**2013**

**A FAIRER STATE PENSION**

**Thursday 17th January 2013**

The sniffy tone taken by some commentators about the new pensions proposals came exclusively from people who will never themselves have to rely on a statutory state pension. If they did, they might be a bit more receptive to the idea of a much higher, guaranteed basic pension, with proper provision for women with caring responsibilities.

What the plans suggest is a new statutory state pension of £144 per person, and an end to the current two tier system of basic pension and earnings-related pension on top of that, always above the level used for means testing of other benefits, so those who put a little won’t see that clawed back through the benefits system.

Some say that because it only applies to future pensioners it shouldn’t be done at all. I’m not sure that’s logical. Those who have paid higher contributions to SERPS for years might not expect their legitimate expectations to be swept away, and the pension credit will continue to ensure that current pensioners don’t lose out. They simply won’t be on the new system, because they haven’t enrolled (or paid contributions) on that basis.

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

**STOPPING FOR SNOW**

**Thursday 24th January 2013**

I do wonder what people from other countries must think if they visit us during one of our infrequent winter “snow events” to find so much of our infrastructure incapacitated.

Snowfalls which in northern Europe and America would be considered entirely normal are sufficient to close us down. But that is precisely the point. Because they deal with it on an everyday basis for large parts of the year, they have everything they need to hand. For us, it is a rare occurrence, and it would be an expensive nonsense to tool up to the same extent for something that only impacts on us for a few days each year.

So I am tolerant of disruption. Up to a point. But what I think many authorities forget (and yes, airlines and airports, I’m looking at you) is that what most infuriates and upsets people is a dearth of information.

For instance, Heathrow instituted a perfectly sensible plan to cancel a number of flights to ensure they had the capacity to run the rest. If the airlines had told their frustrated passengers what was happening, what they could expect, and helped them make arrangements, then there wouldn’t have been nearly as much distress. Instead, we had desperate passengers stranded in a departure lounge with no idea when or if their flight would leave. That’s bad business, and terrible service. Surely they can do better.

**THE REASONS FOR FLOODS**

**Thursday 31st January 2013**

We must hope that this year doesn’t involve quite as much rain as the last, but the signs don’t look good at the moment. The Environment Agency have done wonders in protecting huge numbers of houses from flooding, but that’s scant comfort for people who still find themselves affected.

It is clear to many of us that limited maintenance over many years has reduced the capacity of our rivers and rhines. I am talking to my colleague Richard Benyon, the flooding minister, about this, and I think he recognises the problem. As a constituency MP, I am clear that we ought to look again at the dredging of the rivers in the south of my constituency to see if we can safely increase their capacity.

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

**A NEW DEAL FOR FORESTRY**

**Thursday 7th February 2013**

Last September I took on ministerial responsibility for our forests. As people will remember, previous government proposals were not popular, and a lot of people care passionately about our woodland. On Thursday I published our new policy. So what have I suggested? Well, firstly to make it clear that the public forest estate will stay in public ownership. The previous decision to sell off 15% of the estate is rescinded, and I’ve not only been able to restore the budget that was cut but added a bit more as well.

But it goes much further than that. Keeping the public forest intact and free from political interference is essential . So I’ve proposed that our forests be placed in trust for the nation, with clear objectives to protect their use.

We need greatly enhanced protection against disease. I want to improve the management of woodland, to boost the local economy and provide opportunities for recreation, community involvement and r education.

And I want us to continue to expand tree cover. I think it’s possible to see 12% of the country covered in woodland by 2060; as much as in the year 1300, so it’s no mean aspiration!  
  
I hope we can not only restore woodlands to their former glory, but protect them for generations to come. And if I achieve nothing else as a minister, that alone will make it worthwhile.

***The new policy was warmly received by many. Unfortunately, however, I left office before the legislation which I had worked on could be put before parliament, and it seems to have been quietly forgotten.***

**HORSEMEAT**

**Thursday 14th February 2013**

Despite the jokes, the horsemeat scandal is a serious one. What is becoming clear is that processed beef in branded goods has been systematically adulterated, probably as a result of substantial and extensive criminal activity. And what started as an issue in Ireland affecting some of our retailers is now a labyrinth of problems across continental Europe.

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

That started a process of investigation which as we all know has now exposed wholesale substitution of horse meat in ready-prepared meals, the withdrawal of products, cases found across Europe, and as a result of the actions we have taken, the biggest testing regime of processed beef products ever. It is probable that new cases will be thrown up, unfortunately. It may involve criminal behaviour in more than one country, including the UK.

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

***The horsemeat scandal threw up issues of consumer protection and sourcing policies of big companies. I am convinced what was discovered revealed the involvement of organised crime across Europe, which perhaps indicates why we were not able to secure evidence from overseas police and significant convictions.***

**DANGEROUS DOGS**

**Thursday 28th February 2013**

On Tuesday I had to reply to a debate on dangerous dogs. This is an emotive subject. We consider ourselves in a country of dog lovers in Britain, and yet there are far too many abandoned and stray animals that end up in the care of charities or being put down, and there are also far too many dog attacks each year causing very serious injuries or even death. The legislation put in place over twenty years ago has proved almost useless.   
  
So the need is for measures which will protect the welfare of animals, weed out irresponsible dog owners without putting undue burdens on the great majority of owners who are perfectly law abiding and considerate. What is now being suggested deals with the issue on a number of levels. Firstly, there will be an extension of the microchipping of dogs to all by April 2016. That will mean that for the first time every dog will be able to be tracked back to its owner.   
  
Secondly, we will shortly extend the offence of dog attacks to include private property, offering for the first time protection to people such as postal workers who have to visit homes and too often find themselves attacked. And thirdly, we will use anti-social behaviour legislation to stamp out those who deliberately keep vicious animals. Taken together, that ought to make a real difference.

**FOUL BROOD  
Thursday 14th March 2013**

I had a meeting in Frome last week with bee-keepers. I remember a few years ago how concerned they were at the threat to their hives from the *Varroa* mite, and I got dressed up in the clobber to go and look at some hives myself. As a result, I went back to parliament and made the lives of Ministers a misery until they committed to putting some funds into bee research. Because pollinating insects are absolutely crucial not only to agriculture but the environment as well.

So when the Somerset bee-keepers came to see me I assumed they would want to talk about neonicotinoids, the pesticide which some think is endangering bee populations. It’s a very live issue in Europe at the moment, and a difficult one, because although I would be the first to want to act if the evidence is there, the effect’s only been seen in laboratories, and field trials, which ought to show what’s really going on, aren’t finished yet. And the trouble with banning neonicotinoids as a “precaution” is that the alternatives, such as pyrethroids, still perfectly legal, are probably a lot more damaging to the environment.

Anyway, that’s not what they wanted to see me about. It was Foul Brood, which is apparently worse in Somerset than elsewhere, and the loss of bee inspectors. I’ll take their concerns back to my colleague. And not make assumptions in future.

**SAVING SHARKS**

**Thursday 21st March 2013**

I had an opportunity last week to do my bit for animals facing extinction when I represented the United Kingdom at the meeting of CITES, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. I was in Bangkok, Thailand, leading a trade mission to the biggest trade fair in Asia. But the timing meant that I could also attend as minister the triennial CITES conference.

Did we get everything we wanted? No. The vexed question of polar bears, for instance, was unresolved despite our best efforts. But we led the way in making huge advances in securing the future of the rhino, and the tiger, that most iconic of the big cats. We made a significant advance in battling the poaching of ivory, with an important declaration by the Prime Minister of Thailand on trade in elephants within her country.

But the biggest drama of the day was a vote on the conservation of sharks and rays. Sharks aren’t everyone’s favourite creatures, but there’s no denying the importance and even the fascination exerted by something like a hammerhead shark or a manta ray. And they are under threat, largely through over-fishing for their fins.

The Japanese weren’t happy, and were confident they could overturn the decision. It turned out they couldn’t, as country after country stuck to their principles. I have seldom felt more delighted to have been on the winning side.

***A lot of credit should go to the representatives of a number of small Caribbean and African countries who I was speaking to and who were being offered significant inducements to vote the other way, but they held firm.***

**OPENING STATIONS**

**Thursday 28th March 2013**

Consultants are this very week doing a study into the cost and benefits of electrifying the Great Western line to Westbury. Needless to say, I am very supportive, and I am giving strong backing to the local groups, including Frome Town Council, who are pushing the case. Because being able to run electric-powered trains will substantially improve the resilience of the service, and also mean faster trains. And although I’d like it extended to Frome, it would still greatly enhance local services

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

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

**AMENDING DANGEROUS DOGS**

**Thursday 11th April 2013**

Most dog owners are entirely responsible, looking after their animals well, making sure they are properly trained and kept under control, Some, however, are not. Either through ignorance, malice or neglect they keep dogs which are a danger to others and result in thousands of attacks each year, not least to post deliverers and health professionals.

And the law is lamentably deficient. The Dangerous Dogs Act was produced in a panic, when the newspapers and media were clamouring for action after a spate of dog attacks, and as so often when parliament produces legislation in a hurry, it produces bad law.

The amendments I announced this week I hope have been properly prepared. They deal with two loopholes in the present law. Firstly, it means that police will be able to prosecute when a dog is dangerously out of control on private property. At the moment if a dog attacks in a public space, it is an offence. If it happens within a house it is not. Incidentally, you won’t be prosecuted if your dog tackles an intruder such as a burglar. The second is to include attacks on guide dogs specifically.

Along with the already announced requirement for all dogs to be microchipped by April 2016, enabling dogs to be tracked to their owners, and new provisions in anti-social behaviour legislation next year, I hope we are now getting on top of the problem.

***It was slightly unusual to have an Agriculture Minister dealing with art of a Home Office Anti-Social Behaviour Bill.***

**POT HOLES**

**Thursday 18th April 2013**

I hear lots of people complaining about the potholes which appear on a regular basis on even major roads in Somerset. I seem to remember that a very substantial sum was provided to highway authorities a year or so ago directly to deal with the pothole problem, but there is scant evidence that it has had a lasting effect locally.

Clearly there is an issue of priorities, and what limited resources are spent on. But it’s also an issue about how work on our roads is done. We live in a pretty wet place. That water tends to freeze, which is not good for asphalt and tarmac. And the roads carry, even in our most rural areas, a significant amount of traffic, including many HGVs which disproportionately damage the road surface. So our roads suffer higher than average wear and tear.

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

The alternative is to do the job properly by replacing road surfaces in an ordered way, a better solution in that it lasts much longer. Letting our roads go to rack and ruin is bad economics and bad management.

**THAT RUBBISH POLICY AGAIN**

**Thursday 25th April 2013**

If you’re clearing rubbish in your house or garden, don’t do it on a Tuesday or Wednesday, at least in Frome or the villages hereabouts. You’ll turn up at the recycling centre and find it closed. Helpfully, you may be told that there are always local alternatives available. Up to a point. That alternative might be Street (closed Thursday and Friday); not exactly convenient, or environmentally friendly. Or there’s always Coleford, where you enjoy the privilege not only of paying to drive over, but also a two pound “entry fee” when you get there.

Of course there’s always a further option, which sadly far too many take, which is simply to leave your rubbish on the roadside or chuck it over the nearest hedge. That not only means we live in an open-air waste disposal site, but also costs money either to the local authorities or to some blameless landowner to pick up.

This is a policy which is simply bonkers.

I really had hoped that by now some sense might have broken out, but unfortunately it hasn’t. The accumulation of rubbish on our lanes and verges increases while we have disposal sites closed. Surely it would make sense now to make sure that facilities provided at public expense are open when they’re needed and encourage people in rather than drive them away.

**GUILTY**

**Thursday 2nd May 2013**

I ‘m delighted by news that a former constituent, James McCormick, was found guilty of fraud last week having made millions of pounds from selling so-called bomb detectors that in fact were entirely useless. As a result countless numbers of people, including British troops, were put at risk of death or maiming in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. It was one of the most morally bereft crimes I have ever come across.

I took up the issue of McCormick’s fake detectors back in 2009. The truth is they were no more than a “joke” golf ball finder and a bit of aerial. Buyers were told that something with no working parts could detect explosives “up to 1 kilometre under the ground”. They could, of course, do no such thing. The devices cost their purchaser up to £27,000. They cost McCormick £13 each. And, appallingly, some are still in use by police who think they’re protecting the public.

I raised the issue in parliament and elsewhere, appeared on TV and radio, did everything I could to put an end to the cruel deception. The then government was, I believe, slow to act. I am glad that the campaign we waged to bring this to the attention of the authorities paid off, and I would particularly like to congratulate Clinton Rogers and the Points West team for some first-rate investigative journalism. Now McCormick faces jail. Personally, I’m glad he does.

**LOCAL ELECTIONS**

**Thursday 9th May 2013**

The elections for Somerset County Council have come and gone. In this constituency there was effectively no change. Boundary changes mean it’s difficult to compare like with like, but in Frome the Liberal Democrats won all three seats, including one made up of parts of two previously held by the Conservatives, and in the rural area of Mendip to the west of Frome a seat made up of parts of a Conservative held seat and one held by the Liberal Democrats was won, reasonably narrowly, by the Conservatives. Otherwise, the seats stayed in the same hands.

So what is to be said? Firstly, congratulations to all those who have won, and thanks and commiserations to all those who stood but were not successful this time. Secondly, it’s sad that turn-out is so low. Some rationalise this as distaste for all the political parties. That’s often a cop-out. Of course candidates are not “all the same”.

There are real issues in local politics which will be defined by the outcome of the elections. So if you couldn’t be bothered to vote last Thursday, don’t bother to moan about the state of the roads, or about services like libraries and social services, or the level of your council tax, or the number of police on your streets. You had your chance to express an opinion. You chose not to. So be it.

**WRONG QUESTION, WRONG TIME**

**Thursday 16th May 2013**

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

There’s one simple reason we don’t need to pass a new bill on a European referendum. We’ve already done it. Two years ago we spent some time passing through legislation, the European Union Act 2011. It requires that if there are any significant changes to our relationship with the EU then a referendum to agree those changes would be triggered. And it is binding on any future government unless they repeal it.

So why on earth would we need to repeat that exercise now when all the polls tell us the vast majority of our fellow citizens are much more concerned about their jobs, their health, their children’s education and their safety on the street.

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

**A SHOCKING ACT**

**Thursday 30th May 2013**

The murder of young soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich last week was truly shocking. An awful event made somehow worse by the banality of the setting; for a serviceman to lose his life not in a theatre of war but in the supposed safety of south London seems somehow worse.

There are three responses which are understandable but wrong. Firstly, to somehow blame all muslims for an act which certainly bears no relationship to the teachings of Islam and one which will have horrified the vast majority from that faith.

Secondly, to blame the security services for “failing to protect us”, when they do a terrific job to block the attentions of these lunatics, week in, week out.

Thirdly, as some “senior politicians” now tell us, to pass yet more intrusive and authoritarian legislation such as the so-called “snoopers charter” in the mistaken belief it would have made any difference given the powers the authorities already have. The former home secretaries urging that path are exactly the ones who already put in place so many laws to restrict individual freedoms to no effect. They are simply wrong.

There may be a case for strengthening our legal protections. Indeed, I would support something proportionate and with appropriate safeguards to protect innocent citizens. But if so, let’s do so in a reasoned and sensible way, not in the immediate aftermath of terrorist outrage.

**SLEAZE IN THE LORDS**

**Thursday 6th June 2013**

The latest slew of revelations of MPs and members of the House of Lords caught trying to profit from lobbying is depressing. Depressing firstly in that there are still people stupid enough after the last few years to convince themselves it's OK. Secondly, because the expenses regime, which I was partly responsible for bringing in, is now much more transparent and stringent. But thirdly, because we have known for years that more work needs to be done on lobbying and the Lords.

There is nothing wrong with lobbying as such. What's wrong is when it is clandestine, when money or inducements change hands, or when members of parliament act for private interests. That's why in my last ministerial job I brought forward plans for registration of lobbyists. That now needs to be put into law.

But we also need to clean up the House of Lords. I would have liked wholesale reform, but that was not to be. But at the very least we need a way to get rid of a peer shown to be dishonest. At the moment you can go to prison and then come back and make our laws. That can't be right.

The public need to know that those in either house of parliament are acting in the public interest, not their own or of those with deep pockets. That's not sufficiently clear at the moment.

**WHERE DOES FOOD COME FROM?**

**Thursday 13th June 2013**

One of the most extraordinary things about modern society is the disconnect between those who produce our food and those who consume it. Time and time again surveys show that children, and indeed many adults, have very little idea of where the food on their plate comes from, and that’s true of those growing up in towns in rural Britain like Frome just as much as the inner-cities.

That disconnect also manifests itself in choice of careers. All too often people do not think for a moment about working in agriculture, horticulture or the food industry even though they may be surrounded by it. They simply don’t know what goes on in those green areas which surround the towns.

That’s why opportunities like Open Farm Sunday, which was celebrated last weekend, are so important. I went the short distance up the lane to Walk Farm in Witham Friary to be shown around what happens there. And I wasn’t alone. 365 farms were open to all-comers on the day, and a huge number of members of the public took the opportunity to see what happens in the fields on their doorstep.

I get around a lot of farms nowadays, but every time I learn something new. It’s a great way to find out how we get the milk and meat we consume, and why farmers do what they do. And it’s a good day out in the sunshine as well!

***What I didn’t know at the time and only learnt recently is that the Special Branch officers were having kittens that I was wandering around the farm and riding in an open wagon with completely unvetted members of the public around. Needless to say, at the time I felt entirely safe.***

**ANOTHER PLAN FOR FROME**

**Thursday 20th June 2013**

“Developer To Unveil Saxonvale Vision” ran the headline last week, as the Somerset Standard revealed that the development company which has been in discussions with Mendip District Council for some time is about to consult on its plans. I’m sure we all look forward to what is revealed, and whether it meets the demands of the town.

But the trouble is, and this is no fault of the current developers, we have heard it all before. Not once, but many times. That part of Frome must be one of the most consulted on pieces of real estate in the country. And yet we still don’t have the new development which has been promised so often, and it would hardly be surprising if local people were a bit cynical about whether this time will be any different.

Because you can be sure that almost whatever is suggested will be vigorously argued about. As the little *vox pop* in the paper last week showed, locals have hugely different expectations. What some see as essential ingredients of a thriving town, others would consider an abomination. One thing is certain; you won’t please everyone.

It would be nice to think this time it will be different, but I doubt it. Nevertheless, it’s important the town can serve its growing population, without losing its character in the process. A little economic growth would go a long way.

***I was right. After innumerable blueprints for the development of Saxonvale and the town centre, and consultation ad nauseam and beyond, nothing has to date actually happened.***

**CUTTING THE BUDGET**

**Thursday 27th June 2013**

The last few weeks have been a tense time in Government departments, as we all wrestle with finding the necessary savings to meet the stringent requirements of the spending review.

In my own department we have been trying hard to ensure that key frontline areas are not cut back, such as flood defences and plant and animal health protection. And personally I've been arguing strongly that we need to keep our separate environmental protection bodies able to provide an independent voice on biodiversity. Whether we have been successful you will be able to judge once the announcements are made.

But one of the most important areas of reductions in expenditure is finding those elusive efficiency savings. Undoubtedly it's not easy, particularly after several years of austerity. My department, for instance, has already cut its spending by over 27% over the last few years, and so finding anything approaching another 10% now is difficult.

But managing the system by cutting back on unnecessary staffing, disposing of surplus land and buildings, cutting the spend on IT and consultancy, and joining up procurement and "back-office" functions is right for taxpayers and essential to preserve more important frontline functions.

And it works, and we've done it, to the tune of hundreds of millions of pounds. The shame is that much of this work wasn't done years ago.

**FLY-GRAZING**

**Thursday 4th July 2013**

The Somerset Standard reported last week that three “mystery ponies” had been found tethered and grazing on Frome’s showfield. I have no idea whose they are, whether they have now been claimed, whether it will have turned out they were there entirely legitimately (although judging by the reaction of the Agricultural Society that sounds unlikely), and I certainly do not want to cast aspersions on these particular animals or their owner.

But I do know about a phenomenon that has been only too prevalent in the Frome area, and indeed in many other parts of the country, over recent years. The practice is known as “fly-grazing”. It basically means an owner of horses using somebody else’s land and grazing to provide for their animals. And it poses real problems for the landowner, not only in removing the horses but also the liability they unwittingly and reluctantly have for them while on their land.

Sadly, the current law is very little help to people who find themselves in this situation, which of course the irresponsible owner knows well. Indeed, it’s said that some such owners have no land of their own at all, just a string of horses. The good news is that help may be at hand.

I’m working with the Home Office to ensure that anti-social behaviour orders in new legislation can cover cases of fly-grazing. With determination, perhaps we can stamp it out.

**NEW TEACHER OF THE YEAR**

**Thursday 11th June 2013**

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

Joanna Hawley is 27 years old and teaches Art at Ansford Academy in Castle Cary. And last week she won an award as the Outstanding New Teacher of the Year. So congratulations to Joanna, but also to every teacher who shows enthusiasm, passion for their subject and care for their pupils.

I have not the slightest doubt that some aspects of the changes to the curriculum announced this week will be bitterly contested, although some of the reflex reactions I think are mistaken. Having no rigour in a curriculum does nothing to stretch the able child or ensure a level of competence in those who are academically weaker. So I hope the curricular changes focus on what is important, and on a wide enough canvas to engage the interest of every child.

But there’s no change to a curriculum which will work without the engagement of an inspiring teacher able to communicate and empathise. And that’s where special people like Joanna come in. I hope her career goes from strength to strength.

**CAPPING BENEFITS**

**Thursday 18th July 2013**

Reform of the welfare system is never going to be an easy option, but it is important to ensure that the total budget is controlled, and also that it doesn't provide perverse incentives where you’re better off collecting benefits than doing a job of work. It’s also important to be fair to those who pay from their taxes to fund welfare.

That's why I think it is pretty difficult to argue with the principle that there should be a cap on the total amount of benefits a family can receive, which came into effect this week. It's not as though it's a particularly low cap; it still allows a total take from the system of an amount equal to the average wage in this country.

Some say that to impose this cap is somehow a disgraceful attack on the vulnerable. I'm sorry, I fundamentally disagree. It’s only by putting some limits on welfare spending that you can afford to properly help those who are genuinely vulnerable, particularly those with disabilities (who, incidentally, are exempt from the cap). And it’s an extraordinary insult to most working folk to suggest that to bring the income of these families down to what they earn is a vicious cut.

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

**THE LONG RUN  
Thursday 25th July 2013**

I'm sure that some runners would have preferred the organisers not to have chosen one of the hottest days of the year for running. Despite the weather, the Frome Half-Marathon was by common agreement another terrific event. You may not be surprised to hear I'm not a runner, but I could tell from the smiles of those who were.

It was made particularly memorable this year by the presence of paralympic swimming medallist Stephanie Millward from Combe Down, who started the event from our somewhat shaky podium while I held her Olympic torch. When I say medallist, I somewhat underestimate her achievement, because in fact she had no fewer than five of the incredibly heavy Olympic medals hanging round her neck. No wonder she was happy to let youngsters try them on for size - it probably came as a relief!

Congratulations to the organisers for a superbly organised occasion which did Frome proud. And congratulations to Stephanie, who couldn't have put more effort into encouraging the next generation of potential medal-winners, as well as charming some of the older participants who probably didn't expect to collect their goody-bags from a real live Olympian.

I'm sure there will be some who will be upset that roads were temporarily blocked off and they were briefly inconvenienced. I just hope they recognise that there were hundreds of happy participants, and what a good advertisement the event is for our town.

**GETTING A LIFE**

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

When I read the resignation letter from former Labour front-bencher Tom Watson to his leader Ed Miliband a couple of weeks ago I noticed he expressed a determination to go to more music festivals, and regretted that Ed wouldn't be able to do the same. And my immediate reaction was "why not?".

Because, believe it or not, you can just buy a ticket and go, and that would be my advice to any of my colleagues, whether they 're party leaders or humble back- benchers. If you want to go to a sports match, don't ask to sit in, or wait to be invited to, the directors' box; go and sit in the stands and get wet, as I regularly do at Bath Rugby.

And if you want to go to a music festival, again, buy a ticket and go, as I did last weekend at the Village Pump Festival in Westbury. It rained a lot, and I got a few looks from constituents who recognised me, but nobody came and had a whinge at me, and it was very enjoyable. And I dare say I was the only government minister at a festival that weekend!

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

**CHILD PROTECTION**

**Thursday 8th August 2013**

After tragic cases like the death of young Daniel Pelka in Birmingham there is often an outcry against “the authorities” for failing to intervene. Often the criticism is unfair. Except where clear and avoidable mistakes are made, social workers in particular do an incredibly difficult job.

However, we should be very worried indeed about a report issued this week into child protection services in Somerset. Because the report is damning, not of individual social workers, but of the management of systems in our county. Particularly upsetting, as up until a few years ago Somerset was seen as a leading authority in social services.

The report follows an unannounced inspection by OFSTED. It found that overall effectiveness, the help and protection provided to children, young people, families and carers, the quality of practice, and leadership and governance, are all “inadequate”, which it defines as failing to meet minimum requirements. This is shocking and deeply disturbing stuff.

What the report reveals is not overstretched staff unable to deal with workload. Indeed, it says explicitly that there are enough social workers and first line managers. It’s about the way cases are managed, in record-keeping, in overall management. And what is worrying is that those issues were detected in a previous report over a year ago.

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

**THE C.A.P.**

**Thursday 15th August 2013**

I've spent the last few weeks talking to people about the outcome of the tortuous Common Agricultural Policy negotiations. Some, but not I suspect most UK taxpayers, will be upset that for the first time the total EU budget has been cut. Not many will have sympathy with those countries arguing for more direct commodity support, even for products like tobacco.

What I think we have is something which is flexible, because it's obvious that a one size fits all policy can't work across the whole of Europe, and on the whole moves, however slowly, in the right direction. Now we've got to make it work in England.

That means simplicity, because we don't want to go back to the shambles the system got into in 2005, and effective in ensuring public money supports public goods. We've got a very good record on encouraging the environment in English farming, and I want that to continue and be improved, providing additional habitat for pollinators, for instance. And I want to continue to help marginal areas, like the uplands, and promote innovation and investment. But I don't want an outcome that's over complicated or over prescriptive.

That's not an easy balance to reach. And we've got to remember that food production is important too, with many more mouths to feed in uncertain times. It's all a question of balance, for farmers, for the environment, and for taxpayers too.

**COOL FROME**

**Thursday 22nd August 2013**

The piece puffing Frome in the Times a week or so ago by journalist Simon de Bruxelles prompted some pretty strong reactions in the town. It’s always good to have people saying nice things about our area, of course, even if it is a little wearing the regularity with which we are “discovered” by one London-based scribbler after another. Could the proximity of Babbington House have anything to do with it? It surely could.

No, what seems to have caused offence is the suggestion that Frome’s economic improvement, not to mention its flourishing arts and crafts scene, started in a “year one” in 2011, co-incident with the election of a new town council. Could that have something to do with who the writer spoke to in the town? It certainly sounds like it.

This is not me knocking the town council. Some things they ‘ve done over the last couple of years I have agreed with, others I certainly haven’t. Mostly, not a lot has changed. But Frome has dragged itself up by its bootstraps over a period of about thirty years, from unemployment of 17% in the 80s to near full-employment now. Venues like the Black Swan and the Cheese and Grain were established decades ago. A lot of people have worked hard over a lot more than two years to improve Frome

Come and find out what really makes us tick sometime, Mr de B.

***Frome still benefits from articles telling the world how cool it is, but that is now joined by the new rival, Bruton. Any article that starts with a litany of the ‘celebs’ to be found on our streets is deeply suspect.***

**LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE**

**Thursday 29th August 2013**

Having been slightly sniffy about some of the claims by the Town Council to have rewritten the entire recent history of Frome over the last couple of years, today I'd like to offer them a bouquet. I 'm glad that they're making a real effort to communicate with, and more importantly listen to, young people in the town.

They are asking what it is that younger citizens would like to see in Frome. It's something that has been attempted before, not always with stunning success. I remember about twenty years ago making a real effort to try to find out what teenagers bought about policing in the town, only to find that the only lad wanting to get involved, and all credit to him for doing so, was the son of the station sergeant at the nick.

What is more difficult is delivering. They are likely to hear of the need for more sports and leisure facilities, which needs the District Council to spend sizeable amounts of money. A common problem expressed to me is the deficiencies in public transport, so important to young people without a compliant " mum's taxi" to take them round. Again, easy to identify, harder to provide.

That's not to say it's not worth asking. And who knows, maybe there are some things which would make a real difference which us older worthies simply haven't noticed.

**REGULATING LOBBYISTS**

[**Thursday 12th September 2013**](x-apple-data-detectors://0)

Lots of people have e-mailed me in a campaign to drop the current lobbying bill. There are very good reasons not to.

I fully accept that sometimes drafting can be made better to avoid ambiguity or unintended consequences, a point I've made to the ministers working on the bill, and it sounds like they'll accept amendments to improve the wording.

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

However, the bit causing the trouble is the proposed limit on what organisations including charities and pressure groups can do to intervene directly in an election campaign. It doesn't "gag" them, as some have it. They can say what they like. What they won't be able to do is spend bucket loads of cash, far beyond the limits applied to political parties, to influence a particular election result. And that must be right. Why would it be appropriate for organisations with deep pockets to try to "buy" the result in a specific constituency? It's not about free speech, it's about democracy.

**PLASTIC BAGS**

**19th September 2013**

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

As a party in government, however, there are always a few announcements to make, and the one in my area of responsibility is the decision to introduce a charge on plastic bags. This is hardly earth-shattering, as it’s already been done in Wales and Scotland. But it will encourage people to do the right thing when they are shopping, which is to reuse bags, and help remind those, like me, who sometimes forget.

And incidentally, this isn’t a secret tax to help the Chancellor balance the books. The charge, rather than adding to Treasury coffers, will go to support environmental charities. I’ve been arguing for this for some time. I’m glad we’ve finally got there.

***I do take the credit for the plastic bag charge in England, as there was a fair amount of resistance from others to its introduction. It has been spectacularly successful, reducing the use of single-use plastic bags by 90% since its implementation.***

**THE WHEEL TURNS**

**Thursday 10th October 2013**

So, after three and a half years in government, I am now once again on the back benches. I was told that the reason was to ensure as many as possible have the opportunity to contribute their skills to ministerial office during this parliament. So be it.

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

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

For the moment, though, a new chapter begins. I have the chance to speak unfettered in parliament again. Whatever my current disappointment, I might even enjoy it.

**LOCAL PLANS**

**Thursday 24th October 2013**

Changes in planning introduced by the government were intended to put many more decisions in the hands of local people rather than the planning inspector from Whitehall. That must be right. But the result, at least for the moment in Mendip, has been quite the reverse. Because Mendip’s local plan figures were successfully challenged, at the moment it seems to be open house for any opportunistic developer seeking permission for developments, and there are some communities feeling besieged as a result.

I had yet another meeting with villagers from Evercreech this week on their concerns about an application for eighty houses, on top of one hundred and twenty already given permission in recent weeks. They rightly point out that the facilities and the employment in the village cannot possibly cope with such an influx. Villagers in Norton St Philip, Rode or Beckington could tell similar stories.

It really doesn’t matter any more whether Mendip were right or wrong, justified or incompetent. What matters is we get back some local control over planning. That’s why I asked planning minister Nick Boles in parliament this week to allow “emerging plans” to be something that can be taken properly into account, and to bring resubmitted plans from councils like Mendip to the top of the pile for agreement.

He answered positively, but let’s wait and see. We need new houses; we don’t need rural Somerset turned into suburban sprawl.

**MORE MIS-SELLING**

**Thursday 31st October 2013**

What is it with banks? Yet again they’ve been caught out taking small businesses to the brink of bankruptcy by activities that are certainly irresponsible, probably deceitful, and bordering on the criminal. And still they don’t seem to learn.

Probably very few people know what “complex interest-rate swap derivative” are. I certainly didn’t before looking into the issue on behalf of constituents, and they’re far too boring and complicated to explain here. But the key point is that people were unwittingly sold a financial product they didn’t want, didn’t need, didn’t understand, and which had the capacity to do their businesses considerable harm.

Indeed, some weren’t even aware what they’d been sold, and yet many were forced to have them as a condition of a normal bank loan arrangement. So the banks were found out. Thousands of cases were uncovered of clear mis-selling, and eighteen months ago redress was ordered.

But what has happened since? Almost nothing. The big banks have used every device of procrastination and prevarication to avoid making payments. And meanwhile small businesses desperate for that cash are failing.

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

**THE COMMUNITY COVENANT**

**Thursday 7th November 2013**

Remembrance Day this coming weekend will follow what for me is a very familiar pattern. In my case, over many years now, that means the laying of a wreath and reading the lesson in Bruton in the morning, joining the parade and service in Wincanton in the afternoon, and attending the civic service in St John’s in Frome in the evening.

But, as I pointed out at questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on Monday, while we are honouring the fallen, I hope we will also spare a thought for those who currently serve in our armed forces and those who are veterans.

That’s why it is important that the so-called Military Covenant, the contract between the country and those who serve in the armed forces, is so important. That now has a new currency, in the form of the Community Covenant, which local authorities are asked to sign up to.

I am very happy to say that all of our local councils have done so. Indeed, according to the Royal British Legion when I asked them at the beginning of the week, eighty per cent of authorities across the country have followed suit. But that suggests that one in five have not, which is shameful. Wearing a poppy is one thing. Providing real help and support takes it that one step further.

**A “CULTURAL QUARTER”**

**Thursday 14th November 2013**

I received an invitation on Monday morning to a meeting on Thursday evening at the Library which unfortunately, at short notice, I won’t be able to attend as I am already booked elsewhere. But the meeting, organised by a number of bodies including the town council, has an interesting subject – creating a “Cultural Quarter” in and around the cattle market site.

Setting aside my doubts about whether the term “cultural quarter” may not be a tad pretentious, what is being talked about is not at all far from what some of us had intended the best part of thirty years ago. It was what motivated me to push for and secure the library on its present site, what we had in mind in refurbishing the derelict Black Swan and creating the arts centre, why we invested in the wool-drying tower as a tourist information centre, and why the Cheese and Grain was established as an alternative music venue.

Frome now has a flourishing arts and crafts scene, albeit one which has been under some economic stress over the last few years. That is important in itself, but it is also a draw to attract visitors to the town, or should be if the local authorities had any gumption, and that’s important to the local economy.

If the consortium of bodies discussing the issue can come up with practical suggestions to further that aim, I for one would be interested.

**THE BATTLE OF PHILIP’S NORTON**

**Thursday 28th November 2013**

I have written before about the dangers of planning applications getting through in Mendip at the moment because there is no local plan in place. On Saturday I spent an hour or so walking around Norton St Philip in the company of villagers concerned about the virtual siege they are under from speculative developers.

Is there a case for more housing in villages like Norton St Philip? Yes, of course. Should developers almost double the size of the village to produce more and more dormitory provision for people working in Bath and Bristol? I doubt it very much. Should we allow an historic and important community to lose its character in the process, including building on a key 17th century battlefield and destroying the very fabric of the village? Surely not.

It is not for me either to comment or decide on any individual applications. That is the job of the District Councillors elected for that purpose. But I do hope they will not feel that they are forced into an impossible situation by the way that the government’s planning reforms are, perversely, working.

And I hope the planning minister realises, as I told him on Monday in parliament, that the appeals system needs to back local communities, not attack them. The answer from him, that it’s up to planning authorities to get their plans in order, is correct, but not sufficient.

**THOSE LEFT BEHIND**

**Thursday 5th December 2013**

I got into trouble this summer when I expressed my very real frustration with the speed of progress with the roll-out of high-speed broadband across Somerset. Much of the delay is, I fear, down to the fact that we have effectively a monopoly supplier in BT, but I know that those working in the county councils have been desperately trying to keep things on track.

Now we’ve had confirmed that 82% of premises in my constituency will, indeed, have superfast connectivity by the end of the roll-out programme in December 2016. But that success also underlines the deficiency in the anticipated progress, in that over 8,000 premises here will be part of the “final 10%” which will not get decent connections even at the end of the procurement.

Now we need to mobilise the funds set aside by the government to finish the job. And that’s exactly the point I made when I had the rare opportunity of a question at Prime Minister’s Questions this week.

What we don’t want is another complicated bidding process, nor do we want a system based on “matched funding” which we know doesn’t exist. Before the start of the present programme just 28% of the premises in my constituency had access to high speed broadband. Currently, by 2016 that will be up to 82%. I won’t be content until it’s 100% - job done.

**COLD CALLING**

**Thursday 12th December 2013**

I am not remotely interested in assistance with mis-selling of Payment Protection Insurance. help with insulating my property, or claiming for damages for an accident that was not my fault. Most of all, I don’t want a long period of silence followed by a click. But all are offered to me, and to millions of other people across the country, on a daily basis. Indeed, I am always pleasantly surprised when my phone rings at home and it is a real person, rather than yet another nuisance call.

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

Ministers are also looking at the problem, and proposals are on the way. One thing needed is a way to report nuisance calls easily, and capacity to trace the offenders. Then we need realistic and enforceable penalties. And the threshold needs to be lowered. The Information Commissioner should be able to take enforcement action if a telephone call or text message is likely to cause “nuisance, annoyance, inconvenience or anxiety”. I would be delighted to be free of all four, and I don’t think I’m alone.

**QUIS CUSTODIET?**

**Thursday 19th December 2013**

Last week I had the opportunity to bring forward a bill in parliament under what is called the “ten-minute rule”. It was called the Surveillance of Telecommunications (Judicial Oversight) bill, and dealt with the issue of how our security services keep us safe from terrorist attack, but also the rules which apply to looking through our private communications.

Nobody needs to tell me how serious a threat terrorism represents; as someone who was on Capitol Hill in Washington on 9/11 and Aldgate on 7/7 I have a very personal involvement.

Nor do I in any way criticise our security services, who do a terrific and often dangerous job on our behalf. But any clandestine operation has to work, in a liberal democracy, within a framework of law, and the boundaries as to what is acceptable must be set, not by the agencies themselves, or even by the government of the day, but by parliament.

And serious questions are now being asked about the collection of the results of surveillance and communications data from internet traffic, not least that acquired from British citizens by our American allies. In the United States that debate is being led by the Senate. In Britain, I fear parliament is not taking the lead I think it has a duty to do.

We need to know that what is done is necessary, targeted and proportionate, and properly scrutinised on our behalf.