment Minister's remit. That is no slur on his abilities, because he is no fool, but it is telling that forestry has gone from the environment Minister's portfolio. The message is quite simple: the forests and woodland, from the inception of this Government, were downgraded in importance; they were no longer part of the natural environment brief.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Richard Benyon): I am very grateful to my predecessor for giving way. There is a very good reason why I do not have responsibility for forestry: I have some personal interests. I am happy to declare an interest now. My local village of Beenham had a small piece of Forestry Commission land in which my children and I bought small shares with the village as part of a community project. It is an absolute model, which we are trying to follow under the consultation before us.

Huw Irranca-Davies: That is a very useful clarification, which I accept.

The former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who is now shadow Leader of the House, was always clear about the Forestry Commission. He and generations of senior Ministers with the same responsibility held jealousy to public ownership of the forest estate, because that was in the interests of the British people. Why? There

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are 13 million tonnes of carbon stored in the trees, 22 million tonnes in the ground and more than 100 million day visitors every year. Public access is protected under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000, and the forest estate is the largest provider of green space around cities, including regeneration and growth areas such as Merseyside, Manchester and the Thames Gateway, with 3,500 hectares established over the 10 years to 2009 and more potential to expand that green infrastructure. Even then, only 10% of the population—notably, in disadvantaged areas—have access to any woodland within 500 metres of home. We are still way below the EU average.

Bill Esterson: My hon. Friend mentions Merseyside, and one of my constituents from Crosby, Kay Redmond, backs up what he says about keeping the forests in public ownership

"to maintain current access for the public and to protect the diverse wildlife found in forests".

Huw Irranca-Davies: My hon. Friend's constituent is absolutely right. The issue is about not only timber production and public access, but about biodiversity and locked-up carbon. It is about the 1.5 million tonnes of timber produced annually and sustainably; the £1.1 billion of economic value for £17 million in operating costs; the potential further restoration, which comes with the Forestry Commission, of ancient woodlands; and the £100 million of partnership funding in the 10 years to 2009. It is also about the commercial ventures, which were expanding, with the Caravan Club, Go Ape, forest concerts and the Forest Holidays company. In addition, parliamentary funding for the Forestry Commission dropped from 36% in 2003 to 24% in 2007. If that were not good enough, there was also potential for 200 MW of renewable wood fuel energy from managed forests, hydro, geothermal, and, if Ministers were so included, wind energy. I could go on and on.

All that is now at risk, despite reassurances from the Minister and the Secretary of State. Those sound to the public—and to an old sceptic and former Minister like me—like the reassuring words spoken at a deathbed, because that is what this is. It is the funeral of the publicly owned forestry estate. It is the death of the body of expertise and co-ordination that lies within the Forestry Commission. It is the killing off of jobs, skills and knowledge.

Public access is at risk, too. The post-war Labour Government brought in the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949. We introduced the right to roam. Only recently, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central designated the South Downs national park, and I took through the provisions for the England coastal path in the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. Since this Government came in, we have seen soft-peddalling on the England coastal path, and now we are seeing back-peddalling on access to our woodlands.

It does not even make economic sense, even by the Government's own figures and the figures in the report mentioned by the Secretary of State. The cost in public goods lost far outweighs the benefits. The Treasury has not given thought to the fact that for every £100 million of woodlands sold off, £40 million will be lost in inheritance or other taxes, as companies and individuals buy woodland as tax write-offs. Are they going to look after it?

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There is not enough time to say how the Government are now trashing the hard-won policy launched only last year which brought together, for the first time ever, carbon and climate change issues with biodiversity to improve the diversity of woodland habitats. There is the issue of climate change alone. I quote from our public service agreement 28—yes, we were the Government who had binding targets for ancient woodlands and priority habitats—which said:

"In the face of climate change, a successful strategy would require a landscape-scale approach, joining up the highly fragmented ownership pattern into a shared endeavour".

The last and only other time this sell-off was contemplated was under John Major's Conservative Government. Here we go again—back to the 1980s. If I have not made the Government think again, the public surely will.

5.27 pm

Miss Anne McIntosh (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am delighted to follow the hon. Member for Ogmore (Huw Irranca-Davies), whom I had the privilege to shadow in the previous Parliament. There are six forests and woods in the new constituency of Thirsk, Malton and Filey—namely, Dalby, Cropton, Boltby, Kilburn woods, Newgate Bank and Silton forest.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on responding to this debate and on moving our amendment. We are absolutely right to discuss ownership of the forests and woodlands at this time. One has to consider the history, and the history that pertained in 1919 and 1920 is not necessarily relevant in 2011. The background then was that many of the trees and forests, particularly the fast-growing trees, had been decimated to build the trenches during the first world war.

My regret about the debate being called at this time is that the consultation should have preceded the Second Reading of the Public Bodies Bill in this House, because then we would have had the legal base and context so that we knew precisely about the management and the access issues to which my right hon. Friend referred. I have a severe reservation that that Bill will remove, once and for all, the right of this House and the other place to scrutinise these issues over the next 10 years and thereafter. I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister responds to the debate, he will put my mind at rest on that point.

Most of the issues raised by people who have written to me and by other Members relate to access. The Woodland Trust has put it on the record that the issue is not ownership, but how woodlands and forests are managed. In preparing for today's debate, I tried to find out about the status of the forests and woods in my constituency. I have not found that information on the Forestry Commission website, in the Library document or in the consultation. It would be helpful for Members who represent areas containing forests and woodlands, and for the people who enjoy them to know the precise status of those forests and woodlands. Otherwise, we will be queuing up to make our cases.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): We all recognise that this is only a consultation, but given the distinction between heritage forests and other forests, there is some nervousness about which forests count as heritage forests. Does my hon. Friend agree that people want the reassurance

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that there will be no loss of access or amenity for walkers, cyclists and horse riders even in the forests that do not count as heritage forests but that are an important public amenity?

Miss McIntosh: I welcome my hon. Friend's intervention, but I would go further. I would like to know the precise mechanism being proposed. If it could be achieved through an amendment to the Public Bodies Bill, we should agree to it now and it would remove many of the anxieties that we are debating this afternoon. If the Minister responded on that point, it would progress the debate and allay many of my anxieties and those of my hon. Friend's constituents.

I would like clarification on the written ministerial statement to which the Secretary of State referred. It stated:

"I am today publishing tightened criteria for those sales under the Forestry Commission's programme to deliver £100 million in gross receipts during 2011-15."-
[*Official Report*, 27 January 2011; Vol. 522, c. 17WS.]

Does that relate to 85% or 100% of the sales? I would like to explain to my constituents how the sums add up and what the exact financial figures will be.

I am surprised that in introducing the debate, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) did not mention the role of woods, trees and forests in promoting flood defences. The Forestry Commission is playing a flood defence role in the Pickering pilot scheme. It is planting a number of trees that will create a carbon sink and retain water, which will prevent Pickering from being at risk of flooding in the future.

Hugh Bayley: The hon. Lady makes an extremely important point. However, if the Forestry Commission is not there, does she think there will be the same investment in tree planting on Forestry Commission land and private land to reduce flood risks?

Miss McIntosh: I would put that question directly to the Minister, as I have done before. I want an assurance that the Pickering project, if it is successful, will be the forerunner of many similar projects in areas such as mine across the country. I want an assurance today that the trees will be planted and that the investment will be made. The hon. Gentleman prompts the question of why we should rely on the state to make that investment. We have moved a long way from the previous Government's mistake of selling off the national treasure of Rigg wood in the Lake district without guarantees of access, the enjoyment of benefits and the continued biodiversity for which we have called.

I should like assurances on the economics, including what the gross receipts will be, and on continuing access. If, as the Woodland Trust states, ownership is not the key, I should like to

know what guarantees there can be about how management and commercial interests will fund the commercial forests. In the case of heritage forests, I may be being very simple, but I should like to know how the Government are going to fund investment in the charitable funds that will run those forests.

Sir Peter Soulsby: The hon. Lady has spoken about some of the public benefits delivered by the Forestry Commission, particularly with regard to flooding in her

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constituency. Does she seriously think that there is any prospect at all of any private operator being prepared to give guarantees that it will deliver the same public benefits, on flooding or other matters, that the Forestry Commission currently can?

Miss McIntosh: I take great heart from what the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), said. There is a large private estate in the heart of Thirsk, Malton and Filey that makes many investments for the public good and allows access. My concern is that I do not know the status of my area's forests, so I do not know whether I should be arguing for heritage protection or another type of protection, but I want to keep an open mind on the question of ownership.

I end with a plea to the Minister. If the consultation is to be worth anything, the Government must listen to, and act on, the tone and content of the responses.

5.36 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) on introducing the debate, because it is absolutely clear that the way in which Ministers incorporated the power to sell the forests in the Public Bodies Bill was designed to avoid parliamentary scrutiny. Furthermore, the Bill was published before the consultation document, which I suppose we can take to be part of the Maoist approach that the Government are now taking to the management of public business.

Hamsterley forest, in my constituency, is a Forestry Commission forest that has 200,000 visitors every year. It is the largest forest in County Durham and includes two sites of special scientific interest, Low Redford meadows and Frog Wood bog. A huge number of my constituents are concerned about what is going on, and they are right to be concerned.

One of the most important points about people being able to visit forests is that it makes them a source of economic regeneration. That is absolutely vital in many parts of the country. People need access for physical and spiritual restoration. What is the point of the Prime Minister giving speeches on the importance of well-being when he denies people access to the sources of well-being? He said in November last year about well-being:

"I am excited about this because it's one of those things you talk about in opposition, and people think 'well of course, you say these things in opposition, but when you get into government you'll never actually do anything about it'".

But the reality is on page 42 of the impact assessment that the Secretary of State published last week, which states that the Government

"did not see it necessary to carry out a Health and Wellbeing Impact Test, because if access is reduced at preferred woodland it is likely users would substitute their preferred woodland for another".

In other words, "Your wood is closed, go to the one 60 miles away."

The main problem with what the Secretary of State is doing is that she does not seem to understand the importance of landscape in developing our national consciousness and identity. She has seriously misjudged the national mood. In his wonderful book "Landscape and Memory", Simon Schama writes:

"If the entire history of landscape is indeed just a mindless race towards a machine driven universe, uncomplicated by myth,

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metaphor and allegory, where measurement not memory is the absolute arbiter of value, then we are indeed trapped in the engine of our self-destruction."

He illustrates that point with a poster from world war two of somebody walking through the countryside, and the caption is, "Your Britain-fight for it now". That is true today, as well. Do the Secretary of State and other Ministers think it is an accident that Robin Hood has such a hold over the imagination of the nation's children? Of course it is not. It is because every child knows what eludes Ministers-that the forest is a place where we can be free. The Secretary of State evidently wants to take on the role of the sheriff of Nottingham.

Since 1500, the central argument on the true purpose of the nation's forests has been the same. It is a question of development or conservation. The Prime Minister is not the first to see the value of green photo opportunities. Charles I was always sure to be painted under a spreading oak tree. The similarity between them does not end there; Charles I was the last king to sell the Forest of Dean. The Prime Minister should reflect on what happened to him after that.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): The Prime Minister is the one who promised the north-east that the region would suffer more than most from Tory policies. The Forestry Commission owns 67,000 hectares of forest in the region, more than anywhere else in the country. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have abandoned the people of the north-east, and now want to sell or give away their forest heritage and their play places?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Cunningham, everybody quite rightly wants to intervene, but we have six minutes per speaker, and every time someone makes an intervention, another minute is added. All I am bothered about is getting as many Members in as possible. If we are to have interventions, they have to be short and very quick.

Helen Goodman: I agree with my hon. Friend. I notice that the heritage forests, which are to be saved, are in the south of England, not the north.

People need forests for the physical, mental and spiritual freedom that they get from them, but the Treasury has succumbed to what used to be called political arithmeticians. Nothing has changed. A parliamentary committee of inquiry in 1763 was told in evidence that there would be a loss of hedgerows and a decline in the linnet population. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Trevelyan, the great historian, became a founder of the National Trust. His view was that

"without access to wild nature the English would spiritually perish".

I am therefore calling on Ministers and the Secretary of State to stop this fire sale. The hastily-put-together retreat of selling the forests to community organisations is utterly ludicrous. Why should people pay for what they already own? The forest is a place for free spirits. Those spirits will not be quenched by this pathetic, mean, small-minded Government. The inestimable *Teesdale Mercury* has launched a "Hands of Hamsterley" campaign. I am calling on everyone who cares to come to Hamsterley forest on 26 February for the ramble in aid of keeping Ministers' hands off Hamsterley.

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5.42 pm

Guy Opperman (Hexham) (Con): I live just outside Wark in Northumberland, which is at the centre of three historic forests-Wark, Redesdale and the mighty Kielder. That is barely to touch on the multiple other forests in the area, such as Slaley or Sidwood. Kielder alone covers more than 250 square miles and is a truly enchanting place. Without a shadow of a doubt, it is the green lungs of the north-east and the heart and soul of the Northumberland countryside.

Kielder is a very important local employer and one of the region's major tourist attractions, with more than 250,000 visitors a year. It is also home to several sites of special scientific interest; it is one of the last bastions of the red squirrel in England; it has species of birds from

osprey to curlew; it has whiskered bats, otters and the magnificent roe deer; and it has cycling and the observatory. I could go on. I might sound passionate about Kielder forest, but that is because it holds a special place in the hearts of all who, like me, choose to call Northumberland home.

Ian Lavery: The hon. Gentleman says that Kielder forest is the green lungs of Northumberland, and it is the jewel in the crown of the county. Does he share my concerns that the proposals that the coalition Government are pushing forward will put Kielder forest in jeopardy?

Guy Opperman: I have some concerns and I need assurances on them. The key one is public access. For the reasons given by others, it is crucial that all public access is safeguarded permanently. With respect, that could be a deal-breaker. Biodiversity and long-term environmental management are equally important, as are jobs. This is not an area with a preponderance of other jobs. Above all, as we have all found through 500 e-mails each, people want a rethink, with all options potentially on the table. That means that people need to be flexible.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): My hon. Friend knows Savernake forest in my constituency probably better than I do, and we share a great concern about biodiversity and public access. Does he agree that in specifically making those issues the underpinning of the consultation process, along with other key variables, we are doing a far better job to protect public woodlands than the last Government, who sold off 25,000 acres with no consultation?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I did not make a ruling from the Chair for it to be breached. This is a very important issue to Members on both sides and many want to speak.

Guy Opperman: Each year, 475,000 cubic metres of timber are felled to supply local wood as fuel and to provide timber-intensive local businesses, such as Egger, which is the largest employer in Hexham. It has more than 400 employees. Kielder is a working forest, unashamed of its clearings and felled areas which, while not always postcard pretty, are replanted to provide a continuous cycle on which much of the employment and way of life and the whole ethos of the area are dependent. It is also the biggest employer in the north Tyne area.

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I have worked closely with Northumbria Water, which is responsible for Kielder Water, the largest artificial lake in the UK. It sits at the heart of the forest. The development of these vast resources is already subject to a 25-year investment plan which has outdoor activities and all manner of other aspects of the environment at its heart. I find it hard to believe that that will be undeveloped and not taken forward, with a FTSE 100 company at the heart of the development.

Fundamental to this issue is ongoing access to walkers, cyclists, horse riders and a host of others. I hope that these plans will see an additional £31 million boost to the local economy, and several hundred new jobs in the next 10 years in an area where employment is far from guaranteed. I have genuine concerns that all that will be put at risk. I strongly urge the Minister to look closely at the proposals and to consider the many representations that I have received from my constituents who share my scepticism, and to reflect on the possible effect on this special place at the heart of my constituency.

Mr Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Like my hon. Friend, I have had many constituents expressing concerns about the Government's plans and the consultation. Does he agree that access and the maintenance of biodiversity are the crucial components, and we should not have dishonest misrepresentation about the proposals? People deserve to be dealt with honestly. I do not mind opportunism, but I cannot stand dishonesty-

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. We have heard quite enough. We need very short interventions. This debate will otherwise be very disappointing for constituents who are affected by the issue that we are discussing. Hon. Members should know better.

Guy Opperman: I have yet to be satisfied that a good economic case has been made, and with so much at stake I await genuine satisfaction that it will be made. I will fight the specific clauses that are linked to this issue in the Public Bodies Bill.

5.49 pm

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I have been prompted to speak in today's debate by the tremendous anxiety expressed by so many of my constituents about the Government's proposals. I know that this is not a concern peculiar to residents in my city, but perhaps Nottingham folk feel it even more keenly because they regard themselves as the descendants of our great hero Robin Hood, who made his home in nearby Sherwood forest. I was going to say that Robin's hiding place, the 1,000-year-old Major oak in Sherwood forest country park, is safe from the proposals, because it is in a national nature reserve managed by Nottinghamshire county council and because even the council's aptly named leader, Kay Cutts, would not dare to take her axe to our famous forest. However, I read earlier today that the Government are shortly to begin a consultation on divesting themselves of the country's national nature reserves too, so, perhaps like many of our Forestry Commission local woodlands, the Major oak's future is not secure either.

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Nottinghamshire has nine Forestry Commission woodlands, including the east midlands' largest tract of forest open to the public, Sherwood Pines forest park, which is just a few miles north of Nottingham. Sherwood Pines is a large mixed conifer and broad-leaf woodland with open spaces, heathland and pond, providing space for timber production, wildlife and recreation. I have been a regular visitor to Sherwood Pines since my children were small, and in that time I have witnessed the tremendous work that the Forestry Commission has done to encourage local people to get out and enjoy our beautiful countryside. There is a new café and visitor's centre, children's play areas, walking and cycling trails, a mountain biking area, an adventure course with ropes and zip wires, and, away from the centre, miles of peaceful woodland habitat and wildlife to enjoy. The forest is also used by many local schools, and the education service at Sherwood Pines was one of the first to be awarded a Learning Outside the Classroom quality badge.

Sherwood Pines is well developed as a visitor attraction, so perhaps public access would be secure, but what of the local woods that so many people enjoy, such as Blidworth woods, Haywood oaks, Silverhill wood, Boundary wood, Thieves wood, Oxclose wood and the Birklands? The Government tell us not to worry. The Secretary of State says that public rights of way and access will be unaffected, but can we trust this Government? My constituent Dr Chris Edwards certainly does not, saying that he has

"no faith in the promises being made to preserve access...this is the government that's broken every election promise it made".

This is the Government who promised to keep the education maintenance allowance and told us that there would be no more top-down reorganisations of the NHS—a Government who include Ministers who signed pledges saying that they would scrap tuition fees, but then voted to treble them. I would say that their promises are not worth the paper that they are written on.

The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 guarantees public access on foot, but as I have explained, the Forestry Commission has done much more than that, providing car parking, signage, visitor centres and leisure opportunities. The Government proposals contain no safeguards to guarantee that they will continue in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Is there not something obscene about the sale of English woods and forests when the other regions of the United Kingdom—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—have all decided to retain their forests, keeping rights of access and the right to roam for ever?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: those are things that we should protect. We should seek to learn from countries that appreciate the value of those public assets. Indeed, recent experience tells us that we are right to be wary. Rigg wood near Coniston water was sold off last autumn.

Mr Aidan Burley (Cannock Chase) (Con): By Labour.

Lilian Greenwood: We should learn from things that we get wrong as well as from things that we get right. Indeed, what happened at Rigg wood, where there are

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padlocks on the car park, is why so many people—85% of the public, according to recent polls—want us to keep our woodlands in public hands.

Those people include my constituent Donna, who works at a local country park, who said:

"I am quite shocked that the present government is planning to sell off our land—land that we have a right to keep free and open for us all to enjoy";

Carl, who has used forests all his life, who says:

"It grieves and horrifies me to hear that these beautiful places are going to be sold off and ruined forever, so that future generations will no longer be able to enjoy them as I have, please don't support this awful bill";

and Alison, another constituent, who described the potential sell-off as

"devastating for the people of Nottinghamshire,"

adding:

"Families are already feeling the effects of cutbacks in terms of affordable leisure activities for the whole family to enjoy".

Dozens and dozens of constituents have been in touch to express their concerns about the potential damage to native woodland species, habitats and wildlife, and especially to our national treasures such as Grizedale forest, Kielder and the Forest of Dean, and to tell me their stories of using local forests and woodlands, week in and week out, for dog walking, orienteering, rambling and even historical re-enactments. Others have talked about their passionate love of the outdoors, developed as a result of childhood visits to our local woodland. They recognise that the Government have a duty to protect access to areas of natural beauty and to ensure that these irreplaceable natural habitats and their wildlife can be enjoyed by future generations.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lilian Greenwood: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman. He has not been here for the whole debate.

Today in New York, the United Nations is launching the international year of forests, which is described on the UN website as "Celebrating Forests for People". Our Government seem to be out of step not only with public opinion here but with the rest of the world. Some things are too important to leave to the market. Our ancient woodlands should be for the whole nation, and kept safe for future generations, not sold off for a quick buck.

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lilian Greenwood: I have already said that I will not give way.

I hope that the consultation is genuine, and that the Government will rethink this deeply unpopular plan.

5.55 pm

Mr Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am an enthusiast of the Government's policy, but given the brevity of the debate, I shall restrict my remarks entirely to the opportunities for the New Forest that I see in the proposals. I have received a large number of communications, many of them very thoughtful, raising perfectly legitimate and proper concerns. I hope that the consultation will address many of them. What has

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surprised me is that the people who are the most vociferous in their opposition to the proposals are the very same people who stood shoulder to shoulder with me and my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) as we campaigned against the New Forest being shoe-horned into a highly inappropriate structure in the national park. I hope that those critics will look at these proposals with an open mind and wonder whether they might just be looking a gift horse in the mouth. There might be an opportunity to rebalance the interests of the forests that have been so shoddily disrupted by the creation of a national park. Within the Crown lands of the New Forest, there are already many private lands and private commons. Indeed, the National Trust itself owns two of the real gems: Hale Purlieu and the Bramshaw Commons. The land is not all owned and managed by the Forestry Commission.

I pay tribute to the fine public servants among the staff of the Forestry Commission who have been responsible for the stewardship of the New Forest, but we cannot hide from the fact that there have been enormous problems. The fact is that I have constantly had representations about the impact on ancient and ornamental woodlands, and on archaeological sites, of commercial forestry operations. I have endured arguments about the impact of the campsites and their increasing commercialisation -on the local communities and on the habitats. I have also endured controversies -here is the humbug!-regarding the disposal of New Forest properties under the last Administration, and I brought one of those cases to an Adjournment debate in the House to raise the disgraceful way in which that property was disposed of. I endured the absolute furore when the Forestry Commission brought forward proposals to restrict dog walking in the New Forest. My hon. Friend and I were able to see off that threat.

Keepers of the New Forest have beaten their way to my door to complain about the way in which the byelaws of the forest were being flouted and not enforced. I have also had complaints about the way in which the skills, the stature and the place of the keepers are being diminished and downgraded. I do not lay any of these complaints and problems at the door of the management of the New Forest by the Forestry Commission in Queen's house. However, the reality is that the Forestry Commission is headquartered in Edinburgh, and those who manage the New Forest report to Edinburgh. I want to see an arrangement whereby we have much more local control over the forest.

I offer a word of caution about the possibility of the National Trust stepping in. As I have said, it already manages part of the forest. I do not want another national organisation with a national strategy and a national vision. The New Forest is unique and what I would like to see is something along the lines of what we have in Queen's house in Lyndhurst -perhaps even with exactly the same staff and personnel who currently manage the forest there -but reporting not to a board in Edinburgh, but to a board in the New Forest representing the proper interests of the New Forest, and particularly those of the people who have always safeguarded the forest and been responsible for the law of the forest -namely, the Verderers.

Such a board, however, could not possibly be the board of the national park authority, which has, by its own choice, made itself a planning authority almost

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exclusively concerned with development control. It could play no part in this process, but I say again to my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, and also to opponents, that there is an opportunity here for us that we would be foolish to pass up.

6.1 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): It is difficult to follow that. Let me be as brief as possible. I commend the hon. Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne) on referring to the staff of the Forestry Commission. It was a shame, however, that the Secretary of State

never said a single word about the staff; indeed, it was more than a shame-it was a disgrace. The staff of the Forestry Commission are extremely loyal and they have built up expertise over time.

I chair the Public and Commercial Services trade union parliamentary group. I have a representation from the president of the PCS branch at the Forestry Commission. It is worth our while listening to what he wanted Parliament to hear. He says that the staff

"have spent their entire careers, a lot of them, in the FC and are deeply traumatised at the prospect of losing their jobs."

Sir Alan Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (LD): I very much endorse what the hon. Gentleman says about Forestry Commission staff, but as a constituency MP, I have seen the Forestry Commission in Northumberland shed good quality, experienced staff over many years, and whole villages that were built for forestry employees no longer have a single Forestry Commission employee living in them.

John McDonnell: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point and I have shared his concerns over the years as well.

The PCS president continued:

"For many there is no prospect of picking up other work because the economy is in such a poor state that there simply isn't work as all of the other public services also have to make cuts...Staff in the FC are unique; they regard their jobs as vocational. They are amongst the most loyal and committed that I have ever seen."

Most of us would share that viewpoint and want it to be placed on the record. Where we have loyal staff, I believe they deserve some loyalty from us, as their employers, as well.

The current position has been mentioned, but not as starkly as I am about to put it. The 25% cuts from the comprehensive spending review mean that from a staff of 1,400, between 300 and 350 will lose their jobs. About 29% of the cuts relate to Forest Enterprise, which manages the estate. Already 256 jobs are notified as being lost in that section. Moreover, in the Forestry Authority and Forest Research, at least 40 to 50 and possibly more jobs will be lost as the 19% cuts takes place. The organisation is structured in those three elements: Forest Enterprise, Forestry Authority and Forest Research. Expertise, however, has been built up in the whole organisation so that one feeds information to the other and the expertise becomes interchangeable. By breaking up the organisation, as the Government

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propose, the bulk of the work within Forest Enterprise will be sold off either to the private sector or to charities and others. The expertise will therefore be cut off from the regulatory authority section of the Forestry Commission as well as from the research element.

Richard Graham: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says, but given that the debate is about the future of our forests, it is vital for Members in all parts of the House to recognise that heritage forests such as the Forest of Dean-which is next to my constituency-are not for sale, and that whatever the outcome of the consultation, access rights and biodiversity will be preserved for ever.

John McDonnell: As I have said, we need to recognise that these forests have been preserved for us by staff who have worked for us for generations over the last century. In my view, failure to discuss the staff undermines the Government's duty of care to those people who have served us so well.

Mr Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John McDonnell: Will the hon. Gentleman allow me to continue? Other Members wish to speak.

The consultation document contains only one paragraph that deals with staff. It states that the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations will apply to the transfer of any of them. However, as we know from other privatisations and sell-offs, TUPE does not

prevent a new employer from laying off staff in due course. It does not protect pay and terms and conditions in the long term.

Mr Stuart: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

John McDonnell: No, I will not.

TUPE does not even protect pensions. There is nothing to prevent a new employer from laying off staff while also undermining their conditions and pensions. I urge the Government to address the issue of their future. When I looked at the impact assessment to see whether there was any reference to it, I found that the only reference in the first seven pages related to redundancy costs. It reads as follows:

"Transition costs of redundancy, TUPE and possible further professional fees have not been quantified."

That is repeated six times. It appears on each of the first seven pages of the document.

There are real anxieties among this group of expert staff about their future. There are anxieties about a transfer to the voluntary sector. Most Members have been involved with charities-most of us have served on their boards-and we know how difficult it is to maintain a charity. In any charitable or voluntary organisation, about 30% of the time is spent on trying to find funds for future years.

Mr Sheerman: I chair a charitable trust, the John Clare trust. We hoped to buy some woodland, but were told that the cost of managing woodland is 10 times the purchase price. Managing woodland is very expensive, and charities will not be able to do it.

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John McDonnell: When charities encounter difficulties in these circumstances, they will be forced to make further savings like any other organisation, and the only savings that they will be able to make will be secured by further staff cuts. The House must understand the insecurities that exist among this group of people. I also believe that the sell-off will degrade the overall expertise that has been built up over the last century, and that as a result the very management of the forests will be put at risk.

The management met the staff and unions this morning. People were dismayed; and yes, a number of union representatives have said that, if necessary, they will resort to industrial action in an attempt to protect their jobs. I believe that it would be the first occasion on which industrial action had taken place in the Forestry Commission. That should demonstrate to Members the depth of the anger that exists about how these people are being treated. They are being treated like chattels rather than as the staff who have been so loyal to us over the last century.

6.8 pm

Mr John Leech (Manchester, Withington) (LD): I am glad to have the opportunity to take part in the debate.

Although my constituency may not be the most directly affected by the proposals to sell off or lease woodland currently owned by the state, the issue has attracted considerable interest among hundreds of my constituents who are rightly concerned about the impact that such a sale might have. There is little doubt that there has been much speculation, and even scaremongering, about what may or may not happen to public forests. I have received hundreds of e-mails from constituents, some of whom have been led to believe that whole swathes of woodland will be razed to the ground to make way for housing developments, golf courses and leisure clubs.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman or any of his colleagues emulate his party's president, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), in ripping up the Public Bodies Bill and voting with us this evening?

Mr Leech: I am not sure whether to thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but we are not voting on the Public Bodies Bill today; we are voting on an Opposition day motion. I shall go on to discuss how I am going to vote.

Other constituents have sent e-mails suggesting that forests are going to be closed off to the public and surrounded by 10-foot fences, but that is clearly not the case. Unfortunately, the Labour party has been complicit in this misinformation and shameless in its attempts to scare people into believing that the future of our forests is under threat. Instead of participating constructively in the consultation on the future of our woodland, Labour Members simply choose to try to score cheap political points by tabling an Opposition day motion to grab the headlines. That is why I certainly will not be voting for Labour's motion and why I will support the Government's amendment, which exposes the disgraceful sell-off of thousands of acres of public woodland by the previous Labour Government without any of the protection being put in place and promised under the coalition Government's consultation. However, I wish to go on record as welcoming the measured comments

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made by the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) about staff at the Forestry Commission, which should be added to the consultation process.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that people would take the consultation more seriously if it was a genuine debate about whether or not we take these forests out of public control, rather than how we do that, as it is now? The public want this to be about "whether or not", so that they could tell us not to do this.

Mr Leech: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I endorse this as a proper consultation, and I hope that everyone who has an interest in this issue will participate in it and put their views clearly on the record.

I will never support the sell-off or leasing of woodland if I think that it will be detrimental to the long-term sustainability of the woodland and its biodiversity, and will threaten the access that people have enjoyed over a long period. What better safeguards will Minister's introduce to protect the land and access to it compared with those that we already have? These forests will outlive all of us in this Chamber today and the public want to know how long these safeguards will be in place. Can I be assured that, whichever organisation might take on the running of a public forest, these safeguards will remain in place for not only our lifetime, but centuries to come?

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I have received more than 400 comments about these proposals, so I am keen for the consultation exercise to go ahead. I am thinking of holding a meeting in my constituency to meet all 400 contributors, because this is important. I wish to raise the following questions: first, can I be absolutely sure that communities-

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Mr Carmichael, I have tried to tell everybody recently that we want short interventions, because we want to get as many people in as possible. Indeed, people who are speaking do not have to take the full six minutes or interventions.

Mr Leech: Guaranteeing the future of the woodland is important, but so, too, is the guardianship of that land in the meantime. There is a real fear that the trend to improve the forests will fade over time. What assurances can the Minister give that the woodland will not just be maintained as it is and that the new owners will be compelled to improve both access and the natural habitat? The public estate enjoys 40 million visits a year, a quarter of it is dedicated as a site of special scientific interest and it hosts a wealth of biodiversity. None of those things should be under threat, and they must flourish under this coalition Government.

One of the big unanswered questions is whether or not the private ownership or leasing of forest land will make the savings that the Government anticipate. I am not convinced that these proposals will save any money; they may end up leaving the Government with a bigger bill to maintain the forests, because the sale or lease of commercially attractive forests will mean that their revenue is no longer available to subsidise the running

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of heritage and other loss-making forests. That was the only sensible point made by the shadow Secretary of State.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that Ministers simply have not allayed the very real fears in this country and that we need assurances from them that the consultation process is genuine and that decisions have not already been taken?

Mr Leech: I do. One problem is the fact that the Opposition have tabled the motion at this stage rather than allowing the consultation to take place so that people can have their say and a proper, sensible decision can be made following the consultation.

I do not think we should be too precious about the model of ownership of our forests. The previous Government could not be trusted to safeguard the future of the public forests that have been sold off in the past 13 years. It is certainly not the case that the forests would be safer in Labour hands. Many might argue that the future of the forests would be more certain if they were run and managed by organisations such as the Woodland Trust or the National Trust. It is not the model of ownership that we should be precious about but the people, including the staff, and the organisations that might run the forests.

In my constituency, after the previous Labour Government closed my local hospital, Withington hospital, Paupers wood on that site was put up for sale. Like many others, I expressed grave concerns about what that might mean for the future of that relatively small piece of woodland. However, the sale of that land to one of my constituents, Mary, resulted in enormous benefit for the community. That area of woodland, which had not been maintained for years and had been inaccessible to local people, is now available for local community groups to enjoy and for schools to use for outdoor classrooms. The woodland is well managed and is now sustainable for the future. That would not have happened without that sale. It is not simply a case of public ownership being good and private ownership being bad. This debate should be about what is best for individual woodlands and communities and about securing the future of our forests for generations to come.

6.17 pm

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Manchester, Withington (Mr Leech), who, along with the hon. Member for Hexham (Guy Opperman), has laid out some of the problems confronting the Government's proposals. It is a source of legitimate confusion that a party whose new symbol is the oak tree is involved in this extraordinary sell-off of our forests. It was chosen as a symbol of the Tories' newly discovered environmentalism, belief in British strength and protection of our heritage, but that all seems a long time ago now.

The Government seem to have been taken by surprise at the outburst of concern about their proposals. I think it was Harold Macmillan who said:

"First of all the Georgian silver goes. And then all that nice furniture that used to be in the salon. Then the Canalettos go."

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This Government have surpassed Mrs Thatcher and are now selling the wood that built the furniture that was in the salon. In my view it is a grave error, for which there is no support or mandate.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I am sure that my hon. Friend will recall that a previous Conservative Government sold off the playing fields. This is phase two—selling off the trees and woodlands.

Tristram Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for making that point. The Conservatives have, as they say, previous in this field.

Since the announcement of this Opposition debate, the internet and other social networking sources have come alive with people hoping to save their local forests. Cannock Chase, near my constituency, now has a Facebook site with 2,500 supporters. A YouGov poll suggests that 84% of people oppose the sale. The Secretary of State says that people simply do not understand the proposals and have been misled by the media, but we do understand the Government's plans and we do not like them, because they will limit public access. The hon. Member for Manchester, Withington spoke about access being allowed to a forest in his constituency, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) says, that was because of principles and legislation that Labour put in place to make sure that access was preserved.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The issue is not only the potential private ownership of woods, but the nationality of the private company that might own those woods.

Tristram Hunt: The matter becomes difficult when we think about where many of our trees have come from. I take my hon. Friend's point, but the forests and woodlands have come into this country from many sources across the world .

I shall touch briefly on something mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman): the forests and woodlands are a great matter with regard to our national identity. The Government are striking at something very particular to English identity and British identity. In the 18th century the idea of the British heart of oak recurred on pub signs and in pamphlets. It was a bulwark against Catholic absolutism. According to Simon Schama the very idea of Britain, which was new in the late 18th century, was planted with acorns. In 1763 Roger Fisher-a disciple of John Evelyn, the great 17th-century arboreal enthusiast -published "Heart of Oak, The British Bulwark", in which he argued that empires rose or fell depending on the dearth of the sovereign hardwood.

As Government Members have pointed out, this Government are not the first to try to offload our national forests. King Charles I, in the 1630s, tried to do the same. Again, it was an attempt to limit public ownership: with the forests went the common lands, the moorlands and the wetlands of East Anglia. This is a tradition in Toryism that Opposition Members recognise and do not like. The point of this history is to suggest that this is a shared inheritance, and we are particularly worried about access in the context of the Government's plans.

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Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): What my hon. Friend is saying is fascinating and excellent. Does he recall that the Forestry Commission was established because of the loss of so much forest cover in this country, designed to recreate the environment that had been destroyed by previous generations and their greed?

Tristram Hunt: Absolutely. I do not accept the idea that the state intervening in the control of forests is somehow an evil. I regard it, in many situations, as a virtue.

Let me move on briefly to the situation facing Cannock Chase, which is the woodland that my constituents in Stoke-on-Trent Central like to enjoy. We have heard Ministers provide special securities for the heritage forests, but Cannock Chase does not fall into that particular category. However, it contains precisely the kind of forest that the Woodland Trust is most concerned about-that mixture of ancient habitat, conifer and recreation. Over the past few years the Forestry Commission has opened up access to it, with more and more enjoying it. The idea that local community groups will be able to compete at market value for the same amount of land is simply not credible. There is a lot of talk about community groups having special provision, but history simply does not show that. When we look back at previous Conservative-led Governments, we see that hundreds of thousands of acres were sold off.

The debate points to the core of the Government's notion of the big society, and there is a hole in the middle of it as large as that in which King Charles II hid from the forces of republicanism. It will take investment—a belief in social capital and in capacity—if those community groups are to be built up to manage our woodlands. Nothing in the consultation or the Public Bodies Bill suggests that that is anywhere near the mind of this Government.

6.24 pm

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At the end of that classic film, "It's a Wonderful Life", the James Stewart character is taken back to see what would have happened to his home town, Bedford Falls, if he had never lived. He discovers that it would have been cheapened, commercialised and degraded. Indeed, even its name would have been changed to Pottersville after the greedy grasping capitalist who was the villain of the film. I know that no one would wish to see any such fate befall the New Forest, but there is huge concern in my constituency that steps may be taken in that sort of direction.

I had an early start this morning. I had to go to the New Forest and get back in time for the debate, because I was attending the funeral of my constituent and friend, Mr Mike Gilling. Mike was the sort of person who, by anyone's definition of a society, big or not, put into it far more than he took out of it. It was therefore not surprising that there was a wide spectrum of mourners at that funeral, representing a good cross-section of the people of Hythe, which is on the edge of the New Forest. Did any of them come up to me after the funeral and say, "Julian, I really think you should be supporting these proposals that the Government are putting forward for the New Forest"? Not one. Did anyone come up to me and say, "Julian, I do hope you're going to speak out against these proposals this afternoon in the debate"? Quite a few.

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I did not just go by an, as it were, self-selecting sample like that. Nor did I just go by the self-selecting sample of people who have written a sheaf of letters to me, even though the balance is still dozens on one side of the argument and not yet a single letter—the Whips Office had better get cracking and find someone in my constituency so that I cannot say this again—in favour of the Government's proposals. No, I am afraid it is all anti.

I did not rely even on those two samples, the small one and the larger one via the correspondence. I also spoke to one of the most senior figures in the New Forest, who has all the expertise that I freely confess I lack. What he said to me was that everybody in the New Forest who is involved in its administration in various types, capacities and dimensions is in a state of deep shock; that the status quo is unanimously preferred; and that, if there is a consultation, we had better hope that it is a genuine one, because then, on the basis of the sampling that I am seeing so far, there will be an overwhelming series of representations against what is proposed.

Neil Carmichael: What I would like to know is what will happen to multi-purpose woods—those which are commercial, heritage and used for recreation.

Dr Lewis: My hon. Friend will find that I am coming to that very point. There are two models according to which the New Forest can be run. There is the old model, with many sources of power intermixing, interacting and influencing each other, and there is the overarching model, with some authority in place to which everything else is subservient. My dear and hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Mr Swayne) was right when he said that we stood shoulder to shoulder to battle against the national park authority being imposed on us, because we felt that that was an overarching model rather than an interacting model of different organisations.

That is where I fear my Front-Bench team has lost its way. It is not as if the Forestry Commission has, or ever has had, overall control. The Forestry Commission is one of a number of bodies in this universe, along with the verderers, the New Forest Commoners Defence Association, and voluntary bodies such as the New Forest Association, all of which have to work together and persuade each other before they can go forward. The Forestry Commission is not just about commerce or timber; it is also about conservation and disease control.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that when phytophthora ramorum, otherwise known as sudden oak death, is starting to devastate large forests and mixed woodland, it is not the right time to do something that might put at risk measures to control it?

Dr Lewis: I share that concern. It comes back to the exchange that I had with the Secretary of State during her initial contribution. There is a deficit in the running of the New Forest, and there is a good reason why there is a deficit. It is precisely because the Forestry Commission has duties, such as trying to address matters concerning disease and matters concerning conservation, as well as trying to make what profit it can from the commercial management of the timber industry.