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10.1 am

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have heard of competition on the high street, but here there seems to be competition between high streets. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on making a persuasive case. I can almost see her on one of those 1930s rail posters, saying “Come to York, to Bishy, and live.”

Were any Member who is here today to stroll down to Westminster station, hop aboard the District line, take the scenic route to Ealing and alight at Ealing Broadway—at Haven Green, where many a scene from the “Carry On” films was made—and then to hop on the E2 bus, they would come to Pitshanger Lane, which won the Great British High Street award for best high street in London. In every shop and retail premises on the lane, there is a letter from the Minister, signed personally by him, congratulating us. I have tried to take some credit for it, but the credit goes to the organisers and the local council, to the Pitshanger Village Traders Association and the three active local councillors—particularly Lynne Murray and David Rodgers—and also to John Martin, from the local estate agents, who has done so much work for it.

The important thing is that a massive change is happening in high streets, before our eyes. Throughout the 1980s barns on the bypass seemed to be the thing. We had planning policy guidance almost encouraging people to move out of the city centre. We had inward-looking malls that did not encourage any interaction. They did not encourage people to walk through but were inward-looking, defensive and negative. They are not fit for purpose any more. Those malls are usually too small—people need bigger retail space—and not specialist enough. What is happening in the high street today is dramatic, and it is almost a case of the Government needing to follow behind the change, which is happening organically. There are many things that the Government can do, which have been mentioned by the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies). I appreciate that I should not refer to him as my hon. Friend, but he is my friend, and I am grateful to him for raising the matter.

There are things that the Government could do to encourage things that are already happening in the high street. High streets are specialised, with more high-end, quality smaller retailers. In my part of the world we have butchers and bakers and the marvellous Pitshanger Bookshop, which has managed to survive despite the depredations of the internet. If the major internet book suppliers paid a little more tax, there might even be a level playing field; but such shops survive. There is also more pedestrianisation, and it would be marvellous if cycling were encouraged. We have a lot of empirical data about high streets and if there is one thing we know about pedestrians and cyclists it is that, although you would not think they would be major purchasers, they are. That is why we need public transport and a different sort of high street. We also need housing on the high street. What is wrong with emulating Pitshanger Lane, and having housing in the high street itself—getting totally away from the inward-looking mall and the barn on the bypass, and into something more organic, structured and accessible, from which it is easier to operate?

I would not be a member of my party were I not to mention in passing the potential horror and devastation that the relaxation of Sunday trading laws could bring.