**2014**

**DEALING WITH THE APOCALYPSE**

**Thursday 9th January 2014**

Well it didn’t take long into the New Year before the weather reasserted its hold on all of us. With gale force winds (we had a mini-cyclone through our garden), rising floods and hailstones ripping through plastic roofing and smashing greenhouses, it has occasionally felt like the end of days. Where flood alleviation schemes have been put in place, they largely worked well, saving many hundreds of thousands of homes around the country from inundation, but the extreme weather conditions highlight why we mustn’t let up on the vigilance.

That is one of the great concerns I had when I was in the Environment department. We all recognise the need to cut costs; we simply cannot continue to sustain an economic deficit and to increase debt. But we also need to understand priorities. The fact is that DEFRA is a department of state which, perhaps more than any other, deals with natural catastrophe. It has to have resilience – the capacity to deal with whatever is thrown at it.

That isn’t just flooding, where the lack of maintenance of watercourses over decades has, I am convinced, contributed to the problem. It’s animal and plant health outbreaks as well, as we have learnt to our cost over the years. Being effective and efficient is one thing. Being unable to deal with contingencies is quite another.

**SHENANIGANS AT COUNTY HALL**

**Thursday 14th January 2014**

Just what is happening down at County Hall? Why is the Chief Executive Sheila Wheeler, appointed five years ago following the summary sacking of the previous Chief Executive by then Conservative Leader of the Council Ken Maddock, “out of office”, as the council puts it, having been “on sick leave” for the last seven weeks?

The former CEO was sacked by the incoming administration due to a clash of personalities with the leadership. His release reportedly cost Somerset taxpayers over a third of a million pounds. It is not unreasonable to ask whether the present leader, John Osman, is going down the same path, and if so how much it will cost the long-suffering council tax payer, let alone the fact we will lose another effective executive for no obvious reason.

The problem is we don’t know. The leadership of the council is refusing to comment, and has bound other members of the council into silence through invoking confidentiality. But this is public money, and the public have the right to know what is going on. Perhaps the Secretary of State Eric Pickles, who I understand is visiting my constituency this week (not that he has followed protocol by officially letting me know) can ask his colleagues in local government what is going on. He is, I know, committed to transparency in local authorities and cutting waste. A suitable case for action?

**THE UNKNOWN SOLDIER**

**Thursday 23rd January 2014**

There are now no elderly men left alive who fought in the trenches of the first world war. Those of my generation had grandfathers who did; mine was at the battle of Mons, called up as a Somerset farm boy into the field artillery as someone used to working with heavy horses. He survived the war, but many millions, of course, did not. And for younger people this is ancient history, not something they can readily relate to through direct family connections.

That is why commemorating the centenary of this human catastrophe is so important.

Occasionally something happens to throw it into perspective, and that happened recently with the discovery of the remains of a British serviceman who died in Beaurains in France in 1917. The body is one of four officers known to have died there, of whom one was local. Although described as from Weston-super-Mare, Lieutenant Stanley Ashman was the son of Alfred and Annie Ashman of South Field Radstock.

I know there are many Ashmans in the area; it is a well-known Mendips name. If there is anyone who thinks they may be related and would be prepared to take a DNA test, the MOD would like to hear from you, as they would relatives of the other lost soldiers, in the hope of a positive identification. They can then rebury the remains appropriately, in the presence of their family. It would be fitting.

**CLOSING ROADS**

**Thursday 30th January 2014**

My constituents from further south in the constituency had to endure months of inconvenience and difficulty last year when a railway bridge was closed to traffic just outside Castle Cary station and as a result the main road was shut off. Not only did people have to undertake long detours, but it cost businesses affected many thousands of pounds.

I immediately pricked up my ears, therefore, when I heard that another major local road was likely to be closed for a prolonged period from March this year. This time it’s the A36, and the closure will be at the bottom of Brass-knocker hill, just south of Bath. It’s not on my patch, but it will certainly affect many in the Frome area who need to travel to the north, and the fact that many motorists will need to find alternative routes will inevitably mean extra traffic in villages such as Norton St Philip, which is hardly designed to take more.

Last week I called a meeting with neighbouring MPs who are affected, and we are now arranging an urgent briefing from the Highways Agency. The work needs to be done; otherwise a landslip will get worse, with potentially catastrophic consequences. But we need to know how traffic flow will be managed, how long the road will be closed, and if there is anything that can be done to reduced the impact.

**POLICE GOING MISSING**

**Thursday 6th February 2014**

For as long as I can remember I've been arguing that we ought to move Frome's police station out of what was originally built as a divisional headquarters in Oakfield Road into something both more appropriate but also more accessible for people in Frome. Complicated ownership of the surrounding land, with both the district council and the court service having a stake, always made it difficult to do so.

A couple of years ago, with the regrettable closure of the magistrates' court, the deal became possible however, and we're now close to the station closing. But we're still none the wiser about what is going to be provided in its stead, and I understand even the police stationed in Frome don't yet know what is planned for them.

What's needed ideally is a smaller, purpose-built station in central Frome, and I was always hopeful that one of the many prospective retail development schemes would provide the opportunity. The return from selling the Oakfield Road site should certainly provide the resource. It's odd, to say the least, that nothing has been announced as to what's going on.

I think we need to know, and at a meeting I have with the Chief Constable and the Police Commissioner next week I hope some answers will be forthcoming. It was never part of the deal to lose the police station and gain a mystery.

**Thursday 13th February 2014**

The Prime Minister faced a barrage of criticism on Wednesday about the comparative lack of women in the government. Unfortunately on a day when Ed Miliband had packed his front bench with every available female colleague, not a single woman member of the cabinet was around.

It is not for me to say whether the Conservatives have a problem selecting and promoting women. Even if they have, I, as a member of a party which despite our best efforts has just five women MPs, would hardly be in a position to say so.

But I think there is still an issue for all political parties in ensuring that parliament better reflects the make-up of the country at large. Instead, there is a huge over-representation of white, male, middle-class, middle-aged men. I know – I’m one, and there’s not much I can do about it other than by particularly drastic means!

However, we do need to look at what we can do to improve the balance. I’m particularly pleased that the candidate selected by the Liberal Democrats only last week to seek to succeed me, Sarah Yong, is a young woman, who also happens to be a highly energetic and highly able individual. What is pleasing is that in at least four other long-held seats where male MPs are standing down their replacements are female. The party is doing its bit; now we must see what the electorate decides.

***Sarah Yong, unfortunately, stood down before the election the following year.***

**LOCAL PLANNING?**

**Thursday 20th February 2014**

The planning application for the Saxonvale site is probably, quite literally, the biggest issue that Frome has faced for many years. There are strongly divergent views, as there have been on each and every occasion that the redevelopment of the area has been discussed, but nobody could suggest that there is a lack of interest in the town as to the outcome.

If any did harbour such doubts, the attendance of over two hundred people at a meeting at the Cheese and Grain organised by the Keep Frome Local organisation, and ninety or so turning up at a Frome town council meeting ought to disabuse them of the fact.

So the planning board meeting at Mendip District Council is likely to attract a lot of interest. Indeed, the council recognise this, as they have booked a special hall for the meeting. The only problem is that the hall they have booked is not in Frome, where the interest is. It’s at Kilver Court in Shepton Mallet. No, I have no idea why either!

The Town Council have been trying to get the meeting rearranged for Frome. So have I. So far no luck. I cannot imagine that Mendip want to disenfranchise Frome people or make life difficult for them. So why on earth are they insisting on deciding on the future of Frome Town Centre somewhere other than Frome?

**MENTAL HEALTH**

**Thursday 27th February 2014**

Mental health is a subject which many people don’t like to talk about. Experts say, though, that one in four of us will face mental health issues at some stage each year, and it is as critical an area of health care as any physical ailment, which makes the relative lack of priority given to it inexplicable.

I spent last Friday morning talking to people attending a mental health outreach group in Trinity church hall in Frome. It was good just to hear their experiences first hand. But it also confirmed my view that we need to do a lot more to make mental health a headline issue within the NHS, and to ensure we have the right support systems in place to help people.

One area where an awful lot goes wrong is in the benefits system. Despite best efforts, the system still doesn’t cope properly with episodic illness. And the performance of ATOS, the company employed by the last government to carry out work capability assessments, is nothing short of lamentable. They now say they want to give up the contract early. Well, good riddance say I and many thousands who have had an awful experience with them, but I hope they don’t expect a heap of taxpayers’ money to send them on their way. The insensitivity and incompetence with which they have carried out their task would be risible if it weren’t so tragic.

**BOGUS BOMB DETECTORS**

**Thursday 6th March 2014**

A constituent of mine, Jim McCormick, was jailed for fraud last year. He had peddled so-called bomb detectors to countries such as Afghanistan and Iraq to use against terrorism. There was just one problem; the bomb-detectors were bogus. They did not work, and indeed could not work, as they had nothing in them to work, which may well have cost many lives. The ten years sentence he received for his venality hardly seems sufficient.

Patient investigation by BBC West has revealed these devices are still being used in places such as Baghdad to this day. Over 7,000 people lost their lives in the supposedly peaceful Iraq last year. Who knows how many deaths could have been avoided had proper detection equipment been in place? But even more shockingly, a company in Romania, has patented a device which is almost identical to McCormick’s . It is equally useless at detecting explosives.

This is serious stuff, which is why I asked a Foreign Office Ministers this week to look into it and to inform other countries of the findings of the court case and warn them not to buy the device. I hope they will also contact the Romanian government. To put innocent lives at risk in pursuit of profit is despicable. You can’t fight terrorism with a plastic box filled with hocus-pocus and an old aerial.

**GRAVITY**

**Thursday 13th March 2014**

I don’t often get the chance to go to the cinema, so I was particularly pleased to be able to do so last week in an official capacity. As a member of the Select Committee on Science and Technology, I was asked to attend a showing of the Oscar-winning film *Gravity* in the company of some of the leading lights in the British space community to hear their detailed comments and to receive a briefing on the potential problems of space debris.

It’s a sector which is almost invisible to most of us, but the potential is enormous, and there are a number of local companies who are involved in the development of satellite technology. SEA, based at Beckington, is a good example. It is interesting that by opting out of some of the more high-profile stuff, Britain has actually established a niche expertise in the smaller satellite sector, for both research and commercial objectives.

It’s a sector which can only grow in importance as satellite technologies become instrumental to more of our daily life.

Their verdict? Apart from some criticism of just how Sandra Bullock’s hair remained so neat in space, they felt that the depiction was technically very good indeed. I was most intrigued when the former commander of RAF Fylingdales held up her mobile phone and told us they could spot debris that size at three thousand miles. That’s pretty good definition.

**RODE: THE BUS**

**Thursday 20th March 2014**

Public transport can be a remarkably emotive subject, and never more so than when a village community feels it is losing a vital connection. That is exactly the case in Rode at the moment, where everyone’s really getting behind a campaign to fight against the rerouting of the 267 bus. First Bus has announced that from April 13th the service, which goes from Bath to Frome, will no longer go through the village.

The campaign has attracted over 1500 signatures on a petition and a public protest numbering some two hundred or more villagers. Steve Eyles, the chairman of the local parish councillor, his colleagues, and county councillor for the area Sam Phripp have successfully demanded a public meeting with the bus company so that people can air their concerns. The protest has even attracted the support of Bath Rugby captain Stuart Hooper, who lives with his family in the village.

The fact is that a bus service which connects a village like Rode to Bath and to Frome is important whether it’s to get to work, to socialise, to visit friends, whatever. For those with no easily available alternative, it’s more than desirable, it’s essential. Yes, of course bigger communities will create more business, but for smaller places it’s that much more important. That’s why I’m fully behind the campaign, and why I’ve written to First Bus to ask them to think again.

**THE BUDGET**

**Thursday 27th March 2014**

The budget statement was notable more for the good news than the bad. There were some things I particularly welcomed. Firstly, the income tax threshold went up again to £10,500. That takes many more people on low pay out of tax altogether, but people forget that it’s also a tax cut for anyone earning less than £100,000 a year. That tax cut now amounts to £700 a year and it’s getting to over 40,000 people in my constituency.

If there is one really clear success story over the last four years it is the rapid expansion of apprenticeships, with 2,360 being created in Somerton & Frome constituency alone according to official figures. That’s a lot of young people who will get a proper start into work as a result.

Then there are the changes to pensions. It will be a huge relief to many pensioners that they are no longer forced to buy an annuity, and the so-called state pension triple-lock, meaning the pension goes up in line with prices, earnings or 2.5% whichever is the greatest, has been worth £650 a year to pensioners so far, with over 22,000 in my area benefitting.

So things are getting better. Should we be complacent? Not for a moment. After all, most of us are worse off now than before the crash. But I think it’s fair to say that we may have weathered the worst.

**UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE UP**

**Thursday 3rd April 2014**

Do you remember all the furore a few years ago about university tuition fees. How they were going to prevent anyone from a modest background ever going to university again, and numbers at college were sure to drop?

Well, it turns out that was all nonsense. Here are the facts. More people are going to university than ever. In fact, in 2013, 495,600 entered higher education, the highest number recorded. The share of disadvantaged young people has also gone up each and every year over the last four years. That’s hardly surprising because the money available to support young people from poorer backgrounds has gone up from £444 million in 2011 to £708 million now.

But most importantly, the amount a student pays on leaving university having got their degree is much lower under the new scheme than it was under the previous one. For a start, you don’t pay a penny back of the loan which pays for your fees until you earn over £21,000 a year. Under the old scheme that was £16,000. And the terms are much easier. Someone earning £24,000 was paying £67.50 per month under the old fees system. Under the new scheme, the figure is just £22.50 per month.

I still don’t like high fees and putting people into debt. But in purely practical terms, it’s a much better deal for students than the one it replaced.

**HARD CASES MAKE BAD NEWS**

**Thursday 10th April 2014**

Frome seems particularly adept at creating headlines, but the story that has been in the papers over the last week about local resident Tracy Johnson is fairly odd, to say the least. She received over £50,000 in benefits on the basis she was an agoraphobic with a fear of open spaces who had barely left her home for years, while at the same time apparently running tours in Patagonia and visiting India and New York. She was found guilty of fraud, and warned to expect a custodial sentence.

So far, so good. I don’t think many people would argue that benefit cheats shouldn’t be dealt with. But there is a problem when some try to use examples such as this to suggest that everybody who claims benefits is somehow trying to leech off the rest of society. Because although of course we must crack down on fraud, the vast majority of welfare claimants do so entirely legitimately and necessarily, and I far more often find people not getting, or even asking for, what they are entitled to than the reverse. The “scrounger society” so beloved of some of the tabloids is far from the truth.

But politicians, particularly, mustn’t make the mistake of damning those who desperately need help simply to get by, often through no fault of their own, and certainly not through intention. Many live lives of quiet desperation. They shouldn’t be made scapegoats as well.

**SLEAZY MP’S**

**Thursday 17th April 2014**

In Westminster there is general despair at the whole expenses business rearing its ugly head again as a result of Maria Miller’s resignation. Having sat through her rather perfunctory apology to the house, I think it was right that she resigned, not only for the apparent bending of the rules then in operation, but also for seemingly delaying and obstructing the investigation. And the public are absolutely right to feel upset yet again, while I simply do not understand some old-time members who prefer to blame the press rather than errant colleagues.

But where people have got it completely wrong is not realising this was all under the old, discredited system. We don’t need to change it now, because that’s what we did four years ago. Expenses are now independently managed by a body called IPSA. Irregularities are independently investigated. And the verdict wouldn’t come anywhere near a committee of MPs, but a court of law instead.

Far too many people think nothing has changed, when in fact it has, totally. Indeed some MPs grumble it’s changed too much, wrongly in my view. The idea of producing proper receipts for costs genuinely incurred in running our offices and carrying out our duties is second nature for anyone who has worked in the real world of business. That’s what we now have. The recent case is part of a bad system we’ve now, rightly, got rid of.

**A FAIR RENT**

**Thursday 24th April 2014**

I had some good news just before the Easter bank holiday break. I say I had good news, but actually the good news was for tenants of a particular housing association providing rented accommodation in villages near Frome. I won’t say which one, because the tenants will soon know the outcome themselves, and as the landlords are, albeit belatedly, doing the right thing, I have no wish to embarrass them.

What they suggested a few weeks ago was very definitely not the right thing. They discovered that for some considerable time they had been over-charging their tenants, billing for sums higher than the actual tenancy agreements required. Rightly, they offered the money they had taken in error back. But at the same time, they announced they were imposing a massive rent increase for the future. Some people were facing bills several hundred pounds more each month than they had budgeted for, and that simply isn’t on.

Anyway, a few letters to the housing association, the regulator and even the housing minister from me, and last week I got the glad news they were reconsidering. Although they maintained they were legally right, they clearly weren’t acting in the spirit of tenancy regulation and they have backed down. The new rents will be pegged back.

All of which means that tenants may have had a rather happier Easter, and I am reassured that, occasionally, we can still make a difference.

**Thursday May 1st 2014**

I think it was about twenty five years ago that I first started arguing for the closure of the current police station in Oakfield Road. It was soon after a court case had made it impossible for police authorities to require officers to live in police houses, which made the houses by the station of no value for policing purposes, and the main building was hugely underused, built as a divisional headquarters and now accommodating far fewer.

So I’m not dismayed at all at the announcement of closure this week. Nor am I upset by the temporary arrangements. Using a building on the Marston Road estate, and introducing a new police post in the town centre in the library are both sensible solutions for the next couple of years.

But it still doesn’t make sense to me to rebuild a purpose-built station in Oakfield Road. The receipts from the redevelopment of the site should be used to either build a new, properly designed station in the town centre, or to refurbish a suitable building. We need the police to be both accessible and visible, which Oakfield Road doesn’t offer. I hope the Chief Constable and the Policing Commissioner will use the next year or so to think again, to talk to the Town and District Councils about possibilities, and to find the best solution to provide effective and convenient policing for Frome.

***The “temporary” arrangements on Marston Trading Estate are still in use, six years later. There is no sign of a purpos-built police station.***

**A RECURRENT PROBLEM**

**Thursday 8th May 2014**

Fly-tipping and rubbish on the verges are disgusting. People are, rightly, upset. They look to their local elected councillors for action. Councillors can only do so much. They can raise a fuss. They can get officers of the council to come and see the problem. And if they’re persistent, then they can get things done. But a key part of improving things is for someone to take the trouble to get involved.

And there are some places in the town where it is a recurrent problem. I remember taking up the issue of littering of the verges down Gypsy Lane over twenty years ago. As a local councillor I did something about it, but I can’t pretend it was a permanent solution. Even so it’s a shame, literally, that the issue is an issue once again. Of course, the decision to close or restrict rubbish tips hasn’t helped.

So well done local councillor Adam Boyden for not just allowing things to get worse, but being prepared to make a stand. I understand the meeting he organised last week was well-attended, and local people had a chance to have their say. I hope the council officers and police took note. And I hope Adam is successful in dealing with the problem, at least for a few years. But I warn him, he may have to do it all over again!

**DODGING TAX**

**Thursday May 15th 2014**

It’s a very precipitous descent from national treasure to public enemy. The most recent “name” to fall from grace is former ‘Take That’ star Gary Barlow, the acceptable face of pop music, rapidly embracing establishment status, who as a result of a ruling by a high court judge has now been labelled a tax-dodger, a disgrace, and a target for the opprobrium of the self-righteous red-top press.

What he and his colleagues were found to have done was to invest money in a clever-clever scheme which purportedly helped people starting in the music industry but which the court found to be a barely-disguised wheeze to avoid paying tax. An awful lot of tax. Some £30 million which he and his colleagues will now have to stump up.

And quite right too. For far too long there have been rich people in this country who have avoided paying their fair share, while those on modest incomes pay in good faith to support the things which we as a country have to pay for.

One of the best things this government has done in recent years is firstly to prevent the appalling unfairness of the big boss paying a lower share in tax than the person who cleans their office by abusing capital gains tax rather than paying income tax, and another is really getting to grips with large-scale tax avoidance and evasion.

**EURO-POLLS**

**Thursday 29th May 2014**

Barely more than one in three voted, and the result was appalling for my party, I won’t disguise that. But what is I think most wrong with the European elections is that it’s impossible to recognise someone who does a good job, or oppose somebody who’s demonstrably useless. When Jack Straw was required to bring in a proportional system, which he’s always vigorously opposed, he deliberately chose the least satisfactory system, the closed party list system, where voters only get to choose a party, not a candidate. Many object to this, and I argued strongly against it at the time.

As a perverse consequence some MEPs feel they only have any accountability to members who decide their place on the party list. Most people couldn’t tell you who represents them in the European parliament. Even I, as an MP, could only name a handful over recent years, even fewer I had confidence in. One of them was Sir Graham Watson, who after twenty years of representing Somerset lost his seat on Sunday.

Graham and I do not agree on everything on matters European, far from it. But I have tremendous respect for the hard work he did on behalf of this area, and his experience will be hugely missed. If we had a fair system, people would have voted on his personal record. I don’t think they did, which is poor reward for his service.

**INTO AFRICA**

**Thursday 5th June 2014**

Because I believe passionately that we need to take every opportunity we can to increase our overseas trade, I was intrigued to be asked a few weeks ago to take on a new role. If we are serious about improving our balance of trade and selling to new markets, then we cannot afford to ignore some of the fastest growing economies in the world. You can be sure that our competitors will not. And that is why I have, with some diffidence, given that it is not a particularly easy option, agreed to become the Prime Minister’s Trade Envoy to Nigeria and to Angola, both huge potential markets.

What does a Trade Envoy do? Well, it’s unpaid, and I would not have taken the job on if I felt it would interfere with me representing my constituents properly while I remain an MP. The purpose is acting as an advocate for British businesses, encouraging companies to seize opportunities, and developing a relationship with the governments of the countries involved to encourage a genuine economic partnership.

I am not so naïve as to believe it is all plain sailing on the African continent. Of course there are problems, which we read about on a daily basis. But there is also a lot of good news as well, which perhaps doesn’t get the headlines. And if we can help create a stable and prosperous Africa, that’s good too.

**UNFINISHED BUSINESS**

**Thursday 12th June 2014**

Last week I trekked down the corridor to the Lords for the last time before my retirement next year to hear the Queen’s speech. Rather than commenting on what is there, perhaps I can say a few words about two bills which I worked on as a minister and which are not part of the programme. The first is on forestry, the policy which I put together which would ensure that the public forests in England were maintained and improved and put in trust for the nation in perpetuity. It is a good policy, it was widely welcomed by people who previously had been very upset by plans to dispose of woodland, and in my opinion should have been put into statute before the end of this parliament.

The second is the draft bill to ban wild animals in circuses. I did not have direct responsibility for this area of policy, which fell to the minister in the Lords Lord De Maulay, but I was pushing hard in DEFRA for a promise to bring forward legislation to be kept. In reality, the effect would be slight. There are only a handful of animals now kept by the dwindling number of travelling circuses, and their welfare is carefully controlled by the licensing system we introduced. But it would have been nice to have finished the job, and we haven’t.

**PASSPORT PROBLEMS**

**Thursday 19th June 2014**

The media have exaggerated the scale of the difficulties with passports, with 97% of applications currently processed in the normal three week period, and 99% in four weeks. However, that still means that a significant number of people are experiencing problems, which can be very costly and inconvenient.

Why is it happening? Firstly, there is a marked rise in the number of people applying for passports, 350,000 more than normal, probably a reflection of the improving economic situation. Secondly, and this is entirely a consequence of policy, the Home Office has taken over the task of renewing passports for Britons resident overseas from the locally based consular services.

The general message is, if you know you’re going to need a passport, for heaven’s sake don’t wait until the last minute to apply for it. Even with the system working as it should, the advice is three weeks for a renewal and six weeks for a first time application, assuming everything is in order, so suddenly realising you’ve booked a holiday but don’t have a passport a month before you leave is a bit of a non-starter.

Sometimes an intervention from an MP is necessary. But please don’t call for help, as a few have done over the last few days, when you only applied for a passport a week ago. We need to prioritise those who are genuinely desperate, rather than those just seeking peace of mind.

**A NEW BOY**

**Thursday 26th June 2014**

For a newly elected MP the first time you attempt to ask a question to the Prime Minister in the weekly Wednesday morning session is a daunting prospect. Indeed, it's probably one of the most terrifying things you can do, with half or more of the house willing you to fluff your lines and the noise levels going through the roof. So I felt a little sympathy in human if not political terms for the, to my ancient eyes, absurdly young looking by-election winner Robert Jenrick when he was called by the Speaker last week.

I needn't have worried on his behalf, because he delivered a perfectly competent question about his constituency. However, it still engendered a lot of amused muttering, because it mentioned the ancient Nottinghamshire town of Southwell, which he pronounced as it is spelt, South-well. And there were plenty around the chamber, particularly those of us familiar with the town's racecourse which as far as I know is universally pronounced "Suth'll", who wondered if he had committed a massive faux pas by mispronouncing the name of a town many of his constituents live in. It's the sort of mistake you would never live down.

In fact, we were wrong, and he was, at least partly, right. Apparently, locals can't decide how they pronounce their town, and are split almost equally down the middle on the issue. Some say it's only in-comers who use the phonetic version. Others say it's quite the reverse. So either is right, or perhaps more accurately, equally wrong. Whichever, Mr Jenrick had not committed a solecism of the first order.

***Robert Jenrick is now a Secretary of State.***

**FROME FESTIVAL**

**Thursday 3rdh July 2014**

It’s Frome Festival time again. It’s still a small recurrent miracle that a town the size of Frome can put on such a varied and exciting programme year after year, or would be were it not for the fact that the “miracle” is in truth the outcome of a lot of hard work by a small and dedicated band of people, and I for one would like to thank them for their efforts on our behalf. The festival is undoubtedly one of the things which makes Frome a great place to live in.

When Martin Bax first floated the idea fourteen years ago I don’t think any of us thought it would become quite the success it has been, or certainly that it would achieve its present longevity. Indeed, there were times a few years back when it looked extremely doubtful whether the festival would survive in anything like its current form. Happily, there were people, like director Martin Dimery, but also many volunteers working behind the scenes, and business sponsors providing much-needed cash, who thought otherwise.

I am usually very put out that I miss so many of the events which I would really like to attend because I am required to be in London. It’s the same this year, although I do have tickets for a couple of things. But for those of you in Frome all week – take your pick. You won’t be disappointed.

***I was delighted to have been asked in 2015 to become the Vice-President of the Frome Festival.***

**STANDING ROOM ONLY**

**Thursday 10th July 2014**

At the risk of sounding like the traditional grumpy commuter, my Monday morning train to London from Westbury has for two weeks running now been standing room only. Admittedly, a fortnight ago the problem was people returning in numbers from the Glastonbury Festival, but last week there seemed to be no obvious reason beyond demand exceeding supply.

In one way that is a good thing. Use of the railways has been steadily increasing for years now, and that’s taken a lot of traffic off the roads. But it does suggest that the service is not adequate to the need, and when I use the evening train straight back to Frome it is always overcrowded for at least half the journey and you’re lucky to get a seat.

There are ambitious plans to improve the route via Bath and Bristol. Surely we need the same investment in the route via Westbury and Castle Cary, and perhaps more direct trains to Frome as well. After all, we do have our reputation as coolest town in the country to keep up.

Finally, I just wanted to brag a little. Small trophy sitting in corner of the room, next to ancient Witham Friary Cricket Club awards (and there aren’t many more ancient Witham Friary cricketers than me!). Frome Festival Book-lovers Quiz at the Cornerhouse on Sunday. Don’t think I personally contributed much, but my team won anyway. I think people should be impressed!

**AN I.T. SCAM**

**Thursday 17th July 2014**

A constituent came to see me recently fuming that he had been caught out by what can only be described as a scam. He had applied for a car licence online, given his payment details, and in time received his tax disc. It was only when he looked at his credit card statement that he realised that he had been charged some thirty pounds more than the face value of the licence. Despite the fact that he was perfectly IT literate, he had fallen for a bogus government site which charged for passing on his details to a site he could have used at no extra charge.

I have been campaigning on this for some years, ever since I spotted a site charging nine pounds for the European Health card, which ought to be free. The problem is that if you look at the small print, they always say clearly that it isn't a government site, and that the charge is purely for the "convenience" of passing on your details. Ministers have always said as a result that they're not sure there's an illegal act being committed, despite appearances

Now, I see, prosecutions are being brought by the National Trading Standards organisation. About time. It's a con preying on the unwary, and it needs stamping out. I hope the prosecutions are successful, and that a clear message goes out that charging people for what should be free is simply stealing.

***It's still going on. Recently I was registering a statutory off-road notice and got as far as filling in the details before realising the site intended to charge me £30 for what is a free service.***

**TIME TO PLAY HARDBALL  
Thursday 24th July 2014**

The news broadcasts over the weekend were just about as grim as I can remember. Two tragedies unfolded on our screens, one with the shooting down of a civilian airliner in eastern Ukraine, the other the continuing and appalling situation in Gaza. Both involved awful scenes of death and suffering.

The House of Commons had the opportunity to make its views known this week. On Monday the Prime Minister laid the blame for the loss of Malaysian Airways flight MH17 squarely at the door of the pro-Russian thugs in Ukraine and president Putin and his government in Moscow.

I made the point that if the gangsters in the Kremlin and their sock puppets in the Russian media are unable to understand the enormity of shooting down a civilian airplane on a recognised route, then perhaps we should seriously consider whether Russian commercial carriers should continue to be welcomed into sovereign airspace in civilised countries. It is time to play economic hardball with Russian interests.

In the case of Gaza, of course Hamas, the Palestinian organisation, should stop lobbing missiles at Israel, and Israel is entitled to defend itself. But it is not entitled to use massively disproportionate force, to ignore international law, and to kill or maim thousands of innocent people. If they do not recognise that, then Netanyahu’s government also needs to feel the force of international sanction, and the UK should be leading the way in Europe.

**FAREWELL TOUR**

**Thursday 31st July 2014**

One of the consequences of my decision to stand down next May is that I am working my way through a series of events and duties which I am very conscious I am doing for the last time. After eighteen years as an MP, and twelve years before that representing Frome as a county councillor, that is sometimes a relief, but more often a sadness.

So it was that this year's Frome festival was the last which I will be attending while I'm in my current job. The Frome half-marathon which I started will be the last at which I will officiate, and no, I don't intend to run it next year, however excellent the organisation is; I have never felt the urge to run without a ball being involved!

And last week, I was out and about around the villages undertaking my last ever village tour. It's something I've done every year, with the exception of last when I was advised by the police not to do it on security grounds. It's my chance to visit about a hundred of the hundred and thirty five villages in my constituency where I don't get to hold regular advice surgeries, just to chat to people, find out about local concerns, and make sure I keep in contact.

I'll be back doing the rounds again next week. If you'd like to say hello, I'd be delighted to see you.

**SILLY SEASON**

**Thursday 14th August 2014**

August is often referred to as the “silly season”, because the lack of hard news means that the newspapers and media are often filled with the trivial or frankly barking stories that normally wouldn’t see the light of the editor’s day. Unfortunately this year, with the unfolding tragedies in Gaza, Iraq and Ukraine to the fore, that is not the case. But one story reported earlier this week should win a special silly season prize.

A senior lecturer from the University of Westminster, one Dr Pitcher, declared on Radio 4 that Gardeners’ Question Time is racist. Why? Because it uses terms like “non-native” and “invasive” species. In other words, it uses the language of science and, in particular, botany, in its correct way and unambiguously referring to the spread of plants.

It would be easy to dismiss this as nonsense, and indeed it goes beyond satire. Dr Pitcher would no doubt want to rename the blackberry for the same reason. But by being risible, it actually does the fight against overt racism and xenophobia a huge disservice.

There is, even in a largely mono-ethnic area like Somerset, too much discrimination, either intended or subliminal. There are politicians who play on those fears, again, either overtly or by implication. By reducing the arguments to a farcical denunciation of a blameless gardening programme, Dr Pitcher undermines those genuinely trying to make a difference.

**WE NEED HARD SCIENCE**

**Thursday 21st August 2014**

While students received their A-level results last week and, if all went well, booked their places for University, a little bit of history was made. An Iranian woman, Mariam Mirzakhani, won the Fields Medal, the equivalent of a Nobel prize for mathematics, the first woman to do so.

Why is that important? Because in this country, and some others, the myth persists that being female and being good at maths, science and engineering are incompatible, despite plenty of evidence to the contrary. As a result, many able students are steered away from, or convince themselves not to pursue, academic and professional careers to which they are well suited.

And the sad thing is that these are specifically the subject areas which we desperately need. Despite numbers of university entrants, and the number from less well-off backgrounds, being at the highest ever, (which nevertheless did not stop The Guardian writing this week that young people are “increasingly deterred” by the funding system) there is still a dearth of those following so-called STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) subjects.

As a member of the Science and Technology Select Committee, this is something which worries me.

So if you are an eighteen-year-old who’s done well this year, congratulatons, and commiserations to those who missed out. If you’ve chosen a hard science, double congratulations. And if in addition to that you’re female, well, thank goodness for that.

**A CLERK FOR THE HOUSE**

**Thursday 28th August 2014**

To be honest, I doubt whether anyone in Frome is the slightest bit bothered by the row which has been developing in the House of Commons over the summer. But because I am a Member of Parliament, I have to be concerned. The issue is all about the retirement of the Clerk of the House, Sir Robert Rogers, and the appointment of his successor. Normally this would hardly engender news comment. The Clerk is the repository of knowledge on procedure in the house, runs the in-house organisation, and advises the Speaker on law and precedent.

The current Speaker, John Bercow, decided this time to throw the post open to competition from outside. And the person he wants to appoint is somebody who has been running the catering service for the Australian parliament. She has no experience of parliamentary procedure, and indeed has only been in her current job for two years. She’s also subject to two investigations back home.

Running the management of the house is a big business. It may be that Carol Mills is exactly right for that part of the job. But can she advise the Speaker and occasionally tell him he’s wrong? Or protect parliament when government gets too big for its boots? And if not her, then who else? At the very least, such a big change should be decided by the house as a whole.

***The then retiring Clerk, Robert Rogers, now Baron Lisvane and a respected member of the House of Lords, has recently lodged a dossier of complaints of bullying against John Bercow during his time as Speaker.***

**A TRAGIC CASE**

**Thursday 4th September 2014**

The story of five year old Ashya King which has led the news over recent days is sad in all respects. I cannot begin to grasp the anguish that parents must go through when told their child has a serious and probably incurable illness. The distress and the urge to do something, anything, must be huge.

In Ashya’s case what the family did do was to take the child away from the care he was receiving at Southampton Hospital and transport him across Europe, prior to seeking a different treatment for him in Prague. What the hospital then did was to alert the police hat the child was in imminent danger, causing them to seek and obtain a warrant for the parents’ arrest and return to Britain.

Everybody, I suspect, believed they were acting in the child’s best interest. The parents, obviously, and they had taken care to ensure his safety *en route*, it seems. The hospital, because they didn’t know that, and were afraid he would simply die through unintentional neglect. And the police, based on the information they received, although it’s hard to understand exactly what crime was suspected.

Doctors do not control patients under their care. Parents can still exercise judgement. Sometimes, however, that judgement will be clouded by what is picked up on internet research and lack of professional understanding. It is a curse of the modern age, with potentially tragic results.

**AN OUTRAGEOUS USE OF PUBLIC MONEY**

**Thursday 11th September 2014**

It is not that usual for a Secretary of State to accuse a local authority run by his own party of “an absolutely outrageous use of public money”. But that is exactly the charge levelled at Conservative-run Somerset County Council by Local Government Secretary Eric Pickles this week. And I think we should be concerned.

I had asked him on Monday about reports that Somerset were paying one senior officer, Peter Lewis, in charge of the failing children’s services department about which I’ve written previously, a staggering £318,500 per year, the highest local government salary in the country. What’s more, it is reported that the money is paid not though a normal employment contract, with income tax deducted, but into a limited company owned by Mr Lewis and his wife.

And to add to the generosity with taxpayers’ money, his deputy is apparently costing £275,000. All told, there are apparently fifteen senior officers at County hall being paid over £96,000. At the same time, Somerset tell us that they have to massively cut services to ordinary people because there isn’t enough money!

I hasten to add that there is nothing illegal about the arrangements. It just seems odd that an officer, not even the chief executive, of a local authority can be worth more than twice what we pay the Prime Minister. I’m inclined to agree with Mr Pickles; “an outrageous use of public money”.

**WILL SCOTLAND GANG AWA’?**

**Thursday 18th September 2014**

It is an extraordinary thought that by the time you read these words the country in which we were born and where we have lived all our lives may be no more. If Scotland votes Yes to separation this week, then everything will have changed.

I have heard many people say that if they want to leave, well good riddance to them. England, along with Wales and Northern Ireland, can manage very well without the Scots. That attitude is understandable, but I think profoundly wrong.

Firstly, because there has never been a union of countries as successful as the United Kingdom has been over three centuries, so it is to repudiate our shared history. But secondly, because to split the UK will cause huge upsets in the short term with disastrous effects on all of us.

We have already seen the first glimmers of the flight of capital from the UK since the pollsters started to predict a close result. If it goes the wrong way that could easily turn into a major economic downturn, just as we have secured by hard work and no little privation financial security again. We would also enter a period of profound constitutional wrangling as we disentangle three hundred years of joint institutions.

A Yes vote would undoubtedly be bad for Scotland. But it would equally be bad for Great Britain. All of it.

**NO, THEY’LL STAY – FOR NOW**

**Thursday 25th September 2014**

So, we remain a United Kingdom. Scotland in the end said no. But the further devolution of powers which the party leaders took it upon themselves to offer in the last week or so of the campaign throws up new issues, and they largely focus on the government of England.

Let us deal with what ought to be a relatively simple thing first, although party politics means that it is unlikely to be. The more powers in respect of Scotland which are removed from Westminster, the less sustainable it is for Scottish MPs to vote on matters which only affect English constituencies. What started as an anomaly has now become indefensible. There are relatively simple ways of managing things in the House of Commons to deal with the problem, and we should now take them up.

But there is a deeper issue. We now live in what looks like a federal nation but isn't. For England, all real power (with the exception of London) is retained by the central government. There is a clear argument for more devolution within England, but the issue is how to do so without creating new tiers of politicians and civil servants, or the sort of pathetically small local government fiefdoms satirised in Chesterton's "The Napoleon of Notting Hill".

Constitutional reform is complex, and for every action there is a consequence elsewhere. It will take intelligence and time. Let us hope we have plenty of both.

**IRAQ**

**Thursday 2nd October 2014**

As regular readers will know, I occasionally visit Nigeria as the UK Trade Envoy to promote British exports to the largest economy in Africa. I am always gratified when I hear of local businesses benefitting from the doubling of trade we have secured over the last four years. I used the recess last week to make another visit, and as a result I was caught out by the announcement of the recall of parliament on Friday; the earliest available plane didn't get me back in time.

So I wasn't able to participate or vote in the debate on military action in Iraq. I regret that. I would have liked to have heard the arguments on both sides. As most will remember, I was strongly opposed to our involvement in Iraq under Tony Blair, supported by the then Conservative opposition, and it saddens me that so many of the consequences I warned about then have since come about.

There is, however, a difference. Help has been requested by the elected governments of Iraq and the autonomous Kurdistan. They are threatened by a murderous terrorist organisation with superior arms bent on killing civilians and enslaving opponents. And the parliamentary motion specifically excluded any action beyond air support in Iraq, either in that country or in Syria.

As I said. I would have listened to the arguments. But most people recognise the threat, not just to the region, but to us.

**MEMORIES OF …. WALES?**

**Thursday 9th October 2014**

The Liberal Democrat conference this year is being held in Glasgow, happily still part of the United Kingdom. The only problem is the distance, which means a very long car journey, an equally difficult train trip, or using the flight from Bristol to Glasgow, which is the least expensive and by far the quickest. Accordingly, it was off to Bristol Airport I went, once I’d done my advice surgeries in Frome on Saturday.

Now, those who use Bristol Airport know how much it has improved over recent years. But I have a bone to pick with them. In the vast “duty free” area of the departure lounge there is a section for souvenirs. That’s good; the many visitors who use the airport to visit the west country ought to have a chance to take something to the folks back home.

But are there any souvenirs of the south west of England? Not one. There is, instead, a whole display of souvenirs of…..Wales! Apart from that, there is a bit of generic Union Jackery and, bizarrely, some merchandise from Manchester United!

Can you imagine Cardiff or Manchester airports having souvenirs of Somerset or Dorset? Of course not.

When are we as a region going to take our holiday and hospitality industry seriously? It supports a lot of jobs and creates a lot of income, but our local authorities seem to be on another planet. Or possibly in the pay of the Welsh!

**EBOLA**

**Thursday 16th October 2014**

In the space of four days in Nigeria a couple of weeks ago I had my temperature taken thirty four times. Happily, I was OK each time, but at the moment you cannot go into or out of any public building in Nigeria, particularly airports and hotels, without being screened. That’s an indication how seriously they are taking the possibility of the Ebola virus spreading, and so far they have successfully contained incidents where people from abroad have brought the disease in.

The direct threat in Britain is far lower; we have fewer people from the three main centres of infection, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea, entering our shores. But that doesn’t mean we should be complacent, and I hope that the checks at airports now being introduced will be rigorously carried out. Ebola actually isn’t that infectious a disease in normal circumstances. You could sit next to an infected person on a bus and not catch it. But it is readily passed on in body fluids, and medical staff are at real risk. And there is currently no treated cure or preventative vaccine.

The whole world therefore needs to act together to stamp it out in West Africa. But we also need to be on our guard, and I hope that every GP surgery and every clinic know exactly what they are looking out for, and what to do if they suspect an outbreak.

**RECALL**

**Thursday 23rd October 2014**

When the fervour over MPs expenses was at its height people worried that those who had done things which would have had them sacked in any other job were allowed to carry on blithely until the next election. Of course there were those who had committed criminal offences, who were tried, found guilty and jailed. But if the sentence was less than one year, their voters could do nothing about it.

That is why we are now considering a Recall of MPs bill, which allows for a vote on whether you want your MP to continue if he is found to have behaved improperly.

Some want this to go much further, and allow for anyone to start a recall petition for any reason. I think this is a mistake. It should be for misconduct, not simply because you disagree with what an MP says or the way he votes. Otherwise we would have rich lobby groups, or individuals, trying to unseat any MP they didn’t agree with, a millionaires law, and it would mean that no MP could ever vote for anything unpopular with some constituents ever again, even if it was right, and his conduct otherwise impeccable.

I do want to open up the process to voters, however, and I’m trying to strengthen the bill. It shouldn’t be for MPs themselves to decide which colleagues to remove. If people misbehave, then they should pay the consequence.

***The Recall of MPs Act 2015 has since been used three times: Ian Paisley Jr in North Antrim in 2018, which was unsuccessful, and in 2019 successfully against Fiona Onasanya in Peterborough and Christopher Davies in Brecon & Radnorshire.***

**AN EXTRAORDINARY ELECTION**

**Thursday 30th October 2014**

There was a by-election last week, although I doubt if many people knew about it. What’s more, a local man, one of my constituents, won, and as a Liberal Democrat too, so I should be congratulating him (which I do) and talking up the result. Which I’m afraid I’m not going to do.

The winner was the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, who as many people will know lives at Mells. And the by-election he won was to become a sitting member of the House of Lords as one of the 92 remaining hereditary peers. I am personally delighted, as I’m sure he will do a very good job. His background in the diplomatic service will be of great value, and of course it’s always good to have another voice from Somerset in the legislature. What’s more, he’s a great-grandson of the Liberal Prime Minister HH Asquith.

But what an extraordinary process, and what does it say about our democratic procedures? Lord Asquith was elected by 155 votes of the total of just 283 electors, all hereditary peers. Fifteen peers stood for election, two Liberal Democrats and thirteen Conservative, but by a quirk in the system, the members of the House of Lords by convention had to support one of the Liberal Democrats to succeed his late colleague, whatever their own persuasion.

An election, yes, but not as we know it. And this is part of our legislature!

**IN MEMORIAM**

**Thursday 6th November 2014**

As I have for many years, but for the last time, next Sunday I shall lay wreathes and read lessons at Remembrance Day ceremonies and services in Bruton, in Wincanton, and in Frome. It is a duty which has always meant a lot to me personally.

But this year I had the opportunity to do something I’ve not done before. I took advantage of an invitation from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to meet with them and to tour the war graves in Frome.

I think many of us, when we think of war graves, think of those hugely impressive, hugely melancholic, serried ranks of white stones in the cemeteries of Flanders. We do not think of those on our doorsteps.

And yet, in Christchurch, in Trinity, in the Dissenters Cemetery in Vallis Road, there they are. Most are marked with the familiar Portland stone, inscribed with the name, rank and number and regimental insignia of the fallen. Others may be incorporated into family plots or are private headstones, but are still cared for by the Commission.

While I was in Christchurch graveyard I saw a stone being replaced, renewed because it had become worn.

Many served in our county regiment, the Somerset Light infantry. Some were very young, teenagers, others approaching an age they should have been looking to retirement. Far too many died, not on the battlefield, but in training. All should be remembered.

**DAFT WHIPS  
Thursday 13th November 2014**

There are times when government whips are, to use the old-fashioned phrase, too clever for their own good. We had a good example on Monday. Over the weekend, even on Monday morning when the Home Secretary Theresa May took to the airwaves, we were told that the house would debate and vote on the European Arrest Warrant. It is a serious issue, on which some hold strong views.

Then, when we reached the debate on Monday afternoon, it transpired that the government motion was not about the Arrest Warrant at all. Indeed it asked us to agree to eleven measures, all of which were conspicuously not the EAW. Not unexpectedly, or in my view unreasonably, people on all sides of the argument got very excited. And the government looked shambolic. All because the Conservative Chief Whip wanted to do something which he considered clever, and most felt was disingenuous, if not downright deceitful.

For the record, the vast majority of MPs do support the Home Secretary’s view that the European Arrest Warrant is essential to our security. It means criminals are brought to justice quickly and effectively, and avoids the old Costa del Crime. There are concerns, but they have been largely addressed.

Frankly, I am more concerned about our extradition treaty with the United States, which I opposed at the time. So why not have a straightforward debate and a straightforward vote? I genuinely have no idea.

**LANDING A FLY ON A BULLET**

**Thursday 20th November 2014**

Okay, so the shadow of a cliff meant that it couldn’t recharge its batteries, there’s criticism of the expenditure against what might have been more worthy projects, even the chief scientist’s choice of shirt (a rather flamboyant hawaiian) was panned, but nothing should take away the sheer brilliance of the achievement of landing the Philae probe on a comet.

Some have likened it to landing a fly on a speeding bullet, but I would say it’s a lot harder than that.

Space exploration is a strange thing. It divides people, including scientists, as to its usefulness. But there is nothing that thrills more. I still remember the sense of awe I felt as a teenager when we were taken to Bristol University to hear a talk about the moon landings and I had the opportunity to hold a tube containing lunar dust in my hand. I can almost feel it there now.

While the European Space Agency has something to shout about, meanwhile, the European Commission has done something really stupid in summarily removing the Chief Scientific Adviser and declaring that it no longer needs independent top-level scientific advice. It does, it really does.

The European Union is prey to fits of unscientific nonsense fuelled by a misunderstanding of “the precautionary principle”, which is too often interpreted as a “do nothing principle”. Just like our government, they need dispassionate advice based on evidence. And they need to listen.

**A WINTER STATEMENT**

**Thursday 4th December 2014**

The Chancellor's so-called Autumn Statement seems to invariably happen nowadays in the first week of December. Perhaps it's time to consider a different name. Anyhow, whatever it's called, it serves as a sort of second annual Budget Statement, giving an update on the state of the economy, some indications of future policy, and a number of key spending announcements.

I write this before the Chancellor actually stands up to share his thoughts, so I am not sure what rabbits, if any, he is able to pull out of the hat. However, what we do already know is some of the spending plans, because they have already been announced by other ministers, and I have to say that Somerset has, for the first time I can remember in thirty years of representing the county one way or another, done very well indeed. What's more, two of my key campaigns have finally borne fruit.

Firstly, we have at last the improvements to the A303 which should have been done years ago. The whole length of the road is going to be dealt with, including the thorny problem of Stonehenge, and an early priority is duelling the stretch in my constituency between Sparkford and Ilchester.

Secondly, we have the commitment to further substantial sums of money to help prevent flooding in the county, including the sluice on the River Parrett. That's good news indeed.

***Neither the improvements to the A303 or the sluice/barrage of the Parrett have been built.***

**AUSTERITY ON AND ON?**

**Thursday 11th December 2014**

Having written last week's column before the Chancellor's Statement, I could only guess at its contents. As far as spending is concerned, I was just about right. Most of the things I've been arguing for on behalf of constituents over many years are now been given the green light, including the improvements to the A303 and the additional money to protect against flooding in Somerset, with the agreement to set up a Somerset Rivers Authority signed on Monday. If I was entirely convinced the government are going to fill the holes in the broadband internet provision, I'd be feeling pretty smug.

There was other good news too. I think the restructuring of stamp duty on house purchases is long overdue. Currently it catches many people, often already over-stretched, buying quite modest houses And I'm pleased to see yet further progress on raising the threshold for income tax, taking yet more low paid people out of tax and reducing tax for most of us.

But the controversy, which has led to some over-excited commentators to talk about the end of the coalition, is the Chancellor's long term plans for permanent austerity based on squeezing the poorest. We simply don't agree. This is a fundamental difference between the parties. With an election looming, of course positions are set out. But the coalition, however difficult, has delivered rescue from economic disaster. When the deficit is defeated, we must move on.

**I’M DREAMING OF A GRIM CHRISTMAS**

**Thursday 18th December 2014**

You would imagine, perhaps, that in the last working week before Christmas the House of Commons would be debating matters of, let us say, less weighty content. The price of mince pies, perhaps, or the impact of the failure of the Air Traffic Control System on Santa's flight plans. Not a bit of it. We've had two lengthy days discussing counter-terrorism. Not seasonal, but as we have seen in Australia and in Pakistan over recent days, grimly relevant.

On Tuesday I had the chance to put my input into another funding bid from the Local Enterprise Partnership, the economic development body for Devon and Somerset. And I told them my top priority, now that we have secured, I think, the A303 and flood defence funding, is to fill in the gaps which the current roll-out of high-speed broadband won't reach. Nothing could be more important for businesses trying to operate in rural areas.

I hope it will be a strong bid. And that means that if you're opening a new computer or other gizmo that needs broadband on Christmas morning, and you live in a village outside Frome, it might be good news. Meanwhile, while we're waiting, may I wish you a very happy Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous New Year.