**2009**

**NON-DETECTING BOMB DETECTORS**

**Thursday 28th January 2009**

A story broke late last week relating to a business operating in my constituency. Almost all its business is carried out overseas, and particularly with the Iraqi government, to whom they apparently sold $85 million worth of “bomb detectors”. According to an impressive array of scientists who appeared in the BBC report, these bomb detectors don’t work. Not only that, they couldn’t work. There was nothing in them which could, other than by a process unknown to science, detect a bomb.

But these are being used to protect Iraqi citizens and British and American servicemen against suicide bombers in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities. Hundreds of people have died over recent months as a result of undetected explosive devices. This couldn’t be more serious. Or outrageous, if substantiated.

An export ban was imposed on Friday evening. That’s all well and good. But I have questions I’d like answered. When did UK authorities know that these “bomb detectors” were ineffective? What warning did they give to the Iraqi government? If they didn’t know until the BBC report, can we assume that no check is made on $85 million of goods exported from this country to a war zone? If they did know, why wasn’t the export ban introduced with immediate effect? And did the Iraqi Brigadier-General who ordered the equipment personally benefit from the contract? I hope the answers don’t need an inquiry to be uncovered.

***As we shall see later, this campaign ended in welcome convictions..***

**HOME TRUTHS ABOUT RUBBISH**

**Thursday 12th March 2009**

At the risk of sounding like I’m name-dropping, Bill Bryson, the author, seems a really nice bloke. I’ve met him a couple of times, and I’m a great fan of his books. He is, of course, American, from Des Moines, Iowa, but he has a deep and lasting affection for the English countryside. And I’m sure that’s what prompted him to accept the post of President of the CPRE, the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

So when he said this week, "Millions of visitors from overseas are genuinely puzzled that we can allow this beauty to be casually despoiled in a way which, in my experience, simply doesn't happen in the rest of Europe'', I think we should take notice. He was talking about litter, and fly-tipping, and graffiti. And in and around Frome is, sadly, no exception. Our roads and lanes are full of detritus thrown out by people who, apparently, simply don’t care that they’re turning our countryside into a rubbish tip as long as their own little space in their car isn’t full of crisp packets or sandwich containers.

It’s very sad, and exhortation doesn’t seem to work. I’m afraid we need to spend more on keeping our countryside clean, encourage more help from volunteers, but also crack down on the litter louts. Community service picking up the rubbish they’ve dropped should do the trick. Preferably on a Saturday afternoon. In the rain!

**FUEL POVERTY**

**Thursday 19th March 2009**

I’m geared up this Friday for my private member’s bill, the Fuel Poverty bill. Whether it gets through remains to be seen, although I’m gratified by the huge level of support it’s attracted from up and down the country, but it looks like it won’t get government support, which is very disappointing since it puts into statute policies they say they’re committed to.

I can’t believe that in a so-called rich and civilised country we allow up to five million households to be in a position where people have to make an impossible decision whether to heat their homes or feed themselves or their kids because they can’t afford both. I can’t believe we allow people each year to die in their own homes from the cold. And I can’t believe that when climate change is such a threat we don’t do something as obvious as ensure our homes are more energy efficient.

Not only that, but it will mean the creation of a huge number of jobs in the construction industry, a sector where the recession has bitten hard and which desperately needs a stimulus. I hope the argument is not that we can’t afford to do it, because my answer is very firmly that we can’t afford not to. It’s good for the elderly, good for the less well-off, good for keeping our population healthy, good for the environment, and good for the economy. What more could you possibly want?

***My bill was eventually defeated, largely by the efforts of Islington South MP Emily Thornberry, who at the behest of the Government whips “talked out” the bill***

**MP’s EXPENSES**

**Thursday 26th March 2009**

So, another slew of allegations about what some MPs seem to think it’s acceptable to claim from public money. They’re all at it, scream the headlines, and even the most scrupulous get smeared as a result. Well, I’m just about fed up with it.

How can any London MP justify taking taxpayers money to pay for a second home? Not a single one of my party colleagues who represent outer London seats takes a penny. So why would someone on a minister’s salary feel the need to do so? Expenses are there to pay for what is necessary to do the job, not a penny more, not a penny less. Those of us whose constituencies are far from London need somewhere to sleep during the week. In London, you don’t. And the family home is where the family lives. How hard is that to understand?

And now some are saying scrap the allowances and give us a big hike in our pay. Pull the other one. That just means that those who bend the rules at the moment will get a dirty great big pay rise, and those who actually need the allowance to do their work will be worse off. It’s so transparent it’s laughable.

I am sick and tired of hearing about those who manipulate and, frankly, abuse the system for their own benefit. There are plenty of MPs who don’t, and it’s time we threw the book at those who do.

**YOUTH CLUBS & JOB CLUBS**

**Thursday 2nd April 2009**

Almost every Saturday morning I am normally to be found doing an advice surgery in some part of my far-flung constituency, but last Saturday I had a free morning, so I thought it might be a good idea to knock on a few doors in Frome simply to have a chat to people and see how things are going.

An awful lot of people were out (or hiding!) but I did get a chance to talk to a few, and two issues cropped up which I want to take further.

Firstly, young people still say there’s not enough opportunities for them to enjoy themselves without getting into trouble. I know there is a huge range of sports clubs, but for general socialising, barring pubs, there’s not a great selection, especially since some of the clubs closed down.

The second issue is those who find themselves, perhaps unexpectedly, unemployed. Looking for a job is no fun. Even visiting the jobcentre can be intimidating for some. When unemployment was last at a high level in Frome, we had a job club, where people could go and help each other in a slightly more relaxed environment. There are groups for hard-to-reach youngsters, but I don’t think at the moment there’s anything for the middle aged newly-redundant. Maybe, I’m wrong, and the jobcentre will put me right, but if not, I think it might be a good idea.

**PARKING PROBLEMS**

**Thursday 9th April 2009**

Parking in Frome has always been a vexed issue, but the introduction of parking charges for car parks such as Badcox, coupled with increases in the fees elsewhere, has brought predictable chaos. Not only predictable but predicted, as councillors representing the town pointed out the problems when the idea was first mooted, as indeed I did in representations I made on behalf of local people at the time.

The result was to turn what had been a well-used car park into an empty one, while drivers desperately looked for spaces in surrounding streets, much to the irritation of local residents, who found their access blocked and were unable to park in even the vicinity of their own houses. And the effect on local businesses was, again, predictably negative.

So I suppose I should raise a rather weak cheer that the policy has now been partially reversed. Unfortunately, I’m not sure the concession that has now been announced will make a huge difference. Just five allocated free spaces, and then for a maximum of one hour, doesn’t return us to where we were a little while ago. And those who need to drive into and park in Frome to shop or use our businesses will still feel ripped off and fed up, as will residents of streets in the Trinity area and Nunney Road.

It’s a little, but probably too little, and certainly too late.

# *Badcox car park now offers short-term parking for free.*

**SIXTH FORM SUMS**

**Thursday 16th April 2009**

The financial year for local authorities and for schools and colleges starts on April 1st. On the last day of March, the very day before the start of the new year, schools received a letter from the Learning and Skills Council, which funds 16-19 year olds education, telling them that they were to have their budgets cut with immediate effect.

There was no prior warning or consultation. Instead, they were told flatly that they were to be funded on the basis of 3.71% fewer students than they had anticipated. In case the percentage figure sounds as though they’re not that big, let me translate it into hard cash. It means that across Somerset the eight secondary schools with sixth forms will lose a total of £342,393. Frome Community College will lose £74,464. That’s a lot of money.

This is quite extraordinarily bad management, leaves schools with a real headache, and begs the question how on earth the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, the bizarrely named government department with oversight of this area, allowed this fiasco to happen. I think I would be more reassured if I saw ministers directly intervening to sort it out, but so far I have been disappointed. With these “arms-length” agencies it is difficult to get anyone to actually take responsibility when things go wrong. But our students deserve better than hastily cancelled courses because some bureaucrat can’t do their sums right.

**PANDEMIC PREPARATIONS**

**Thursday 30th April 2009**

In 1918, Spanish Influenza killed, incredibly, between forty and fifty million people worldwide. Asian Influenza in 1957 killed two million, and Hong Kong Influenza in 1968 caused one million deaths. So the fear that the new strain of Swine Flu might become a pandemic is real.

I took up this issue in parliament about five or six years ago, when I initiated a debate on our country’s preparedness. I’m very happy to say that I think we are now much better equipped to first of all identify, and then to deal with, such an outbreak, and the government deserve credit for that

But if we are relatively well equipped to deal with a major infection, it would still have devastating effects. The balance is not to over-react until we know just how virulent this strain is. A few hundred, even a few thousand cases, do not make a pandemic. Bear in mind that “ordinary” flu kills between 500,000 and a million people worldwide every year. In Britain alone, sadly, about twelve thousand people die. So it is illogical to panic about a new strain until we have a sound scientific basis, and the economic consequences could be catastrophic.

The budget last week shows what a dire position the United Kingdom plc is in. The last thing global economics needs now, with just a hint of renewed activity, is a panic based on an inaccurate assessment of risk knocking the markets for six again.

**JOCK GARLAND R.I.P**

**Thursday May 14th 2009**

Jock Garland, my friend and colleague, worked tirelessly in and for Frome for over fifty years. Sadly, he died last week.

I first met Jock when I came back to work in Frome in the 1980s. I joined the local Liberal party, and Jock was already a key member. I’m not sure what he made of the rather over-confident young man I then was, but I remember him as someone full of sound advice, resolute good humour, and a connection with every single one of the many clubs and societies in the town. Go canvassing, or even walk around Frome, with Jock and you very quickly realised that there were very few who didn’t know him and value him.

A few years later and we were both serving as county councillors for Frome. Somehow, he found the energy to represent the town at every council level, to be Mayor, a leading light in the British Legion, and a key representative to Frome’s twin towns in Europe. It was touching to see the website of Murrhardt given over this week to a tribute from the Bürgermeister to the man they too recognised as “einen freund”, a friend.

Jock had so much time for everyone, and such a personal story to tell – not least about his part in the Normandy landings, and his comrades in the Scots Guards who he never forgot. No-one did more for Frome, and he will be greatly missed. Not least by me.

**DEMISE OF SPEAKER MARTIN**

**Thursday 21st May 2009**

As people read about the antics of some MPs it’s easy to assume that anyone connected with politics is little more than a crook. It’s not fair, nor is it true, but it’s understandable.

I returned to Westminster on Monday even more resolved to ensure parliament changes, and changes for good. And I’m afraid that meant that the present Speaker had to go, and I would be one of those who had to tell him so. As you will know by now, what I and a few other MPs said was taken to heart, and Michael Martin announced his resignation on Tuesday.

His resignation is not enough, though. He shouldn’t be used as a scapegoat for the extraordinary and, on occasions, near criminal behaviour of others. Personally, he is a kind, gentle and generous man. He had to go, simply because he was not the right person to lead the reforms that are now needed. Indeed, in many ways he represented the clique of old timers and stooges who have consistently blocked the sort of reforms and transparency of the system that some of us have been advocating for years.

Now we need a new broom, a genuinely radical approach to what has borne all the hallmarks of a gentleman’s club run for the benefit of its members, and quickly. My fear is that the damage already inflicted will take years to repair.

**BROADBAND IN SOMERSET**

**Thursday 18th June 2009**

I have been warning for some time that rural Britain was likely to lose out on high-speed broadband, and that would put is at a huge economic disadvantage. So I’m delighted that a new government report published this week seems to take the problem seriously.

The aspiration to introduce decent broadband connections by 2012 was already pretty feeble, as the speeds suggested would be uncompetitive in global terms. But to make it worse, many rural areas would lose out, and even those that are connected seem to get a pretty awful service. There is nothing more frustrating than trying to connect up when it seems that a messenger with a cleft stick would be quicker.

Now the government say they’ll do two things. Firstly, they’ll use money left over from digital television switchover to fill in the gaps by 2012. Then they’re going to use a small levy on land lines to build a fund which will mean the third of the country which would never have been connected to super-fast broadband by 2015 now will be. And you can be sure that most of Somerset would have been in the left-out bit.

I‘ll believe it when I see it, but at least we won’t see high-tech companies deciding not to come to Somerset because the infrastructure can’t match their needs. Broadband connections are as important to the 21st century as bridges roads and railways were to the 19th. We couldn’t afford to have been left out.

**THE IRAQ WAR**

**Thursday 25th June 2009**

I have argued that we need a proper inquiry both into the circumstances which led up to the Iraq war and the way it was conducted for many years now. The arguments from the government have always been that we shouldn’t do so while troops are still in Iraq, but that defence has now evaporated, and the prime minister has, reluctantly, agreed to the setting up of an inquiry.

But it won’t do the job needed if it’s held behind closed doors, its remit is limited, and it can’t compel witnesses to attend or require them to give evidence under oath. The proposals as set out last week were hopelessly inadequate, and the argument that this was necessary to allow military commanders to give their evidence in an unconstrained manner was blown out of the water virtually the next day.

In a phrase which I will remember for a long time, Air Marshal Sir John Walker, the former head of Defence Intelligence, said: "There is one reason that the inquiry is being heard in private and that is to protect past and present members of this Government. There are a hundred and seventy-nine reasons why the military want the truth to be out." Those one hundred and seventy-nine servicemen who lost their lives in Iraq, and their grieving families, deserve nothing less.

**LONG TERM CARE**

**Thursday 16th July 2009**

Back in 1997 Tony Blair identified an issue which caused many people a great deal of concern. He didn’t want to live, he said, in a country in which the only way pensioners could get long-term care in old age was by selling their homes. Many facing the same agonising decision felt the same way. And yet twelve years later nothing has changed.

I welcome, therefore, the latest government green paper on the subject. We heard some interesting figures. Male life expectancy is now seventy-eight years, compared with just sixty-six in 1948. There are now more people aged over sixty-five than there are under eighteen. And while in the 1940s there were eight working adults for every retired person, that has now dropped to four, and by 2050 it will be down to just two. The costs of providing long-term care can range from under £1,000 to over £200,000 for someone with dementia.

It’s not surprising that the answers to this are difficult, but we can’t go on ignoring it. I’m not sure how easy it will be to reach consensus, but we need to have a policy that all political parties can sign up to, and which has some chance of surviving changes of government. Looking after the elderly, respecting their dignity and providing for their needs is surely a priority. Even in an increasingly austere future, we should make it one.

***In 2020 we’re still waiting..***

**AFGHANISTAN**

**Thursday 23rd July 2009**

There is a broad consensus that the military action in Afghanistan is necessary to deprive Al Quaeda and its allies the bases and freedom of movement which allows them to launch a war of terrorism against this country and others. It is a shame that attention and resources were diverted to Iraq which prevented the job being completed first time round, and as a result our troops are now trying to regain ground recovered by the Taliban.

But that consensus doesn't mean we shouldn't be asking some serious questions about both the strategy and the conduct of the conflict. What exactly are the objectives? How will we know when they are achieved? Are we fated to stay in the inhospitable mountains and deserts of Helmand province for a generation?

But the most serious immediate charge is that our troops are not being given the political backing to do the job. Partly that is because of a massive failure of allies in NATO to provide their fair share of fighting troops. .But reports, barely denied, that requests were made for reinforcements and turned down by the government are serious. Worse is the lack of helicopters which puts our forces in immediate danger. It's no good saying there are more when it's clearly not nearly enough and when budgets have been cut. Our brave young men and women deserve better.

**THE HOLIDAY POLICE CALL**

**Thursday 30th July 2009**

I’ve had a few letters over the last few days from people asking me to fill in a survey from an organisation called 38 degrees, who apparently want to know what MPs will be doing over the summer recess. I’m afraid I don’t do questionnaires – I get too many of them and it’s easier to simply say no – but I have no problem telling people where I’ll be, although a simple call to my office in Frome would be easier.

I have a feeling the organisers have in mind MPs spending the whole of three months sunning themselves on a beach or working on their second or third job. Maybe some do, but I think it’s the exception. Most are as frustrated as I am at the three months in which we can’t hold the government to account, especially with a major conflict in Afghanistan, the unpredictable course of the swine flu epidemic, and of course the economic crisis.

I am taking a couple of weeks’ holiday away with my family. I make no apologies for that. But apart from that, I’ll be working in the constituency. For three weeks I shall be undertaking my annual tour of a hundred or so villages across the constituency. And there are plenty of people who I need to see and casework to do. I’m quite happy working through the summer, as I always do. I slightly resent feeling as though I’m under surveillance!

**COUNTRY PUBS**

**Thursday 6th August 2009**

I’ve written before about the number of pubs which are now closing at an ever-increasing rate. I’ve also expressed the view that tourism, albeit not mass tourism of the type that Devon & Cornwall seem to attract, is now a key part of our local economy, and something we should encourage.

There is a connection between the two. Pubs, particularly but not exclusively those out in the countryside, are an important part of the “offer” we can make to tourists. We draw people with a combination of history, culture, quality of life and good food. Needless to say, the village pub plays a part in this.

But I wonder if we’re really making sufficient efforts on their behalf. I have recently being trying to get a brown, tourist direction sign to a pub which lies within a mile of a main road. The highways authority tells me that a sign to a pub which is in open countryside is OK, but if it’s in a village which is already signposted, it’s not.

This is daft. Why not a rule that signs will be put up to any pubs (and maybe post office/shops as well) within, say, a couple of miles of an A road. It would be helpful to tourists, good for pubs, and fair to landlords. So how about it, county council?

**HANDLING COMPLAINTS**

**Thursday 13th August 2009**

Why can’t the utility companies treat their customers properly? If they make a mistake, why don’t they treat their customers’ complaints with the seriousness they deserve? And why can’t they run a customer service helpline properly?

I say this because I am sick and tired of dealing with complaints from worried or angry constituents who simply can’t get satisfaction from their suppliers. Chief among the offenders seem to be energy suppliers and internet providers, but there are many others. Sometimes it’s because the customer has had the temerity to change suppliers, but sometimes it’s simply rank incompetence by accounting departments. Whatever the reason, they tend to follow the same course. The customer uses the helpline provided for the purpose. They get no help. They send increasingly exasperated letters or e-mails. They get no response.

Finally, the individual in desperation comes to see me for help. I write a letter to the Chief Executive of the errant company on House of Commons notepaper. And within a few days, the matter is sorted out.

That it is resolved is good. That it takes a letter from an MP to get the sort of service a member of the public should get from the start is not. Indeed, it’s very frustrating. And quite honestly, with the size of these companies and the competition between service providers, they ought to do much better.

***I didn’t realise that a large part of my work after retiring from parliament would be trying to improve the approach of large companies to consumers***

**ANT-EATING BUTTERFLIES**

**Thursday 20th August 2009**

I was driving home on the A303 on Tuesday listening to the radio when a programme about butterflies came on. It’s the sort of programme which I would normally listen to with mild interest but no great enthusiasm, but this one immediately caught my attention by mentioning a nature reserve in my constituency, a hill just outside Compton Dundon. I remember when the site was first acquired about twenty-five years ago and I was invited to see it.

Well whatever was done obviously worked because the site is now the only place in the country where you will find the Large Blue butterfly, re-introduced there after becoming completely extinct. Which given its complicated life cycle is perhaps hardly surprising.

The eggs are apparently laid in the colonies of a particular species of red ant, and the caterpillar disguises itself by excreting a chemical which makes the ants think it is “one of them”. It then proceeds to eat baby ants before finally emerging as an adult butterfly. And I thought butterflies were gentle, peaceful things!

Anyway, the point of this is not only to applaud a first-rate piece of environmental protection, but also to celebrate successful local nature conservation schemes. They work because of a lot of dedication from volunteers such as the Somerset Trust, and they can make a real contribution to biodiversity. Which in the case of ant-eating butterflies adds to the quality of life. I think.

**A DOSE OF THE COBBLE-WOBBLES**

**Thursday 24th September 2009**

An official told me that Frome had done a better job than Blackpool. It’s enormously creditable that the town showed last week that not only can we host a major sporting event, but we can lay on a better show than places many times our size. The Tour of Britain race stage starting from Frome and heading off to Bideford was, everyone agreed, a great success.

It wasn’t just the day itself, but the events of the previous night, the Velo-jam and the Cobble Wobble, which drew thousands of people onto the streets of Frome. The race up Catherine Hill was won in a staggering twenty-four seconds. Blimey! It takes me that long to get on my bike and stop wobbling!

Great credit ought to go to Frome Town Council for doing a great job on the day. But we also ought to thank Cllr Alvin Horsfall who persuaded Somerset County Council a couple of years ago to back the race and bring it to Frome.

How incredible, then, to hear that there are those who argue that Somerset should back out of future years funding, just like it’s incredible for the District Council to give up funding the Tourist Information Centre. We need visitors to Frome, and we need to show the world what we can offer. Events like the Tour are great for our local economy. How hard is that to understand?

**CUTTING SPEED**

**Thursday 8th October 2009**

The subject of speed limits and their enforcement is in the news this week, as the use of speed cameras is questioned. I’m sure that many drivers see them as a pain in the neck (and potentially in the wallet), but I know from my postbag and from meetings all over the constituency that many communities are desperate for effective measures to slow traffic through their villages and help to save lives and injury.

A case in point is the small village of Standerwick, where residents have been doing their utmost to encourage action on what is clearly a dangerous stretch of road and junction. Even over recent weeks there have been two more serious accidents resulting in serious injury. A problem is that the A36 is a trunk road, and therefore the responsibility of the national Highways Agency, and the road crosses the county boundary between Somerset and Wiltshire, and so two county councils and police forces are involved.

It may be that progress is now being made, but for residents fighting the case it seems as though for every step forward there are two steps back. The need for safety improvements, including an extended speed limit, new white lines and better signing, is urgent and incontrovertible. When it’s finally done, I hope we won’t have anyone saying that it is another example of “bureaucracy gone mad” or “a war on the motorist”. Drivers are often the victims, remember, of dangerous roads and dangerous speeds.

**FULL FRONTAL FROME**

**Thursday 15th October 2009**

Well, now I know how to get five hundred or so respectable citizens of the Frome area, principally but not exclusively female, in a state of simmering and occasionally uncontrolled excitement. And how to do so five times in one week! The answer of course is to persuade a number of equally middle-aged and hitherto respectable male members of the Frome Amateur Operatic Society to take their clothes off. In public. On stage.

I refer of course to last week’s production at the Memorial Theatre of *The Full Monty*, and I can only say the whole show was a revelation, in more ways than one. Those who have watched the film will know the basic story, of unemployed workers (in Sheffield, in the film; Buffalo, New York in the stage show) turning to stripping to make ends meet. It was a daring choice for FAOS, with nudity and a gay sub-plot thrown in. And it was a resounding success, on every level.

I’m getting quite used to seeing great entertainment in Frome nowadays, but this was a departure in more ways than one. Not only was the content courageous, but there was a meeting of minds with our other great venue, the Merlin, with leading lights from the latter involved in the production. That’s a great fusion of talent which wouldn’t have happened a few years ago. And really worth celebrating.

**NOT-SO-SHELTERED HOUSING**

**Thursday 22nd October 2009**

Every sheltered housing scheme used to have an on-site warden, who looked after residents, checked they were OK, and often did quite a lot more besides to ensure their welfare. Then in 2003 a court case found that twenty wardens in Barnet were in breach of the European Working Time Directive in that they were working up to a hundred hours a week, way more than they were paid for. They got hefty compensation, and local authorities and housing associations across the country understandably started getting rid of resident wardens.

Now, usually, there isn’t even a part-time warden. Instead, there is a remote contact system and emergency response. For some, I’m sure it works well. But many are left feeling vulnerable and anxious, despite all the assurances they are given. And sometimes those fears are justified, as in the case of the elderly gentleman in Holcombe this summer who had a fall and broke his hip, to be found eventually by his neighbour. Four years ago, there would have been a warden on the scene.

I spoke about this in parliament this week. Despite the best intentions, I don’t think elderly residents are being treated properly. And very often, they’re not getting the support they expected when they signed their leases. This is a national problem, which will soon affect sheltered housing across the country. It needs looking at urgently.

**THE THIN BLUE LINE**

**Thursday 29th October 2009**

As regular readers of my columns will know, I have been banging on about the need for more police officers in Somerset for more years than I care to remember. For a long time it seemed a forlorn hope. Then, as budgets for police authorities finally increased a few years ago, we started to see an increase.

Now that process has been put into reverse as the squeeze starts to tighten again. Avon & Somerset is one of the forces which has seen a reduction in police numbers over recent years, although we’re still doing better now than a decade ago. What’s more, we now have a new sort of uniformed presence, the Police Community Support Officers. When they were first introduced, some were sceptical that they were a cheap way of replacing fully trained constables. But I always supported their addition, providing reassurance on the streets, as long as we knew the limitations of the role. And I have to say that some of our local PCSOs have been tremendous, a real addition to keeping order in Frome.

So what are we to make of reports that funding for PCSOs is to be slashed next year, with a quarter of the funding axed? I hope it proves to be a false alarm. Because, frankly, keeping the peace ought to be a priority, whatever the pressures on budgets.

**LEST WE FORGET**

**Thursday 12th November 2009**

As usual, I attended Remembrance Day parades and services in Bruton, Wincanton and Frome this year. It was noticeable to me that, despite the death of the last survivors of the First World War and the passing on of many who fought in the Second, participation has grown rather than dwindled, with many young people perhaps recognising the sacrifice made by their own generation in Iraq or Afghanistan.

It would be inappropriate to try to link the commemoration of this week with current policies, but many up and down the country must worry about what exactly is happening in Afghanistan. That is why I called for a debate last week in parliament, given that the House of Commons has never endorsed our military involvement.

To withdraw is a very difficult option, leading to the Taleban re-establishing control and, potentially, the collapse of Pakistan and the frightening prospect of a fundamentalist failed state in control of nuclear armaments. However, the alternative is also difficult: increasing the force levels deployed, getting proper support from our NATO allies, moving to a policy of search and destroy, but all in support of a government with no legitimacy in Afghanistan, based on massive electoral fraud and corruption.

What is unsustainable is our present position. We owe it to the brave young men and women we send to fight and, potentially, die to have a clear mission objective, proper support for their endeavours, and a clear programme for eventual withdrawal. At the moment we do not.

**WASTING THE QUEEN’S TIME**

**Thursday 19th November 2009**

The Queen’s speech this week marks the official opening of the parliamentary session and sets out the government’s legislative programme. But one thing we can be absolutely sure of is there will be a general election within the next six months, which means that few if any of the measures contained in the speech will ever become law. So what on earth is the point of it? Aren’t we just wasting our time?

The answer is, of course, yes. Ministers know perfectly well that what they propose over the next few weeks won’t get onto the statute book. What we have instead is a series of glorified press releases, where they hope that opposition parties can be portrayed as being on the “wrong” side of some fatuous argument or other. It is the start of a six-month long election campaign.

How much better it would be if the list of tawdry bills were torn up, and we spent the remaining few months of this disastrous parliament trying to repair the damage by genuine and radical reforms to the way we do our business. That way after the election we could start with a more effective system, one where the abuses have been corrected, we can scrutinise the government more effectively, and for the first time have a proper handle on the spending of public money, the signing of treaties and waging of war. It isn’t going to happen, but it ought to.

***As predicted, the measures in the Queen’s Speech were not enacted before the election..***

**THE NEW FROME HOSPITAL**

**Thursday 26th November 2009**

I’m paying another visit to the new Frome Community Hospital on Thursday, in the company of my colleague and party leader Nick Clegg. Frankly, I’m showing off the results of what so many people in Frome and hereabouts campaigned so hard for over many years, but I’m also hoping that it will serve as a model for hospital provision elsewhere.

I’m particularly pleased to hear that two of the outstanding issues relating to the hospital may now be on the way to being solved. Firstly, the hours during which treatment can be given for minor injuries is going to be extended; this was an annoyance to people who found that they had to trek off to Bath rather than visiting the brand new hospital in the evening, and I took it up with the chief executive of the Somerset PCT when the hospital was opened. I’m very glad he listened, and now hours are to be extended as from January.

Secondly, after a lot of preparatory effort, the Park Road GPs practice are publishing plans for a new surgery. I hope this will be possible next to the hospital, subject to any planning problems, which is what was anticipated in the first place but cut out for budgetary reasons. Providing a one-stop shop for treatment in purpose-built facilities, and as far as possible avoiding people having to go to the Royal United, has to be the right sort of provision for a place like Frome.

***The GP practice did move, eventually, to the new Health Centre next to the hospital.***

**SAFER WAYS TO GET TO SCHOOL**

**Thursday 3rd December 2009**

It’s no great revelation to suggest that things are a little different now to 1944. For a start, our roads are a lot busier and a lot more dangerous. Yet the law as it relates to transport to school dates back to the 1944 Education Act, which said it’s reasonable for a child up to eight years old to walk two miles to school, and an older child three miles. Anything further, and the local education authority is required to provide a bus.

The law says the distance must be measured by the shortest available route, and that is defined as a route safe for a child accompanied by a responsible adult. A lot of parents think that to allow their children to walk along a busy road is often anything but responsible. That’s why we get many appeals against decisions, and those who can’t get school transport end up either driving the kids to school or paying for a bus place.

That’s the dilemma facing parents in Nunney who came to see me this week. The road between Nunney and Frome is considered too dangerous for school buses – they use another route. But at the same time it’s considered safe for children to walk. Something wrong there?

What’s really wrong is relying on a law sixty-six years old that doesn’t relate to modern conditions. It’s time it was changed.

***My Private Member’s Bill to provide for US style yellow school buses fell throughlack of parliamentary time.***

**AFGHANISTAN AGAIN**

**Thursday 10th December 2009**

I don’t mind admitting that my thinking on the subject of Afghanistan has been influenced by what was in my opinion a very good analysis by a Conservative MP, Adam Holloway, the member of parliament for Gravesham in Kent, who speaks with authority as a former Grenadier Guardsman and someone who has exceptionally good contacts with the intelligence community.

Now he’s written another article, this time about Iraq, and come up with a shocking revelation. It appears, from his account, that one of the strongest pieces of “evidence” for the claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction primed to use “within forty five minutes” as Prime Minister Blair told the Commons in the notorious dodgy dossier, was a conversation overheard in the back of a Baghdad taxi.

Intelligence gathered from a cabbie’s eaves-dropping sounds flimsy enough, but apparently analysts from our Secret Intelligence Service very quickly concluded that the information was “verifiably false” and that the agent was unreliable. A footnote to that effect was added to the report by MI6, but was removed by the Prime Minister’s office and ignored.

This is potent stuff, if true, and underlines the duplicity of the arguments used at the time to justify the war. It certainly reinforces my view that I was right to oppose the Iraq War, and speak against it, at the time, and I wish others in parliament had done the same.

**A WHITE CHRISTMAS**

**Thursday December 24th 2009**

Dreaming of a white Christmas? Or fed up with slipping and sliding around when there’s shopping to be done, relatives to be visited, maybe even work still to do before the festivities begin in earnest? Yet again winter weather seems to have paralysed the nation and transfixed the national media.

Now I admit I wouldn’t have been best impressed if I’d spent a night in a tunnel courtesy of Eurostar. And I get frustrated as anyone when the roads are impassable because of snow or ice. But I do wonder when people say everything would be alright if only the councils showed more gumption. The fact is that it is wholly unrealistic for this country to spend the amounts needed to cope with an arctic winter to deal with just a few days each year, and the council taxpayer would soon be upset if they did.

What would make sense is if more was done to let people help themselves. Strategic supplies of salt and grit in roadside bins which people could use on slippery surfaces. Local sub-contracting to farmers to use their vehicles to help in more rural areas. More detailed and localised forecasting, early enough to make a difference.

Of course principal roads should be cleared, and early, too. But it’s unrealistic to expect every lane to be free of ice in a blizzard, and it’s better to say so. So if you are stuck at home, “enjoying” the snowy weather, have a happy Christmas!