It is the honour of my life to address this House as the Member of Parliament for Thurrock, my home, and to speak in this important debate on the future of our railways. I congratulate the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on her passionate speech, which was infused with pride for the community she serves and a strong commitment to her new role, particularly to help the people of Dawlish to rebuild after the flooding and to speak up for those who have experienced the care system. I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) on such a brilliant speech, which was infused with peacocks and train puns, which I will not try to outdo. I will steam ahead, get back on track and diesel-power on with the main body of my speech!

I would like to begin by talking a little about my predecessor, Jackie Doyle-Price. Although our politics are different, she served our community for 14 years and was a vocal campaigner against violence towards women and girls, both in this country and internationally. She highlighted the role that rape and sexual violence play as a weapon of war, and the lifelong impact that these appalling crimes have on women and girls here in the UK. She was a strong supporter of SERICC, the groundbreaking rape and abuse service based in my constituency, which found her a listening ear and a vocal advocate for its work. I will ensure that I will carry on that relationship and continue that work.

I would also like to thank the former Member of Parliament for Barking, Margaret Hodge, who gave me my first job in politics and taught a newly graduated, idealistic young woman that politics is more often than not about who gets the potholes filled, the grass verges cut and people’s individual problems solved than the big issues of the day. Moreover, she taught me that being a visible, vocal advocate for one’s constituents is the fundamental job of being an MP. In doing so, she defeated the extremists of the British National party by demonstrating that politics can be a force for good—work that I was extremely proud to play a part in at the time, and something that I will continue to take forward, to counter the threats from extremism and populism that our communities face today. She has also shown kindness and support as I, like many others who are new in this House, struggle to navigate the early days of this unique role.

It is an incredible privilege to have the honour of representing my home in this place. Thurrock has had representation from across this House since its creation in 1945, but this is the first time that someone born there has addressed the House as its Member of Parliament. I am that much unfairly maligned of creatures—a true Essex girl. I prefer Dr. Martens to white stilettos, but I am extremely proud of the county of my birth and the history of our community and the people who live there.

Thurrock has a fighting spirit, having played an important role in the decoy operations prior to the Normandy landings in the second world war. It provided a muster and departure point for those leaving to take part in the D-day operations. Several hundred years earlier, Tilbury is where Queen Elizabeth I rallied her troops before fighting the Spanish armada, famously declaring:

“I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too”.

The Empire Windrush landed at Tilbury docks in 1948, bringing those who answered the call to help restore and rebuild our country after the second world war. A permanent exhibition, “Tilbury bridge walkway of memories”, is a moving testimony to those who came. Unfortunately, it is currently closed as a side effect of the Tilbury to Gravesend ferry ceasing to operate for the first time in nearly 600 years, something my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan) and I are determined to rectify.

Further down the river, we can find the Purfleet heritage centre which, among its extensive collection of local military memorabilia, also hosts an exhibition honouring the contribution of the Gurkha regiments to our armed forces, reflecting the significant Gurkha and Nepalese community who have chosen to make Thurrock their home. The museum is well worth a visit, although I would take with a pinch of salt anything one of the volunteer guides says about the etymology of Purfleet and its deriving from an exclamation of Elizabeth I, “My poor fleet”.

The towns of Tilbury and Purfleet are just two of the many that make up Thurrock. Aveley, Ockendon, Stifford Clays and Chafford Hundred all have their stories to tell. One reason I am so pleased to be making my maiden speech today as part of the debate on the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill is that one of the uniting factors of all of these towns is the role they play as key commuter locations for jobs in the City of London and the docklands—journeys that are primarily made using the rail network. The public ownership of our railways, delivering a better service and better value for taxpayers’ money, will make a daily difference to the lives of many of my constituents, and, indeed, to many of my friends and family.

I would not be here without the support of many people, but in particular my family: my children, my mum and dad, my husband Ali—a stronger or kinder partner you would struggle to find—and my in-laws Mike and Sue. It really does take a village.

I would like to share my own personal story about my motivation for being here, beyond the love of my community and my desire to serve. Almost seven years ago, I found out that the baby I was carrying had Down’s syndrome—a rug-pulling, life-altering moment which I did not realise, but wish I had, would be the making of my family and the start of a truly incredible journey. As the actress Sally Phillips says, the special educational needs and disabilities parent club is the one no one wants to be in, but once you are there you realise that all the best people are there. However, the world does not work for families like mine. It does not work for children like mine, and it does not work for people like me and my daughter. When I received her diagnosis, I made her a promise that I would do everything I could to make her life easier. Little did I realise that it would lead me here.

I am here to serve my community, to speak up for the home that I love and the people who live there. If by being here I can make a difference to the lives of children and families such as mine, I will consider it a job well done, however long my constituents may opt to keep me.