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Mines Rescue Service

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mr. Dhanda]

10.3 pm

David Taylor (North-West Leicestershire) (Lab/Co-op): The main town in the constituency of North-West Leicestershire is Coalville—a place created by an industry that provided it with work, shaped its community, fashioned its landscape and gave it its name. My constituency office is close to the town centre and just a few hundred yards from the old No. 5 pit of Whitwick colliery. In the early hours of 19 April 1898, 42 men were in that pit when a fire broke out, 34 of whom were cut off and perished. Of the eight men who escaped by the main roadway or by the return airway, one bravely returned to the smoke and fumes in an attempt to help his workmates, but tragically he, too, died. That man, Charles Clamp, a 27-year-old onsetter, was heroically doing a job that has developed in the past century into a key role in the modern-day Mines Rescue Service, the courage, skill, knowledge and professionalism of which are renowned wherever coal has been mined in our nation.

I was privileged to unveil a statue on the centenary of that worst disaster in the history of the Leicestershire coalfield, and ever since then I have kept in touch with the MRS through visits to its original local headquarters in Ashby and its modern base at nearby Moira. Generations of mining communities have looked to the MRS and its predecessors for assistance. Now the MRS needs our help as it carves out a new future in a country with just a handful of remaining deep mines. Tonight's debate will summarise its present position and the options available to us.

Following the privatisation of the mining industry by the previous Conservative Administration, the Mines Rescue Service was formed on 17 January 1996 for the purpose of taking over the operations of the Mines Rescue Service and associated activities previously undertaken by the British Coal Corporation. Its turnover in the year to 31 March 2005, including £2.5 million from the Coal Authority, was around £6 million and its operating costs were £7.1 million. The MRS has, over the past nine years, followed a strategy designed to counteract the decline in membership fees paid by the coal mines by increasing other income earned by its employees.

Colin Burgon (Elmet) (Lab) rose—

David Taylor: I will happily give way to my hon. Friend, who advised me in advance that he wished to participate in the debate.

Colin Burgon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Today I spoke with Steve Kemp, the general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, who believes that the Mines Rescue Service should be treated in much the same way as the ambulance and fire service. He also believes, as I do, that it should be taken back into public ownership, along with what is left of our deep mine coal industry. Will my hon. Friend deal with these matters?

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David Taylor: I hope the Minister will do so too. My hon. Friend knows from previous conversations that I fully agree with such an outcome. We shall see whether the Minister announces it in his response.

The other income that the MRS has tried to develop has been earned by the provision of health and safety services to industry in general, and it has so far successfully enabled funding gaps to be covered. The strategy has enabled the MRS to retain its highly trained personnel during a time when confidence in the future of the coal industry has been very low. The past 12 months, however, has seen a sudden and marked decline in output from the deep mines—13.1 million tonnes falling to 9.5 million tonnes—at a time when the industry itself has been in some financial difficulty. An anticipated fee income of £2.3 million has declined to £1.5 million, leaving a shortfall of £800,000.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend probably knows that I still have a deep coal mine in my constituency. I am one of the few people who believe that there is a future for deep mining in this country because we have access to millions of tonnes of reserves, but without the MRS on standby I do not know how the ordinary services could do the special job that it does if they were ever needed—God forbid—to go underground to rescue people at Maltby colliery.

David Taylor: That is a topic for a separate debate. There are 800 million tonnes of coal left in north-east Leicestershire, and I agree that we need to work those reserves in the future. The need for the MRS will be acute at that time.

Every effort is being made by the MRS to increase other income and reorganise services to the remaining underground mines without reducing standards. It is anticipated that the shortfall of £800,000 can be reduced by some £500,000, leaving an actual shortfall of £300,000, which can be carried this financial year, but losses cannot be sustained for next year. Action must be taken now to stop the decline.

Mr. Fraser Kemp (Houghton and Washington, East) (Lab): I have a mines rescue station at Houghton-le-Spring in my constituency, which has a proud and brave history. As we have lost the last deep coal mine in the northern region, the service has diversified into other areas, particularly specialist training in the fire service. Does my hon. Friend believe it would be a good idea for the Government to consider some seed-corn resources, as such diversification can be very expensive to develop? That would give the MRS the support that it needs to develop such training.

David Taylor: I am pleased that my hon. Friend mentioned that and I thank him for it. I shall deal with the point at the end of my speech.

The MRS is in discussion with the Health and Safety Executive, mine owners, trade unions and its own employees about a more efficient use of the mines rescue resource. Operational personnel cover 24/7 and they will, within the constraints of the legislation, provide an overall framework of emergency cover to the mines as efficiently and effectively as they can. These changes will not reduce numbers overall, but will release operational personnel for income-generating work elsewhere.

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The expertise of the MRS is unique and its advice and training is much sought after by industry, fire brigades and the civil resilience directorate. I know that it will continue to work with these as long as it is financially able. The UK coal industry has an enviable record for safety worldwide and the MRS will hopefully continue to play a major role in ensuring that that continues as long as underground mines exist in the UK.

May I instance just one example of how the MRS has diversified in recent times? On 11 May 2004, a huge explosion at the ICL Stockline plastics factory in Maryhill, Glasgow caused a four-storey building to collapse, killing nine people and injuring 40. In the three days of intense rescue and stabilisation activity that followed the collapse of the factory building, more than 200 firefighters were involved in freeing trapped workers from the wreckage. Time is, of course, the crucial factor in such search and rescue operations, and the work of the Strathclyde fire and rescue service was greatly assisted by the presence at the scene of staff from the MRS office in Fife.

The chief officer of the Strathclyde fire and rescue service, Brian Sweeney, has praised the role that the 14 members of the MRS staff played at Stockline over that tense three-day period, which has subsequently led to training and development links of the sort that my hon. Friend the Member for Houghton and Washington, East (Mr. Kemp) mentioned being forged between Strathclyde fire and rescue service and the MRS. When my office contacted Mr. Sweeney, he said:

"The expertise and commitment of the Mines Rescue team from Crossgates, Fife was invaluable during the search and rescue phase of the tragic incident at Stockline Plastics, Glasgow . . . The knowledge, skills and experience of the Mines Rescue staff provide a much valued resource to enhance the skills and safety of firefighters in the area of Urban Search and Rescue."

That endorsement of the specialist skills and professionalism of MRS staff clearly illustrates the enduring importance of such skills in reacting to disasters of a potentially bewildering diversity, particularly in urban areas.

In discussing with the MRS its experiences at Stockline, I have been struck by the impact on search times that its expertise brought to the situation. Minor details suddenly become extremely significant when the clock is ticking on a search and rescue operation in such a hazardous environment as a collapsed building. The fact that the breathing apparatus that the MRS carries as standard has a minimum of four hours air supply increases in importance when one realises that the standard air supply carried by a firefighter is 20 minutes. That is not a criticism of firefighters or the fire and rescue service—far from it—it merely provides further demonstration of the flexibility, adaptability and specialised nature of the skills and equipment possessed by MRS staff.

In my county, Leicestershire, the MRS has supported and assisted the fire and rescue service in a number of ways, most significantly in the development of Leicestershire fire and rescue technical rescue team. As a result of that partnership, Leicestershire is one of the leading fire and rescue services in the new dimension

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urban search and rescue roll-out programme. Ian Holden, the manager of Leicestershire's technical rescue team, has commented:

"Our joint collaboration with the MRS . . . has increased our capacity to assist members of the public who are in need of rescue. There is no other organisation that has this technical expertise within the United Kingdom."

I appreciate that the fire service comes under the remit of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, but I am sure that the Minister agrees that that is powerful testimony.

The continued decline of the domestic coal industry is an obvious challenge for the MRS, and UK Coal's sudden and unexpected closure of the last working coal mine in the north-east of England, Ellington, was an unwelcome shock for all concerned. However, the MRS has been able to mitigate the impact of the loss of unworking mines in the UK by planning for it. The sale of land assets, not least the former headquarters at the Selby complex, and a 29 per cent. increase in income from non-traditional streams in the past year, have enabled the MRS to address its pension fund deficit, invest in its national network of rescue stations and training centres and upgrade vital search, escape and rescue equipment.

Mr. Alan Meale (Mansfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing the debate. He has mentioned other income streams: the MRS headquarters in Mansfield has recently been used as an estate agents to sell holidays and holiday cottages and flats abroad. A recent case involved land and property in northern Cyprus owned by refugee Greek Cypriots, one of whom resided in my constituency. Such practices do not suit the operation of the MRS, and I urge my hon. Friend to urge his friends to desist from such activities.

David Taylor: That is not the sort of diversification that I had mind, and I will certainly raise the matter with the MRS.

The growing range of emergency escape and rescue services provided by the MRS offers an alternative source of income that benefits not only the company, but society as a whole. The Government have provided financial assistance to the MRS to the tune of £2.5 million in each of the past two years, but that is not the whole picture. The Minister for Energy, who is unable to respond today, has said:

"This funding enabled Mines Rescue Services Ltd. to reimburse to UK deep-mine operators the production-related levy sums which the latter had paid to the company throughout that period."—[Official Report, 6 July 2005; Vol. 436, c. 464W.]

The payments from the Coal Authority to the MRS have gone back to the mining companies, which are thereby assisted by the Coal Authority in that regard. It is a source of regret to the MRS, its staff and its many supporters that the £2.5 million payments from the Coal Authority to itself via the MRS have been the extent of a Labour Government's financial help to a service that is increasingly needed beyond the shrinking confines of its industrial origins. The MRS only ever budgets to break even and still performs its statutory duties at the remaining deep coal mines in the UK to a high standard. Although the Government have helped to prolong the existence of some of the remaining pits by making those payments from the Coal Authority to the MRS over the

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past two years, I feel that they should make a continued further contribution to secure the continued existence of the MRS. The long-term strategic aims of the company are working, and it is anticipated that its continued diversification will reduce net costs and enable it to become less reliant on the UK deep coal mine industry. Yet member companies running underground coal mines in the UK continue to have access to a fully functioning and cost-effective emergency escape and rescue capability.

Consolidation of the role of the MRS in the provision of escape and rescue emergency services in the mining sector has been achieved in the form of a three-year contract with the Coal Authority. The deal is to provide 24/7 emergency response call-out for surface hazards associated with legacy coal mining activities. A year into the contract, the MRS is meeting stringent service delivery targets and creating an excellent working relationship with Coal Authority representatives. During the past year, the MRS has successfully bid for several large training contracts in mining and non-mining sectors. The outsourcing of health and safety training requirements has benefited it, and the acquisition and use of mobile training facilities has increased its competitiveness.

Many Members have been consistent advocates for the MRS since 1996 and are well aware, often through the bitter industrial experiences of their communities, of the origin of the skills that it has honed so well for a broader search and rescue application. I pay particular tribute to my hon. Friends the Members for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) and for Elmet (Colin Burgon), who are both present, and to others who have intervened.