**2013**

**THE FUTURE OF FARMING**

**Thursday 10th January 2013**

I hope everyone had a restful (and not too wet!) Christmas, and let’s wish for a prosperous and peaceful new year. Speaking personally, I spent most of the holiday period feeling very sorry for myself as I nursed the bug which has been going round, and which seems remarkably difficult to shake off even weeks after the infectious stage. Not that I’m in any way bitter and twisted!

It’s always hard to get back into harness after holidays, and even though I spent the week after Christmas on call, there’s a world of difference between answering the odd phone call or e-mail and actually physically going back to the office. But all good things come to an end, which is why on the 2nd January I found myself heading off to Oxford for the annual farming conference. Quite why this happens on the second day of the new year is one of life’s mysteries, but it is always well attended, and an important part of the agricultural calendar. It’s certainly something which I, as farming minister, need to attend, if only to listen to what people in the industry are talking about.

However, in this instance I had a further intention. I was there to launch a new initiative on the Future of Farming. If we are to have a sustainable future for the food industry, and if we aren’t it’s hard to see how we’ll feed ourselves in the future, let alone the rest of the world, then we need to attract young people now. The fact is we don’t, neither into agriculture itself, nor the industries which support it, nor in the wider food industry. And that’s something we should be concerned about.

I think there are a number of reasons. Firstly, farming has, whether we like it or not, a negative image. It appears to be a job which entails a lot of work for little reward, and there is some basis for that. But it’s far from the whole truth, and in fact there are good careers to be made, with most, myself included, optimistic for the future. Then there is the constant catalogue of woes. Most of the stories you read or hear about agriculture are about what has gone wrong. Sometimes that is justified, as in this year’s disastrous weather. But again, it’s just part of the picture.

Then there is the ignorance of schools and colleges and the lack of direction in steering good candidates into considering food related careers, even in rural areas like ours. And finally, there are the genuine obstacles like lack of access to capital or land, reduced opportunities for apprenticeships in rural contexts and the like. That’s what we need to put right.

Once we used to “dig for victory”. There may come a time soon when we need to “dig for survival”. I want to make sure we’re equipped to do it. That’s why the review, which I have asked west country farmer David Fursdon to lead, is so important. What I don’t want is yet another report to gather dust on a shelf. I need practical actions, whether for government or the industry, which we can take as a matter of urgency.

**A FAIRER PENSION**

**Thursday 17th January 2013**

It is instructive that the sniffy tone taken by some commentators about the very important announcement made this week by my colleague Steve Webb, the pensions minister, came exclusively from people who will never themselves have to rely on a statutory state pension. If they did, they might be a bit more receptive to the idea that a system is being proposed which creates a step-change in the total pension, a guarantee of its future value, and for the first time a pension which recognises the fact that for many women looking after children a full contribution record is nigh on impossible.

What the plans suggest is a new statutory state pension of £144 per person, and an end to the current two-tier system of basic pension and earnings-related pension on top of that. It is at a rate which will also, through the so-called triple-lock, always be above the level used for means testing of other benefits, so those who put a little aside or have a modest private pension won’t see that clawed back through the benefits system.

It’s a bold plan, and not without difficulties in the transition from one scheme to another. Some say that because it only applies to future pensioners it shouldn’t be done at all. I’m not sure that’s logical. Those who have paid higher contributions to SERPS for years might not expect their legitimate expectations to be swept away, and the pension credit will continue to ensure that current pensioners don’t lose out. They simply won’t be on the new system, because they haven’t enrolled (or paid contributions) on that basis. If we always have to backdate any improvement (and the extra contributory factors) to every existing pensioner, we will never be able to put things on a better footing.

This isn’t a cheap option, either for the government or the future pensioner. But it does reflect future needs and demands, and it’s fairer in the long run to the elderly. It needs careful thought now as to how to put it into effect.

Meanwhile, on a totally different subject, I am getting increasingly concerned about an unpleasant condition in farm animals called Schmallenberg Virus. It is literally a new disease, appearing little over a couple of years ago in the small German village after which it is named. It’s spread by midges, and some of those blew across the English Channel last year and infected some sheep and cattle. All the signs are that the infection, particularly in sheep, has now spread across the country, albeit affecting a small proportion of lambs.

It’s a nasty disease, causing malformation or still-birth of lambs and calves. We’re keeping a very close eye on its spread, and the development of a vaccine, although whether it will be a commercially sensible option for farmers is still doubtful. It’s not a notifiable disease, because it does not infect humans, and there is currently no value in collecting information with all the bureaucracy that entails to no specific advantage. What’s surprising, as I had confirmed by a top German epidemiologist on Monday, is how little we know about the bug. But we need to watch it carefully.

**TOO MUCH WEATHER**

**Thursday 24th January 2013**

I’m getting a bit fed up with this weather business. We just seem to be having too much of it at the moment, with drought for half of last year, floods for the other half, and now snow that kept me in my village last week when I had plenty of other things to do. At least I suppose we can say the snow and ice are seasonally normal, however inconvenient. And indeed, we shouldn’t really be surprised that we get snowfall at this time of year, even if the rate of it falling (and pitching) was rather faster than usual.

In general, and it’s unusual for me to hand out plaudits to the current county council, I thought the highways authority did a pretty good job at reacting quickly to the situation and gritting and salting the majority of our local roads. I suspect they were helped by having surprisingly accurate forecasts from the meteorological office, who despite the frequent criticism they face, played a blinder this time in warning us precisely what we were in for and when. Unfortunately, if you live in a small village in a natural basin, as I do, even if the main roads are clear it is still a major undertaking to reach them unless you have a four by four, and even then it isn’t always the case that you have sufficient traction over a layer of snow on top of ice.

I do however wonder what people from other countries must think if they visit us during one of our infrequent winter “snow events” to find so much of our infrastructure incapacitated and our media obsessed with what they portray as chaos to the point of commissioning special programmes on the subject. Snowfalls which in many north European and north American countries would be considered entirely normal and which would not impinge on their daily routine in any way are sufficient to close us down. But that is precisely the point. Because they deal with it on an everyday basis for large parts of the year, they have everything they need to hand. For us, it is a rare occurrence, and it would be an expensive nonsense to tool up to the same extent for something that only impacts on us for a few days each year.

So I am tolerant of disruption. Up to a point. But what I think many authorities forget (and yes, airlines and airports, I’m looking at you) is that what most infuriates and upsets people is a dearth of information. Over the weekend and the beginning of the week, for instance, Heathrow instituted a perfectly sensible plan to cancel a number of flights to ensure they had the capacity to run the rest. If that had been explained, and then the airlines had told their frustrated passengers what was happening, what they could expect, and helped them make arrangements, then there wouldn’t have been nearly as much distress. Instead, we had interview after interview with desperate passengers stranded in a departure lounge with no idea when or if their flight would leave. That’s bad business, and terrible service. Surely they can do better.

**HELPING THE RIVERS TO FLOW**

**Thursday 31st January 2013**

We must hope that this year doesn’t involve quite as much rain as the last, but the signs don’t look good at the moment. I worry about the consequences on two levels; firstly, because I represent a constituency which, as we all know, has a very high propensity to being underwater even at the best of times; and secondly, because although water and flooding is not my personal ministerial responsibility, it does fall to my colleagues in DEFRA and obviously I am involved in trying to react positively to what is sometimes overwhelming demand.

As I’ve said before, what is clear is that the investment over recent years and the hard work of the Environment Agency has had a very substantial effect in protecting a high number of properties from flooding that would inevitably have been affected by the phenomenal rainfall levels even a few years ago. That much is good, even if it is scant comfort for those facing flooded houses or land now. It is also clear that the readiness and effectiveness of the Agency as improved, as has their relationships with local people, and that more individual communities and householders have been able to take small measures to mitigate the effect of flooding on their lives.

But that doesn’t mean to say that there isn’t still a big problem. You only have to go down on to the levels and speak to the despairing farmers facing the best part of half a year with pasture under water to realise that although protection of properties has to be the priority it isn’t the only question we have to answer. And far too many people experience local surface water flooding which may be far removed from watercourses and flood defences. Which brings me to the vexed question of drainage.

And the brutal fact, it seems to me, is that although the Environment Agency quite rightly is concentrating its resources on protecting the maximum number of households, and there is a perfectly respectable argument that increasing flow in our drainage rivers simply gets large volumes of water into our bigger towns more quickly, nevertheless it is clear to any of us that limited maintenance over many years has reduced the capacity of our rivers and rhines. I am talking to my colleague Richard Benyon, the flooding minister, about this, and I think he recognises the problem. As a constituency MP, rather than a minister, I am clear that we ought to look again at the dredging of the Parrett, the Tone, the Brue and the Cary to see if we can safely increase their capacity.

But the other part of that is that the county council as highways authority must do its bit. I’ve lost count of the number of reports I’ve received of blocked gullies and culverts, or dodgy patching repairs which increase the likelihood of local surface flooding. Clearing those drains should be a priority, and yes, the council does have the funds to do it, and if it doesn’t think it does, then I have a few suggestions (like not spending money on refurbishing county hall, or expensive consultants, for instance). For roads to be blocked or houses flooded because someone hasn’t cleared a drain of leaves is unforgiveable.

**THE HORSEMEAT SCANDAL**

**Thursday 14th February 2013**

If it’s not one thing it’s another. It’s a little bizarre when I can’t go to my advice surgery in Langport on a Saturday morning without being ambushed by a Daily Mail reporter bearing a heated -up Findus ready-cooked meal for my immediate consumption. Quite why he thought that I would for one moment want to replicate the ill-advised pictures we all remember of John Gummer force-feeding a beefburger to his daughter during the BSE crisis I’m not sure. As I said, I don’t want people to eat foods because I tell them to, but because they have the evidence to make an informed decision themselves. My job is to help them have that evidence.

The horsemeat scandal is a serious one. What is becoming clear is that processed beef in branded goods in our supermarkets has been systematically adulterated, probably (and here I have to be careful because of the likelihood of court actions) as a result of substantial and extensive criminal activity. And what started as an issue in the Republic of Ireland with ramifications for some of our retailers and processors is now a labyrinth throughout continental Europe.

The facts are relatively simple. A routine composition test in Ireland showed that meat destined for beef-burgers was contaminated with horsemeat. A couple of the cases, including one connected to a plant in Yorkshire, were trace contamination only. But one, with 29% of the burger horsemeat, looked very much like either gross negligence or criminal adulteration.

That started a process of investigation which as we all know has now exposed substitution of horse meat in ready-prepared meals, the withdrawal of products, cases found in France, Luxembourg and Sweden and links to twenty other countries, and as a result of the actions we have taken the biggest testing regime of processed beef products ever.

It is probable that testing in itself will throw up new cases, unfortunately. It may involve criminal behaviour in more than one country, including the UK. Added to that, we have seen trace contamination of products labelled as kosher or hallal with porcine material, which is of course a major concern for religious communities.

From all the tests that the independent Food Standards Agency have conducted so all, the one reassuring factor is that to date none has shown the meat to be unsafe. That includes the presence of phenylbutazone, the anti-arthritic drug administered to horses which shouldn’t be allowed into the human food-chain, although the advice from the Chief Medical Officer is that at the levels it would be found in horse meat it would be very unlikely indeed to produce ill-effects.

Also, cut meat has not shown to be subject to substitution, and indeed the reputation of British meat remains undamaged. And I am glad that retailers and caterers are co-operating and taking action to test their products and reassure their customers, although given they are legally responsible and vulnerable to huge reputational damage, I would expect nothing less.

But the bottom line is this. People who buy beef shouldn’t get horse meat. People should be clear that what they pay for, what’s on the label, is what they get, and that it’s safe and wholesome. That just as true for cheap products as expensive ones. And nothing else will do.

**CHEDDAR TO JEDDAH**

**Thursday 21st February 2013**

Last week I warned that the horsemeat scandal was likely to throw up more examples of likely criminal activity. I was right. The good news is that we have secured the agreement and cooperation of governments across the European Union in dealing effectively with the matter, and of Europol to co-ordinate international police action, that raids have taken place in this country and charges brought, and food businesses, from retailers to caterers and suppliers, are systematically testing processed beef products.

We also had some reassurance on contamination with the anti-inflammatory drug phenylbutazone, or “bute”, along with a very sensible assessment by the Chief Medical Officer that to get anything approaching a dangerous dose you’d have to eat something like five hundred large-size burgers consisting entirely of contaminated horsemeat. I am not in the slightest bit complacent; the whole episode has shown gaping inadequacies in the food supply chain which the supermarkets need to address, and for me also a big question about the value or otherwise of the horse passport system that’s been in place over many years. But perhaps we are now seeing a bigger picture.

Meanwhile, I am preparing for a more positive part of my job; creating trade opportunities which I hope will lead to more exports, more revenue for the UK, and more jobs in local companies. We have been very successful in recent months in targeted trade missions to potential growth markets. For instance, a visit by the Secretary of State to China has unlocked new sales of pig-meat, poultry and dairy products. We’ve finally managed to overturn barriers to export of beef to Russia which were put in place at the time of BSE. And I am now leading a big trade mission to the middle east, to Dubai, with around forty British companies who believe they can successfully trade in the region if we can remove any existing barriers.

Why is it important to trade overseas? One obvious reason is that it brings much wanted revenue into our country and reduces trade deficits. But if we are successful at developing foreign markets for our goods, then it of course results in growth in our country, improved economic performance and more jobs. And given that there are rapidly expanding demands for, particularly, food products, in parts of the world we would never once have thought about sending goods to, it would be foolish not to put a considerable effort into supporting our own industries rather than letting other competing nations take the market share at our expense.

One of the companies accompanying me to Dubai will be trying to sell Somerset cheese. That is particularly satisfying as I have long been saying that part of the answer to the difficulties we have had in the dairy sector over recent years has been a lack of ambition to find export markets, which we’re well placed to do. We may have our problems in the food supply chain at the moment, but those issues shouldn’t be allowed, whatever some in the media want, to cloud the fact we produce top quality, high health and welfare status produce in his country, and there’s a world out there interested in buying from us.

**DANGEROUS DOGS**

**Thursday 28th February 2013**

It was good to see cheese and meats from within a few miles of where I live in Somerset being promoted in the slightly surreal surroundings of Dubai on the Arabian Gulf. I wrote last week about the trade mission I led to the middle east. In the end over sixty British companies took part in what has become the world's biggest food trade fair. And who better to show what top-quality British produce can create than top chef Gary Rhodes, who of course started his career many years ago in the Castle Hotel in Taunton. Gary has a restaurant in Dubai and was only too happy to lend a hand in promoting the best of British food.

Returning home I found that within an hour or two of landing I was needed to speak in the House of Commons. The main business of the day was something I have mentioned before, a bill I have been taking through the house alongside colleagues in the department for business. On Tuesday the Groceries Adjudicator Bill had its Third Reading, which means it has now completed its parliamentary scrutiny and subject to Royal Assent will become law. I can't remember how many years I have been arguing for a supermarket ombudsman to try to ensure a fair deal between the big supermarkets and producers. Now it is a reality, and to be honest I'm feeling pretty chuffed that I have been able to deliver something promised for so long.

The other debate I had to reply to as Minister was on the subject of dangerous dogs. This is an emotive subject. We consider ourselves in a country of dog lovers in Britain, and yet there are far too many abandoned and stray animals that end up in the care of charities or being put down, and there are also far too many dog attacks each year, some of them causing very serious injuries or even death. The legislation put in place over twenty years ago has proved almost useless. And there is a growing and alarming trend for some to keep dogs which are inherently dangerous almost as weapons of violence.

So the need is for measures which will protect the welfare of animals, weed out irresponsible dog owners without putting undue burdens on the great majority of owners who are perfectly law abiding and considerate. What is now being suggested deals with the issue on a number of levels. Firstly, there will be an extension of the microchipping to all dogs by April 2016. That will mean that for the first time every dog will be able to be tracked back to its owner. Happily, the dog welfare charities have offered to meet the costs for those owners who might otherwise find it difficult to pay for the very small operation required.

Secondly, we will shortly extend the offence of dog attacks to include private property, offering for the first time protection to people such as postal workers who have to visit homes and too often find themselves attacked. And thirdly, we will use anti-social behaviour legislation to stamp out those who deliberately keep vicious animals. Taken together, that ought to make a real difference.

**AFTER THE DELUGE**

**Thursday 7th March 2013**

Although the weather has improved over the last few weeks and the water levels have gone down, it would be naïve to assume that our problems with flooding have gone away, They certainly haven’t, and there are lots of discussions going on locally about what needs to be done to help prevent the sort of problems we so regularly face locally. Everyone understands that you are never going to avoid flooding on the Somerset levels; it is part of the nature of the place. And most agree that the local staff of the Environment Agency worked heroically in trying to minimise difficulties over the winter. But the feeling remains that more could be done, despite the extreme weather conditions we faced last year.

It is frustrating for me and a couple of my colleagues that the rules of the house of commons mean that as ministers we are not allowed to speak out on these issues in parliament. Nevertheless, we can press on behalf of our constituents behind the scenes, and that is why I arranged another meeting with my ministerial colleague Richard Benyon this week. Richard has responsibility for flooding and the Environment Agency, and I know from previous discussions with him he is very aware of the issues in Somerset and sympathetic to doing something to help.

The key point I wanted to impress on him was the need to maintain the capacity of our watercourses. Over the years the lack of maintenance in our rivers and drainage ditches means that they have silted up to an unprecedented degree. And it is no good clearing the rhynes if the rivers are not dealt with, as you are still going to see water backing up. The view from the Environment Agency seems to be that it is not cost effective to dredge the rivers, partly because their priority, understandably, s the protection of the maximum number of properties in the towns.

I beg to differ. I want to see the Tone and the Parrett dredged urgently, along with all the contributing waterways. That needs the EA to change their minds, and I think Richard Benyon understands this.

I’m also taking up a couple of ideas that came out of the NFU conference I went to last week. Firstly, that we should have a definitive map of watercourses and the responsibility for clearing, which I think is sometimes vague at the moment. It’s important that landowners, drainage boards, local authorities (who could do a lot better at clearing gullies and culverts) and the Environment Agency each in turn know exactly what their responsibility is.

And secondly, I think we should be reviving the idea of whole river catchment management. Clearing drainage channels is important, but so is retaining water upstream in a coordinated way, and we need to look at what better incentives, perhaps through the tax system, we can give landowners to do exactly that.

The best news is that Richard has agreed to come down again and meet me and some of those affected in Somerset. I’ll be arranging a meeting in Langport or somewhere close over the next few weeks. It’s time we talked seriously about what needs to be done.

**SAVING SHARKS**

**Thursday 21st March 2013**

Much of my work in the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs centres on the last two parts of the title, so it’s good just occasionally to be able to make a difference on the other part of the agenda, the environment. I had just such an opportunity last week when I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

I was in Bangkok, Thailand, leading a trade mission on behalf of British meat and livestock to the biggest trade fair in Asia. But the timing meant that I could also attend as minister the CITES conference, the triennial gathering to look at the rules which regulate trade in species which are facing extinction. The conference attracts some two thousand delegates from over one hundred and fifty countries. As twenty years ago I worked briefly as a consultant to the Worldwide Fund for Nature I was particularly interested to see what progress has been made.

My impressions? Firstly, a hugely positive view of the work of the British team in tirelessly working to build coalitions of interest to secure the future of some of our most vulnerable animals and plants before they are lost to extinction. That is coupled with some tremendous efforts from British non-governmental bodies and individuals with a huge level of professionalism and knowledge of the subject. Secondly, a great deal of satisfaction with what was achieved.

Did we get everything we wanted? No. The vexed question of polar bears, for instance, was unresolved as we could not establish a meeting of minds. But we led the way in making huge advances in securing the future of the rhino, for instance, and the tiger, that most iconic of the big cats. A significant advance in battling the poaching of ivory, with an important declaration by the Prime Minister of Thailand on trade in elephants within her country. For the first time some strict rules on the import and export of endangered tree species, which have sometimes seemed forgotten within the CITES framework.

But the biggest drama of the day was a ground-breaking vote on the conservation of sharks and rays. There had earlier been what may be a game-changing decision on the status of oceanic species and their relevance to the trade restrictions which means that the treaty obligations of CITES will now clearly deal with fish outside territorial waters. Sharks are not everyone’s favourite creatures, but there’s no denying the importance and even the fascination exerted by something like a hammerhead shark or a manta ray. And they are under threat, largely through over-fishing for their fins. So the decision to list the oceanic white-tip, the hammerhead and the porbeagle shark and the manta ray for protection was important.

The Japanese, however, weren’t happy. And they had support, some from neighbouring countries which share their predilections for the culinary qualities of shark, but also countries which may have been given other reasons for supporting the Japanese position, not unconnected with trade or aid deals. They thought they could overturn the decision. It turned out they couldn’t, as country after country stuck to their principles. I have seldom felt more delighted to have been on the winning side.

**IMPROVING OUR RAILWAY**

**Thursday 28th March 2013**

Regular readers will know that I have been critical over the years of the lack of investment by the previous government in the infrastructure of the south west, and particularly in our principal arterial route the A303 as far as roads are concerned, and the readiness to put money into every rail service in the country other than those which serve the west country.

That may be beginning to change. The work by local authorities in the region to build a business case for doing the necessary work to improve the A303 continues. The recent announcement of the electrification of the Great Western Railway between Paddington and Cardiff, along with the work currently underway to expand capacity through Reading, the bottleneck for west-bound trains, means that we’re seeing improvements on the rail network as well.

But the missing ingredient is the other Great Western line, through Westbury, Castle Cary and Taunton. When I first raised this with the Transport Secretary a year or so ago I was told that this line would also see improvements in reliability and comfort as engines and rolling stock were moved over to supplement what was already there. Seeing as how these additional trains would still be the old 125 engines which, to be polite, are quite aged now, I wasn’t entirely convinced. But now there is a further glimmer of hope.

Consultants are this very week doing a study into the cost and benefits of electrifying the line to Westbury as well. Needless to say, I am very supportive of this, and I am giving strong backing to the local groups who are pushing the case. Because being able to run electric-powered trains will substantially improve the resilience of the service, and also mean faster trains. And in case any residents in the vicinity of Castle Cary or further west are thinking that electrification to Westbury won’t do them much good, that isn’t the case either. As we learnt when the announcement of electrification to Cardiff was made, hybrid electric/diesel trains mean that the advantages of running on electricity would be a positive also to passengers travelling further when the same train switches to diesel power.

So it’s important that we get the right result, and the west country doesn’t get left out once again, not least because it will preserve the viability of the stations we have and the services which many people rely on. Of course, what would be even better would be if we could also use the line for more local traffic, which has sadly not been the case since Dr Beeching did his worst. That means re-opening some long-closed local stations like Somerton and Langport, allowing a stopping service between, say, Westbury and Taunton via Frome, Bruton, Castle Cary, Somerton and Langport. In my more parochial, or perhaps more ambitious, moments I add Witham Junction to that list, not least because it would be so convenient for me!

It’s a plan we put together in the 80s, but it got nowhere then. Recently, though, my colleague Rail Minister Norman Baker announced a fund to pay 75% of the costs of reopening local stations. Time the county council thought seriously about it again.

**A LONG-FORGOTTEN TRAGEDY**

**Thursday 11th April 2013**

There are a few sombre anniversaries that stick in the mind because one had a direct involvement, others simply so devastating that it is impossible to forget, and yet more where they become part of a folk memory long after those involved have passed on.

The day of 9/11 was, for instance, both a personal memory for me because of my experiences, and widely remembered around the world because of the scale of the event. The deaths of young American airmen when their flying fortress crashed into the hillside in Bayford during the second world war are remembered by few directly, but still annually commemorated in Wincanton.

I had forgotten, frankly, what happened forty years ago this week until I read a BBC news report on the subject. I’m sure that is not the case for many Somerset families who will still keenly feel their sense of loss. But in a very peripheral way I was involved, dealing with relatives and survivors, and the report brought back to me vividly the sense, as a young man, of what had happened to the families involved and their irrecoverable loss.

To briefly recount the story, Invicta Airlines flight 435 took off on the morning of 10th April 1973 from Bristol Lulsgate Airport bound for Switzerland. One hundred and thirty-nine passengers were on board. The vast majority were mothers from Somerset off on a day trip, from places like Cheddar, Axbridge, Congresbury and Yatton. They were going shopping and sight-seeing, hardly a routine in those days when air travel was perhaps less frequent than now, but nothing exceptional otherwise, and certainly their families could have had no thought of the tragedy that was to ensue. As the plane came in to land, in a snow storm, it crashed on a mountainside near Basle. One hundred and eight died

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I was working that week in my father’s optician’s practice in Wells. I remember a succession of people coming in to ask for repeat prescriptions of pairs of glasses to be made up to replace those lost in the crash for the few survivors. And I remember that so many came into our practice either in Wells or Burnham on Sea in subsequent weeks who had lost relatives or friends in the accident. It was as if the heart had been ripped from the communities involved, which of course it had. To lose so many mothers and wives in one event must have been devastating. Although I was not remotely directly affected, I still recognise and to an extent feel the grief that was all too evident.

Of course, communities recover. New people arrive and life goes on. But I doubt if anyone who lived there at the time will ever forget, and nor should they. It is a tenuous, and perhaps inappropriate, link from that awful story to the small and happy occasion last week when I re-opened the Wincanton Museum in new premises in the library. But the connection is this. It’s important for people to have a sense of place and a sense of their history, whether distant or recent. We need to know where we come from, and what happened in the past. It’s part of our shared experience.

**HOW NOT TO MEND A ROAD**

**Thursday 18th April 2013**

Okay, so the weather has been awful over the last six months, and that’s bound to have an effect, I accept that. It is also the case, and I have never sought to hide the fact, that times are difficult right now for local authorities. But I am concerned that the surface of many of our roads in Somerset is now getting into a state which will be difficult if not impossible to repair properly, and I hear lots of people complaining about the potholes which appear on a regular basis on even major roads in the county.

Indeed, I had an e-mail from a constituent only last week describing a hole which he described as appearing to be the entrance to a nether world. Whether that is a slight exaggeration is not for me to say. I simply recognise that this is a rapidly worsening problem, and unless something is done, things are going to get steadily worse. I seem to remember that a very substantial sum was provided to highway authorities a year or so ago directly to deal with the pothole problem, but there is scant evidence that it has had a lasting effect locally.

Clearly there is an issue of priorities, and there are a number of issues I have had on occasions with the way priorities are set. But it’s also an consequence of how work on our roads is done, in my opinion. I have never been a great fan of excessive spending on roads simply to make them look neat. Many other similar countries to not feel the need to obsessively provide kerbing stones down the edge of rural roads, for instance, which seems to have been a periodic obsession of highways engineers here.

But we should also recognise we live in a pretty wet place. That surface water tends to freeze, which is not good for asphalt and tarmac. And the roads carry, even in our most rural areas, a significant amount of traffic, of which, again, a significant proportion is HGVs which disproportionately damage the road surface. So our roads suffer higher than average wear and tear. When you add to that the fact that many of our roads on the levels are causeways across wetland much prone to subsidence, you have a high, not low maintenance demand.

The cheap way of dealing with this is to apply patches to damaged road surfaces. You might as well throw public money down the drain. The patches inevitably and quickly detach themselves from the sub-structure and you have, again, a pot-hole, potentially an accident, and a risk of surface flooding. It is extraordinarily bad management.

The alternative is to do the job properly by replacing road surfaces. It is frustrating for people trying to get around, held up behind lorries and edging their way over loose gravel. But it is a better solution in that it lasts much longer. Again, I don’t want ever country lane immaculate. I actually don’t mind the smallest lanes having grass growing down the middle. It’s Somerset, after all. But letting our roads go to rack and ruin is bad economics and bad management. The words “stitch”, “time”, and “saving nine” come to mind.

**GOOD NEWS – BUT DON’T TELL ANYONE**

**Thursday 25th April 2013**

There is an important but slightly curious convention in British government that Ministers and government departments should in normal circumstances avoid making policy announcements during the period of any elections, including the county council elections which are currently underway. It’s called ministerial “purdah”, and the intention is to ensure that ministers don’t derive an unfair political advantage for their party by making popular decisions in areas where it may affect voting intentions.

It can be over-ruled when it is necessary; for instance, I made an announcement last week about offsetting the costs of disposal of sheep carcases in those areas drastically affected by the blizzards a few weeks ago, an announcement which couldn’t be held back for a few weeks because it was so important to the individuals concerned. But generally we are able to stick to the rules.

That’s why we were scrupulous in keeping to the purdah rules when my colleague Richard Benyon, the Minister responsible for flood defences, came to Somerset last week and attended a meeting I organised in Langport. He, and I, made it plain that he would be unable to say anything definitive, or, as he put it, even interesting, about our problems. He was there to listen to concerns so as to be better informed when decisions are taken. And I in turn made sure that we did not invite anybody as sitting county councillors or candidates in the areas affected by flooding so there could not be any suspicion of electioneering.

Despite all that, I think it was a very constructive meeting, I am very grateful to Richard for coming, and indeed the continuing interest he has shown in the issues on the Somerset levels over recent months. He was able to hear from those at the receiving end; farmers, those representing communities such as Muchelney, Langport, Martock and Ash, Isle Abbotts and others. We also had the local land drainage boards, officials from the Environment Agency, and others with specialist knowledge. All of them had the opportunity to say what they thought about the current arrangements, and what could be improved.

The messages were clear. We have long gone past the point when we can ignore the need to maintain our water-courses, and that means dredging the bigger rivers such as the Parrett and the Tone and making sure that the smaller drains and rhynes are also cleared. We need to look at our river catchment areas in the round, not just at the point of flooding but further upstream as well to see how we can hold back excess water more effectively. And we need better coordination between the various agencies, including a renewed urgency on the part of the highways authorities to clear drains and gullies and thus prevent avoidable surface flooding.

Everyone knows that we live in a very wet place, and that some flooding of land in the winter months is inevitable. But we also need to see what more can be done to protect communities and livelihoods on the levels. I’m very grateful to Richard for listening to us. As soon as we come out of “purdah”, I will be pressing him for announcements on what we do next.

**GUILTY AS CHARGED**

**Thursday 2nd May 2013**

I cannot pretend to be anything other than delighted by news from the Old Bailey last week. One of my former constituents, James McCormick, who lived in Langport, was found guilty of fraud after having made millions of pounds from selling so-called bomb detectors that in fact were entirely useless. As a result countless numbers of people, including British troops, were put at risk of death or maiming in some of the most dangerous places in the world, including Iraq and Afghanistan. It was one of the most morally bereft crimes I have ever come across.

I first took up the issue of Mr McCormick’s fake detectors back in 2009. I raised the issue in parliament and elsewhere, appeared on TV and radio, did everything I could to put an end to the cruel deception. The then government was, I believe, slow to act. What seemed extraordinary is that there seemed to be no bar to selling bits of plastic tat to overseas governments on the wholly wrong premise that they could protect people from bombs. In fact the “detectors” had no working parts whatsoever. They consisted of a “joke” golf ball finding device coupled with a bit of metal aerial and a lot of spin. So buyers were told that something with no circuitry or chemical reagents could “work under water from the air” and could detect explosives “up to 1 kilometre under the ground”. They could, of course, do no such thing.

But, ironically, because they were useless they apparently didn’t need licenses as military exports. Despite the fact that they were being sold to foreign armies and police forces, they fell outside export controls. It wasn’t until January 2010 that I finally persuaded ministers to stop the trade. By then they were already in use, and possibly still are, at checkpoints where the threat of terrorist bombing is a very real one. Who knows what may have occurred because officers were relying on something utterly useless to keep the public safe.

Of course there is also the question of how McCormick found buyers willing to place very highly priced orders with him. Certainly not on the basis of any expert assessment of the devices. The suspicion remains that the generals involved had other inducements to buy the rubbish, and sufficient lack of scruples not to care that they were putting their countrymen at risk. The devices cost their purchaser up to $40,000 each, about £27,000. They cost McCormick £13 each.

He will not be sentenced until Thursday this week. Personally, I hope that the judge will recognise that although the charge sheet reads fraud, the reality is this wicked con was tantamount to murder, and that the sentence will reflect that. I am glad that the campaign we waged to bring this to the attention of the authorities paid off, and I would particularly like to congratulate Clinton Rogers and the Points West team for some first-rate investigative journalism. But I’m sorry that somebody from the peace and tranquillity of Somerset could risk the health and lives of people in some of the most war-riven places on earth, all for the sake of ill-gotten gain.

**THE COUNTY COUNCIL ELECTIONS**

**Thursday 9th May 2013**

So, the elections for Somerset County Council have come and gone. Despite the excitement of the political commentators, in my constituency there was effectively no change. The number of county councillors overall has gone down, so it is difficult to compare like with like, but in Frome a division which was made up of parts of two previously held by the Conservatives was won by the Liberal Democrats, and in the rural area of Mendip to the west of Frome a seat made up of parts of a Conservative held seat and one held by the Liberal Democrats was won, reasonably narrowly, by the Conservatives. Otherwise, the seats stayed in the same hands.

That is not to say that there was not movement in share of the vote. Like elsewhere, UKIP took a larger share of the vote than previously, Labour and the Greens made little if any progress, and no independent came close to winning. That was not the picture universally across Somerset, however, and the current state of the parties on the County Council gives the Conservatives a slender majority of one. That could make any future by-elections in the county a little more interesting.

So what is to be said? Firstly, congratulations to all those who have won or retained a seat. It is a huge privilege to serve one’s local community, but it is also very hard work for little reward. So we should be grateful to those who have volunteered for the task, from whichever party. As an MP I need to work constructively with councillors of whichever political persuasion, so I hope that they will feel able to share with me problems in their individual areas, and will also respond positively when, on occasions, I ask for their assistance in turn.

Secondly, we should record our thanks and commiserations to all those who stood but were not successful this time. Some will be rightly very proud of increasing their share of the vote. Others will be deeply disappointed that despite their efforts the electorate looked elsewhere. Often that will not be a reflection of individual capability or commitment, but rather of political currents beyond their control or the vagaries of new boundaries. Whatever the reason, to have worked for weeks and on occasions months for no outcome is a dispiriting pursuit, but very necessary to the electoral and democratic process, which is why, as I said, we should be grateful, even to those with whom we have profound disagreement.

Thirdly, I find it very sad that turn-out continues to sink. Some rationalise this as distaste for all the political parties. I think that is often a cop-out. Of course candidates are not “all the same”. There are real issues in local politics which will be defined by the outcome of the elections. So if you couldn’t be bothered to vote last Thursday, don’t bother to moan about the state of the roads, or about services like libraries and social services, or the level of your council tax, or the number of police on your streets. You had your chance to express an opinion. You chose not to. So be it.

**TORIES VOTE AGAINST CAMERON’S PROGRAMME**

**Thursday 16th May 2013**

As most people know, I am not the biggest fan of the European Union in its current form. I have been consistently against joining the euro, with I think abundant justification in recent years, and I have always argued that the British people should be given the opportunity to express their views about British membership of the EU in a referendum. Indeed, I voted for a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, was summarily sacked and spent a couple of years on the back benches in consequence. But having said all that I am bemused by the current eruptions and tergiversations in the Conservative party which seems to me to bear all the hallmarks of obsession or hysterical panic.

It is quite extraordinary to have members of a government party voting, effectively, against the Queen’s speech by supporting a critical amendment. It is even more extraordinary to have ministers in that government not supporting the very legislative programme that they themselves agreed only a week or so ago. If there was a deep area of division between the parties in the coalition then perhaps I could understand it. But there wasn’t a terse stand-off on the subject of referendum legislation, with the Deputy Prime Minister blocking the Conservatives’ wishes. Far from it. No such legislation was ever entertained. Why? For one simple reason. We’ve already done it.

And this is what I really don’t understand. Two years ago we spent some time passing through legislation, the European Union Act 2011. It requires that if there are any significant changes to our relationship with the EU then a referendum to agree those changes would be triggered. It was introduced by the Conservative Foreign Secretary William Hague, and supported by both parties in the government. And it is binding on any future government unless they repeal it.

Any such referendum would, of course, be in effect an in-out referendum, because if the UK were to reject new constitutional arrangements then the government would either have to renegotiate new terms which were acceptable or secure the country’s departure from the union. And that has to be taken with the Prime Minister’s initiative to look at all aspects of the functioning of the EU to see where it can be improved. I fully support that. We need the structures of the EU to be more democratic, more transparent, less bureaucratic, and allowing far more to be done at national and local level. The package that results would inevitably trigger a referendum at that point, probably in 2016.

So why on earth would we need to repeat that exercise putting through another bill to the same effect? It’s not as if we haven’t got plenty enough else on our plate at the moment. The answer, of course, is that this is all about the obsessive interests of a few who think and talk about little else than this country’s relationship to Europe. That is not a preoccupation, as polls frequently remind us, of the vast majority of our fellow citizens who are much more concerned about their jobs, their health, their children’s education and their safety on the street.

I still want people to have their say on Europe. But this is no way to go about it.

***David Cameron, under pressure from UKIP, effectively abandoned his own position by promising a referendum in the 2015 election. The rest, as they say, is history.***

**THE RIGHT RESPONSE**

**Thursday 30th May 2013**

The death of the young soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich last week shocked the nation. Many will feel that the extended coverage extended to the two perpetrators provided them with exactly what they were looking and hoping for, publicity for their vile and perverse actions, but that will not have stopped both the feelings of horror and the desperate sympathy for the victim’s parents and loved ones. It was a truly dreadful event, made in some ways even worse by the banality of the surroundings. It is one thing, awful of course but not entirely unexpected for a serviceman or woman to lose their life in a theatre of war, but for it to happen where they are ostensibly at safety on the streets of Britain, and at the hands not of a dispossessed guerrilla but a fellow Briton, is arguably far worse.

There are a number of reactions which are understandable, but nevertheless wrong. It is easy, and some on the near fascist right will certainly want to do so, to blame all muslims. It is as wrong-headed as to blame all Christians for the murderous escapades of a lunatic in Norway claiming to be acting on God’s behalf. The Woolwich murder, just like the previous terrorist outrages, have nothing to do with the religion of Islam other than the claims of the madmen who perform them, and indeed are based on heretical teachings of medieval obscurantists who cannot be held to speak for the religion as a whole.

Secondly, it would be wrong to blame the security services for “failing to protect us”. The precise details of this case will be looked at in some detail, not least by the committee in parliament set up for that purpose. If they find that important signs were missed, they will say so. But I know just how much work is done which can never be shouted from the rooftops to foil terrorism and protect the public. It is a non-stop endeavour, and it deserves our heart-felt thanks and admiration, not criticism when occasionally some idiot gets lucky.

Thirdly, an event like this emphatically doesn’t mean we have to turn the ratchet again on authoritative and restrictive measures which serve only to constrain our traditional freedoms and actually do the terrorists job for them. I see that a group of “senior politicians” have immediately pronounced that we need to look again at the surveillance legislation recently rejected, the so-called “snoopers charter”. Many of these are the authors of the huge number of new laws over recent years, few of which have proved to be effective.

The powers that such a law would have given the security services would have done precisely nothing to stop the Woolwich outrage. They already have powers, with safeguards, to monitor electronic communications. To reintroduce the measures on the back of a knee-jerk reaction to a genuine tragedy would be wrong-headed, opportunistic, and deeply counter-productive.

There may be a case for strengthening our legal protections. Indeed, I would support something proportionate and which had appropriate safeguards to protect the innocent citizen. But if so, let us do so in a reasoned and sensible way, not in the immediate aftermath of terrorism.

**LORDS A’LEAPING**

**Thursday 6th June 2013**

The latest batch of revelations of members of both houses of parliament apparently accepting money for lobbying is profoundly depressing. Depressing on a number of levels; firstly, that anyone is stupid enough after everything that has happened over recent years to fall for blandishments from a bogus PR firm, or to feel that what they were doing was in any way proper. Secondly, because actually a huge amount has changed, not least in the now very stringent expenses system which I was involved in bringing in, which has made things hugely more transparent and hard to manipulate. But also because we knew for a long time that in the lobbying system and in the rules of the House of Lords there were loopholes still open to abuse, but it has taken so long to do something about it.

As far as lobbyists are concerned, let’s make it perfectly clear that it is entirely right and proper for people to lobby MPs and peers. Indeed, it happens every week in my advice surgeries, where people want to explain the effect a particular measure or circumstance is having on them or on their business and ask me to help. That is legitimate, and it makes no difference if someone is employed professionally for that purpose.

What is wrong is when it is done in a clandestine manner, so that the pressure being put on legislators is not obvious. What is even more wrong is when the MP or peer is offered an inducement, either through cash payments or payments in kind – the offer of trips abroad or something similar. And what is most wrong of all is when a member of either house of parliament is paid to represent a particular interest in what they do in the chamber.

I have long argued for a register of lobbyists to bring this into the open, and in my previous ministerial job worked on the white paper we issued on the subject, the proposals for consultation prior to legislation. I am quite clear. That legislation must now come forward and be passed. The world of public affairs does not need to be murky, and it is important that it isn’t.

And that brings me to the House of Lords. Again, let me completely open about this. I would prefer a proper reform of the House of Lords, and worked hard to get that reform through parliament, but it was not to be, because enough backbench Conservatives resisted, and Labour weren’t prepared to help a reform they claimed to be supporting. So we have the House of Lords as it is. And it largely does a good job; I have never argued otherwise, my argument was about legitimacy, not utility. But it’s important that it is subjected to the same checks and balances on probity as the Commons. And the sad thing is that it isn’t.

So at the moment peers can commit criminal offences but still be entitled to make our laws. There is nothing like the same transparency about their activities. That’s why standards of conduct are even more important there, and need to be addressed.

**MEDIA INTRUSION**

**Thursday 13th June 2013**

What do you think might be best for a distressed teenager facing sufficient levels of despair to either self-harm or attempt suicide? Would you think it was a suitable subject for media coverage? A good story to splash over the front pages of newspapers? Or you might think that the young person in question should be given support and, if necessary, treatment outside the glare of publicity, and that to indulge public voyeurism on the subject was, way beyond a lapse of good taste, positively abhorrent.

What then if the person in question was a “celebrity”; would that change any of the editorial decisions involved? What if the person was not a celebrity in their own right, but simply related to somebody in the public eye? And would it make a difference if they were foreign? Would that somehow make it alright to exploit the prurient assumed interest of the British public as a form of entertainment, or in the mistaken belief that it would sell extra papers?

My answer to all the above questions, as you would probably have guessed, is a resounding no. I cannot imagine the circumstances where the mental anguish of a disturbed child is considered to be fair game for the tabloids, let alone the “respectable” press. And indeed, I had thought that such a case, where there is no discernible public interest, would be entirely outwith even the limited restrictions imposed by the press rules such as they are.

So what are we to make of the blanket coverage given last week, including candid photos showing clear evidence of slashing to her wrists, of the sad case of fifteen year old Paris Jackson, whose only claim on our attention is that she is the daughter of the late pop-star Michael Jackson?

As she lies recovering in a psychiatric hospital, the victim it would appear of cyber-bullying which has so damaged her as to lead her to seek to end her young life, we have the spectacle of our news media, including the BBC and the broadsheet newspapers, treating this as a bona fide story meriting the most intrusive coverage. And nobody, it appears, seem to find this anything other than okay. No sign of criticism from any quarter. Is it because she’s a showbiz relative? Or don’t Americans deserve the same consideration I would hope, but am by no means convinced, would be extended to a British youngster in similar circumstances?

I raise this because I don’t think we take nearly seriously enough the mental pressures exerted on some young people, and the vulnerability they often display. I don’t think we recognise the prevalence of mental health issues, or devote enough resource to providing help and support. And our attitudes are often, in this most sensitive of areas, still too often rooted in old prejudices or appallingly dated approaches. Someone with a problem of this kind, particularly an adolescent, is not a spectacle to be gawped at or amused by. They need help to rebuild their life, quietly and with loving care. And so-called civilised editors of grand national newspapers who nevertheless feel this is a good use of column-inches should be ashamed of themselves.

**CLOSING ROADS**

**Thursday 20th June 2013**

I was late for my advice surgery in Somerton last Saturday. Actually, although I am loath to admit it, that is not entirely unusual; one of the problems of having a constituency as large and rural as I have is that you are very vulnerable to the odd herd of cows, slow moving tractor or recycling lorry on a narrow lane that means that despite your best intentions you don’t quite arrive where you’re meant to be at the right time. But in this instance, the reason I was late was that the road between Lydford Cross Keys and Somerton was closed for roadworks, meaning I had to go on a diversion via Charlton Mackrell and Kingsdon (and please don’t write to tell me you know a much better way!).

I write this not as a bit of special pleading, as there is no reason why I should not be held up as much as anyone else, and of course I realise that sometimes repairs have to be done, but to raise the issue of whether the highways authorities are much readier nowadays to allow a total road closure than they used to be.

I used to be a county councillor, many years ago. In those days much more was decided by committees in open session than now, when most if not all road maintenance is contracted out and highways engineers answer to “portfolio holders”. But I cannot remember many occasions when roads were closed in their totality for maintenance or repair. Things would normally be arranged so that at least one lane was open for access. Yes, there would be lights, and there would be delays, but at least you could get where you wanted without going on a huge diversion.

We have the same sort of thing happening in Castle Cary, with the closure of the railway bridge. When it was first raised, I managed to get the closure delayed for a few months, while Network Rail consulted with local people about their plans. I’m afraid it hasn’t done much good, because the closure is going ahead, albeit at a better time of the year and for a shorter period. But it will still cause a lot of inconvenience, and be costly for local firms. I even appealed to the Minister for Transport, but he was unable to prevail on what is essentially a private company to change their plans, plans agreed with the local highways authority.

I know bridges need to be maintained. We don’t want the one over the railway collapsing. And I do understand that the cost of providing a temporary bridge would be substantial. But I have the nagging feeling at the back of my mind that these closures are arranged firstly for the benefit and the advantage of the statutory undertakers and the contractors rather than for the convenience of the public. It may be that road closures are occasionally unavoidable, but I would simply like to think that every possible alternative is explored first, so that we work on the basis that the road will be kept open to traffic unless it is absolutely impossible to arrange otherwise. Or is it more a case of “carry on, lads, and let’s see who shouts loudest.”

**CUTTING THE CLOTH**

**Thursday 27th June 2013**

This week sees the announcement of the spending review. It has been a tense process for all concerned, as we try and shave yet more savings from government departments so that we spend within our means, and, although at the time of writing I don’t know the details, there will inevitably be valuable activities which will be lost, along with efficiency savings which become that much more difficult when you repeat the exercise year after year. In my own department, for instance, the cumulative reduction in spending over the first four years of government amounted to over 27%. To find something approaching another 10% now was never going to be easy.

And of course there are areas of spending which you reduce at your, or should I say our, peril. In our case, for example, we would argue strongly against cutting back on flood defences. Nor can we let our guard down on animal or plant disease. And I have been arguing strongly that we must not dilute the effectiveness of our environmental bodies by inappropriately merging them. Whether we have been successful in this can only be judged after the announcements from the Chancellor of the Exchequer are made. But that all adds to the pressure to use resources wisely. We need to ensure, for example, our arms-length agencies which operate separately nevertheless share the so-called “back-office functions” such as financial and human resources support more effectively. That might seem like straightforward good management, and it is, but it’s surprising how hard it is to instil across a civil service used to its own practices.

It also means disposing of land and buildings which we are no longer using to best effect. You would think that was obvious, but you would be surprised how difficult it is to persuade people not to keep parts of the estate which “could come in handy” even if not fully occupied. And of course the costs of moving people and functions and acquiring smaller, better suited premises sometimes incurs expenditure in order in the longer term to save money. I remember attempting to do the same when I was Leader of Somerset County Council only to be told that there wasn’t even a comprehensive record of the land we owned, the so-called “terrier”. A bit hard to rationalise your holdings when you don’t know what they are!

Anyway, we haven’t done badly in the department overall. We’ve reduced our total number of staff by 5,000, about 17%, with senior civil servants taking a 25% cut. We’ve saved £35 million each year on the costs of running the estate. Sixty two sites across the country, and particularly in London, have been vacated. We’ve saved £48 million on IT, and reduced spending on consultancy by 40%. And the number of separate bodies in the department will have reduced by the end of the parliament from 92 to 36.

I say this not to pretend that the job is done, but perhaps to reassure people that we are getting to grips with the bureaucratic spend, as should perhaps have been done years ago, because when money is tight that makes more sense than cutting front-line services. It’s not easy, but it’s necessary.

**THE MOTHER ROAD**

**Thursday 4th July 2013**

I’m quite sure that I’ve harassed the Secretary of State for Transport (and his many predecessors) beyond the point of reason on the subject of the A303, our favourite local traffic jam. I may have mentioned it a few times in this column, as well! I know I’ve got through to the Secretary of State because he’s taken to avoiding me by ducking into doorways when he sees me coming rather than be on the receiving end of yet another diatribe.

But it’s worked! That and the efforts of local campaigners and the belated but welcome realisation from the County Council that upgrading the road is a strategic necessity. The announcement from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury of the government’s capital programme (which I very much welcomed in providing real investment into Britain’s infrastructure) included at last, for the first time since 1996, work on the A303.

For those who don’t know, we had a plan to make the A303 safer back in the 1990s. It included the dualling of the stretch between Sparkford and Ilchester in my constituency, a bottleneck where the road passes from three lanes to single to dual carriageway and back, and sadly a part of the road which bears more than its fair share of accidents, many fatal. I remember appearing myself at the public inquiry into the scheme, which was approved in 1996. Then we had the general election, and the incoming government placed a moratorium on all major road schemes. They then sheltered behind the fact that it is very difficult to deal with the problems around Stonehenge to argue that nothing at all should be done to the road at any point.

Then, when road schemes were coming on stream again, the local authorities in the south west in the so-called regional assembly decided to downgrade the A303 from the status of Second Strategic Route to the south west it had enjoyed, and of course the government found other priorities for any available cash. It is only over the last year or so, since the absurdly named South West Regional Spatial Strategy was binned, that Somerset and the other counties have, to their credit, worked on bringing the A303 improvements up the pecking order again.

Now we have a commitment. Not quite as clear as I would have liked, as the first thing is to establish the technical feasibility of what needs to be done. But the most important thing is that not only is there the announcement of the feasibility study but there is capital money set aside and earmarked for the work. And I have already discussed with Transport Ministers that if they want an early start, then the obvious segment to bring to the front of the queue is the Sparkford to Ilchester stretch because we already have agreement (although we’ll have to consult again) as to what should be done, and the fact that it is an on-line improvement means there is no difficult and expensive land acquisition to complete or any substantial environmental issues, as there may be elsewhere.

So if we get what we want, I’ll have to find something else to lobby the Transport secretary on. Now, about the railways...

***Despite numerous announcements, the improvements to the A303 still haven’t happened.***

**OUTSTANDING**

**Thursday 11th July 2013**

To win a national prize for being exceptional in your chosen job is a pretty extraordinary thing. To do so when you’ve only been in that job for a year is even more spectacular. But that’s exactly what one young teacher from a local school did last week, and I was delighted to welcome her to the House of Commons when she came up to get her award.

Joanna Hawley, 27 years old, lives in Frome, and teaches Art at Ansford Academy. And last week she received one of the Pearson Teaching Awards as the Outstanding New Teacher of the Year. From her citation, she richly deserves the recognition she has now received. It isn’t just that her pupils got the best GCSE art results in the whole of Somerset. It’s that everyone, from her colleagues at work to the young people she teaches, reckon she’s a delight to work with and a real credit to her profession.

So congratulations Joanna. But it’s also a chance to congratulate every teacher who imparts their enthusiasm, passion for their subject and care for their pupils to their work. There are occasions when the teaching profession feels distinctly unloved. But there’s an awful lot of people who are deeply grateful to the teachers who genuinely “educated” them, in the true sense of the word of “leading out”, finding qualities and interests latent in a young mind.

That’s why these national teaching awards are, in my view, such a good thing, and of course I’m delighted when the judges underline the achievements of one of our local teachers.

Teaching is a complex and difficult job, one which a lot of us, if truth be told, would find very difficult indeed. And it is not helped by changing fashions and theories as to what our children should be taught, or even the way it’s taught and, in due course, tested. But we do have to make sure that children get the level of understanding of basic principles that will stand them in good stead as they grow older, and it’s in that context that the changes to the curriculum which were announced this week should be viewed.

I have not the slightest doubt that some aspects will be bitterly contested, although some of the reflex reactions to anything which can be interpreted as “retrograde” I think are mistaken. Having no rigour in a curriculum does nothing to stretch the able child or ensure a level of competence in those who are academically weaker. And many of us have been perplexed over recent decades by those things which are simply left out of the teaching agenda while others (the history of the Tudors and the Second World War come to mind in my own children’s school career) seem to be repeated again and again. So I hope the curricular changes focus on what is important, and on a wide enough canvas to engage the interest of every child.

But there isn’t any change in a curriculum which will work effectively without the engagement of an inspiring teacher able to communicate and empathise. And that’s where special people like Joanna come in. I hope her career goes from strength to strength.

**CAPPING BENEFITS**

**Thursday 18th July 2013**

Reform of the welfare system is never going to be an easy option. It is much easier to keep passing out the money to people who by definition are the least well off than to try to control the expenditure or target it more effectively, and any change is likely to be bitterly resisted. Sometimes that is a perfectly reasonable reaction, if the government of the day gets it wrong, but equally it is important to ensure that the total budget is controlled, and also that it doesn't provide perverse incentives where it is better for your pocket to be collecting benefits than to be doing a job of work.

That is essential from two points of view. Firstly, because there is then nothing to encourage people to find a job, and it creates a society where a significant number of people become entirely dependent on the welfare system. Secondly, there is an issue of fairness. We must never forget that welfare payments can only be made because we take money, through the taxation system, from people who work hard and many of whom are not desperately well off themselves. They will very quickly resent other people receiving that money for "doing nothing", especially if they are actually getting more in benefits than they can earn in their wage packet.

That's why I think it is pretty difficult to argue with the principle that there should be a cap on the total amount of benefits a single family can receive, the measure which came into effect this week. It's not as though it's a particularly low cap; it still allows a total take from the system of an amount equal to the average wage in this country. Even to spell that out indicates what's wrong with the arrangements as they were. That an out of work family could receive not just a minimum wage but well beyond what the majority of working people in the country could earn working full time, and these were the people paying the bill, seems out of synch with common sense.

There is an orthodoxy amongst some who would describe themselves as left wing or liberal that to impose this cap is somehow a disgraceful attack on the vulnerable. It has been described as a savage cut in family incomes. I'm sorry, I fundamentally disagree. Firstly, because it is only by putting some limits on welfare spending that you can afford to properly help those who are genuinely vulnerable, particularly those with disabilities (who, incidentally, are exempt from the cap). And secondly, because it is an extraordinary insult to most working folk to suggest that to bring the income of these families down to what they earn is unsupportably vicious.

It's said that some will have to move out of expensive accommodation in central London. Well, yes, that is unfortunate. But it is the daily experience of millions of people who can't afford to live exactly where they would like to. Why should the taxpayer subsidise central London house prices?

I do have genuine concerns about some welfare cuts. But limiting total take to the equivalent of £35,000 a year before tax isn't one of them.

**VACCINATING BADGERS**

**Thursday 25th July 2013**

I doubt if there is very much more that could be said or written on the vexed subject of bovine tuberculosis and badgers, but I'm equally confident a lot more will be over coming weeks and months, as we move to the implementation of the pilot cull in Somerset and Gloucestershire. As I drove out of my village to go to the Frome Half Marathon on Sunday morning there was a dead badger in the middle of the road, and I half expected to have to explain that I hadn't been personally responsible for its demise.

But on Tuesday in the early hours of the morning I was in Gloucestershire and within literally inches of several live badgers, all of whom, happily, survived the experience. I had the opportunity to observe at close quarters the vaccination programme we have been supporting for some time, and which forms a very important of the comprehensive strategy which we published a few weeks ago to eradicate the disease in both cattle and badgers over the next twenty five years.

There are those who want to have you believe that we are deliberately ignoring vaccination as an option because, for some reason which I have some difficulty understanding given how emotive an issue it is, we prefer to simply kill badgers. Of course, the opposite is the truth. Vaccination, of both badgers and cattle, is a key part of the programme, and will be an increasingly important one. And what we want is healthy cattle and healthy badgers.

It is frustrating that we don't have a vaccine for cattle that we can use yet. We have one, the old BCG that many of us had put in our arms as children. We also have a test which we think will distinguish between a vaccinated animal and an infected one. But we can't use either until we have jumped through a long series of regulatory and legislative hoops at European level, and the European Commissioner, who I spoke to recently on the matter, says that's likely to beat least ten years away yet.

As far as badgers are concerned, we have an injectable vaccine, which is what I saw being used this week. What we don't have, but we're putting a lot of money into developing, is an oral vaccine, which would be a lot easier to use and which would enable us to immunise a lot more badgers. And what we're also working on is better diagnostic tests so we can better identify infected setts and individuals. But for the moment we have the injectable vaccine, which is expensive to administer and has the disadvantage of having to be repeated each year. And of course, vaccination doesn't cure a sick badger. But it is still an important tool in dealing with the disease.

And that's precisely the point. When you're fighting a devastating infection which results in over 28,000 cattle being slaughtered each year, and will cost the taxpayer around £1billion over ten years, you need to use everything available. That includes culling, because other countries, including Ireland, show it works. But it also includes vaccination, alongside better biosecurity and cattle movement controls, until we're finally on top of the disease.

**LIVING AN ORDINARY LIFE**

[**Thursday 1st August 2013**](x-apple-data-detectors://0)

I had a letter the other day from a constituent which followed an all too familiar pattern. While seeking my assistance with a local planning issue, my correspondent trotted out the dreary litany that as a member of parliament I obviously must live in a grand house surrounded by my estate and entirely cocooned from the cares of "ordinary" people. I don't. It's like the common enquiry as to whether and when I might be "visiting my constituency".

Now there may be, indeed I'm sure there are, some parliamentary colleagues who have a great deal of money and do, in reality, inhabit the sort of world these people imagine. And there certainly was a time when MPs very often didn't live in their constituencies and certainly wouldn't do the regular advice surgeries that we do nowadays. But I would say that applies to very few now, and for me, of course, it's just my family home.

But although the myth that elected representatives lead lives hugely detached from their constituents - yes, I do shop in the local supermarket, use the local doctors, get held up by the same roadworks - there are also self -imposed constraints which you can, if you let them, stop you having any fun. And I think there are times when you need to do just that, enjoy yourself with friends and family.

I was thinking exactly that when I read the resignation letter from former Labour front-bencher Tom Watson to his leader Ed Miliband a couple of weeks ago. Among the normal platitudes, he expressed a determination to now go to more music festivals, and regretted that Ed wouldn't be able to do the same. And my immediate reaction was "why not?". Of course there is the risk of media intrusion, as George Osborne has found when satisfying his apparently entirely genuine but unaccountable appetite for Big Macs. And there is the understandable desire on the part of organisers to whisk you away to a VIP area to nibble at cucumber sandwiches, which may not be what you want.

But you can just buy a ticket and go, and that would be my advice to any of my colleagues, whether they 're party leaders or humble back- benchers. If you want to go to a sports match, don't ask to sit in, or wait to be invited to, the directors' box; go and sit in the stands and get wet, as I regularly do at Bath Rugby. And if you want to go to a music festival, again, buy a ticket and go, as I did last weekend at the Village Pump Festival in Wiltshire. It rained a lot, and I got a few looks from constituents who recognised me but had the good sense to realise that this was not a good time to bring up their housing problem or whatever, but it was very enjoyable. And I dare say I was the only government minister at a festival that weekend!

By the way, if you like blues, catch a guy called Eric Bibb, who I heard [on Saturday night](x-apple-data-detectors://1). Absolutely brilliant, and playing the Cheese and Grain in Frome in November. If I can, I'll be there.

**INADEQUATE IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH**

**Thursday 8th August 2013**

Late July and early August are usually part of what is known as the “silly season”, when serious news stories are few and far between and the media increasingly depend on “soft” stories and rather ridiculous fillers to make up the empty columns or air-time. However, occasionally really shocking issues come up, and I doubt if anyone can read the reports of the sad life and death of young Daniel Pelka in Birmingham without feelings of huge sadness and anger that he was so abused by people who should have been caring for him.

Sadly he is not alone, and he will I fear not be the last. Very often anger and outcry is directed not only at the perpetrators but also at the authorities, on the grounds that they should have intervened. Certainly it is the case that we need the social services, police, teachers and others to correctly identify signs of abuse and take the appropriate steps to protect vulnerable children. But too often I think the criticism is unfair. Except where clear and avoidable mistakes are made, social workers in particular do an incredibly difficult job and do so with astonishing commitment and devotion. I’m afraid the authorities simply can’t stop every wicked person from doing wicked things.

But we do need to have the right systems in place to support the work of individual practitioners, and we should be very worried indeed about a report issued this week into child protection services in Somerset. Because the report is damning, not of individual social workers, but of the management, the organisation and the governance of systems in our county. That is particularly upsetting, as historically and up until a few years ago Somerset was always seen as a leading authority in social services, and disturbing because it follows up on another damning report in 2012 and finds that little if anything has changed for the better.

The report is after an unannounced inspection of child protection services in Somerset by OFSTED. Inspections grade services into four classifications; outstanding, good, adequate and inadequate, the latter being defined as “a service that does not meet minimum requirements”. What does they find in Somerset’s case? Let me quote from the conclusions: “Overall effectiveness of the arrangements to protect children in Somerset County Council is judged to be **inadequate**.” “The effectiveness of the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers is **inadequate**”. “The quality of practice is **inadequate**”. “Leadership and governance is **inadequate**”. This is shocking and deeply disturbing stuff.

What the report reveals is not overstretched staff unable to deal with workload. Indeed, it says explicitly that there are enough social workers and first line managers to ensure that caseloads are largely manageable. It shows that there are deficiencies in the way cases are managed, in record-keeping, in overall management. And what is worrying is that those issues were detected over a year ago. Although the council has now moved to strengthen senior management of the service, it has not yet got to the position where levels are even adequate.

This matters. It needs to be dealt with. Before we read about another tragedy, not in a grimy inner-city, but in bucolic Somerset.

**LISTENING TO FARMERS**

**Thursday 15th August 2013**

When you're dealing with budgets of literally billions of pounds, it pays to listen carefully to what people have to say. That's why I've not only been travelling around the country over the last few weeks, talking to farmers, environmentalists and others in places as diverse as Cambridgeshire, Kent, Gloucestershire, Breconshire, the New Forest, Northumberland, Berwickshire and the Orkney Islands, I've also spent this week in talks in London. The issue is how we design the next Common Agricultural Policy as far as England is concerned.

You will note that I said England, because one of the outcomes of the tortuous negotiations we've been engaged in over the last year in Brussels is to provide much more flexibility between the constituent parts of the UK to find the best fit for each of the nations. What best suits England may not be best for Scotland, and vice versa. Indeed, that was one of the main themes of the overall negotiation, in that a one size fits all policy can never work across a continent as diverse in its climate, its environment and its farming practices as Europe.

I say outcome, but one of the frustrations is that the whole thing still hasn't been formally signed off, as the European Parliament has still not agreed to the final figures, but we are nearly there. And of course there are controversies. Some will be upset that the total EU budget has been, for the first time, reduced, although I doubt that will include many UK taxpayers. Some farmers can't see why that budget reduction has to apply to farm payments, although with CAP representing some 40% of the budget it's hard to see how, or indeed why, it shouldn't.

But the issue now is how we make it work. We have got to make it simple. Having now got the Rural Payments Agency, which distributes the money, working efficiently after having been frankly shambolic a few years ago, the last thing I want is to return to the bad old days of 2005.

Then we want to ensure that public money provides for public goods. We have a very good record in this country in encouraging good environmental practice on farms. We want that to continue, and to be improved on. For instance, I would very much like to do something which directly improves and expands the habitat for insect pollinators like bees. At the same time we don't want systems which are over complicated or over prescriptive.

We need to settle the distribution between what is called pillar 1, the money paid out as single farm payments on the basis of acreage, and pillar 2 payments, which are more sharply focused. Some farmers want us to transfer less from the former to the latter, but it is pillar 2 that supports agri-environmental schemes, more marginal farming like the uplands, and support for innovation and investment in dairying, for instance.

Many people would like to see the end of the CAP, and when you hear some countries arguing for a return to commodity support, even for crops we can do without like tobacco, it's an easy argument. But while we have it, it must support a sustainable, in all senses, agricultural industry. That's what we're trying to achieve.

**FRACKING**

**Thursday 22nd August 2013**

I can perfectly well understand why people are concerned about drilling for gas in the shale rock which lies beneath large parts of the country using the technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking”. I understand the concerns, but I think that most of them are misplaced.

In writing this, I am well aware that it will provoke an angry postbag from people who are absolutely convinced that fracking is the work of the devil incarnate, and therefore if I do not agree with them I must be either a rogue or a fool. Oddly enough, I seem to get the same sort of letters from people who equally dislike wind turbines, photo-voltaic, deep mining, nuclear power, indeed every conceivable source of the energy which we all use and which we take for granted. The fact is there is no energy source entirely benign in its effects, either because of environmental risks, human costs of recovery or simply loss of amenity. But here’s the thing – if we don’t do something on these small islands of ours to generate power, then we’re either going to have to buy it in very expensively, or the lights will go out. It’s a question of assessing relative risks and relative disbenefits.

So. To return to fracking. There is an awful lot of nonsense, I’m afraid, spoken about the risks of doing it. Firstly, we’ve actually been fracking for some time. Many of the people most virulently against would be equally strongly in favour of so-called “hot rocks” technology, but that depends on fracking to create the thermal gradient. Many scare stories are brought into play about the “contamination” which happened in the United States. In fact, there has been no cases of contamination discovered by the Environmental Protection Agency in the US associated with fracking, despite alarmist stories in the press. The same applies to seismic activity, which if it can be detected at all is at a much lower order of magnitude than what occurs naturally. And the huge quantities of water used, as we are told by some, is actually less than services local golf-courses.

But there are proper concerns, and there are arguments against. There is a need for proper regulation and environmental assessment, and that is a necessary part of the licensing process. There is a need for even greater care in areas which have a complex hydrogeological structure, which includes the Mendips with its fractured limestone aquifer, which is why I doubt, not because of any “nimby” arguments but because of sound scientific concerns, whether Somerset will prove to be a good candidate for drilling.

But the genuine argument is that gas is a hydrocarbon, and we should be moving away from carbon-based energy. And that is absolutely right. But while we reduce demand and increase the use of renewables, there is still a period when we need to use hydrocarbons. So the question is firstly, whether fracking gas is better than digging and burning coal, which of course it is, and is it better than importing gas at a higher price, which again is self-evident.

I’ll lose friends by saying so, but actually fracking, for the time being, makes environmental and economic sense.

**A CORRUPT, MORONIC, WARMONGER WRITES**

**Thursday 5th September 2013**

Dolly Parton has a standard reply when she is accused of being “a dumb blonde”. She says something along the lines of “Well, I don’t think I’m dumb, and I sure as hell ain’t blonde!”. I feel something along the same lines after receiving an e-mail this week telling me that I am, and I quote, a “corrupt, moronic warmonger”. I know no reason why I should be accused of being corrupt, other than that is the sort of currency we have to get used to nowadays; I don’t think I’m moronic, but of course that’s for others to judge; and I “sure as hell ain’t” a warmonger, as even a cursory glance at my record over the years, and particularly my frequently expressed objections to the war in Iraq, would show.

The context, as I’m sure you will realise, is the vote last week on what action if any should be taken against the atrocities committed in Syria. And, as the Prime Minister said, you cannot avoid considering the matter without reference back to a previous holder of his office, Tony Blair, and his behaviour. It has, as he said, poisoned the water.

But what many people, including my intemperate correspondent, seem to have missed is that the motion before us last week was not to “go to war”, or anything like. Indeed, the motion reflected not only discussions between the political parties in advance of the debate, but also, and I don’t think I am disclosing any confidences here, the strongly expressed views of many members of the government, myself included. So, the motion asked us to agree that using chemical weapons, nerve gas, to kill one’s own citizens is an evil and heinous act, and should be condemned. I hope there is no civilised person who would disagree. Chemical weapons have been banned since after the first world war. They should not be used with impunity.

Secondly, it agreed that we should wait until the United Nations inspectors had a chance to report, something Blair refused to accept, you may recall, in the case of Hans Blix in Iraq.

Thirdly, it committed us to return to the United Nations Security Council to seek an international agreement, although with Russia maintaining a veto on behalf of its ally that might be difficult. Fourthly it ensured that intelligence information was shared with the house. And fifthly, no action involving British forces, however limited, could happen without a second vote by the House of Commons.

Nothing could be further away from the way Blair treated the house and the country. He went into a full scale war on the basis of weapons of mass destruction that didn’t, in fact, exist. There is little doubt WMDs not only exist but were used in Syria. This was the first time parliament had been given an opportunity in advance to debate such a matter, let alone effectively block any action. That’s a victory for parliamentary democracy and transparency.

As for the leader of the opposition, who says he would support action under certain conditions, lays down those conditions, and then when they are met votes against anyway, he looks rather like a man who won’t take yes for an answer.

**CONTROLLING THE LOBBY**

**Thursday 12th September 2013**

If you want the antithesis of the "junket" so often described by the tabloid press, try a meeting of the European Union Agriculture Council of Ministers. However, given that it decides the use of huge amounts of public money, including a very sizeable chunk from the British taxpayer, it's important that the country is properly represented, which explains why the early part of this week have found me in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, the country which at present holds the EU presidency.

That in turn is a shame because it means that I will miss debates at Committee stage of the bill which seems at present to be the preoccupation of a large number of constituents who have clicked to send me an e mail sponsored by the 38 Degrees organisation. The bill is, to give it it's full name, the Transparency of Lobbying, Non-Party Lobbying and Trade Union Administration Bill, usually just referred to as the lobbying bill. And if you were to believe what some say, it represents the end of free speech as we know it in this country. Which, I hope needless to say, it isn't.

That is not to say that every bill which issues forth from the government is perfect in every way and incapable of improvement. I fully accept that sometimes drafting can be improved, either to avoid ambiguity or unintended consequences. That is a point that I have made to the ministers working on the bill, and I am pleased that it sounds as though they will be prepared to accept, either in principle or in detail, amendments suggested by some of my Liberal Democrat colleagues which put any inappropriate construction of the terms of the bill beyond doubt.

But some, who possibly haven't actually read the bill, insist that it should be dropped altogether. I profoundly disagree. We do need to better regulate lobbyists. Lobbying as such is not a problem; constituents do it all the time, as do charities, pressure groups and businesses. What is wrong is when it is not transparent, so that government decisions may be affected by shadowy figures unaccountable to anyone. The opposition are now shouting loudly that the bill doesn't go far enough, having failed to bring any legislation whatsoever forward over thirteen years.

But the bit causing the trouble is the proposed limit on what organisations including charities and pressure groups can do to intervene directly in an election campaign. It doesn't "gag" them, as some have it. They can say what they like about the issues that concern them. What they can't do if the bill is passed is to spend bucket loads of cash, far beyond what the political parties themselves are allowed to spend, to influence a particular election result. And, pardon me for saying so, that must be right. Why would it be appropriate for organisations with deep pockets to try to "buy" the result in a specific constituency?

So far from being an issue about free speech, this is actually about a functioning democracy. I don't want us going down the route of the United States where huge amounts of money are spent to support or oppose candidates by non-party organisations. If we've got the drafting wrong, let's improve it, not throw away the principle.

**A NEW POLICY ON PLASTIC BAGS**

**Thursday 19th September 2013**

Mid-September, so it must be the party conference season again, and this year the Liberal Democrats are in Glasgow. That is very much in line with the trend for party conferences. Once upon a time, not so long ago, the venues would always be seaside resorts. We would find ourselves swept along almost deserted esplanades in a traditional sequence that included Bournemouth (actually quite nice and the best of the resorts), Brighton (good venue but nobody can afford anything), and Blackpool (indescribable!). Now instead all the parties are more often to be found in our big cities, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, places with purpose built exhibition and conference centres and plenty of hotel accommodation, but also places where the conferences are almost completely incidental while real life goes on all around.

Anyway, I rather like Glasgow. It is a remarkably fine city, and the local folk couldn’t be more friendly or helpful. Despite the pretty atrocious weather spirits are high. But of course there is a lot of talk around about the big decision that all Scots (or more accurately, all Scots who live in Scotland) will be asked to take this time next year; whether they want to remain as a country in the United Kingdom.

I think I understand the strains of Scottish patriotism and independence that drive the campaign. Scotland is noticeably a different culture in all sorts of ways to England, and my observation is that the differences are becoming greater rather than more muted since devolution and the creation of the Scottish Parliament. But I still hope, and I believe it will be the case, that the Scots vote no to full independence.

I say that because I actually believe in something called Britishness, that together these four small nations and regions form something greater than the constituent parts. It is the differences, indeed, that make us stronger. I think Scotland would be diminished by independence, but so would Great Britain.

Meanwhile, in our conference we do something which none of the other parties do any more. We actually debate and vote on policy. This confuses the press and media, who are unused nowadays to such a concept. That’s why they always, without fail, try to ramp up a story about leadership crises and critical votes, only to shrug their shoulders when, as always happens, we have a sane rational discussion and come to a reasoned, consensual conclusion. It’s not very dramatic, but it is a better way to decide important issues.

As a party in government, however, there are always a few announcements to make, and the one in my area of responsibility is the decision to introduce a charge on plastic bags. This is hardly earth-shattering, as it’s already been done in Wales and Scotland. But it will encourage people to do the right thing when they are shopping, which is to reuse bags, and help remind those, like me, who sometimes forget. And incidentally, this isn’t a secret tax to help the Chancellor balance the books. The charge, rather than adding to Treasury coffers, will go to support environmental charities. I’ve been arguing for this for some time. I’m glad we’ve finally got there.

***The new policy I announced was arguably the most effective thing I did in my time in parliament. Since its introduction, single use plastic bag use in England has reduced by 90%.***

**TO EVERY THING THERE IS A SEASON**

**Thursday 10th October 2013**

So, after three and a half years in government, I am now once again on the back benches. Rather than attempt an explanation, here are the letters exchanged between the Deputy Prime Minister and me on Monday.

***Dear David***

***I want to thank you for the key roles you have played in government over the last three years, first as Deputy Leader of the House, and subsequently as Minister of State in DEFRA.***

***You have managed the challenges of both positions with your customary thoughtfulness and commitment. As Deputy Leader of the House you changed fundamentally the way that the House of Commons does its work, making it more able to be relevant to public concerns. I am very aware of the pressures on you within DEFRA over the last year, and I am particularly grateful to you for the clarity and objectivity you have brought to issues of animal and plant disease, your defence of environmental issues, your commitment to agriculture and rural areas, and the development of new and exciting policies to protect and enhance our forests. All of these will have made a real difference to the sort of area you represent and to the country as a whole.***

***It is always difficult to move colleagues out of government but as you know, I have always been keen that we provide the opportunity for as many in our ranks as possible to contribute their skills to ministerial office during this parliament so that, just as government has benefitted from your key contribution over the past three years, it can also gain from those of other colleagues in the remaining years of this parliament.***

***I am immensely grateful for your dedication and commitment over the past few years. You have made a major contribution to this historic coalition government and as one of the very few ministers who have served in two departments, I am sure there will be an opportunity for your experience to be deployed in government in the future.***

***Nick***

***Dear Nick***

***First of all, I would like to thank you for the opportunity and the privilege of serving in government. It is testament to the resilience and determination of yourself and colleagues that, despite the undoubted challenges of coalition government, we have made it work and achieved real results for the people of Britain.***

***I could not imagine two positions in government to which I was better suited than those in which I have served. One, at the heart of government in parliament, strengthening our democratic institutions and effecting genuine reform. The second, working for the people of rural Britain, arguing their case so often unheard, and working for a sustainable agriculture, and enhanced environment and a thriving rural economy. I am hugely grateful for the opportunity to contribute.***

***As you know, I will by the time of the next election have represented my community in Somerset for thirty years, eighteen of those as Member of Parliament. I hope I am able to make a further contribution to public life in some capacity. However, I do not for one moment regret taking the opportunity to play a part in the government of this country at a very difficult time.***

***I wish you personally, and the government more widely, every success in the future.***

***David***

**TIME TO CALL IT A DAY**

**Thursday 17th October 2013**

On Friday evening last week I made one of the most difficult speeches I have ever been called on to make. The occasion was not a grand one – simply a meeting of my local constituency party members in the Davis Hall in West Camel. The difficulty was for me personally, in that I was announcing that I would not be seeking re-election as member of parliament at the next election. And that may not mean much in the great scheme of things, but for me it means calling time on what has been the purpose of, and what has occupied my time for, half of my life, so it is perhaps natural that I found it hard to keep my emotions in check.

Some people have naturally linked my announcement with the news last week of me leaving the government, but the truth is they are entirely unrelated other than in timing. I had long ago realised that this would almost certainly be my last term as MP, and in fact I had promised my wife at the time of the last election that this would be the last campaign I would fight. People do not recognise the pressure, not on a politician but on their immediate family, of effectively being on call twenty-four hours of each day, seven days of each week, and I think I owe them a period of calm. That is not a cry for sympathy – we each of us choose our profession and everything that comes with it, and there are certainly no shortage of applicants for the job of MP – but a recognition of the fact that it is not necessarily an easy career choice.

There is also the question of age. I was first elected as a county councillor in 1985, and immediately became leader of Somerset County Council. That means by the time of the next election I will have represented Frome and Somerset in public office for thirty years, the last eighteen as MP. I will be sixty-one years old at the next election, sixty-six by the end of that parliament. I have seen too many hang on, either in local government or in parliament, considerably past their sell-by date, and I don’t want to be one of them. That is not to say some older heads are not a good idea, and haven’t a lot to contribute. But I think there is a time when being around for too long risks staleness and lack of effectiveness, and although I like to think that doesn’t apply to me yet, I want to leave while I think I’m still doing a good job.

Will I miss it? You bet. I can’t think of a greater privilege than being able to represent your own community in parliament, and I have had some lovely messages and letters of appreciation over the last few days. But I’ve got eighteen months to go, and I will use those to the best of my abilities to speak up for Somerset. Then what? No idea, but I’m hoping there’s something worthwhile I can do. It just won’t be as member of parliament for Somerton & Frome.

**BACK ON MY FEET**

**Thursday 24th October 2013**

One of the compensations for no longer being a minister is that I am now allowed to raise issues on behalf of my constituents in parliament, rather than having to work behind the scenes in direct contact with government departments. So it was that on Wednesday last week I was able to secure what is called an adjournment debate, a short half hour debate at the end of the normal business of the house in which an MP sets out an issue and receives a reply from the relevant minister. The subject was something which certainly concerns a lot of people in the Castle Cary and Ansford area, which is the prolonged closure of the railway bridge on the A371.

I say that the closure concerns a lot of people, and it’s true that the inconvenience and difficulties for many individuals is a serious issue. But even more concerning is the disastrous effect on the local economy. It is estimated that the additional costs on the eight largest local businesses alone is in excess of a million pounds, with a further million falling on a larger number of smaller businesses, some of which have been forced to lay off staff or even to close.

Of course, we all understand that if essential maintenance is necessary, then it must be done. And I do recognise that when the closure, originally proposed as twenty-four weeks in the winter of 2012, was put forward we were able to persuade Network Rail to think again about the timing. But since the work started in July, with another two or three weeks still to go, that’s about as much as we can say on the positive side.

Because it is clear throughout that Network Rail are committed to one thing only; to carry out the work at the least cost and at minimum inconvenience to themselves, and I’m afraid the needs of the local community and the local economy come a very poor second. That’s why any suggestion to reduce the effect of the work, by providing an alternative bailey bridge, by using a prefabricated replacement, even to making temporary car parking facilities on the Castle Cary side of the bridge for rail users, have all been rejected out of hand. It’s why signing and advertising has been late, and misleading in that it leads people to assume they can’t cross the stone bridge over the railway rather than the almost invisible bridge in front the station which even many locals didn’t know existed.

But I dare say all that could have been forgiven if there was the slightest urgency detectable in the work, but there isn’t. There has been no evening or night working, or work at weekends, both of which were promised. In fact, there’s precious little sign of work at all on many days, as I saw for myself the day after my debate. With a project that’s causing so much disruption and so much in the way of additional costs, any democratically accountable body would do their utmost to minimise damage. But Network Rail are not accountable – not to ministers or anyone else. And as a result, it would appear that they couldn’t care less.

**THE BANKS ARE STILL AT IT**

**Thursday 31st October 2013**

I’m really sorry to come back to the issue of the behaviour of banks again, but if they acted with any decency to their customers I wouldn’t have to. Certainly most members of parliament would be more than happy not to have to deal with constituents trying to run successful small businesses but taken to the brink of bankruptcy by activities on the part of supposedly respectable financial institutions that are certainly irresponsible, probably deceitful, and bordering on the criminal.

I have been trying for some time to help constituents who have found themselves in financial difficulties as a result of the mis-selling of complex interest-rate swap derivatives. The fact that I suspect only a tiny fraction of those reading this will have the slightest clue what a “complex interest-rate swap derivative” may or may not be is illustrative of the problem. I certainly didn’t know much about them before looking into the issue. But the key point is that neither did the people who were unwittingly sold them. They were a financial product they didn’t want, didn’t need, didn’t understand, and which had the capacity to do their businesses considerable harm. All in the interests not of the businesses themselves but of the bank doing the selling.

I will not go into detail about what an interest-rate swap entails. I can detect the glazing over of eyes even at the thought. Suffice it to say that it is a way of ensuring that you would not be clobbered by an increase in interest rates on a loan you have taken out by essentially paying a form of insurance. But the amounts are often unequal, the payment on the interest-rate swap deal may continue long after the original loan is settled, and the whole thing was in any case unnecessary and badly advised in the context of stable low interest rates which is where we have been for some years and are likely to be for some time yet.

Indeed, such was the level of deception foisted on these customers that some weren’t even aware that is what they had entered into, almost none understood the possible consequences, and yet many were required to buy the product as a condition of a normal bank loan arrangement. That is the point at which it looks very close to fraudulent practice; where someone is required to buy something which could send them to the bankruptcy courts in order to access a standard business arrangement.

So the banks were found out. Thousands of cases were uncovered of clear mis-selling, and eighteen months ago redress was ordered. But what has happened since? This is where the conduct of the banks is so reprehensible. They know they’re wrong, they know they have to compensate, but they have used every device of procrastination and prevarication to avoid making payments. And meanwhile small businesses desperate for that cash are failing.

We had a debate about this last week. I was among about fifty MPs who spoke on behalf of their constituents. It would be nice to think we will now get action. But is it any wonder that people still distrust the big banks so. They do so little to regain our confidence.

**THE MILITARY COVENANT**

**Thursday 7th November 2013**

This coming weekend will follow what for me is a very familiar pattern. Remembrance Day is one of the busier days in the parliamentary calendar, as MPs attend parades and services in their constituency. In my case, over many years now, that means the laying of a wreath and reading the lesson in Bruton in the morning, joining the parade and service in Wincanton in the afternoon, and attending the civic service in St John’s in Frome in the evening. The familiarity doesn’t, I hope, reduce the significance or the emotional impact of the act of remembrance.

But, as I pointed out at questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on Monday, while we are honouring those who have lost their lives in service of their country, I hope we will also spare a thought for those who currently serve in our armed forces and those who are veterans. They deserve our support now, and our thanks for what they have done.

That’s why it is important that the so-called Military Covenant, the promise made by the country to those who serve or who have served, the contract between all of those of us who have been protected by their endeavours and those who do the work at the hard end, is so important. That now has a new currency, in the form of the Community Covenant, which local authorities are asked to sign up to. I am very happy to say that all of our local councils have done so. Indeed, according to the Royal British Legion when I asked them at the beginning of the week, eighty per cent of authorities across the country have followed suit. But that suggests that one in five have not.

I hope that the challenge I laid down in the Commons on Monday produces the response it should, and I am very happy that the Minister has said plainly that he will name and shame those councils which, by next week, have still not signed on the dotted line. But simply signing up to an idea is not enough. Those authorities have to put real substance to their policies in support of the covenant if it is to mean anything. It should mean that we really do recognise the dangers and the privations they experience, and their reasonable expectation that when they return to our country their families and they themselves will not be forgotten, will not find themselves last in the queue for the services that councils provide.

But we can go further. On Wednesday I helped to launch the Defence Discount Service and the Blue Light Card, the latter open to those who work in the emergency services. Thousands of retailers are offering discounts to those holding these cards as another way of saying thank you for putting their lives on the line. Some of the biggest companies, like KFC, Iceland and Vodafone, are already on board. But what the promoters would like to do is to extend the scheme to independent shops and service providers across the country, and I would certainly like to see it taken up locally. Wearing a poppy is one thing. Providing real help and support takes it that one step further.

**GOVERNMENTS CAN’T CONTROL FOOD PRICES**

**Thursday 14th November 2013**

An interesting opinion poll was carried out last week. It suggested that the British public is becoming increasingly disenchanted with the operation of the market as it affects basic commodities in the country, and yearns for some old-fashioned state control. So 45% of those polled think the government should control private rents, 74% want it to fix energy prices, 72% for public transport and 35% want price controls on food and groceries.

Some of this is a perfectly reasonable, if in my opinion misguided, reaction to increasing costs of living. People are saying that they are finding it more difficult to make their family budgets stretch, and want someone, anyone, to do something about it. That is particularly so where they believe that a few companies hold a monopoly over supply, and when there is a regulator in place you can see why it is attractive to suggest that they decide how much is charged. Indeed, to some extent they do exactly that in the railways, the energy and the water companies, not always to good effect. In the case of private rented accommodation there is a backstop already to prevent grossly unfair rents, but rigid controls would simply mean that the supply would dry up.

But the clear odd one out is food, my principal concern over the last year or so. Undoubtedly food prices have been going up faster than the rate of inflation by a long way. That puts huge pressure on the family purse. But does it mean food prices are too high? Maybe not, if you compare grocery prices here to other similar countries. Let’s look at continental Europe for instance. As you might expect, if you have ever visited them, British food prices are well below Scandinavian countries such as Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Iceland, and also, unsurprisingly, Switzerland. Indeed, their prices are up to 50% higher than ours. But Britain is also cheaper than Austria, Italy, Belgium, France, Greece, Cyprus, Germany and our near neighbours Ireland. We are almost exactly on the European average.

The reason for that is largely our very competitive retail sector. Indeed, the argument more often is that the big supermarkets set prices too low for our producers, making dairy farming, for instance, unprofitable. The inflation in food prices comes not from within the UK, but is the result of world commodity prices, the cost of fuel, and the fact we import approaching half of everything we eat. So what would be the result of state-determined prices? We saw it in the old soviet states, only too clearly. Shortages, queues, no choice, and bad quality. Is that really what we want?

The outcome of the horsemeat scandal should have been a warning to those who want food to be sold at less than the price it costs to produce it. You end up with people cutting corners and committing crime. If we want to help people to pay for their family food, then the answer is to get more money in their pocket by growing the economy and taking the least well off out of tax. Let’s make sure people can afford the proper price of food, not imagine we can make it cheaper by edict.

**FLY GRAZING**

**Thursday 28th November 2013**

You don’t have to go very far around my constituency before you will encounter somebody riding a horse. Riding is a hugely popular pastime, and there is a high level of ownership. Most are well looked after and a joy to their owners and riders, if sometimes a drain on their pockets!

But there is another, rather darker, side to the story, and it was that which we debated in parliament this week. It is the horses which are abandoned, for a variety of reasons. Or the unscrupulous owner who feels no compunctions about setting his animals to graze on other people’s land, whatever the consequences. Not so long ago such stories were isolated occurrences. Sadly, that is no longer the case, which is why I was glad that a colleague, the Conservative MP for East Hampshire Damian Hinds, managed to secure a debate on fly grazing.

It’s a subject I’ve been raising for some time, ever since a constituent near Frome came to tell me a few years ago about her predicament , with horses placed on her land without her permission which she couldn’t remove and for which she had responsibility simply by being the landowner. The horses belonged, or so she was told, by a gentleman who owned a large number of horses but not a single square foot of land to keep them on. He relied on the inadequacies of the present law to provide him with grazing whenever he wanted.

When I was a Minister in the Department for Environment , Food and Rural Affairs I took the matter further. I was in regular contact with charities dealing with the welfare of horses, and they told me that the economic situation was making things far worse. Many people were finding they simply couldn’t look after horses and ponies any longer, and the results were a sharp increase in welfare cases and examples of abandonment. My counterpart in Ireland told me that exactly the same thing was happening in the Republic, to the point where he was seeking facilities to slaughter the excess equine population to avoid further difficulties.

However, you don’t need to go far afield to see the issue. In Kingsdon, near Somerton, is the Glenda Spooner Farm, which is an excellent facility run by World Horse Welfare. They not only care for abandoned or mistreated horses, they work hard to re-home them with people who will care for them properly. I found it fascinating hearing about their work when I visited them last year.

So what can be done? Well, apart from supporting the work of those looking after damaged animals, and encouraging those who own horses but are running into financial difficulties to seek help in looking after them, we do need to act against the unscrupulous fly grazers. I had many discussions with the Home Office on this, and they assured me that the provisions of the new Anti-Social Behaviour provisions will cover the issue. I now want to make sure they keep that promise. We owe it to the animals to ensure they are protected, and we owe it to innocent landowners that they aren’t landed with a problem entirely outside their control.

**STILL NOT CONNECTED**

**Thursday 5th December 2013**

I got into a little trouble with colleagues in the Department of Culture Media and Sport this summer when I expressed my very real frustration with the speed of progress with the roll-out of high-speed broadband across Somerset. As I said then, and I have frequently repeated, what passes for a broadband connection in my own village of Witham Friary would very quickly be outpaced by a man with a forked stick, so slow is the process. That is irritating for me, and everyone else in the village, but if I were trying to run a business which depended on internet access it would be fatal.

Much of the delay is, I fear, down to the fact that we have effectively a monopoly supplier in BT, who have successfully bid for each of the area contracts so far let in the absence of any competition. I know that those working in the county councils in Somerset and Devon have been desperately trying to keep things on track. This week we have had some tangible evidence of success, in that we now know that 82% of premises in my Somerton and Frome constituency will, indeed, have superfast connectivity by the end of the roll-out programme in December 2016. But that success also underlines the deficiency in the anticipated progress, in that over 8,000 premises in the constituency will be part of the “final 10%” which will not get decent connections even at the end of the procurement.

At least we now know which those areas are, or at least the county council do, which is a major advance on the position to date. But it simply isn’t good enough to write off significant parts of rural areas which need those connections just as much as those in town or city areas do. That’s why, now we have identified where the top-up needs to happen, we need to mobilise the funds set aside by the government to finish the job. And that’s exactly the point I made when I had the rare opportunity of a question at Prime Minister’s Questions this week.

What we don’t want is another complicated bidding process, nor do we want a system based on “matched funding” which we know doesn’t exist. There won’t be one single answer, either, to ensure adequate connectivity. We need to deploy the best technical solution for each area, without trying to package things neatly into a single contract.

Getting Somerset connected will be a major achievement if it is completed successfully. But I for one am not prepared to accept that there may be places where it simply won’t be done, and particularly when I know perfectly well that the necessary funds have been set aside in government to make it happen. Not having connectivity is not an issue of convenience, or letting you play games or watch videos more easily. It’s essential to the thousands of small businesses which now need a decent internet connection to carry on their trade and create both wealth and jobs. Before the start of the present programme just 28% of the premises in my constituency had access to high speed broadband. By 2016 that will be up to 82%. I won’t be content until it’s 100% - job done.

**NUISANCE CALLS**

**Thursday 12th December 2013**

I am not remotely interested in assistance in pursuing a claim for mis-selling of Payment Protection Insurance. Nor do I want help with insulating my property, or claiming for damages for an accident that was not my fault. Most of all, I don’t want a long period of silence followed by a click. But all are offered to me, and to millions of other people across the country, on a daily basis. Indeed, I am always pleasantly surprised when my phone rings at home and it is a real person who genuinely wants to speak to me, rather than yet another nuisance call.

That’s why I raised the issue last week in parliament. For me, it’s an irritation. For an elderly or vulnerable person, it can be a real source of alarm. And of course some of these unsolicited calls go beyond simply touting for business, and are an attempt at fraud. It’s time for the government to take further action.

I may be pushing at a door which is at least ajar. The select committee for culture, media and sport have been undertaking an inquiry into the issue, and their report suggests a number of actions which could be taken to tighten up controls. Ministers are also looking at the problem, and I understand that they will soon publish some proposals.

The difficulty lies in distinguishing between those calls made indiscriminately as a marketing or sales tool, or as a part of fraudulent activity, and allowing legitimate sales practices or unsolicited calls made for good reason. I may not want yet another overseas salesman trying to flog me their services, but I might want an after-sales enquiry to whether a new product was working satisfactorily, and I certainly would want a call, say, from the Environment Agency to tell me that the River Frome was about to break its banks and flood my kitchen.

One thing needed is a way to report nuisance calls easily, and the regulators need to be able to trace the offenders. Once they have done that, they also need to apply realistic and enforceable penalties. And the threshold below which at the moment no action is taken needs to be lowered. Consumer organisations suggest that the Information Commissioner should be able to take enforcement action if a telephone call or text message is likely to cause “nuisance, annoyance, inconvenience or anxiety”. I would be delighted to be free of all four reactions, and I don’t think I’m alone.

From the banality of nuisance phone calls to something very much more important. Monday’s business in the House of Commons was given over to tributes to the late President Nelson Mandela following his death last week. As a sometime rugby player and avid rugby fan, I found it very difficult during the apartheid era when the Springboks seemed to represent everything that was bad about the regime.

One of the finest monuments to Mandela’s determination, dignity and astonishing lack or rancour, is to hear Nkosi Sikilel’ i’Africa and Die Stem, the new national anthem and the old, that of the new South Africa and the old white supremacy, played consecutively and cheered equally, at international rugby matches. RIP.

**ARE THEY LISTENNG?**

**Thursday 19th December 2013**

I’m sorry to raise a rather serious issue at a time when most people’s thoughts are firmly fixed on the forthcoming festivities and the preparations for them. However, last week I had the opportunity to bring forward a bill in parliament under what is called the “ten-minute rule”. What this basically means is that a back-bench MP has a ten-minute slot to make the case for the introduction of a bill. There is the chance for one member to speak against, if they wish, and there may be a vote. If you succeed, then your bill is added to those waiting for parliamentary time. And that, I fear, is exactly where it stays, especially by this stage of the parliamentary year. However deserving the bill, it has little or no chance of making progress. But it is a good opportunity to raise an important issue and, hopefully, engage the attention of government.

And here is the serious bit. My bill was called the Surveillance of Telecommunications (Judicial Oversight) bill, and dealt with the issue of how our security services keep us safe from terrorist attack, but also the rules which apply to looking through our private communications.

Nobody needs to tell me how serious a threat terrorism represents; as someone who was on Capitol Hill in Washington on 9/11 and Aldgate on 7/7 I have a very personal involvement. Nor do I in any way criticise our security services, including GCHQ, the information gathering organisation at Cheltenham, who do a terrific and often dangerous job on our behalf. But any clandestine operation has to work, in a liberal democracy, within a framework of law, and the boundaries as to what is acceptable must be set, not by the agencies themselves, or even by the government of the day, but by parliament.

And serious questions are now being asked about the collection of the results of surveillance and communications data from internet traffic, not least that acquired from British citizens by our American allies. In the United States that debate is being led by the Senate, and is the subject of a great deal of public discussion. In the United Kingdom, I fear parliament is not taking the lead I think it has a duty to do. We need to know that what is done is necessary, targeted and proportionate, and properly scrutinised on our behalf. That view is shared by not only those who are concerned about privacy, but also the senior judiciary and many in the security world themselves, who recognise that they are vulnerable to court action unless things are clarified.

So my bill would make sure there was proper judge-led oversight of what is done, better scrutiny in parliament, and the clear boundaries which were once there (the requirement for a search warrant is hardly new), but which have been superseded by new technologies. No-one disagreed, but the bill is unlikely to proceed. I just hope the government are listening.

As this is the last of my columns before the holiday season, can I take the opportunity to wish everyone a very happy and peaceful Christmas, and a prosperous new year. I have a feeling GCHQ knew I’d say that...!