**2011**

**THE TELEGRAPH STING**

**Thursday 6th January 2011**

Am I upset by the widely reported sting operation on myself and some of my colleagues by the Daily Telegraph shortly before Christmas? You bet I am. Not by the content – it will not come as a great revelation to anyone who regularly reads these columns that, for instance, I still would prefer a system for university finance which did not involve tuition fees, even though I recognise the good work that was put in to producing a very good package which will help a lot of less well-off students, a position which I supported for very good reasons.

Nor will it be a surprise to many that I believe some, but certainly not all, Conservatives have little experience of how ordinary people live their lives. I would, and have, said the same about some Labour ministers in the last government, and even of some in my own party.

No, what appals me is the sheer dishonesty. Two people come to my weekly advice surgery in Langport, purporting to be constituents, sisters from Frome coming to see me on behalf of their mother. I spend twenty minutes of valuable time with them, carefully explaining policies of the government and listening to their “concerns”, in the process keeping genuine constituents with real problems waiting. Of course, we now know that, far from being constituents, they were reporters working for a daily newspaper and secretly recording my responses.

I am told it is naïve not to check they were who they say they are. Sorry, I’m afraid I am still prepared to take my constituents on trust. There is also a salacious undertone that perhaps we were unguarded because we were silly middle-aged men dealing with young, relatively attractive, women. Again, sorry, I’m afraid I deal with all my constituents in the same way, were they to present as svelte super-models or warty old men of ninety-eight. If they ask serious questions, they will get serious responses.

That would be bad enough, not because it is fundamentally dishonest (which it is) and illegal (which it also is), but because it undermines the fundamental relationship between an MP and their constituents in the surgery. Without wishing to sound too pious about it, the advice surgery is a little like a confessional. It is based on total confidentiality on my part, and a readiness to be candid and honest. I am not prepared to change that just because of some journalists on the make.

But what displays further dishonesty is the highly selective extracts printed. It is very instructive that the recording put on their website contained nothing that I haven’t said many times in public and in print. It is entirely predictable that the nineteen out of twenty minutes I spent carefully explaining why I felt that government policies, however difficult, were justified, necessary in the national interest, and enjoyed my support, did not feature in the articles. Nor did the references I made to the very good relationship I enjoy with ministerial colleagues, which I value. Instead, the reporters repeatedly expressed a desperate desire that I say something disobliging about the Chancellor of the Exchequer. When I conceded that he was not everyone’s cup of tea, something which I think even he would concede, while robustly defending his policies, the first bit is what they, of course, reported.

It reminds me of a few years ago when a television programme ran a light-hearted quiz in which MPs were asked questions about their constituencies. I was asked ten questions, and got seven of them right. When the item was televised, there were just five questions, and I had only two correct. Reality didn’t fit their agenda, you see

Reporters used to report. Now they see it as their function to create news, and to do so, not in the national interest, or fairly, but to pursue their own narrow ends. It stinks.

**CLOSING LIBRARIES**

**Thursday 13th January 2011**

An American writer once wrote, “Nothing sickens me more than the closed door of a library”. Judging by the postbag I am receiving at the moment, she is not alone. Ironically, to get to Somerset County Council’s consultation paper on drastically reducing the number of public libraries on their website, you enter via a section headed “popular services”. People value their local library highly, and are not going to readily acquiesce in the destruction of the service.

Nor should they. I know it is ancient history, but I recall that a very potent argument for getting rid of the then Conservative control of the county council in the 1980s was the decision to halt purchase of books for the library service. Of course times were hard for local government – Mrs Thatcher was in her pomp, and there certainly wasn’t spare cash for councils. But when I was leader of the county council, we found ways to restore the book fund, to build the new libraries in Yeovil, Frome and Milborne Port, and to increase the number of mobile libraries.

That is why I take a slightly proprietorial interest in what is currently being proposed. And it’s draconian. Yes, the four biggest libraries are to be preserved. But six of what are described as “medium-sized Market Town libraries”, including Martock and Somerton, will lose their funding, along with fourteen described as “smaller Community Libraries”, including, in my constituency, Bruton, Castle Cary and Milborne Port. Of the six currently available mobile libraries, only two would be kept.

I’ve said before, but it is worth repeating, that it would be quite wrong for me to pretend that cutbacks in public expenditure determined at national level will have no effect whatsoever at local level, and I readily accept that local authorities have difficult choices to make. But I still maintain that Somerset are making the wrong choices, and are cutting back well in excess of what is required, as a result of a curiously skewed and in my view economically illiterate policy of eliminating capital debt at the same time as coping with revenue reductions. And the fact is that Somerset, far from suffering excessively at the hands of a wicked government, in fact have one of the very best settlements in the country.

Many councils would bite off the hand of any minister offering them a reduction of just 2% in spending power, which is what was announced in the case of Somerset by Secretary of State Eric Pickles. And it’s worth recording what Mr Pickles had to say about cuts in library services too, lest it is suggested that what the county council is doing is as a result of government policy. He said: "Before we see libraries cut and all these kinds of things, I want to see councils merge their back-office functions. I would like to see them sharing chief executives, their legal department, their accounts department, their payroll, their IT, their planning, their education support functions. And when they have done all that, if they feel they have to close libraries, they should talk to me again."

If there is greater community involvement in running libraries, I would not argue with that, provided it was properly underpinned by professional librarian support and funding. I do not reject the idea of introducing automation, but I would like to see the business case for doing so and the resulting savings. I would not be averse to changes in charging levels for the dvd and audio collections, or for fines, if that helped preserve the service. But I do think the council should better recognise the value of a good library service, and how much people appreciate it. Those who have strong feelings on the subject should make their voice heard, before the council reaches its final conclusions in February. And I hope councillors whose local libraries are affected will be asking some pretty searching questions of their leadership, as to quite why so much is being cut and for what reason.

**MURMURATIONS**

**Thursday 20th January 2011**

Last Friday evening I went down to Charlton Adam to talk to local farmers. It’s always useful to talk to the agricultural community face to face, because some have a habit of never quite getting round to writing to me about even quite important issues and, as I have sometimes had to remind people, I’m not blessed with the power of telepathy to guess what people are concerned about if they don’t tell me. Anyway, the meeting was well attended, and very useful.

We touched on a number of issues which I have taken up over the years, including the very well-worn paths of farm-gate milk prices, where I was able to pass on the good news that the legislation to bring in a grocery supplies ombudsman to, I hope, sort out the unfairnesses in the relationship between producers and supermarkets is now in the process of being drawn up, and the horrendous problems of bovine tuberculosis.

One problem the farmers mentioned to me, though, is even more difficult, in that it is very local to the area of the Somerset levels, and involves one of the more spectacular displays from nature which I know many people appreciate, but which is causing a big headache for, particularly, livestock farmers. It is the enormous flocks of migratory starlings which now congregate in the wetlands areas and look fantastic as they wheel in the sky but cost the agricultural community a fortune. The inward migration of starlings from Russia and eastern Europe has grown considerably over recent years, and estimates of several million birds are now regularly made.

The wildlife organisations are understandably very excited about this, and indeed several of their websites advertise the annual arrival of these murmurations, as I believe a collection of starlings are meant to be called, although I have my doubts if anyone really does so. But the murmurations among farmers are of a rather different complexion. Because several million starlings means several million mouths to feed, and although the wetland sites are a very good habitat for them to over-winter, they certainly don’t provide the wherewithal for them to feed. So what the farmers find are flocks of starlings descending like some biblical plague upon their feed-stores, and marauding them. They tell me that there is no way of physically barring them, no way of dealing with them by shooting or other means as they are protected, but that it is not unusual to lose twenty or thirty thousand pounds worth of animal feed that way.

I’m not sure what the answer is, or even if there is one. I’ve undertaken to talk to my colleague who is the minister of agriculture about it, which I did earlier this week, and I’ve suggested that at the very least we ought to have some research done to see what is going on with the starling population, and whether, for instance, it is displacing populations of native birds such as lapwings. He tells me it is a problem which seems to be local to Somerset, but he’ll look into it. Meanwhile, it’s another area where quite proper concerns for conservation and biodiversity, and the equally proper concern to ensure we are adequately fed, may be in conflict.

Back in Parliament, I’m not sure the House of Lords constitutes a murmuration, but there’s certainly some rum manoeuvrings going on at the moment. I am writing this at lunchtime on Tuesday, but in the Lords it is still Monday, because they have been sitting all night. This is something the House of Commons used to do regularly, but happily now rarely. In the Lords, there are no rules to prevent people filibustering, that is simply talking on and on to delay proceedings, because they expect them to behave more appropriately. But that’s precisely what they’re doing, or rather a bunch of former Labour MPs are doing, in order to stop a bill passed by the Commons, a bill to allow a vote on whether we should change our voting system, and to cut the size of the house of Commons by a modest fifty seats. It’s not very edifying, and not a very good advertisement for the supposed virtues of the upper house.

**CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM**

**Thursday 27th January 2011**

I briefly mentioned the shenanigans in the House of Lords last week, but I come back to the subject today because it’s still going on, and because the bill that they are trying to block is one which I helped steer through the House of Commons, the Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies bill, and some people might be wondering what it’s all about. As we just completed another constitutional bill last week which I had an involvement with, the Fixed Term Parliament bill, we’re wondering if it will get the same treatment from a small group of unelected peers.

Firstly, perhaps I should set out what the legislation does. It’s in two parts. Firstly, it provides for a referendum on the parliamentary voting system, to allow people to decide whether to switch to the alternative vote system or stay with first-past-the-post as we have at the moment. I know that I will be supporting a change, not because I think AV is the perfect system, but because it at least makes sure that everybody’s vote counts, and that the candidate who wins has the support of more than half of his or her constituents. I think that means there will be fewer “safe seats” where the MP feels they can ignore people from other parties with impunity. Others, however, will prefer the status quo. Where I hope we can agree is that it ought to be for the people of this country to decide, not politicians with vested interests.

The Labour party are theoretically in favour of a move to AV, and the holding of a referendum; it was even in their manifesto, although you might be hard pushed to believe that considering some of the contrary noises coming from that direction. But if that is the case, why are the opposition so desperately trying to hold up progress on the bill in a vain hope of preventing a referendum being held, as planned, this year? I’m not entirely sure, but the purported reason is the second half of the bill, which is what they really hate. And that’s the bit which cuts down on the total number of MPs, not by a huge amount, but from the current 650 to 600, but more importantly ensures that in future the number of electors in each constituency is approximately the same.

You might think that was the case already. You’d be wrong. There is a huge discrepancy between the number of electors in one seat and another, and it isn’t all down to the extreme geography of some parts of the country. There’s a case for an exception being made for the highlands and islands of Scotland for instance, and the bill does make allowances for that. But how can it be explained that under the current arrangements two broadly similar constituencies can have widely differing electorates. Manchester Central, for instance, has 85,522 electors. Equally inner-city Glasgow North has just 50,588. Or, to bring it nearer to home, I currently represent 81,566 people in Somerset. The shadow minister who I faced across the despatch box, Chris Bryant, represents just 51,706 in Rhondda, which is less than fifty miles away. That’s 30,000 fewer voters. Why should the votes of Somerset electors be valued so much less than those in South Wales? That’s why we are proposing roughly equal sized constituencies, no more than 5% more or less than the average of about 76,000.

And this is what is causing Labour peers to wreck the business of the House of Lords for week after week. Because they think it is outrageous for some communities not to be hugely over-represented. Because they say it is impossible for a constituency to cross over more than one local council area, despite the fact that ones like mine, which includes parts of both South Somerset and Mendip, are commonplace. Because they say it is quite impossible to provide a service to so many electors, setting aside the fact that half of us to so already. It really isn’t a credible argument, and to my mind reflects little credit. But worse, it could change the way the current House of Lords operates permanently, and not necessarily for the better.

***The Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Act 2011 received Royal Assent on February 2011, but sadly achieved very little, as the referendum on changing the voting system saw a majority in favour of the status quo, and the constituency boundary changes were not subsequently ratified by parliament.***

**FORESTRY OMISSIONS**

**Thursday 3rd February 2011**

I am getting more letters at the moment about woods than on any other subject. Judging by the content of the letters, you would assume that the government had issued an edict that not a single tree in the kingdom would be left standing, and that only the protests of the concerned stand between us and a far from green, far from pleasant wasteland.

If I thought for a moment that what is being considered would lead to the sort of outcome some have been led to believe would be the case, I would be the first to raise objections. But I honestly think the whole thing has been blown up into a major issue where none, in reality, exists. The government is not selling off all our ancient forests to unscrupulous developers to allow the bulldozers in where walkers, cyclists and riders will no longer be permitted. It simply isn’t going to happen.

Firstly, let’s be clear about the proportion of woodland owned by the Forestry Commission. It is a small part of our forests; just 18% in total. Locally, virtually all the woodland is already in private ownership or in the hands of bodies such as the National Trust. Indeed, the Forestry Commission do not own a forest in my constituency, and the only one they list in Somerset is Neroche, down on the Blackdowns outside Taunton, which is already managed in partnership with community organisations.

Secondly, there will be no sale of the so-called heritage woodlands, such as the Forest of Dean and the New Forest. They have been specifically excluded by the Secretary of State, although she will explore whether they can be better managed by the National Trust or the Woodland Trust, with additional funding from the government, rather than a body like the Forestry Commission with a production focus. The stories about selling off the birthright handed down from the days of William Rufus is simply nonsense.

Thirdly, the land that is up for disposal will not be sold freehold. It will be available on leases, which means that restrictive conditions can be placed on them, such as access rights, species preservation and all the things which people quite rightly are concerned about. That contrasts rather favourably with the 25,000 acres or more which have been sold by the Forestry Commission over the last ten years or so, apparently without anyone noticing or feeling the need to launch a campaign, without any such conditions attached. In passing, I wonder if the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is apparently exercised about the current plans, is confident that the Church of England estates, one of England’s biggest landowners, have not sold any woodland without appropriate conditions over recent years.

The Forestry Commission was not set up to preserve forest. Far from it. It dates back to the First World War when Britain found it was struggling to keep up with wartime demand for timber, and so the government set up the commission to maintain a strategic reserve. Its main activity is still production, providing nearly 70% of England’s softwood timber from its holding of 40% of the country’s conifer forests. The question is whether it makes sense for the government to directly own and control those operations, or whether it would be better to regulate the activity, preserve the access and ecological value, but let others operate the sites.

The other big question is whether we can actually get more public benefit from the forests. Can local interest groups be more involved? Should communities be given the opportunity to own woodland in their areas? Do organisations purely devoted to the preservation of heritage sites make better custodians for the future than the government would?

The last point to make is that these proposals are precisely that at the moment. No decisions have yet been made, and the consultation paper is there for anyone with an interest to have their say. The consultation period runs through to the 21st April, so it’s not exactly a rushed job. I understand that people have strong feelings about this. There is something deeply atavistic about woodland. But I hope they will comment on the basis of fact, rather than the disinformation which is being spread at the moment.

***I was later to become the Minister for Forestry with a responsibility to formulate a new, and more popular policy for our woodlands.***

**HIGH PAY IN THE PUBLIC SECTOR (FOR A FEW!)**

**Thursday 24th February 2011**

There is no doubt that some serious decisions have had to be taken about public sector expenditure, whether at national or at local level. It is simply not sustainable to continue to spend four pounds for every three pounds collected in tax, nor to put up tax sufficiently to make up the difference. So public sector spending has to be brought down, as most people well understand, as did the former Labour Chancellor Alistair Darling who himself factored in 20% cuts. That doesn’t mean that people will meekly accept anything that is done to public services. Somerset County Council, for instance, have in my opinion made the wrong choices and cut well beyond what was necessary. That is the choice of local councillors, and I am entitled to disagree with them.

But whatever the necessity or otherwise, for anyone directly affected a redundancy is a personal tragedy, and we shouldn’t forget that. Nor should we slip into lazy thinking about the value of people in public services. I heard a very disagreeable report on the radio this week about a survey of private sector employers decrying the abilities and potential of ex-public sector workers. That is quite wrong. Some of the people I have worked with over the years in both local government and the civil service have been amongst the most talented, adaptable and committed people I know, and many are imbued with an ethos which means they are dedicated to providing a public good. Just because there are more people working in the public sector than we can currently afford, and the fact that some of the jobs done are not well-targeted or can be done by other means, should not be a reflection on their personal qualities, and they shouldn’t be dismissed as mere “pen-pushers”, as though that is any different from the roles of many in the world of business.

What does give me cause for concern, though, is the levels of pay which seem to have become commonplace in the upper echelons of local government. This is not, I stress, an attack on those many local council employees who are anything but well-paid, nor is it to fail to recognise the need for good leadership and management. But just because some pay for bosses in the business world has gone through the roof (and don’t get me started on the financial sector!), it isn’t clear why executive pay in the public sector has had to follow. It’s not a matter of competition, because the vast majority of local authority appointments are from within the sector. It’s not because of huge increases of responsibility or complexity, nor is it related to customer satisfaction, as studies show there is no correlation between performance and pay. So why is it? Perhaps because the small number of elected councillors who set pay are advised by other local government executives with a clear vested interest what is the going rate for the job. It is done behind closed doors, and usually most members of council have no idea what goes on. And of course it is the taxpayer who foots the bill.

That’s why the figures published this week by Income Data Services are so interesting. They reveal that no fewer than 43% of all council chief executives (and that includes smaller district councils as well as counties and big cities) are paid more than the Prime Minister, who receives £142,500. The average is £147,934, and the highest paid is the Chief Executive of Wandsworth in London, who gets very nearly £300,000. Even district council chief executives are now taking home on average £110,000 each year.

Can that be justified? It’s hard to see how it is. But what I am convinced is that the government is right to make the process more transparent, and to ensure that councils as a whole agree these salary levels. At a time when so many public servants are losing their jobs, we must be sure that those at the top aren’t protecting their own interests. I have always argued that MPs pay and expenses, paid for by the taxpayer, should be open and transparent. These people are being paid twice, three times, up to five times as much. It shouldn’t be a secret.

**THE MYTHS OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

**Thursday 3rd March 2011**

There are two sorts of letter which I receive all too often which make my spirits drop. One is from people who, facing some minor inconvenience or supposed injustice, assert that if I don’t help them they are going to take the matter to law because it affects their “human rights”. Sometimes such nonsense gets picked up in the press and we have yet another “barmy judges” story, despite the fact that the cases go nowhere, are effectively laughed out of court, and never had any substance in the first place.

 The second is the exact reverse, where I am told that some idiocy has been determined by “Europe”, which the letter-writer assumes quite wrongly to be the European Union, when in fact the European Court of Human Justice long predates the EU, is a direct result of the United Kingdom, in the form of Sir Winston Churchill, being determined to avoid the evils of the nazi regime ever being foisted again on the “civilised” european continent, and the only connection with the EU being that, yes, Strasbourg is indeed in France. And incidentally, it was precisely to avoid the need to go to Strasbourg that Britain passed the Human Rights Act, very often ignorantly maligned, to ensure that convention rights were justiciable in a British court before a British judge.

The effect of these two falsehoods, rabidly promoted by a gullible or dishonest press, is to devalue the concept of human rights. And that is a tragedy, because having rights as a citizen against the state is fundamental to the rule of law, and a protection against arbitrary powers.

It’s worth remembering that as this week we have been debating what I think is a very important piece of legislation, the Protection of Freedoms bill. For the first time for a long time, a government is saying that what has been enacted in the name of security has actually gone too far in restricting the freedoms of people in this country, and it’s time we rolled the process back. It was my long contention that the previous Labour government was too prone to ignoring the liberties we as citizens had taken for granted, and so I am naturally pleased that we are now taking steps to put it right.

Some of the measures in the bill are long overdue. We have already knocked on the head the whole issue of identity cards, now we are getting detention without trial back to a more reasonable fourteen days from the twenty eight days imposed by the last government, we are at last doing something about the taking and retention of DNA samples from those not charged or acquitted of any crime, and councils will have to justify before a magistrate the use of intrusive powers given them under previous legislation. The vetting and barring system, necessary to protect children but hugely over-bureaucratic and absurdly over-extended, will be rationalised and pared back. Closed circuit television surveillance will be subjected to clear rules about use.

Police powers to stop and search, intended to deal with terrorism suspects but used far too often in totally different contexts, will be limited. The activities of cowboy car-clampers will be put to an end. There will no longer be fraud trials without a jury. And schools which want to take fingerprints of children for automatic recognition systems will need to get their parents express permission first.

A lot of this requires a sense of balance, and I think Home Secretary Theresa May has got it just about right. Of course the government’s first duty is to protect its citizens. And the threat from terrorists is a very real one, as I know only too well from my own experiences. But taking too authoritarian a line is self-defeating, and threatens the British way of life which we are, presumably, trying to protect. It is also very often totally ineffective. It is just too easy to restrict freedoms (yes, human rights, we shouldn’t be forced to abandon the proper term through ill-directed opprobrium) for what sounds like justifiable reasons. But that way lies an oppressive state, and we should be equally alive to the potential damage it causes or threatens to cause.

**THE LONGEST READ**

**Thursday 10th March 2011**

Tolstoy’s War and Peace is a pretty long book. It runs to 1,204 pages. It is as nothing compared with the UK tax code. Unbelievably, the complete Tolley’s Tax Guide, the standard text on tax legislation, now comes to a total of 11,520 pages, over double the already gargantuan edition back in 1997 of 4,998 pages. I simply do not believe that anyone, even the most assiduous accountant to whom, presumably, Tolley’s is a racy read, can have read and understood it in full. An ordinary, moderately intelligent but not financially expert, member of the public trying to negotiate its provisions has simply no chance. The British tax code is, apparently, the longest in the world, and its very complexity underlines its absurdity. What’s more, it’s got steadily worse. The section on corporation tax has tripled in size over the last ten years, on income tax has more than doubled.

The problem is that all this complexity doesn’t mean that the system is more watertight. Quite the reverse. The more complex the systems, the more they can be exploited by those with the money to pay for the best advice and complicated programmes of evasion or avoidance. By making tax over-complicated, the Treasury actually manages to collect less rather than more from those who ought to be providing, on the basis of fairness, most to the upkeep of our public services. That is why the institution of an office for tax simplification is such a worthwhile endeavour, even if it is a huge undertaking.

The office, which was set up as an independent body last year, has just published its first report, a look at tax reliefs. Their findings are eye-opening. Quite apart from the disconcerting quote from Star Trek in the very first line – to boldly claim to be prepared to boldly go where no man has gone before is eye-catching, if accurate - their first finding was that there are even more tax reliefs in the system than anyone had previously thought, and that includes the people who already knew how complicated the system is. They found 1,042 different tax reliefs, “far more than our initial estimates”. Having quoted Captain Kirk, by the time they get to chapter one they return to the more politically familiar tones of William Gladstone: “for it must be borne in mind, that in every case exemption means a relief to A at the charge of B”. In other words, providing a tax exemption for one person means at the end of the day someone else needs to pay more.

The report comes up with a number of big themes. They propose merging income tax and NIC; reforming and simplifying employee benefits; reviewing inheritance tax as a whole rather than tinkering with reliefs; making sure that so-called environmental taxation works more efficiently; and making sure that capital gains tax is fair in comparison to income tax, a process which was begun in last year’s emergency budget. Some of these proposals may not eventually find favour with the Treasury, some are mightily difficult to put into effect, but the arguments are well made.

But what fascinates me are some of the silly little things they have spotted. For instance, there is a tax break for the first 15p of the value of a luncheon voucher, set in 1946 and never changed since. You can still get tax relief for the £5 fixed stamp duty. Only problem is the fixed rate of duty was abolished in 2008, but not the relief. If pink gin is your tipple, then you may be pleased to know that there is a unique tax exemption for angostura bitters, on the grounds that it is a food additive rather than anything to do with the demon drink. Only one company benefits from that one. If instead you favour so-called “black beers” brewed in obscurity in the depths of Yorkshire (admittedly unlikely), you pay no duty at all, thanks to a relief introduced in the 1930s.

It’s time we sorted some of these anomalies out. It’s a huge task, but I think it’s one worth undertaking. Wouldn’t it be nice if the edition of Tolley’s in 2015 were the shortest ever?

**NATURAL DISASTERS**

**Thursday 17th March 2011**

It puts it all into context a little, doesn’t it? As the Irish rugby coach Declan Kidney said after his side’s controversial loss to Wales last weekend, Japan has faced a devastating earthquake and a tsunami. His problem was only a rugby match. The extraordinary reports of the catastrophe in Japan are almost too awful to comprehend. Mother nature can still destroy everything that one of the most technologically advanced nations in the world can construct.

In fact, it is probably the fact that Japan is a very advanced society that prevented even more loss of life and damage. There are many countries in which the shocks which hit Tokyo would have caused extensive structural damage, but the Japanese have always lived with the risk of seismic activity, and, certainly since the Kobe disaster, have made sure that their buildings have a high level of resilience. Coupled with a disaster contingency capability as good as anywhere in the world, and you have a country better able than most to deal with both the event and the aftermath.

But it is still awful. Thousands have been killed, probably more than ten thousand. Whole cities have been flattened. Hundreds of thousands of people have spent many nights without electricity, water, food or heat in near-freezing temperatures. Transport has been crippled. Even with emergency services working flat out, and the help of people from across the world, including teams from Britain, it will be a long time before even the immediate problems are addressed, let alone the longer-term rebuilding.

Now is not the time to emphasise the economic cost, when the cost in human life is all too apparent, but it is already estimated that the financial impact could exceed £100 billion, and even in one of the largest economies in the world that is not negligible. The Japanese will recover, for sure, but there will be an effect, and it will be felt around the world. One immediate consequence may be on the future of the nuclear power industry, given the grave concerns about radioactive contamination from the damaged reactors and the risks of further meltdown, and the consequential effects on a country heavily reliant on nuclear technology. That may even have a corollary impact in Somerset, as preparations are made for a new nuclear power station at Hinkley Point.

Let me say straight away that what is happening in Japan is not another Chernobyl or Three Mile Island. These are well-constructed reactors, properly maintained and with everyone involved playing by the rule book. There is no prospect of the sort of massive release of radioactive material that we saw after Chernobyl and that even now, decades later, has an effect which can still be detected on the uplands of Cumbria, thousands of miles from Minsk.

But even with all those caveats, in the face of overwhelming disaster, the fail-safe protections could not entirely cope, and Japan has had to declare a nuclear emergency the outcome of which is still not clear. I know that there is a fashionable view that nuclear power is the only option for our future energy needs, but I’m afraid I am still not convinced that either the economics or the risk factors make sense, whether it’s in Japan or Somerset. I accept that an earthquake on this scale is exceedingly unlikely in the relatively stable seismic environment of Britain, and the last significant tsunami experienced in the Bristol Channel was back in 1606, but even so I’m not sure the benefits outweigh the real and definable, if marginal, risk.

Two last points. Should we ask ourselves why, to inform us about events in a country with very capable television reportage, we need dozens of British camera crews roaming the countryside, getting in the way of rescue teams and using scarce resources, in order to ask fatuous questions of clearly distressed survivors?

And is there anything more wicked than the proliferation of internet scam sites encouraging people to make donations to spurious appeals. Apparently more than fifty domains with names like “Japanese Tsunami” or “Japanese Earthquake” were set up within the first few hours after the event. The answer is, sadly, yes; those sociopaths sending malicious messages to families seeking news of relatives, wrongly claiming they are dead. How sick is that?

***One of the Japanese cities devastated in 2011, Kamaishi, recovered sufficiently to become a host city of the Rugby World Cup in 2019.***

**LIBYA**

**Thursday 24th March 2011**

There are a few rare occasions when the House of Commons actually has a well-argued, passionate but respectful, informed debate. Monday of this week was one such an occasion. The circumstances could not have been more grave, as to give orders for young men and women of our armed forces to become involved in conflict is the most serious decision any politician has to take, but for once the house rose to the occasion and the level of discussion was serious, anything other than gung-ho or jingoistic, and cautious in avoiding some of the mistakes that have been made in the past.

The involvement of British forces in preventing what would certainly and in very short order have been a human catastrophe in Libya, as Colonel Gaddafi made clear his determination to extirpate his opponents and treat rebel cities such as Benghazi with a vicious retribution, has received wide-spread support. But that is not to say that quite proper questions cannot be asked. What is the measure of success, other than the obvious one of reducing bloodshed? How do we extricate ourselves from such an involvement, given the difficulties experienced in both Iraq and Afghanistan? Can the use of ground forces be ruled out? What measure of continuing support will there be from the international community, and particularly from the Arab states?

All those questions were posed and, so far as they can be, answered in Monday’s debate. The circumstances are very different from what I remember at the time of debating Iraq. Then, I and my colleagues were strongly opposed. Why? Because there was no United Nations resolution to provide backing in international law to the invasion. Because the then Prime Minister Tony Blair failed to share with even his own colleagues in cabinet let alone the house the legal advice he had received and other information critical to them taking an informed decision. Because the pretext for war and the limits to the action were subject to continuous re-working, but based on what was fundamentally a lie. Because no international consensus existed, and the action drove a deep wedge between the UK and the US on the one side and the muslim world, almost united in their opposition, on the other.

This time it is different. The government have worked hard to secure the agreement of the United Nations security council in resolution 1973 to prevent the Libyan government attacking its own citizens . It is not a license to remove Gaddafi, although that may be a consequence which is in the hands of the Libyan people. The Arab League were prominent in calling for the no-fly zone, and Arab nations have contributed to the contingent enforcing it. Cabinet met and were able to study in detail the advice of the Attorney-General on the legality of the action, and the purport of that advice has been made public. The house was given the chance at the first opportunity to both discuss the matter and vote on it. The Prime Minister led the debate and was perfectly open about what was being done and why. And in a marked departure from some of his predecessors, he then stayed in the chamber to hear what others had to say. His tone was frank, grave and honest about potential difficulties. And the house agreed to the proposition by a margin of 557 to 13.

At the time of Iraq, I had a great number of letters asking me to oppose British involvement. I agreed, and I did. I still do, actually; nothing I have heard or seen since has caused me to change my view. But this time, the only messages I have received from constituents has been to implore the government to do what it can to prevent the tragedy unfolding on the borders of Europe and on our television screens. I am pleased that we have been able to do so, certainly in the short term, but I hope more permanently. Any military action is a desperately serious thing. If we are to be involved, then it must be for the right reasons, and on the right basis. This time, I think it is.

**THE CENSUS**

**Thursday 31st March 2011**

Is there something you should have done last Sunday? I don’t mean change the clocks – you must have noticed everybody else is an hour ahead of you by now! – or do the gardening. I mean, did you fill out your census form? Probably best if you did, as there’s a potential £1,000 fine if you didn’t. And although there are people who worry about the information they are required to divulge (unnecessarily, as nothing is made public for a hundred years, which is more than you say for the information people give quite feely to a supermarket loyalty card), in its collated state it’s very important to making sure that public services are planned properly. And of course it is the most wonderful source eventually for future historians, genealogists and the simply curious. So even while you’re puzzling over question seventeen (it’s a question about the Welsh language which doesn’t apply in England, okay? And if you re-number, it gives the computers a headache, apparently), at least bear in mind that a very brief imposition may be a considerable boon to society in the future.

And we’ve been doing it for over two hundred years now. The first modern census in the UK was in 1801, and what sparked it was the fear that the rapidly increasing population would soon outstrip the supply of food. The actual figures showed a total of 9.4 million. It’s over six times that now.

The historic records show some interesting snippets. For instance, the 1851 census showed the occupants of Buckingham Palace, including Victoria, occupation “The Queen”. However, she was not, of course, the head of the household, which fell to her husband, Prince Albert. The 1871 census required you to say if anyone was “a lunatic, an imbecile or an idiot”. This was objected to by the Registrar General ten years later, saying, “It is against human nature to expect a mother to admit her young child to be an idiot, however much she may fear this to be true”.

TV soap fans will be pleased to know that the 1881 census records the existence of Coronation Street in Manchester, with a resident Mrs E Sharples, though sadly her first name was Ellen rather than Ena, and Albert Square, London, almost entirely populated by prostitutes, brothel-keepers and sailors.

The census of 1911 was noteworthy in a number of ways. It was the first automated census, using punched cards to record the information. It was the first to ask separate questions about occupation and industry; one man described an occupant of his house as ‘Peter Tabby’ and lists his occupation as ‘mouser’. His nationality is ‘Persian’. The enumerator has crossed out the entry with red ink and noted sternly: ‘This is a cat.’

Particularly interesting, however, was that it coincided with the suffragette movement’s campaign to give women the vote. The movement decided to use the census as a way of promoting their cause, by actively encouraging women not to participate. The argument was that if they were not to be treated properly by being given the right to vote, then clearly they didn’t warrant being counted as citizens. The most remarkable effort to publicise this view was taken by a young lady called Emily Wilding Davison, who sadly later found her way into the history books by throwing herself under the King’s horse at the Derby, dying from her injuries. Emily Davison managed to hide herself in a broom cupboard in the crypt of the House of Commons, and was enumerated there. Nowadays there is a plaque in the cupboard recording her uncomfortable night there. The then Speaker, James Lowther, was not amused, sending a note to the Serjeant at Arms to say she was “evidently not a desirable personage to have hanging around” and asking that her name be added to the Index Expurgatoris, the list of people banned from parliament.

So by filling out the census form, you’re not only helping central and local government plan for the future, you’re adding to a rich historical database. And no, the information is not going to be given to the CIA, News International or Big Brother. The 1911 to 1991 census forms fill sixty miles of shelving. Now it’s all electronic. In a hundred years time, it will make interesting reading.

***It has been suggested that 2021 may be the last time a census is conducted, much to the dismay of historians.***

**REFORMING PENSIONS**

**Thursday 7th April 2011**

My colleague Steve Webb probably knows more about pensions than anyone else in the country. In fact, given that he was a university professor on the subject before he was elected as MP for the part of south Gloucestershire that used to be called Northavon and is now known as Thornbury and Yate, he was the obvious person to be appointed Minister of State for Pensions in the new government a year ago. And, as events of the last week have shown, he is rapidly putting that expertise to good use.

Every time we have a general election, the various parties are always very keen to make promises to the older population, Sadly, the promises don’t always lead to real terms improvements. The last government certainly helped in one important respect, in that they brought in the pensioner tax credit. Unfortunately, the process also had two major disadvantages. Firstly, it cost a great deal to administer, because of the process of means-testing. Secondly, a substantial proportion of those who were eligible for the tax credit never claimed it, either because they didn’t want to go through the process, not uncommon among more elderly people, or because they were ignorant of what they were entitled to.

Of course, there were many who assumed that the spending review would see cuts to a range of forms of help that pensioners receive. But despite the spending pressures, the budgets for bus passes, free television licences, free prescriptions and the Winter Fuel Allowance have been protected at the level set out by the previous government. Better still, where the previous government had planned to cut Cold Weather Payments to £8.50 per week, they’ve now been increased to £25 permanently to protect the most vulnerable when the temperature is below freezing.

I’m also delighted that the link between the Basic State Pension and earnings which was broken thirty years ago has been restored, something which could have been done over the last thirteen years but wasn’t. The ‘triple lock’, to increase pensions by the highest of earnings, prices or 2.5% will benefit a typical newly-retired pensioner by around £15,000 during their retirement. That’s a real commitment to the state pension, and a commitment to improving it.

But we also need a state pension system that works for those who have yet to retire and who will be facing a very different world. They will, on average, be working much longer and be retired longer than their parents and grandparents. Workplace pensions are far less generous than they were in the past. Few young workers are saving anything at all for their retirement. We need to put a system in place fit for the future. And that’s where the plans unveiled by Steve Webb in a consultation paper this week come in, and why they’re so important.

A flat-rate state pension worth £140 per week in today’s money will provide a firm foundation for saving. This is crucial as we go through the process of automatically enrolling millions of workers into workplace pensions. They will be free to opt-out, but their employer will put money in, they will put money in, and tax relief will go in. People need to be confident though that their savings won’t be swallowed by means testing. A flat rate pension set above the rate of the means-test means you can be confident that it will pay to save.

Those who were heading for pensions below the poverty line stand to benefit most from this reform. It will also end the penalties facing women who stop work to bring up children or care for a family member. While those years are credited for the Basic State Pension, no provision was made for them prior to the introduction of the State Second Pension. It is time their contribution to society is fully recognised in the state pension. A year spent caring for a child or elderly relative will be worth the same as a year spent running a global corporation as far as the state pension will be concerned.

This sounds like magic. Everyone wins. But the total spend stays the same. It’s just that the costs involved in running a bureaucratic and complex system are instead invested in the purses of future pensioners. And that sounds good to me.

**ALTERNATIVE VOTING**

**Thursday 14th April 2011**

Somebody wrote to me last week asking for my “impartial” opinion on the referendum on 5th May on changing the Westminster electoral system. I tried my best, but it’s a little difficult for me to be entirely impartial because I have a very clear preference myself, and that is for a change to the Alternative Vote system and away from the present First Past the Post method of electing MPs. That is not to say that AV would be my ideal solution. It isn’t. I would like to see a properly proportional system, where the number of seats a party wins relates directly to the number of votes they get in a general election, but given the two biggest parties were against that, it’s not on offer.

So why would I want a change? Well, first of all, when you listen to politicians talking about voting reform, bear in mind that they all have vested interests. I do too. There is evidence that, in most elections, my party would do a little better under AV, which would not be difficult. But bear that in mind as well when you hear the dragoons of old-style politicians supporting the status quo and campaigning for a no vote. They are the direct beneficiaries of the current system.

But the overwhelming arguments for a change isn’t fairness to politicians but fairness to voters. Under the current system, only the votes of those whose first preference is the winning candidate count for anything at all. In my constituency, for example, at the last election I got just under half the total number of votes, 47.5%. That means that the votes of slightly over half of those who voted, who voted Conservative, Labour, UKIP or Independent, counted for nothing at all. Under AV, the second and third preferences of the candidates who did least well would have been added to the scores, and so whoever won would have had the support of most of the people in the constituency. At the moment someone who two thirds of the votes in a constituency think is appalling can nevertheless still be elected.

AV also has some knock-on effects. It means there are fewer “safe seats” where everybody knows which party is going to win, whoever the candidates are. It means that MPs have to actively seek the support of voters well beyond their own party supporters to ensure election. It means that those who really support a smaller party are not forced to vote “tactically”.

The “Yes” campaign is also running a line that AV means that your MP has to work harder. Needless to say, I’m not best pleased with that particular line, because I think (although it’s for others to say) that I work pretty hard already, but it may be true in safe seats where a degree of complacency can set in. I well remember as a newly elected MP astonishing some old-stagers in other parties by insisting that I get back to my constituency every weekend to do my advice surgeries. I got the impression that visits to their constituencies were occasional affairs, and might include being met by the town band at the station!

I’m afraid some of the campaign arguments have been extraordinarily lame. I disagree with one of my colleagues who suggested that the opponents of change are behaving like Goebbels. But the No campaign has come up with some entirely spurious costs of AV elections which they claim could be put to better use. The figures they come up are based on doing the whole election by electronic voting machines. No-one has suggested doing anything of the sort, nor is it remotely necessary. They also suggest AV benefits extremists. In fact, the reverse is true, which is why the BNP are one of the two parties campaigning for a no vote. Then there is the idea that it’s all too complicated. That a nation used to voting for “Britain’s Got Talent” can’t work out how to write 1,2, 3 against candidates’ names rather than an X seems pretty far-fetched to me.

At the end of the day, people will read the material and make up their own minds. But don’t come to me for impartial advice. I’m definitely voting Yes.

**TRASH TALKING**

**Thursday 21st April 2011**

Let’s talk rubbish. A letter which was sent by one of my constituents in Castle Cary to local papers last week certainly did. Apparently, the decision by councillors of another party to introduce charges for using rubbish recycling sites in Somerset this year is all my fault, as a result of actions I am accused of having taken nearly thirty years ago! Now, I’m used to the current fad for blaming me in the local context and the Deputy Prime Minister in national terms for virtually everything mildly irritating that happens in this world – “my car wouldn’t start this morning, I blame that Nick Clegg” – but this is a little wide of the beam even on that basis.

It seems that the charges that are currently being introduced are all down to a policy I “presided over” as “Chairman of Somerset County Council” to sell off the waste disposal operation of the local authority to form a private company, including the operation of Dimmer waste disposal site. I was apparently warned that charges would be the direct result of this policy.

There’s just a few flaws in this argument. Firstly, I was Leader (not Chairman) of Somerset County Council between 1985 and 1989. So it’s hard to see why I could or should be held responsible either for the then Conservative government’s Environmental Protection Act of 1990, which resulted in the sell-off of waste disposal companies across the country, or the incorporation of Somerset’s own operation, then called Wyvern Waste, in 1991 by a county council then also controlled by the Conservatives. I was at that point leader of the opposition on the council. The sale of Wyvern Waste, now called Viridor, may or may not have been a good idea, but given that we’re talking about twenty years after the event, it’s hard to see that what’s happening now was the inevitable consequence.

No, the decision to charge at some skip sites, reduce opening hours, and a clear risk of the policy extending to other parts of the county is an idea dreamt up in the here and now. No previous council has thought it might be a good idea to deter people from taking their rubbish to a tip. It’s not the company that disposes of the waste that decides such things – they merely work under contract – it’s the councillors who sit on the Somerset Waste Partnership board, and it’s they who must accept the responsibility. And I think it’s an utterly daft decision.

Somerset has always had a very good record on recycling waste; indeed, the county and districts between them have one of the better authorities in the country, with South Somerset being particularly effective. But that risks going into reverse if people are deterred from disposing of their rubbish sensibly. But worse than that is the strong possibility – I would put it as a racing certainty – that the consequence will be more littering and fly-tipping. Not only is that a revolting prospect, and hardly good for our tourism industry, let alone the quality of life of local residents, but it costs immensely more to the local authorities in the longer run to clear it up. So this is a cost-saving measure that actually ends up costing the council-tax payer more. Brilliant.

There is a strong suspicion that the charging regime is in any case only intended to demonstrate a reduction in demand that will justify the closure of recycling sites in a few months’ time, in which case it is cynical as well as short-sighted. But why should people who already pay for waste disposal through their council tax pay again to use these facilities? Paying twice over for a reduced level of service doesn’t sound very fair to me. And paying more with a result that our lanes and lay-bys get despoiled with piles of trash is plain stupid.

**CONNECTING UP**

**Thursday 12th May 2011**

It takes something a little unusual to get Members of Parliament of all three main parties, their counterparts in local government, Somerset and Devon County Councils and the newly established Local Enterprise Partnership to agree on anything, let alone to jointly lobby the government. However, ensuring that the west country benefits at the earliest possible opportunity from high-speed broadband is something which is so self-evidently important to our future, both economic and social, that colleagues needed very little encouragement to come together and present a rare united front.

I had originally been asked to arrange a meeting with Culture Minister Ed Vaizey for the five Somerset MPs, but by the time the meeting happened, on Monday this week, we had our Devon colleagues eager to play a part as well, and I’m grateful to all of them, but particularly David Hall, the portfolio holder for Somerset, his equivalent at Devon, and Jeremy Filmer-Bennett, the chair of the LEP, for presenting the case so well. I know from subsequent conversations with civil servants that their clear enthusiasm, but more importantly the planning and commitment demonstrated, went down well.

Why is it so important? It isn’t simply to allow people better and faster connections to their Facebook sites or youTube. It’s an economic necessity. We don’t have the best of transport links with the rest of the country, even if I achieve my long-term aim of finally getting the A303 improved and the Great Western line electrified. We will certainly not represent a good deal for businesses wanting to grow or to relocate if we can’t provide adequate IT infrastructure, and in a part of the country where we increasingly depend on businesses heavily reliant on good IT links that is a massive discouragement to growth which frankly we cannot afford.

It is made worse by the fact that Cornwall to the south west and the Bristol and Bath area to the north are already ahead of us, so to leave a massive area in the south west peninsula still depending on appalling internet links – I often say that a man with a forked stick would in many cases be quicker in taking a message than my so-called broadband in my home village of Witham Friary – would be disastrous, and in the not too distant future as well.

Were we persuasive? Well, I hope so, but we shall know in a few weeks’ time when the decisions are made on the “Tranche 2” winners and losers. Certainly I hope that even if we are not successful this time we will be able to make rapid progress, because I honestly think a lot depends on it.

Meanwhile, I took an hour out of Westminster on Tuesday last week to look around the biggest construction site in Britain – the 2012 Olympics site. Probably not that many locals will be that familiar with the bit of East London where the Olympic Park is being built, but as someone who has played the odd game of rugby on Hackney Marshes, not to mention rowing a few times on the River Lea, let me tell you the transformation is extraordinary. What was derelict industrial wasteland, washed by a river resembling a toxic sump, is almost unrecognisable.

It’s not all finished yet – after all, there’s still a year to go – but there’s no longer any real doubts about it being ready for business when the time comes. I went inside the Olympic stadium, which is virtually finished, saw the beautiful cycling velodrome, and the aquatic sports centre. The river looks wonderful, landscaped and cleaned up. And the press and media building is immense; apparently it would comfortably hold three jumbo jets.

There’s every sign that the London games will be a success. While I was there, I was asked if there were any local people I would like to nominate to take part in the relay to carry the Olympic torch. So how about it? If you know anyone, particularly a young sportsman or woman, who deserves to be put forward, let me know.

Lastly, congratulations to all those elected to their District Councils last week, and commiserations to those who didn’t make it this time. Of course, I’m delighted that South Somerset will remain under Liberal Democrat control for another four years – a remarkable achievement given what was happening around the country!

**FIGHTING FOR FISH**

**Thursday 19th May 2011**

One of the most poignant expressions of public grief mixed with gratitude over recent years has been the little ceremony, unorganised and spontaneous, that has accompanied the sad return of the bodies of casualties of our military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan to Wootton Basset in Wiltshire. Even those who have little sympathy with the political decisions that underlie our involvement in armed conflict share, in the most part, the sense of loss and respect for the young men and women who have lost their lives in military service.

But public sympathy is not enough. For every death there are many more who are injured, some physically, many more bearing the mental scars of conflict. There are families struggling with keeping things going while all the time worrying about the safety of a husband or wife, son or daughter, father or mother whose safety cannot be assured because they are in a very dangerous place. We owe each of them a duty of care, both while they are in service, but as or more importantly later, when they have to readjust to civilian life.

The promise that we, as a society, will do just that is what is called the military covenant. And for too long many people have feared it is something to which successive governments have paid lip-service but little concrete attention. Many of us have argued over the years that something more is needed, and this week we have, I think, made substantial progress.

Partly as a result of campaigns in the house, but more especially, I think, the tireless work of the Royal British Legion and other ex-servicemen organisations on behalf of their members, the government has at last not only published what the military covenant is all about, it will now be enshrined in law. Every year, a report will be published to show how the promises given have been translated into action. And it covers not only what soldiers, sailors or air-force personnel can expect in terms of the care available to them and their families while on active service, it covers the interests of veterans as well. It includes health care, provision for children, special concessions for veterans, enhanced mental health care, assistance with living costs, all the things which have been identified as real issues for service families.

I am delighted that we’ve reached that point, and that we are able to demonstrate very clearly that we not only owe our thanks, we express it in our actions.

It’s a fairly abrupt change of gear to move from that to the subject of fish, but my postbag is heaving with a bumper catch of letters at the moment on the subject. The issue is the perverse effects of the European Union’s Common Fisheries policy, and more particularly the problem of discards.Up to half the fish caught in the North Sea are thrown back into the water either dead or dying, as a direct consequence of EU common fisheries policy rules. The public were alerted to this issue by TV chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall’s Fish Fight campaign, and as a consequence many have written to their MPs or signed petitions. The concern is shared by many members of parliament on all sides, which was amply demonstrated when we had a debate on the subject in the House of Commons last week.

The fact is that the present rules are absurd and need to be changed, and I hate to disappoint those who prefer to think that everything would be fine if it weren’t for the wicked government and its works, but that was a view shared on all sides, including the government. Indeed, British ministers have taken a lead in demanding change as part of the renegotiation of the CFP which takes place later this year.

We aren’t there in securing agreement yet, but it won’t be for want of trying. Mr Fearnley-Whittingstall is, as far as this country is concerned, pushing on an open door. It makes no sense to catch and kill but not land fish, just as it makes no sense to deplete our fish stocks to the point of extinction. A sane policy would recognise both those facts and try to reconcile them.

***When the British Government achieved the change in EU rules which his campaign had been calling for, Mr Fearnley-Whittingstall was conspicuously silent in welcoming ministers’ efforts. No doubt he was already planning his next campaign in support of public opinion.***

**PRIVACY VS FREE SPEECH**

**Thursday 26th May 2011**

The first amendment to the constitution of the United States reads: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a [redress](http://www.usconstitution.net/glossary.html#REDRESS) of grievances”. It is that provision which ensures that in America people have a fundamental right to freedom of expression, which means that the row which is currently swirling around the subject of injunctions and super-injunctions could not possibly take place there. In Britain it is different.

Whatever some would have us believe, the law, in England and Wales at least, is complicated. Defamation, which is currently being looked at again in the context of a draft bill, means that you cannot publish something about somebody that is not true, and if you are challenged in the court, then you need to establish why your claims can be justified. But what if you publish something that is true, but which is damaging to the person or people involved? Well, you cannot be sued for defamation, but whereas there isn’t a formal privacy law in this country, there is a commitment to a right of privacy in the Convention on Human Rights. There are proper arguments why that should be over-ridden – where there is a public interest in disclosure, for instance – but many of the concerns are that by a number of cases over recent years the courts seem to be developing a law of privacy without parliament ever deciding there should be.

Add to that three more elements. Firstly, the increasing use of injunctions to stop somebody saying or writing something before they have done so, and the further sophistication of what are called super-injunctions which prevent anyone not only revealing the details but also letting on that an injunction even exists. Then there is the advent of the modern age of IT, which makes an order of a court in any jurisdiction almost impossible to impose on those using blogs or twitter to circumvent restrictions that apply to the printed press or conventional broadcasters. And the third is parliamentary privilege, which is a necessary protection to prevent MPs from being prevented from saying what they need to say on behalf of their constituents, but can be abused to flout the order of a court.

As we’ve seen over recent weeks, it’s a huge muddle. The press see an opportunity to get rid of restrictions they see as stopping them printing juicy stories. The law appears absurd when an injunction prevents the publication of the name of a misbehaving footballer when everyone with access to google and an inquisitive nature knows it, football crowds chant it out loud, and the logjam is broken by an MP blurting it out in the House of Commons.

But these issues, as I say, are complicated. Most people would agree that people shouldn’t be able to block publication of information which may affect the public interest, like the case I was involved in a year or two ago about dumping of toxic waste. But is knowing about the peccadilloes of a sportsman a proper matter of public interest, or simply of prurience? Should prior restraint be applied to the media, or should they be sued after the event and pay the penalty? Is it right for MPs to defy a court ruling when they have no idea of what the circumstances are or the details which a judge has taken into account? And should there be a law available to the rich and powerful which we know perfectly well is not there for the ordinary man or woman who can suffer just as much from the inappropriate attentions of the tabloid press?

These are not issues which can be decided by a knee-jerk response, which is why I’m glad that a committee of both houses of parliament has now been set up to look at the whole subject. It may be that we do need to pass new law, and it must surely be unacceptable for this whole area to be determined by the judges. Equally, it is wholly unsatisfactory for parliament to find itself at odds with the judiciary. If we want the law to change, we should do just that.

**OBAMA, THE BATH & WEST, AND THE A303**

**Thursday 9th June 2011**

A few weeks ago I wrote about the meeting I organised to lobby Culture Minister Ed Vaizey to try to make sure Somerset was included in the next tranche of high-speed broadband. Well, last week we had the announcement, and we’ve come up trumps, along with Wiltshire and Norfolk. What links the successful areas, apart from a readiness on the part of local authorities and businesses to back the bids, is that each of them represent largely rural areas which would otherwise lose out.

Although there are no doubt many who say “So what?”, either because they have not the slightest interest in using the internet themselves, or because they are perfectly satisfied with what they already have, I think we may look back on this as a critical decision for our local economy, almost but not quite equivalent to some Roman general deciding we needed a road, let’s call it the Fosse Way, and the ideal route would be through Shepton Mallet! It isn’t the inconvenience of waiting for grossly inadequate telephone lines to carry data traffic, it’s the effect on present and future businesses in the area. I simply don’t think we could compete for future jobs without being able to be competitive in terms of IT connections, so I am delighted with the decision. There are still many details to be worked out as to how the roll-out of high-speed broadband will be implemented, but at least we now have the will and the cash to make it happen.

Meanwhile, in other news, I was just a little bit star-struck to have the opportunity to listen to President Obama in the flesh last week. He may not be to the tastes of every American, but he strikes European audiences as being calm, fluent, authoritative and capable. It’s good to hear an American President who you can believe is not only understanding the words he has been given to say and their implications, but indeed might well have written those words himself.

Congratulations, also, to DEFRA for producing a Minister to attend the Royal Bath and West show last week, something the previous government repeatedly failed to do. I accompanied Richard Bennion around the showground on Friday (I always seem to spend almost half a week at the show), and I’m pleased that somebody from the ministry responsible for food and farming can be bothered to actually listen to what our producers are saying. I hope many of the dairy farmers present are pleased that at last we have published the Groceries Code Adjudicator bill, which means that at long last there will be independent assessment of the fairness of contracts between primary producers and the big supermarkets, a reform which has long been needed if we’re going to avoid simply exporting our dairy industry as farms go out of production because they can’t get a fair farm-gate price for milk.

The fact is that the major retailers have a hugely advantageous market position. That is not all bad news for the consumer; many would say we have one of the most competitive and efficient retail supermarket chains in the world. But it isn’t in the long-term interests of the country as a whole if the result is that constant downward pressure on producers means that in the future we no longer have the capacity to be anything like self-sufficient. The bill, which is in draft and is now open for comment, means that there will be an effective arbiter to ensure that abuses in the supply chain are less likely, and that seems to me very welcome.

As an aside, the bill is also breaking new ground by being written in simpler language, which hopefully will make it easier to understand than the legalese beloved of parliamentary draftsmen and lawyers but impossible for others. If it works, it may be a model for other parliamentary bills in the future.

Lastly, who would have thought the BBC would have broadcast a whole programme devoted to the A303? I know I’ve been bashing away at it for years, but perhaps exposure to national attention will help us get the improvements we need. Britain’s answer to Route 66?

**MAKING A HEALTH BILL BETTER**

**Thursday 16th June 2011**

The Health and Social Care bill does some very important things in ensuring that we cut down on the bureaucratic layers in the National Health Service, make sure that the maximum resources go to the front line, and that the outcomes for patients are what drives health policies rather than other interests. But as it was drafted, it also had the potential to produce results that gave rise to huge concerns from many people, including those who recognise that reform of the NHS is essential. Those concerns were shared by many of us in the House of Commons, and in government, and were expressed very clearly in a resolution passed by the Liberal Democrat conference last March, which set out thirteen key changes we wanted to see in the legislation.

Since then we have been working very hard behind the scenes to get those changes in place. The first visible signs of success were when the Prime Minister announced the period of further consultation while the bill was parked, so we could take the advice of health professionals. That process was completed last week, with a report from Professor Field and his team. Some have criticised the delay, but I think they are entirely wrong. It can never be wrong to listen to fair criticism and to respond. Now we have announced the outcome, which is to significantly alter the bill to address the important issues that were raised. And I am delighted that the threats to the NHS which concerned so many people have been removed and new safeguards inserted, exactly as we have been arguing for.

The changes start from the very first line. The Secretary of State will now continue to have responsibility for the integrity and the constitutional basis of the NHS in line with its founding principles. There will be no crude competition based on price which allows for the creeping privatisation of NHS services, and there won’t be “cherry-picking” of profitable parts to the detriment of the service as a whole. Indeed, all providers will now have to contribute to NHS training and research needs, a far cry from the privileged and preferential position of the Independent Treatment Centres set up by the last government. The watchdog organisation Monitor will be required to promote integration and collaboration rather than competition, always on the basis of patients’ interests.

The GP consortia who will be responsible for commissioning health care will now have to be much more open and accountable in the way they carry out their functions, and will not be able to delegate their commissioning role to private companies. They must have clear rules to avoid conflicts of interest. And the consortia will benefit from the experience of practitioners in secondary care in addition to GPs. A fundamental change is that the setting up of consortia to take on these responsibilities will be to a more relaxed deadline, to ensure they are ready and equal to the task, and GP commissioning is not handed over to reluctant and unprepared practitioners.

There are further changes on the boundaries of commissioning areas, the role of local authorities, and enhanced audit and accountability. All in all, I think the changes will answer the legitimate questions that have been asked about how a very significant reform of the NHS will operate in practice, and ought to reassure those who were worried that the legislation might fatally damage the underlying principles of the NHS.

I will admit that, while I agreed with the overall objectives, I was frankly very worried about the details of the legislation, and when people whose views I respect shared their concerns with me I found myself nodding in agreement. That is why we had to push hard to get changes, and I pay due credit to the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary for listening to what we had to say. The outcome is a better bill. And perhaps a clear example of the benefits of a coalition government where the constituent parties can occasionally disagree, discuss, listen, and come up with improvements.

**THE EURO-CRISIS**

**Thursday 23rd June 2011**

If there is one subject on which I am treated with considerable suspicion by my own party it’s Europe. I’m afraid I’ve never been an avid fan of many of the structures of the European Union, not least because to me there’s a deficit in democratic control, accountability, and on occasions transparency, in the political organisation it has become. That is not to say I am a little Englander; far from it, I am a confirmed internationalist in outlook, but just because I understand the ideals and benefits of international cooperation, I can’t get away from the fact that too often decisions are made without the informed consent of the people who are affected. That’s why, a few years ago, I voted for a referendum on the Lisbon treaty and found myself removed from the Liberal Democrat front bench as a consequence.

As part of that, I’ve had a long-standing difference with the policy of my own party on the subject of the euro. Happily, we have always maintained, long before other parties, that the United Kingdom should not join the single European currency without a referendum first. That, of course, I could go along with. But I have never been persuaded that it is in Britain’s interests to join, not least because I have never seen the circumstances in which our economic cycle has been sufficiently close to our European neighbours not to put great pressure on the system. And likewise, I have never been persuaded that locking peripheral European countries with weak economies into a monetary system based on the economies of the strongest, and in particular Germany, would not cause huge social and financial tensions.

You might therefore assume that I would be relishing the present discomfiture of Greece, and to an only slightly lesser extent Portugal and Ireland, and the threat it poses to the euro, as it proves me right in what I’ve been saying over recent years. Some undoubtedly are, and want Greece to pull down the whole edifice as soon as possible. I think they are profoundly mistaken. We are again on the edge of an international banking crisis, and almost every option looks fraught with danger, but a precipitate ejection of Greece from the euro and into default, with the return of a hugely devalued drachma, looks the worst.

The problems seem to me threefold. Firstly, Greece cannot possibly meet its debt repayments, and that exposes a lot of banks in other countries, including the UK, to further massive write-offs and subsequent losses. Secondly, if there is any sign of Greece reverting to the drachma, then anyone holding euros in Greek banks will immediately transfer them to other safe havens in the euro-zone. The Greek banking system will collapse overnight, probably followed by the Portuguese and, possibly even the Spanish. The repercussions will be huge. And of course, Greek debt will still be valued in euros, so far from reducing, it will actually increase by, say, 30% overnight. And thirdly, the very default of a euro-zone country will destabilise the currency of most of our major trading partners, renew pressure on the weakest, and create another wave of recession.

That’s why walking away from the problem is not an option. It’s all very well saying Greece should never have been admitted to the euro – I remember saying that at the time – but that doesn’t help the current situation. It’s all very well saying it’s a euro-zone problem and nothing to do with us; in essence it is, but it could have enormous repercussions on Britain. And it’s all very well saying loftily that Greece should be allowed to default on her debts, but let’s not kid ourselves that we are insulated from the effects.

I understand why people in Britain are very worried about the prospect of more money going into a bail-out, and I share that concern. But using the International Monetary Fund to provide time for an ordered shift in the Greek position seems to me the least worst option, and that is what the British government is trying to achieve. Athens may seem a long way away, but what happens there over the next few weeks could have a real and direct effect on what happens here over the next few years.

**PUBLIC SECTOR PENSIONS**

**Thursday 30th June 2011**

There are a few things that need to be said a little more clearly on the subject of public sector pensions. Quite a lot of people on both sides of the “argument” don’t quite seem to recognise the facts of the position, preferring to rely on either their prejudices, on the one hand, or their quite proper but in some cases misplaced concerns on the other. This issue about the affordability of pensions paid for by the taxpayer is not something new. I remember writing about it in this very column years ago. And it should have come as no surprise to anyone that some difficult decisions needed to be taken.

But to get back to the misconceptions. Firstly, it is simply inappropriate and silly to describe all public sector pensions as “gold-plated”. Most retired teachers or local government officers certainly wouldn’t recognise that description. Nor are those who see the prospect of changes to their pension arrangements outwith their rights to express their concerns and to seek to do the best for themselves and their families. But certainly those who earn the most from public service have very advantageous pension arrangements indeed. A top civil servant earning £200,000, and there are more than a few, could retire at 60 on £100,000 a year with a £300,000 lump sum. In the private sector you’d need a pension pot of nearly £4 million to get that. And the contribution made by the pensioner will have been between 1.5 and 3% of their salary, while the taxpayer currently pays a contribution of 19%. Final salary schemes are almost unobtainable in the private sector, and have been for some time, and yet the best paid civil servants have schemes subsidised by less well-off taxpayers.

But the design of the pension schemes is just one aspect. There is a cross-party consensus that pensions need to be made fairer and more sustainable, and part of that problem is that people are living much longer. The average sixty year old is living ten years longer now than in the seventies, and those pensions all have to be paid for. That’s why Lord Hutton, who was, you will remember, a Labour Secretary of State, recommended that people should work for longer before drawing a pension.

But what he proposed, and what the government is seeking to implement, has safeguards. Low income workers, for instance, will be protected. Those earning less than £15,000 will pay nothing at all. A teacher on 30k would pay £40 per month after tax relief. A civil servant on £70 - £80k would pay £150-200 per month. And further, the pension a public sector worker will get is linked to their average salary rather than either their final salary or what their pension pot is worth. And the retirement age will be linked to the state pension age, with the exception of uniformed workers such as police and firemen. And of course, no-one is taking away the pension rights that people have already accrued.

That’s still a pretty good offer. It’s still better than the great majority of workers in the private sector can hope for from their pension schemes. I hope that those who plan to go on strike on Thursday realise this, because they may find that they get a pretty dusty response from their neighbours who may be on lower pay, worse pensions, and rather resent that they are through their taxes subsidising the enhancements they’re on strike to keep.

One last thing. When I say the public sector, I include MPs. I’ve always been critical of the very comfortable pension arrangements for MPs, and indeed a few years when they were enhanced I not only spoke and voted against, I refused to take the enhancements when offered. The government has made it clear that it expects the public sector pensions policy when introduced to apply to MPs as well. It’s not directly our decision, because a few years back after a lot of perfectly justified criticism from the public we agreed not to vote on our own pay and pensions in future but to pass it over to an independent body, IPSA. I hope soon they will formally take control of our pensions, and they will implement exactly the same restrictions on our pensions as we expect to apply to everybody else.

**THE END OF THE WORLD**

**Thursday 14th July 2011**

The News Chronicle, the Daily Sketch, the Daily Herald, Today, the Sunday Correspondent – quite a few national newspapers have disappeared from the news-stands over the years. But the News of the World is the first to have died of shame. Goodbye cruel World, as one competitor put it. Killed in response to widespread revulsion at the illegal activities that have been uncovered.

What is clear is that over many years there has been an unhealthy relationship between some elements of the press, the police, and senior politicians. Both the Labour and Conservative parties’ leadership have fawned over Rupert Murdoch for decades, and he has reciprocated by bestowing or withdrawing his endorsement. He never bothered with my party, simply because it is power that he is interested in, and we didn’t at that stage wield any. We weren’t invited to the cosy dinner parties or the opportunities to schmooze the media boss which I think has disfigured our recent politics. One has to wonder, though why previous governments were so incurious about evidence of wrong-doing by the press and media. Could it be they were simply afraid of the consequences?

There are three related but separate issues which arise from the revelations of recent days. Firstly, there is the criminal behaviour itself, and how far it went. Secondly, there is the attempt by Rupert Murdoch’s News International to buy in its entirety the broadcaster BSkyB. And thirdly, there is the relationship between the press and the police. All three are now, belatedly, going to be under intense scrutiny.

On the first, I share the public outrage about the way the News of the World did their business, but I doubt illegal actions were confined to that title or indeed to that newspaper group. I will not be at all surprised to find that the independent inquiry uncovers evidence of widespread abuses by the national press, including some of those papers currently revelling in the Murdoch group’s discomfiture. Phone hacking is, quite simply, a criminal offence, and it is entirely unacceptable that it would appear to have been condoned by senior executives. We shall see, I hope, as the police investigation unfolds, exactly what these editors who apparently knew nothing about what was happening in their own newsrooms were responsible for, and then I hope they will be prosecuted, if appropriate, or resign if not.

On the BSkyB bid, there are many people who say the government should just say no. There is a problem with this. It’s called the law. There is no power for ministers to halt the bid. What they can do is refer it to the independent regulators, the Competition Commission and Ofcom, for them to assess the public interest. In particular, Ofcom can apply the “fit and proper person” test to News International, to consider whether an organisation that has, allegedly, been involved in widespread criminality should be allowed to run national newspapers and TV. That is what they are now doing, and I’m told it may take some time. The government couldn’t have intervened earlier as some have demanded without incurring the likelihood of judicial review proceedings, and I for one have no interest in giving further taxpayers’ cash to add to Murdoch’s millions. Frankly, it would be better if he just withdrew his bid and thought again.

Then there is the police. If anyone imagines this suborning of police officers for information is not widespread, then I’m afraid they’re wrong. As previous reports have shown, it happens at all levels and in all forces. I tried to do something about it when I chaired Avon & Somerset police authority twenty years ago. I hit a wall of silence, of *omerta*. Whether that was old pals, the masonic lodge or the golf club at work, I don’t know. All I know is that it was impossible to make progress. To properly investigate, we need a judge outside of those influences. My solution, for what it’s worth, is to appoint one of the very capable senior women judges. But it must be stamped out. And while we’re at it, let’s stop the tipping off of TV cameras when police are carrying out a particularly juicy morning raid, or the selling police camera footage for entertainment.

This is a midden which needs to be cleansed. The police and judicial inquiries must do the job, and we can get back to decent standards of journalism.

**THE TEA PARTY STIRS**

**Thursday 21st July 2011**

One of the problems with writing a column for a weekly newspaper is that your words can be out of date before they are even published. So it was last week. I contributed my four penny’worth to the debate on News International, hacking, payments to police and the unholy relationship between successive prime ministers and the Murdoch press.

What happened next? Apart from the decision to withdraw the BskyB bid, me being asked at short notice to speak in the much-heralded debate in the House of Commons, the announcement of Lord Justice Leveson’s Inquiry, the resignation of Rebekah Brookes and her subsequent arrest, Rupert and James Murdoch refusing, and then subsequently agreeing, to appear before a Select Committee, the Commissioner and the Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police handing in their notice, the death of a principal witness – not much, really.

As I write we are preparing for those committee hearings, and the house is going to sit for an extra day to hear a statement from the Prime Minister followed by another debate on the situation to date, and I suspect the revelations will not yet have finished. Who knows what we will hear next. I have two worries. One is that colleagues on the select committees will over-reach themselves and fancy themselves as hanging judges. Parliamentary questioning is very important, but mustn’t get in the way of a proper police investigation, and there is a concern that sometimes MPs are tempted to play either to the gallery or their own self-importance on such occasions.

The second is a sneaky suspicion that although this is important – police corruption is a pretty fundamental issue – there are large swathes of the general public who see the blanket coverage of this one matter as completely over the top, a Westminster and media obsession, and wonder why we aren’t concentrating on the other subjects that matter to them, whether it’s the economy, the planet, public services or millions dying from the droughts in Africa. And they are right.

I wouldn’t be at all surprised if economic issues come back to haunt us in a big way over the next few weeks. There are two enormous storm-clouds on the horizon. One is the continuing meltdown in the euro-zone countries. Everybody has concentrated on Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Spain, but the latest candidate for collapse is Italy, where the government has become a national joke and the banks are running scared of their liabilities. It wouldn’t take much for this to tip over yet again into default, and that would be catastrophic for the economic recovery not only of continental Europe but of the United Kingdom too.

Bizarrely, something is also deeply amiss in the United states, where Congress, with its new intake of “tea party” fundamentalists, is blocking any increase to the country’s indebtedness. Rather than working with the President to achieve sensible balancing of the budget, they are doing so in a way which risks US default on debts and a crash in credit rating. Again, this could spell global economic turbulence at a time when we simply can’t afford it. It is ironic that at a time when we’re working hard to restore our national finances and get back on a sound footing this could cause real damage to our interests.

One policy which has caused some adverse comment over recent months has been a particular aspect of Welfare Reform. I was reminded of this when I went to open an artwork created by people with learning disabilities in Frome this week, and they repeated their real concerns about the prospective loss of what is called the Mobility Component of the Disability Living Allowance.

This policy started off with good intentions; to ensure that disability support went to those who need it rather than those who don’t, and to bring the position for those in residential care in line with those in hospital. The problem is that many of those in residential care are far from immobile, or certainly don’t want to be. It includes many younger people who want and ought to be able to enjoy both work and social opportunities.

I have been taking up this issue with colleagues to see if we can think again, and they have. The DLA mobility component will now not be removed from people in residential care from October 2012. It may have a different name in future, but the help to disabled people with their mobility needs will be kept. And quite right too.

**ON TOUR**

**Thursday 28th July 2011**

So, parliament has “broken up” for summer. Not quite on the day we anticipated, as we sat for an extra day to hear a statement from the Prime Minister and have an additional debate on the phone hacking business. And at least we no longer have the extraordinarily long period away from Westminster that used to be the case, as we now return in early September before a short break for the party conference season. But there will be a few weeks away from the House of Commons to allow us some time in our constituencies and to catch up with everything that’s been waiting for an opportunity over recent weeks.

As many people will know, every year I use the time available in summer to do a tour round the many villages in the constituency. Quite how many there are depends on your definition of village, and how many houses you need to constitute a separate community, but I reckon on there being about one hundred and thirty-five, not counting the small towns. That’s as many as in any constituency in the country – although there are geographically bigger constituencies in Wales and Scotland, they tend to have quite a lot of empty space between communities. We don’t. You can’t go much further than a couple of miles between one village or hamlet and the next. So this year, over this week and next, I’ll be visiting one hundred and seven.

The important thing to me is that people who live in the rural areas have a chance to come and see me to either tell me about problems or simply share their views. In the towns I do a series of advice surgeries each month anyway. This is an exercise in making sure I cover the other areas as well. On a sunny day, it can be a really nice experience. When it’s pouring down and I’m huddled under umbrellas near the bus stop or by the telephone box, it sometimes doesn’t seem so much fun. But I hope people find it helpful; those I talk to usually seem to appreciate it. And at least it makes sure that if there is a big issue coming up in one of the villages, I know about it, and maybe I can help.

About the same time we finished in Westminster, schools across the country were finishing term as well, and kids were experiencing that first flush of freedom which the summer holidays offer. But even before they finished, the bigger chain stores were putting up their signs saying “Back to School”, with all their offerings for the new school term. For heaven’s sake, give the kids a break! Let them at least think of holidays before reminding them the new term will soon be upon them. Mind you, I read in this week’s papers that in London the department stores are this week launching their Christmas shopping. In July. Presumably it is Christmas 2011 they are preparing for, not next year. At the risk of sounding like a grumpy old man, this is getting ridiculous.

And continuing in grumpy mode, I was a bit cross about the report in last week’s Western Gazette from a lady in Pen Selwood complaining that I hadn’t responded to the petition about pensions she had handed in to my office in Frome. I freely admit, I don’t get everything right. My office work very hard to help me to reply to everything that’s sent to me, and believe me, we get a lot. But occasionally we make a mistake. But when I investigated this petition, a few problems cropped up.

Firstly, the lady who delivered it didn’t give her name or address, which made contacting her a little difficult. Secondly, unlike what I and most people would describe as a petition, this one had not a single signature on it. It was simply a printed list of names. And thirdly, in turn, not one of those names had an address so I had no way of knowing whether they were or were not my constituents. So I had an anonymously presented list of printed names without addresses from people who for all I know were from the outer Hebrides. Makes responding a little difficult, doesn’t it? Oh, and by the way, the lady in question had written to me on the subject, and received a reply. I’m sorry if she was disappointed, but I’m not sure what more I could have done.

**POLICING THE COUNTRYSIDE…**

**Thursday 4th August 2011**

Most of the last two weeks I’ve spent in my less than stately “progress” around the constituency visiting as many villages as I can as part of my village tour, but last Friday I spent a few hours instead with the police in Wincanton. I was catching up with the work of the excellent Sergeant Ed Hawkins and his team, who apart from policing the local area are developing an expertise in two specific areas, one of which has been an issue for me for some time, and the other has rapidly assumed added importance over recent months.

The long-standing issue is trying to provide better security for farms and others in the countryside. It’s never going to be easy policing very rural areas. Clearly, there’s not going to be a police officer on every bend in every lane, or even very often in small communities at all. Nor do the figures justify a massive deployment of personnel or resources; the level of crime in rural communities is still, thankfully, very low, although the perception is often very much higher. But that doesn’t mean it’s non-existent, and people who live outside of the cities and towns are as entitled to protection and, subsequently, detection as anyone else. They’re also entitled not to feel entirely neglected by the forces of law and order, which sadly is sometimes the case.

Most vulnerable are farmers. They often have considerable amounts of valuable equipment and plant lying about the place which is easy prey for acquisitive souls. Farms are easy to get onto, and there are often legitimate reasons to be on the land. They are usually well away from prying eyes. And it is difficult for a farmer or his family to effectively challenge a group of intruders, Worryingly, far too often there is blatant intimidation; threats against property, livestock or person. And, sadly, farmers are often, as they will sometimes admit, their own worst enemies. They often don’t report losses, or suspicious behaviour. They leave equipment without even basic security measures; leaving the key in the ignition doesn’t make it that difficult for the would-be thief. And far too much of recovered stolen goods has absolutely no distinguishing marks to allow return to rightful owners.

That’s why I’m particularly pleased with the work that’s now being done to target rural crime, and the effective use of a Farmwatch scheme which is not only sharing useful intelligence but also keeping people aware of likely threats. Knowing that there are villains in the area, the vehicle they’re using and what they may be interested gives a sporting chance to do something about it. There’s still too much theft, rustling of stock and anti-social behaviour going on. But at least Ed and his team are beginning to push back, and I hope the lessons they are learning are being taken up by police teams in other areas.

The other problem which has grown rapidly, and is not unrelated, is theft of scrap metal. Often this happens from farms, where there’s plenty, as I said before, just lying about. But, as many communities have found to their considerable cost, there’s also lead from church and school roofs, and cabling from electricity and telephone lines. Curry Rivel, for instance, has twice been cut off recently when thieves stole the BT lines. I’m told arrests have now been made there, which is good news. But there is a mushrooming trade in scrap metal due to the burgeoning prices of metals. It’s suddenly become very good business indeed for the thieving community.

Again, there are things that can be done. Marking, either visible or invisible. Good intelligence about suspicious actions. Bearing down heavily on scrap metal dealers who take stolen material. I’m not going to set out what exactly the police team are doing, because I’d prefer the other lot not to know what is being done to counter their activities. But I’m glad someone’s taking the matter seriously, and if we in parliament need to help out by making it harder to dispose of stolen property through dealers, then I’ve already said I’m more hen happy to take it up with colleagues in the home office. One last thing. Insurance companies insist on like for like replacement of lead following theft. Why? It just gives thieves a second helping. There are alternatives far less attractive and, I believe cheaper.

**..AND POLICING THE CITIES**

**Thursday 11th August 2011**

I well remember the riots in the Hartcliffe area of Bristol in 1992, when I was a member of, and soon to be Chairman of the Avon & Somerset Police Authority. The supposed cause was the death in a police chase of two young men who had stolen a police motorbike. They crashed, died in the accident, and the result was three days of rioting which resulted in local shops being trashed. I remember the Chief Constable telling me he was praying for rain, as fine nights only encouraged the criminal behaviour. In the end, the community lost some of its facilities and a lot of its reputation, a number got a criminal record for their pains, and the police authority faced a massive bill which meant they were less able to do their job elsewhere.

Events over the last few days have something of the same ring about them. A grievance against the police, whether real or imagined. A few instigators. And a lot of people who seem to enjoy trashing the very area they live in. Add to that some simple criminality in the looting of shops and stores, and a quicker chain reaction as a result of modern methods of communication, and you have a serious situation in no time. Parliament has been recalled for Thursday of this week, so I will be there to hear further details from the Home Secretary then. But the pictures we all saw on our television screens are simply unacceptable and unacceptable.

Not that some people haven’t tried to do just that. Ken Livingstone, the ex-mayor of London, for instance seemed to be suggesting on the BBC that the riots were caused by the changes to education maintenance allowances and the loss of one and a half posts in the Tottenham Citizen Advice Bureau. I think not. But there, the instant analysis on that modern debating chamber, Twitter, has identified a number of possible causes. They range from no fear of the police, not arming the police, tuition fees, cuts to probation, the previous government, the present government, Margaret Thatcher, twitter and blackberry messaging, public sector pensions reform, David Cameron’s holiday arrangements, policing being too harsh, policing being too soft, bankers’ bonuses, overcrowded prisons, over-lenient sentences, political correctness, police corruption, violent society, lack of ability to protect property, and the breakdown of organised religion. I think we can all agree that not all of these putative causes can be simultaneously correct.

That there is widespread mistrust of the police in some communities is clearly a fact. It’s something the police themselves acknowledge and seek to address. When you have a flashpoint, such as the incident which sparked the initial demonstration in Tottenham, it is easy for things to get out of hand, and for those who want to create mayhem to do so. And yes, social conditions do have part to play, which is why you are more likely to have a riot in Hackney than Weston Bampfylde. I hope.

But there are also questions about families that do not seem to know or care where teenagers are in the early hours of the morning, or how come they return home with a plasma television. And given the roll-call of shops which seem to have been the targets of looting, it’s no coincidence that they happen to be the electrical goods, the mobile telephones, the clothes, booze and cosmetics stores which were hit. Let’s not be precious about this; it wasn’t a “political” riot, it was an orgy of theft in the knowledge that the police could not intervene. And the irony, of course, is that it makes improvement in the economies of often relatively poor areas that much more difficult, and the facilities that are available to local people that much less.

One last point. I mentioned the cost to the police. I was flabbergasted back in 1992 to find that the police were directly liable for paying compensation for uninsured losses as a result of a riot. This is down to a piece of legislation from 1886, the Riot (Damages) Act. It is a strict liability, meaning no proof of negligence or even possibility of protection is required. And it could cost police services, including our own, millions of pounds they can’t afford. A committee in 2003 recommended repeal. It never happened. Oddly, it was something I raised with the Home Secretary a few weeks ago. In this case, I hope I wasn’t prescient.

**THE YELLOW PERIL**

**Thursday 18th August 2011**

Perhaps I shouldn’t have been surprised, but the emergency sitting of the house after the riots last week was hugely well attended. Whether any solutions emerged is a different matter, but I’m glad that the changes to police tactics appear to have put an end to the current situation, and I am pleased to see the courts are doing their job with expedition. I spoke to the Deputy Chief Constable of Avon & Somerset on Thursday to convey my thanks to our local police who seem to have managed the situation in Bristol very well.

Let me set the subject aside for the moment, although I’m sure we will return to it at length in due course, with one comment on the issue. “What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?" Not a leader in the Daily Mail, or a back-bencher in last week’s debate. Plato, the Greek philosopher. In the fourth century BC.

Perhaps I can instead turn to a rather more bucolic subject. I was talking to a gentleman in one of the villages in my constituency during my recent tour, and he was complaining bitterly about the prevalence of ragwort. It’s everywhere at the moment, but particularly on roadside verges and council land. He wanted to know why the authorities were not complying with the law and making sure that it was eradicated, and couldn’t see how other landowners could be expected to keep their land free of it if those in authority so blithely ignored their responsibilities. I agreed to look into it.

Common ragwort, or *Senecio jacobaea* togive it its posh name, is the tall upright weed with bright yellow flowers which can all too readily be seen by the side of our major roads. And it’s a bit of a pest, because it is toxic to livestock. It contains pyrrolizidine alkaloidswhich cause cirrhosis of the liver in animals. Horses don’t eat ragwort by choice, but will after it has died back, and they seem to be the most susceptible. Cattle may have problems if ragwort is introduced to silage. How many casualties there are each year is a matter of some dispute, but it is undoubtedly the case that ragwort is not a good thing for livestock.

But is it illegal to allow it to grow on your land? I’ve always believed so. But when I looked into it, it turns out it isn’t. Certainly ragwort is specifically mentioned in legislation. There it is in the Weeds Act 1959, along with spear thistle, creeping thistle and broad-leafed dock, what are defined as injurious weeds. I presume that the word injurious in this context means injurious to agriculture, as I don’t think the other weeds are toxic. But there is no obligation on landowners to do anything at all. It merely allows the authorities to make an order requiring the person served with the order to “take such action as may be necessary to prevent the weeds from spreading”.

So why are we all convinced that allowing ragwort to flourish is an offence? Partly because those in officialdom often tell us that is the case. Somerset is better than some, the website saying, “Under the Noxious Weeds Act 1959 we are responsible for controlling certain noxious weeds, including ragwort. This has to be removed where it is reported as causing a nuisance to highway users or adjoining landowners”. They add, “Other invasive species being treated in Somerset are Japanese Knotweed, Himalayan Knotweed, Himalayan Balsam and Giant Hogweed”. Apart from getting the name of the legislation wrong, that is nearer to a correct description of the law than some, which simply describe it as an offence.

Now, before I get letters from horse-riders, don’t get me wrong. I want to see the spread of this botanical nasty controlled. I hope people will ring up the highways authority and report incidence of it, as they seem to be prepared to remove it, although the evidence around the countryside at the moment of them doing so is scant. And I’m glad that they are prepared to take the battle to the other invasive species they mention. I’m just puzzled that all of us have a notion of illegality which in fact doesn’t exist.

**GOING UP**

**Thursday 25th August 2011**

So, another group of expectant school-leavers now know what they managed in their A levels, those who got the grades they needed are looking forward to university, some who fell just short are trying to ignore the warnings about the high level of competition in clearing this year, and others are coming to a perfectly proper conclusion that higher education isn’t for them, and either launching themselves into the job market or seeking apprenticeships. Congratulations to those who have succeeded in their expectations, and good luck to all of them. It’s not an easy time to be a teenager.

And of course there is a new issue. This phenomenon, exhibited to the *n*th degree by the BBC but common to all commentators, is to punctuate any conversation on university entrance with comments about the increase in tuition fees, and the “fact” that many won’t be able to afford to go to university next year.

I realise that to even mention the university fees issue is to invite hostile comment. Nothing has upset some people more than the new policy. Personally I am still against tuition fees paid by the student as a principle, but as we all know that wasn’t a view shared by either the Conservatives or the Labour party, so we are where we are. But what upsets me, because it may have the effect of deterring many able students from fulfilling their potential, are some of the myths about the new system that are believed by many young people because they aren’t being told any different. I have spoken to several sixth-formers recently, and their parents, who are genuinely under the impression that they face huge bills to go to university. They don’t.

Let’s re-iterate the facts. Firstly, no-one pays tuition fees up front. Like now, while you are a student you pay nothing. Nor do your parents. One person said to me “How am I meant to find £9,000 next year to pay for my son?”. The answer is, you won’t. Not next year, not ever. Indeed, under the new system, a whole lot of students, the 40% of those who are part-time students, don’t have to pay either, which is not the case at the moment.

Secondly, if you go to university next year, then when you’re in work you actually won’t be paying more each month than now, you’ll be paying considerably less. Firstly, you won’t pay a penny until you’re earning £21,000 or more, unlike now when the threshold is £16,000. And the rate you pay will be much less per month than those who have graduated already or those entering university this year will pay. Not until you are earning more than £50,000 a year will you be paying as much as under the current scheme. Far from being less well off, you’ll have more money in your pocket in the early years of your working and family life, when you need the cash most. Let’s put that in figures. If your pay is £22,000, around the national average, at the moment you pay £52.50 each month on your student loan. Under the new system, it will be £7.50 a month. Which would you prefer?

Thirdly, although the total “debt” is daunting, it isn’t like any other debt you might incur. It won’t feature on your credit-rating, and won’t be taken into consideration by mortgage lenders, so it doesn’t mean you won’t be able to get a house, as I‘ve been told by some. It’s collected by the tax system, and if you stop earning you stop paying. Nobody will be chasing after you demanding repayment. If you go on a course with higher fees, you won't be asked to make higher repayments. And if you don’t earn enough to pay off the debt at the end of the loan period, then it will be written off. In fact, it has all the characteristics of a graduate tax rather than a loan, except the name.

Lastly if you come from a not very well-off family, you will also get a grant to help with living expenses. If your parents earn less than £42,600, that will be £3,250 a year. And that maintenance grant is not a loan, and is not repayable.

I don’t mind people criticising the new system, particularly if they offer an alternative. But I don’t like would-be students being scared off by myths. It’s time people understood the facts, and then made a rational decision on their futures.

**WINDMILLS ON THE MIND**

**Thursday 1st September 2011**

What do you think of wind turbines. A wonderful example of non-carbon technology, things of beauty and the answer to our future energy needs? Or a disastrous scar on our countryside, dominating the landscape and of questionable use in meeting the generating capacity we will need? Or perhaps you agree with both those views, depending on whether the windmills are planned to be anywhere near where you live?

How about nuclear power stations? A brilliantly efficient technology offering a sustainable future and a massive contribution to demand? Or forbidding and potentially dangerous carbuncles on our coastline, producing waste products we will never dispose of safely at a cost we can’t afford? And whatever we choose as our means of generating electricity, how about transmission? Does anyone really like giant pylons parading in quixotic battalions across the countryside? Are there alternatives?

It’s difficult. Of course, one of the key answers is reducing demand, which is why the new provisions in the government’s big green deal are so important, but however successful we are at doing so over the next few years, there remains a big question about how we keep the lights on after thirty years of paralysis in energy policy and a lack of substantive investment decisions.

Unsurprisingly, I am strongly in favour of renewables. I’m afraid I can’t take desperately seriously the wiseacres who have made up their mind in the face of overwhelming scientific opinion to the contrary that climate change does not exist, but even if you discount that as an argument for moving away from fossil-fuel based technologies, then there is a perfectly sound logic to find alternatives to a depleting resource. We need to expand our development of such sources very quickly to meet the need, and it will not be a single answer. Wind turbine will be part of that mix, and although there are strong arguments in our rather windy island to site a lot of wind turbine development off-shore, that doesn’t preclude some on-shore development as well.

But not just anywhere. It isn’t a NIMBY (not in my backyard) argument to state what would be obvious for any other industrial development; that there are some places which in planning terms are right for such development, and others which are not. We have always preserved some of our best landscape from intrusive industrial building, and there is no obvious reason why that should not apply to wind turbines. So, firstly, it’s important that the community involved wherever possible sees some direct benefit. And secondly, the siting should have regard for the landscape value of the area, and should go through planning processes like any other.

We have had issues like this before locally in the Blackmore Vale area, and one of the problems is when an application is received just over the county boundary, in this case in Dorset. So I understand why a number of my constituents are concerned about a revision of the renewable strategy by Dorset County Council, in case that has implications for them.

Obviously it is perfectly proper, indeed entirely creditable, for Dorset to be doing such work, even though it is not required by government. I am pleased to see they appear to take their environmental responsibilities seriously. My only plea is that they remember that lines on maps do not imply a derogation of responsibility, and that they therefore take the trouble to properly consult and take the opinions of Somerset residents into account as well.

As for nuclear power, I’m afraid I haven’t changed my view that the costs and inherent difficulties cannot be justified. Irrespective of that, though, National Grid are planning to build a new line of pylons across the Somerset levels to connect the Hinkley Point to Avonmouth. We are talking about pylons 153 feet high, across the middle of one of our main tourist areas in Somerset. I entirely understand why campaigners in the area, including Wells MP Tessa Munt, are arguing for the alternative of underground cables, the norm in many countries, to be used instead. I am offering any support I can within the constraints of what I can do as a minister. The argument against is one of cost, but even that is debatable given the comparative inefficiencies of above ground transmission. In terms of cost to the landscape there is no sustainable argument for such an intrusion.

**REMEMBERING A DAY IN SEPTEMBER**

**Thursday 8th September 2011**

There are a few dates on which you know exactly where you were at a particular time, and they are so seared into your memory that it is unlikely that they will ever be deleted. One for many of us who are in the middle to older age groups was the shooting of President Kennedy. As a schoolboy I still vividly remember it and where I was at the time, along with the first moon landing and England winning the football world cup.

More recently, though, the really intense memory for many people is what happened ten years ago this Sunday, the date of which is sometimes obscured for British people by the American usage of 9/11, but which I doubt if many will have forgotten. Certainly it lives very clearly in my memory, because I was there, on Capitol Hill in Washington, one of the potential targets for the ill-fated United Airlines flight 93 which crashed in Somerset County, Pennsylvania, about 150 miles short of the terrorists’ intended destination.

I still clearly remember the events of the day. I was in the old senate building at about 9.30 in the morning. Suddenly, police started to run in to the room literally screaming at us to get out. We were led out on to the lawn outside the capitol, assuming that we were fleeing from some crazy with a gun. Then we saw the smoke rising from the Pentagon across the Potomac where the other plane had just crashed, and where we had meant to be until a late diary change. We took refuge in a nearby bar, where the terrible events in New York were unfolding on the television screens. An hour or so later we made our way round Capitol Hill to our hotel, and I saw an unfortunate Arab American who had chosen that morning to take a walk in the vicinity carrying a petrol can. He was descended upon by half a dozen of Washington’s finest.

Of course the city was in shock. When we finally got back to our own hotel, we were relieved to find strict security in place. Why? Because the concierge was a no-nonsense lady from Northern Ireland who had seen it all before and instantly took charge. We tried desperately to let our families at home know we were safe, but all telephone lines across the Atlantic were blocked with traffic. Eventually the embassy managed to tell the House of Commons authorities we were OK, and the Sergeant of Arms rang my wife to let her know. Up to that time, with a husband in Washington and a brother in Manhattan, she had no idea if she had been doubly bereaved.

When you talk about post-traumatic stress, it can take many forms, some entirely trivial. About six months later I was in London and looked up at the dome of St Paul’s against a clear blue cloudless sky and inexplicably found myself in tears. Then realised that the last time I had seen a dome against perfect blue was that morning in Washington. It’s peculiar what triggers a response.

Did the world change? Yes, I fear it did. I think I understand the effect of that event on Americans, not only because of the horror of what happened but also because it struck at an easy assumption they had about themselves, which was the impregnability of fortress USA.

I understand some of the responses in terms of strengthening security, but I believe some of it went too far, became irrational and changed the sort of society we live in, and not for the better. I will never, however, understand the use of 9/11 as a pretext for war in Iraq, and I think it was a huge mistake. And events of ten years ago and what followed clearly resulted in later atrocities in London and elsewhere and the continuing real fear of terrorist activity. We have much to thank our security services and police for over recent years.

At the end of the day, though, it is about people. You will read much this weekend about events in New York. Much less, if anything, will be written about Washington. But I can’t forget the edition of the Washington Post on the 12th September 2001. It showed pictures of the large group of children who died in the crash, children on the way to a school trip visiting a nature reserve whose plane was turned into an instrument of war. They don’t deserve to be forgotten.

**CASINO BANKING**

**Thursday 15th September 2011**

There are some things you don’t imagine you’ll ever hear, and an apology from Shadow Chancellor Ed Balls is one of them, so I’m sure I’m not the only one astonished to have heard him say in the House of Commons on Monday “For the part that I and the last Labour government played in that global regulatory failure, I am deeply sorry”.

The occasion was the publication of the long-awaited report into banking conducted by Sir John Vickers. As the Chancellor said in his statement, a decade-long, debt-fuelled boom that ended in a dramatic financial crisis, a deep recession and a debt overhang that is still holding back our economy; a regulatory system that totally failed to spot enormous imbalances building up and proved incapable of dealing with the crisis when it first broke; and most importantly, huge global banks that turned out to be “too big to fail”, so that taxpayers were called upon for many millions of pounds to prevent a financial meltdown. And it is not good enough to say that all this was unforeseeable, because it was, notably by my colleague Vince Cable, and he said so at the time.

But that is history. What we need to do now is put in place the mechanisms to prevent any recurrence of similar problems, and that is what the Vickers report is all about. The fact that the big banks are squealing so loudly suggests to me that maybe it is about right. I have long argued for a split between the retail banks, the high street banks that look after our money, and the high-risk casino operators which effectively gamble on the markets. That is the thrust of the report. But it goes further by requiring minimum assets to be kept to protect account holders against loss, measures to increase competition, and others to help customers to transfer accounts easily and at less cost.

It looks to me a very sound package, and I am glad that the government has accepted the report’s conclusions. I don’t think anyone is arguing that such massive changes could be effected overnight. What is necessary is that we prepare and bring in the legislation as soon as possible, and certainly during the lifetime of the present government, and that banks prepare to make the changes they need to do on a defined programme. That is what will happen. And I do have a degree of confidence that it will prevent another banking disaster. Banks don’t like it because it will cost them money. Tough. They’ve cost us quite a lot of money over the last few years, as they would be wise to remember.

Meanwhile, at Monday lunchtime I joined a very long queue of MPs and their researchers waiting to pick up the results of the Boundary Commission’s first shy at producing a new constituency map following the reduction in the number of MPs at the next election from 650 to 600. It resembled nothing as much as the sort of excited but nervous scrum you get on the day students collect their A level results, minus the press pictures of attractive young ladies inexplicably leaping in the air. The same furtive look into the white envelope, followed by expressions of delight, puzzlement or despair.

I was told by at least one national newspaper months ago that as a minister I had somehow arranged matters so that my constituency would be unscathed. It was absolute rubbish, of course, as I said at the time. And so it proved. If the proposals go ahead as set out, then my constituency of Somerton and Frome will no longer exist. Frome and the neighbouring villages will join with Shepton Mallet and Midsomer Norton/Radstock to form a new North East Somerset constituency. The rest of my present constituency will, with the addition of Street, Glastonbury and Ilminster, become a new constituency, apparently to be called Glastonbury and Wincanton.

I make no comment on the desirability or otherwise of these changes, or what I shall decide to do in due course. There is a long way to go in the consultative process yet, and the final result may look very different. But, for the moment, it looks as though the constituency I have been proud to represent for fourteen years will, in three years’ time, be no more.

***“Glastonbury and Wincanton”, for which I suggested the rather more euphonious title “Avalon”, never happened. The constituency is still Somerton & Frome.***

**BURNING HALF A BILLION**

**Thursday 22nd September 2011**

After the brief two-week September sitting of parliament we have to break again for the party conferences. In the long run it would obviously be better if we could re-time the conference season, but these events are so big now, and booked, necessarily, so far in advance that, even if all the main parties agree it is a difficult thing tom arrange. Hence the fact that I am writing this from a rather rainy Birmingham, with the Liberal Democrat conference going on around me.

In government, ministers always use the party conferences to make a few announcements of future policy, and we are no exceptions. I think they’ll be welcomed. The new unit to deal announced for instance, to deal more effectively with evasion of tax by the wealthy. Plans to curb executive pay, where bosses seem to get massive rewards for failure. The measures to force more transparency and simpler tariffs on the big energy suppliers in a bid to cut fuel bills. The bringing forward of plans to mutualise the post office network, so in future we have more security for our smaller post offices. Plans to reduce the number of empty houses and make them available to those desperate for homes. These are all things which I’m sure we will hear more about in the months and years to come.

There’s no getting away from the grim backdrop of the economic situation, though, and I listened carefully to what Business Secretary Vince Cable had to say about the gravity of the situation. Vince sometimes seems to carry around with him his own personal miasma of gloom, but in this case it is entirely justified, and I think he’s right to tell it like it is, as indeed he always has. The lack of available funding is a huge constraint on the ambitions of any government, but as he says, you can’t make progress if you’re bankrupt, and facing down the deficit has to be the top priority.

That’s why a report published this week by parliament’s Public Accounts Committee makes such an upsetting read; more than that, it ought to make people across the country very angry indeed. It looks into a wheeze which was concocted in 2004 to scrap the 999 emergency call centres operated by individual fire brigades and replace them with regional call centres. Almost immediately it was criticized as a plan by people worried that the systems would not provide the same level of service as at present and jeopardise emergency response. I remember writing to the then ministers, John Prescott and others, repeatedly on the subject. But whether or not the policy was right, and I don’t think it was, what the report points out is that over a six-year period it effectively wasted £469 million of public money without anything to show for it. When we’re desperately scrabbling around to find the tiniest savings in order to keep other services going, that is almost criminal profligacy.

The committee found that the scheme was “flawed from the outset” and “a complete failure. The Firecontrol scheme had “not achieved any of its objectives”, and after the taxpayer has lost nearly half a billion pounds, eight of the nine centres were “empty and costly white elephants”, including the one built at Taunton to serve the south west. The empty buildings cost the taxpayer around £4 million a month to maintain. But the committee’s main criticism is the management of the project until the plug was pulled on it by the incoming government last year. They say the IT system "was simply never delivered" and that the Department for Communities and Local Government had "fatally undermined" the project by not working properly with local fire services. "The department excluded them from decisions about the design of the regional control centres and the proposed IT solution," it added. The project had been "rushed" and got Treasury funding without proper scrutiny of feasibility and costs. Those involved with Firecontrol also showed "an extraordinary failure of leadership". No-one had been made accountable, said the MPs, and senior staff "had carried on as if nothing had gone wrong" while continuing to work on other government projects.

As I said, we ought to be angry. Could we have found a better use of half a billion pounds than pouring it down the drain? I think we could.

**HUNTING QUANGOS**

**Thursday 29th September 2011**

Back in 1985, when I was first elected both as a county councillor and as Leader of Somerset County Council, one of my first duties was to recommend the membership of a huge number of committees and outside bodies. One perplexed me, and it didn’t take me long to conclude that we could safely dispense with its services. The Somerset Light Horse Committee had happily continued its existence since the beginning of the twentieth century. It had a clear purpose; to ensure a plentiful supply and adequate procurement of good quality cavalry horses for the Somerset yeomanry. The fact that we no longer had mounted units in the front line of the British army had, apparently, passed it by, and the great and the good of the county were still being appointed to a body which had lost its purpose over sixty years previously.

But that is the problem with public bodies, or quangos as they are nowadays termed. They take on a life of their own, irrespective of whether what they do is any longer relevant or could better achieved otherwise. And there is a clear vested interest for their membership and staff to keep it that way. The losers are the taxpayer and, occasionally, the interests of the service involved. Every government knows this, and says that they are going to deal with the problem, but unfortunately little is done. That’s why I was delighted to be asked as a Minister to help to take the Public Bodies bill through parliament, because it feels to me that it’s carrying forward a process I started in my own small way with my abolition of the Light Horse Committee twenty six years ago.

At the moment we are in the three week break from parliament required for the party conference season, but the moment I get back I will find myself again in what is called the committee stage of the bill, where a committee of MPs goes through the proposals line by line. It is an odd bill for me as a minister because, although I have some responsibility for the policy as a whole, the individual bodies and what, if anything, replaces them is obviously a matter for each government department, and I am merely a mouthpiece for their intentions. That has its challenges. It is also a pretty contentious bill, or at least it was when it was being considered by the House of Lords.

There is, of course, a reason for that. The bill abolishes, alters or changes some of the functions of a large number of bodies. The original review last year on which the legislation is based identified that there are currently 901 non-departmental public bodies. Some are non-statutory organisations which do not need legislation to remove or change them, but of those which do, 192 were to be abolished, 118 merged, 171 substantially reformed, and a further 40 earmarked for further consideration. That is a considerable “hitlist”. And the problem is that every single one of those bodies has its chair, one or two members, or the former minister or senior civil servant responsible for setting them up, sitting in the House of Lords. And every single one of them felt they should defend their own, and give the exceptional reasons why the particular organisation in which they had an interest should be spared.

Of course we must listen to such arguments, and occasionally departments have had second thoughts. But the principles must be right. The test that has been applied to each body is based on three criteria: does it undertake a precise technical operation, is it necessary for impartial decisions to be made about the distribution of taxpayers’ money, and does it fulfil a need for facts to be transparently determined, independent of political interference? Those that don’t pass that test probably aren’t necessary to be continued, if not to save money then to ensure proper accountability; it’s important that ministers are responsible to parliament for decisions taken, and far too often that line of accountability is blurred by arms-length bodies.

But the good news is that it will save money. Lots of it. Our current estimate is that the proposals in the bill, if they go ahead, will save the taxpayer at a minimum £1.6 billion in administrative savings over the current spending review period. Which is one reason why I’m happy to be taking it forward.

**THE PROBLEM WITH E-MAILS**

**Thursday 6th October 2011**

It is no use whatsoever a politician complaining about receiving too much post. It’s like a trawlerman moaning about too many fish. It’s our job, or at least part of it, to read what our constituents have to say, and most of us do our best to provide as far as possible cogent responses. It’s also why we have staff working in our constituency offices to help with casework and typing out and sending the replies we offer.

The volume of correspondence is huge, however. I clearly remember when I was first elected feeling rather like the sorcerer’s apprentice when confronted with the apparently unstoppable deluge of mail at a time when I had no office, no staff, not even a computer to deal with it. Over the following years it’s remained constant at about eighty or ninety letters a day. E- mails always have presented a problem, in that they demand instant responses, whereas I’ve always taken the view, rightly or wrongly, that there is no inherent reason why a computer user should automatically take precedence over someone who has hand-written, probably with a good deal greater care over its content, a letter by post.

Most people seem to appreciate that with the volume we have to deal with (and the fact that I am as a requirement of my job away from the office for four days a week) there will be a short delay in a response, although I try hard not to let it get too long. And equally, I have often enough received kind words, even from those who disagree with me, that I do for the most part provide a proper reply rather than some anonymous handout. It’s inevitable that when a lot of people send me identical letters, as is sometimes the case when a campaign is running on some issue or other, then a lot of people will get the same letter back, but it’s my letter, and it tries to address the issue in hand. Of course we don’t always get it right. Sometimes letters go astray, or get misfiled. Even in the best run offices occasionally things go wrong. But I hope that’s the exception.

But there is a new problem, and it’s emerged over the last year or so. As I perhaps intimated earlier, there’s always been a bit of an issue about mass campaigns. Of course an early lesson that every new MP has to learn is that just because you have received two hundred letters supporting a particular position doesn’t mean that the other eighty thousand people you represent don’t take the precisely opposite view, just haven’t felt the need to write and tell you. I have to say that a letter which begins “Dear (insert name of MP here)” is less than persuasive as well.

But just recently, the campaign groups have discovered mass e-mailing. And frankly, it’s a complete pain. Our inboxes are now filled with identical messages. They usually have a name attached, but often it’s impossible to relate them to a postal address. Curiously, some names seem to appear whatever the campaign of the moment. I don’t think this is fraudulent – it’s just that those who are against one thing are, it seems, often against everything. Some of my constituents are quite prepared to send me several e-mails on different subjects in the same day. Would that there were time to write that many responses. Sometimes you wonder if they have really looked at what they are sending – after all, it’s usually the product of a single click of a mouse. And some are on issues unrelated to my constituency. For instance, I have received approximately eight hundred copies of one particular e-mail over recent weeks. At one stage they were coming in at one every thirty seconds. They all start with the same “Annwyl Aelod Seneddol”. Yes, you guessed, they’re in Welsh, and refer to the Welsh Channel 4, S4C.

The problem is not that I don’t want to hear from my constituents. It’s that the entire system is getting clogged up and there is a real risk of important messages getting lost in the process. And I can’t help feeling it’s more about a sort of machismo on the part of the NGOs than a real wish to influence decisions. As such, it’s probably a bad thing.

**LOCAL HISTORIES
Thursday 13th October 2011**

Until last Saturday I had never been inside the rather attractive church of St Mary’s at Compton Pauncefoot, although I had hit a cricket ball into its churchyard. The latter is not such a prodigious feat of batsmanship, as the distance to the boundary (the church wall juts into the field where the wicket is cut) is not all that great. But last week, not only did I go in but I found the church full with the greater part of the village there. I don’t get so many invitations to events in Compton Pauncefoot as to want to turn them down if I can help it, but this was particularly to my liking, as it was the launch of a newly published village history.

As those who take any notice of what I write may already have picked up, I am quite a fan of local history. I think it’s very important to have a sense of place, of what happened in our communities in the past and what shaped their present. And it’s particularly important when villages have changed, not physically but demographically, so as to be barely recognisable over a relatively short period.

I suspect that may have happened in Compton Pauncefoot. It’s not that it’s grown; the population now is, intriguingly, almost exactly the same as when it made an early appearance in the Domesday Book nearly a thousand years ago. It’s that most if not all its current residents were not born in the village, and most are professional people or the retired. That’s where creating a history of a village is so valuable, in recording at least something of the lives of people who built what is now enjoyed by very different people.

So it is with Roy Turner’s excellent book, one of a substantial collection I am now building up of different communities around my sprawling constituency. We learn of the rector after the civil war who was ejected from his living for “lewd and scandalous behaviour, including cattle thieving, fathering of a bastard child and conniving in the murder of a parliamentarian soldier in his house”. Very different, I imagine, from the home lives of most modern clergy, and indeed the charges may have been embroidered at the time as retribution after the village found itself squeezed between Royalist Dorset and Parliamentarian Somerset.

Or we read about the history of the village school, closed in 1960, where one child in 1950 was described as “having a brain which resents any effort to learn”, and a parent in 1959 allowed her child to receive religious instruction from the head teacher “but not from the rector” . What was it about clergymen in Compton Pauncefoot?

The greatest gift, though, is simply learning how our forebears lived. How the village squire made money from the revenue of sugar plantations in Jamaica, while locals earned theirs from gloving, like many villages hereabouts. I’m sure I’m not alone in finding such details fascinating. But it’s important it’s written down, otherwise we will surely forget.

**DISSOCIATIVE AMNESIA**

**Thursday 20th October 2011**

There is a psychological condition known as dissociative amnesia. It means that you forget things with which you no longer want to be associated, because the memory is too painful or you cannot relate to it. I sometimes wonder if there are some members of the previous government who suffer from dissociative amnesia, because they seem unable to recollect what their position was only a couple of years ago.

The most recent example is the hullabaloo kicked up about the registration of lobbyists, brought into sharp relief by the issues surrounding Dr Liam Fox, the now-resigned Secretary of State for Defence, and the extra-curricular activities of his friend Mr Adam Werritty. Why has the government not introduced the lobbying legislation it promised, demands Labour leader Ed Miliband. The answer is of course that we’re well on the way to doing just that.

But it’s no thanks to Mr Miliband and his chums, because we could have had that legislation some years ago if they had not blocked a proposal which I and Liberal Democrat colleagues brought forward back in 2006. Indeed, Mr Miliband was one of those who voted against it (the Conservatives, by the way, abstained).

Or, if they didn’t like taking our advice, they could have listened to the warnings of the all-party Select Committee on Public Administration, who called for a statutory register in a hard-hitting report in 2009. Curiously, it seem to have slipped their minds to do anything about it.

I am one of the ministers working on this over recent months, and we very much hope to publish draft proposals within weeks, with a view to it being included in the so-called third constitutional bill in the next session of parliament. It cannot be done overnight, because it’s important that we get it right; introducing half-baked legislation that fails to do the job properly is in nobody’s interest, and in this particular area we want to hear what people think about what is proposed, and whether it satisfies their demands for more transparency. There is no question of not going ahead – the commitment is there in black and white in the Coalition Agreement – but there are different ways of dealing with the detail.

Why is it important? I think it’s part of the process of cleaning up politics to which we are committed. Lobbying is a fact of life. There are always those who want to influence government decision making. The popular view that this is all down to big business is far from true – there are more lobbyists involved in making the case for pressure groups and charities, and very effective they are too, as we all too often see in our mail-bags. Indeed, I spent a short time many years ago working as a parliamentary consultant for the Worldwide Fund for Nature, trying to strengthen environmental legislation, so I know a little about how things work. But the important thing is that whatever is done is done openly, so there are no secret deals between interested parties and politicians making decisions, and that is where a statutory code comes to the fore.

**THE WRONG QUESTION AT THE WRONG TIME**

**Thursday 27th October 2011**

As many people know by now, I am often considered by my own party as fundamentally unsound on matters European. I have never been keen on the euro (for reasons that have been proved right over the last year or so), I have always argued for less centralised bureaucracy and more devolution of power away from Brussels and towards member countries and communities within them, I have always pushed for greater transparency, and I have consistently called for there to be opportunities for the British people to have their say about changes which affect our constitutional arrangements. That is why I have been a member of various campaigns for a referendum, and why I felt it necessary to resign from my front-bench role a few years ago to vote in favour of a referendum on the Lisbon Treaty.

This week the issue has been in the news again, as a result of the e-petition site (which I helped set up) in the first instance, and the newly instituted back-bench business committee, which can now order the business of the House of Commons when we are not considering legislation, and quite rightly doesn’t feel the need to necessarily make life easy for the government. As most will know, the motion, which called for a referendum on whether Britain should leave the European Union, was heavily defeated by the fact that all three main parties opposed it, but not before a significant number of Conservative and, to a lesser extent, Labour rebels had expressed a contrary view.

So why did the government, and for that matter the opposition, oppose the motion? Three principal reasons. The first is that it was the wrong question. The suggestion was that there should be three options presented in a referendum. Not a simple in-out question, or a proposition which people would be asked to agree to, but a choice of in, out, or shake it about, in ways yet to be specified. Had we had a referendum on such a basis, it is entirely possible that the outcome would be so ill-defined as to be useless.

Second, it could not be a worse time to be asking such a question. The economic upsets sweeping Europe, and particularly the eurozone, have made things extraordinarily precarious at the moment. The instability resulting from a real threat of the UK unilaterally withdrawing could create disaster, just at the time when the prospects for real longer-term change on a multilateral basis in the direction most people would appear to want have never been a more realistic prospect. Secure those changes and we can have a referendum, on a new settlement. Do so now and you risk triggering complete collapse of our fragile recovery.

But thirdly, and importantly, we have already dealt with the issue. We’ve passed legislation which means we will have a referendum, by law, if there is any further treaty change which changes the UK’s position within the EU in future. That’s exactly what we promised, in party manifestos and in the coalition agreement. And that’s what we delivered, after months of detailed debate. Why would we then want to tear up that decision on the basis of a single afternoon’s debate?

**HORROR ON THE M5**

**Thursday 10th November 2011**

There was a sombre mood in the House of Commons on Monday as the new Secretary of State for Transport Justine Greening made a statement on Friday’s horrific crash on the M5 in Somerset, the worst in our county’s history. All the Somerset MPs were there to hear her report of the events of the night, although Jeremy Browne, the MP for Taunton, and I were precluded by our ministerial positions from asking questions.

What was quite clear is that an awful accident had, as is so often the case, brought out the best in people. Not only our police, fire and rescue, and ambulance services, and the staff of Musgrove Park and Yeovil District hospitals, some of whom had come in on their days off to help deal with casualties, but also ordinary people who just happened to be on the road at the time and caught up in the maelstrom, some of whom made heroic efforts to try to rescue those trapped in their vehicles and threatened by the searing heat of fires. We owe a huge debt to all who helped, and we should recognise how important they are in times of emergency. By all accounts, the uniformed services performed superbly.

Of course, many now will be mourning losses or worrying over injured family or friends. The sheer scale is huge; thirty-seven vehicles involved, seven fatalities, and fifty one injured. There is little that one can say to the bereaved under such circumstances, but perhaps we should also say a small thank you to the police liaison officers who are often the first to break unhappy news and offer comfort to shocked families.

What is clear is that inquiries into the causes of the accident will take some time, and no-one should leap to any conclusions about contributory factors. If there are lessons about road safety, then I hope we will learn them. Motorway driving is statistically rather safer than on many other roads, but we all know that many drive irresponsibly, not necessarily because of excessive speed, but by not leaving safe braking distances, unexpected lane changes and other examples of bad practice. None of those factors may be implicated in this accident, but if there are ways of making sure people understand that the margins of error are tight then maybe we can avoid similar events in future.

Lastly, there may be a lesson to learn about our local infrastructure. The closure of the M5 following the pile-up meant the principal arterial route to the south west was out of action, and yet for years both central and local government have failed to recognise the need to improve, in safety terms if nothing else, the second strategic route which is the forgotten A303. I don’t want a similar tragedy in Somerset again as a result of failure to deal with the basic design of a road carrying too much traffic for its capacity. I spoke to Transport ministers again about my concerns on Monday, and I would like to think that I would now have the support of the county councils in the south west to get something done.

***Seven people died and 51 were injured in the multiple-vehicle collision. The Coroner concluded that dense fog was the reason for the accident, with smoke from a firework display at the Taunton Rugby ground a contributory factor but not the prime cause.***

**THANKFUL VILLAGES**

**Thursday 17th November 2011**

Remembrance Sunday now has a fixed pattern for me. For many years past I have attended the wreath-laying ceremony at Bruton in the morning, the march and service in Wincanton in the afternoon, and the service of remembrance in Frome in the evening. This year, and I appreciate it is a small thing, I was pleased that at last the wreathes I laid at the memorials in Bruton and Wincanton had for the first time an official House of Commons insert of the portcullis. I have been arguing for this for over three years, which demonstrates how long it can take for the House authorities to make even a minor change, because it seemed perverse that something which the local councils and bodies such as the Red Cross and the Guides manage as a matter of routine seemed beyond parliament.

As it happens, I was giving a talk last week in Wanstrow about some of the lesser known bits of local history relating to my constituency. After talking about beans in Martock, the invention of Royal Blue in Rode, wife sales in Buckland Dinham and the Huckyduck in Coleford, I mentioned the “Thankful Villages”. These are the villages across the country which did not lose a single life in the first world war, and such was the carnage between 1914 and 1918, there are only fifty-two such villages. Oddly, of those fifty-two no fewer than nine are in Somerset, including three, Chantry, Tellisford and Stocklinch, in my constituency.

Of these Stocklinch has the double distinction that it lost nobody during the second world war either, a fact which is recorded on a plaque in the village. Incidentally, there is only one village in the whole of France, Thierville in Normandy, which does not have first world war casualties, and seems to have enjoyed a charmed existence in that it lost no men in the franco-prussian or the second world wars either.

That made me think again that the act of remembrance is, rightly, based on honouring and respecting those who gave their lives in the service of their country, but we should also bear in mind that it is much better to have servicemen and women come back unharmed, and we should be equally celebrating the return of those who have risked all but survived. That must include respecting their service in making sure that the so-called military covenant, the implied contract between those who serve in our armed forces and the nation, actually means something. I am glad that we recently passed legislation to put into statute law for the first time reference to that covenant, and to require annual reports on what it means in practice.

There has been a marked increase in observance of remembrance day over recent years. That is welcome, although I hope we maintain the proper view that to buy and wear a poppy is something we do voluntarily, and because we want to show our respect, not because we are forced or bullied into it when it would lose all meaning. But equally, to parade and lay wreathes without having a proper care for the veterans of war would be a shameful hypocrisy. I am confident it will not happen.

**FAT CATS**

**Thursday 24th November 2011**

Average earnings in South Somerset at £23,200 are below the national average of £25,900. And with the economic situation, life is pretty hard at the moment. What are we then to make of the report published this week by an independent organisation, the High Pay Commission, which reveals that top executives are paying themselves ever more, massively more, despite poor performance by their companies.

The immediate response may well be “Well, it was always like that”, or “If they’re prepared to take the risks, good luck to them”. But both attitudes are wrong. It wasn’t always like that; in 1980, the boss of Barclays was paid just 13 times the average pay. Last year, John Varley received £4,365,636 – 169 times more than the average UK worker. The pay of the chief executive at now state-owned Lloyds Bank has increased by 3,141.6% to £2,572,000 over the same period – 75 times the average Lloyds employee. And these are not entrepreneurs. They haven’t risked their own money in setting up and running a business starting from scratch. They are paid employees of long-established public companies.

So how on earth can a rise in top executive pay of getting on for 5,000% in thirty years be justified in a period when average pay has barely increased threefold? The answer, surely, is that it can’t, and that there is something deeply wrong about a system of remuneration that allows that to happen. We did not need the Commission to reveal what has been obvious for some time, but we should be grateful they have set it out with stark clarity. That now adds to the evidence which has been brought forward in response to the consultation which my colleague Vince Cable set up in the autumn to look into the issue. And, hopefully, it will now result in action.

A large part of the answer must lie in greater transparency. Top executives’ pay in public companies should be open to scrutiny and decision by the shareholders in a way which allows proper control to be kept. There is a strong argument for staff representatives on remuneration committees, which too often seem to be cabals of old friends in similar situations looking after each other’s interests. One of the extraordinary things about the current situation is that pay seem so often completely unrelated to the performance of the companies in question. Pay increases, especially to the stratospheric levels seen in many public companies, is therefore directly at odds with the interests of both shareholders and consumers.

As Deborah Hargreaves, the Chair of the Commission, says, “"The British people believe in fairness and, at a time of unparalleled austerity, one tiny section of society – the top 0.1% – continues to enjoy annual increases in pay awards”. It is offensive to everybody who is facing real difficulties or, at the very least, discomfort, as a result of an economic crisis not of their making that it should be so, and if Britain’s top companies are incapable of understanding that they, too, need to act responsibly then there may be a need to force them through statute to do so.

**PRETTY GRIM**

**Thursday 1st December 2011**

We’ve had two very important announcements this week. The first was the regular economic assessment from the Office for Budget Responsibility, the independent body set up to give proper evaluations and forecasts of the British economy free from interference and massage from the government of the day. And pretty grim news it was too, if not quite as bad as some commentators had previously suggested and some opposition politicians may, I’m afraid have hoped. Certainly growth in the economy is now substantially lower than had been expected a year ago, as it is in all the other European countries and the United States, and for the same reason; the instability in the eurozone.

Then we had the Chancellor’s autumn statement, and of course it has to take into account the economic realities. Some would argue that a change of course is necessary. Wiser counsel would say quite the opposite, and there is one economic statistic which more than makes that case. Eighteen months ago, Britain was on the brink of having its credit rating reduced. The effect of such a move would have been very simple – it would have meant the cost of borrowing would have increased, and interest rates for mortgages and business loans would have gone up. Instead of that, and as a direct result of the difficult measures the government put into effect then, the UK is the only major western country which has had its credit ratings improve.

What does that mean in practice? Well, Italy’s interest rates are now 7.2%. Ours are less than 2.5%. And if those interest rates went up, as they surely would if the international markets found our deficit reduction plan less than convincing, given we still have a huge shortfall, then for every one per cent rates went up, taxpayers would have to fork out an extra £21 billion in debt interest payments to overseas creditors, all of which would have to come from further cuts in public spending or hikes in taxation. On top of that, the average family with a mortgage would have to pay £1,000 more on their house, and the cost of business loans would go up by £7 billion. That’s worth thinking about when the “easy option” of slowing down deficit reduction is suggested as if that was an answer.

Of course what we all want is for the economy to get going again, and government can help in that by bringing forward spending, particularly capital spending - that is to say building roads, improving railways, creating internet capacity - within current spending limits. And that’s precisely what the government has announced, and why I shall now be redoubling my efforts to get at least some of that cash spent on our needs in the west country, particularly the long overdue safety improvements to the A303.

There are other small areas of good news. The largest ever cash rise to the old age pension. Protection for disability and jobless benefits. Massive new business loan arrangements. An extension to free nursery care. A freeze in council tax and a cancellation of fuel tax increases. But overall, It’s an austere plan. And, sadly, it needs to be.

**A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER**

**Thursday 8th December 2011**

Last July I wrote in my column about the various groups who had contacted me about a change in government policy on benefits which they thought would have a disproportionately adverse effect on them. I went to see a number of organisations representing people with disabilities, and we even had an outdoor event in Victoria Park in Frome where, particularly, younger disabled people told me that if what is called the mobility component of the disability living allowance were taken away it would severely restrict their ability to visit friends, try to get work experience, or just socialise. They asked me to try and do something about it on their behalf.

The problem was that what appeared to be an entirely sensible proposal actually had quite serious consequences in practice. The theory was that if you lived in a residential home, then you didn’t need access to independent transport, because the contracts with the care home providers actually required them to ensure that transport was provided where necessary, and I think the picture in the minds of civil servants is that this would largely apply to those elderly people in care homes who rarely travelled in any case. Additionally, no such allowance had ever been paid to those in hospital or nursing care, so there was a clear anomaly. The difficulty is that the money also goes to very many young, active people who live in residential accommodation as a result of learning difficulties or physical disability, but who certainly didn’t want to spend each and every day confined to their rooms.

I said that I would try and do something about it, and that is what I have been doing over recent months. One of the difficulties of being a Minister is that because of the rules of the House of Commons, there are things I’m not allowed to do. I can’t ask questions in the house, sponsor or speak in debates, or sign motions, to draw attention to a problem. What I can do is work behind the scenes, talking to ministerial colleagues, writing letters and generally pushing something to the top of the pending tray. And this is an example of where doing exactly that has proved useful. I certainly don’t want to take all the credit, as I know many others, including important charity organisations like Leonard Cheshire Homes have been pushing hard, but I like to think that I may have helped.

Anyway, the outcome has been success for my constituents. The plans were first put on hold, and then we had a report commissioned by Lord Low, who as Chairman of RNIB I have worked with closely over the years when I chaired the all-party group on visual health. Colin Low is himself blind, which adds to his understanding of the problems those with disabilities face. Following Lord Low’s report, which made it very clear that there would indeed be serious consequences for a significant number of people if the policy went ahead, my colleague the Minister for the Disabled Maria Miller has now announced that the mobility component will, indeed, be retained. And I am delighted.

**PROTECTING OUR INTERESTS**

**Thursday 15th December 2011**

Normally the run-up to Christmas is a relatively quiet time in politics, with the attention of the media and the public more concentrated on what present to get Auntie Flo than national or international events. Not so this year, with major inter-governmental treaty negotiations getting all the coverage this week.

I will write on another occasion about the entirely unexpected success at the Durban Climate change summit. Let’s consider instead what was agreed, or more specifically not agreed, in Brussels. Nobody, whatever their overall attitude on matters European, should be happy that Britain found itself in a minority of one. As it happens, and here I may disagree with some of my colleagues, I think the Prime Minister was entirely right not to agree to proposals which might have caused damage to British interests without adequate safeguards, but that doesn’t mean that I am not disappointed that we could not secure agreement, which would have been far better than having to use the veto.

There was never any question of us becoming part of the unified fiscal arrangements touted by Germany and France. We are not part of the euro, nor are we likely to be in the foreseeable future, and therefore the arrangements put in place to try to rescue the euro are important to our economy but not something of which we would expect to be part.

There are some who don’t understand why it would be important to protect our financial sector. Aren’t they the ones who caused all this problem in the first place, they say, so why should we stand up for them now? And I understand that point of view, but it is wrong. We need to ensure that the City of London prospers within the European Union because it is a major engine of economic growth and actually pays a lot of the tax bills we rely on. Financial services as an industry contribute just under 14% of national output (almost twice that of the whole south west region), employs about 1.9 million people, more than half of whom work outside of London and the south east, and pays some £53 billion to the exchequer. Nothing in other European countries comes close to that, which is why they can perhaps afford to be a little more cavalier, or even hostile, in their attitudes. And paradoxically, had we signed up to the EU plans it would actually have prevented us from bringing in some of the tighter regulation we want to see.

So yes, it was a vital British interest that was on the line. The failure was to secure agreement with other countries on this matter at an earlier stage, and here I think I would criticise the Conservative party for leaving the European Conservative grouping, the EPP, they had been part of for many years, which means the opportunity for influencing like-minded governments elsewhere has been lost. Now we need to work twice as hard to ensure that the interests of our manufacturing industry are protected, like for instance the Thales plant in Templecombe I visited again last Friday. Thales is a French-owned company. We need their investment to secure jobs in Britain, and I don’t want to see that, and that in many other companies across the country, carelessly thrown away.