**2009**

**PART-TIME FIREMEN & A SOMERSET BANKNOTE**

**Thursday 12th March 2009**

Before I start this week, I really ought to put on record my congratulations to Somerset County Council for winning, for the third year running, a four-star excellent rating from the independent Audit Commission for delivering council services. That’s quite an achievement, putting Somerset among the very best councils in the country, and we should be very pleased to have such a well-run authority. Not that winning stars is everything, in case they start to get big-headed; I for one will continue to criticise them when I think they deserve it! But well done all concerned.

One of the services on which we all rely is the Fire Service. And a large proportion of those providing cover in rural Somerset are retained fire-fighters, who have a full-time job but are on call to deal with a local emergency when required. We should be very glad that they are prepared to do so, and that the companies they work for are sufficiently flexible to enable them to respond when they are needed. We would be at much greater risk if they weren’t around.

That’s why I raised the issue in Parliament last week of the European Working-time directive. Up until now, the United Kingdom, and some other countries, have enjoyed an opt-out from the provisions of the directive, which require a maximum working week of forty-eight hours to be imposed. Last December the European Parliament, with the majority of British MEPs voting against, decided to end that opt-out. If the British government is unable to negotiate a further derogation, it will come into effect in three years’ time. There are many arguments for saying that a limit of forty eight hours has some merits, although it certainly doesn’t apply to MPs, and I cannot think of many self-employed or people who run small businesses who could survive without putting in well over the prescribed maximum. But in some cases, hospital doctors being one, it would cause a big problem for us. And retained fire-fighters are a case in point.

At least, that is the view of the Retained Fire-fighters Union, which is warning that this could cause difficulties in retention and recruitment, and will certainly involve fire brigades putting in extra full-time fire-cover, at significant cost. For rural areas, it may mean a less prompt and effective local service. That’s why it’s sensible to raise the issue now rather than wait for it to take effect. Already there is some evidence that, because of a previous ruling for HGV drivers, some large hauliers (Eddie Stobart has been mentioned) won’t allow staff to work as part-time fire-fighters. Because we value what they do, we ought to be talking about this, and the government needs to give a commitment that the retained officers will, indeed, be retained.

Last Friday I kept a promise to a Conservative colleague, Peter Luff, by staying on in Westminster on a day when many of us leave to do constituency business in order to support his Private Members Bill, the Small Business Rate Relief (Automatic Payment) Bill, of which I was a co-sponsor. The bill tried to ensure that every small business which qualifies for business rates relief would get it automatically, as is already the case in Wales, rather than having to go through a process of application. Obviously, getting a rates bill cut by a half can make a huge difference to the cash-flow and the profitability of a small business, especially at the moment when the economic conditions are very difficult indeed. But about half the businesses which qualify aren’t applying, which is extraordinary. In the end, the minister gave assurances that the matter will be looked at in the budget, so we must hope are efforts come to something in April.

Following the business rates bill I found myself dealing with a bill by the only Scottish Conservative MP, to force shops across the United Kingdom to take Scottish banknotes. I’ve got nothing against the Scots having their own notes, but I think it’s expecting an awful lot of a shopkeeper in a Somerset village who might see one such note every few years to be able to confidently recognise the twenty-two different designs of Scottish notes and a further seventeen issued in Northern Ireland. The confident assertion that it would be the work of a matter of moments to look up the design on the internet, presumably while the queue to buy a pint of milk or a tin of beans waited patiently to be served, didn’t entirely convince.

But I did learn a little bit of Somerset history that I hadn’t been aware of until then. The United Kingdom is almost unique (Hong Kong is the other exception) in allowing ostensibly private banks (I’m not so sure after recent taxpayers hand-outs) such as the Royal Bank of Scotland, the Bank of Scotland and the Clydesdale Bank to issue notes rather than the state bank, in our case the Bank of England. But up until the early years of the last century, private banks in England also issued their own notes. And what was the last such note to be issued, in 1921? A five pound note (the old, enormous white fivers you sometimes see in black and white films) issued by the Fox, Fowler and Company Bank of Somerset. It stopped because it was swallowed up by a bank called Lloyds. I wonder whatever happened to them?

***I have since acquired an example of an even more local currency – a Frome Shilling minted as a result of a shortage of coinage during the Napoleonic wars***

**SOMERSET FLOODING**

**Thursday 19th March 2009**

I’m not sure yet whether I have persuaded a minister from the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to pull on his wellies and visit us in Somerset, but it’s not for want of trying. Last Thursday I managed to get a short debate in the House of Commons on the perennial problem of flooding yet again. Since my unfortunate experience of losing my car in the floods before Christmas, I seem to have spent a lot of time touring round the constituency talking to parish councils or local people about their flooding problems. The list so far includes Queen Camel and West Camel, the pub at Marston Magna, Bridgehampton and Ilchester Mead, the garage at Anchor Hill in Holton, Martock and Ash, and on Friday evening I went to a meeting in Stoney Stratton where about half the village was there.

Of course, flooding has always been a fact of life in Somerset, particularly on the levels, but it seems to me that there is a difference now. Firstly, it’s becoming both more common and more unpredictable. Secondly, it’s not just flooding from watercourses but from surface water as well. And thirdly, I think that, oddly, we are becoming less able to cope. My debate was intended therefore to secure some more help from government, to ensure that the various agencies work together, and to offer some good practice from what is going on here that may be useful elsewhere.

One of my first objectives is to try to unlock more cash to help the county council relocate Countess Gytha School in Queen Camel, which has been repeatedly flooded and will undoubtedly be again if it stays in its present position next to the river. The county council is working hard on a feasibility study to move it to higher and drier ground, but to do so they have to use capital money that they haven’t got, so getting government support is important. But actually, we need to somehow secure a much bigger share of government money in any case, because I think there needs to be a step-change in our drainage, and just as importantly the maintenance and clearing of existing drains, culverts and watercourses, if we’re to deal with modern conditions.

Added to that, which will require local authorities and the Environment Agency working together, I think we need to get the Highways Agency in on the act as well. The A303 is heavily implicated in quite a few of the local flooding problems, either acting as an unwanted dam or letting water through culverts vastly bigger than the next drain downstream leading to backing up, the problem at Holton. Whether it is optimally designed as a road is open to serious question, but as a tool of water management it fails utterly.

But some good things are happening. The county council, and Castle Cary County Councillor Henry Hobhouse is taking a lead on this, is doing a good job at disseminating useful information about how to make individual properties as resilient as possible, and is looking at innovations to improve flood warning. Some parishes are getting much better at identifying what local people can do to help themselves, and using available skills in the local population. Some very basic expenditure could help, like providing visible depth gauges at sites where flooding is likely so motorists and pedestrians can better assess the risk.

I’m very keen to maintain the pressure on government on these issues, because as always there is a real risk that Somerset will again be taken for granted. As far as ministers are concerned, the top priorities are those areas which flooded so spectacularly a year or so ago, places like Gloucestershire and Kingston upon Hull. By some quirk, we didn’t suffer so badly for once that year, so we get forgotten about. I see it as part of my job to jump up and down and shout a bit so we don’t get left out.

Meanwhile, I’m geared up this Friday for my private member’s bill, the Fuel Poverty bill. Whether it gets through remains to be seen, although I’m gratified by the huge level of support it’s attracted from up and down the country, but it looks like it won’t get government support, which is very disappointing since it puts into statute policies they say they’re committed to. I can’t believe that in a so-called rich and civilised country we allow up to five million households to be in a position where people have to make an impossible decision whether to heat their homes or feed themselves or their kids because they can’t afford both. I can’t believe we allow people each year to die in their own homes from the cold, something which is unknown in much colder countries, in Scandinavia for instance. And I can’t believe that when climate change is such a threat we don’t do something as obvious as ensure our homes are more energy efficient.

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

***It wasn’t until 2012 that flooding in Somerset became a national and even international news story.***

**WHAT’S WRONG WITH PARLIAMENT**

**Thursday 26th March 2009**

If you want very clear examples of what is wrong with the way parliament functions, or rather malfunctions, at the moment, then this last week provides them in abundance. Because at least two affect me personally and what I try to achieve in the House of Commons, you may say that I take a biased view. Too right I do. But given that the same frustrations are replicated on an almost daily basis, I think I am entitled to point them out.

First example, my Fuel Poverty bill, which was debated on Friday. I won’t go into detail on what it was intended to do, just that I think saving the poor, the elderly, the disabled, and less well-off families from making impossible decisions each winter about whether they can heat their homes or pay for food or clothes is a reasonable objective. Certainly a broad coalition of outside bodies thought so, from Age Concern and Help the Aged, to Friends of the Earth, to the Women’s Institute. And so did a very wide range of MPs, 172 of whom of all parties signed a motion in support of what I was trying to do.

That support carried over into the debate on Friday. I was fortunate to get backing from colleagues on all sides. A conservative member said that he supported the bill because he hoped it would engender clarity and coherence. A Labour MP was kind enough to say about my speech that “his passion, as much as his pragmatism, has won him even more admirers in this House than he had before”. A little florid, perhaps, but kind words nevertheless. The only negativity came from the government minister, who tried hard to persuade the house that they were already doing all the things that my bill suggested, and paradoxically that putting a duty on the government to do those things would be far too expensive and couldn’t possibly be accepted.

So be it. I could have lived with the government with its majority simply voting against the bill. But instead we had the farce of using parliamentary procedure to “talk out” the bill, in other words to keep prolonging the debate until eventually there is no more time. We tried to close the debate so that the bill could go into committee. Including the tellers, 91 MPs voted to help the bill. Two, the government chief whip and one other, voted against. And do you know, the two won. Because there were fewer than a hundred on the winning side, the debate was allowed to continue, and the minister was still talking at 2.30 pm when the bill was officially “talked out”. So much for democracy.

Another example, on Monday. A very important government bill was before the house, the Coroners and Justice bill. As is so often the case, it covers a huge range of issues, including a far-reaching reform of the Coroners’ courts, some key reforms of criminal justice, and much else beside. Two of the topics became very heated, the introduction of inquests held in secret where the government are concerned about release of sensitive information, and a clause to allow widespread sharing of information from government databases, now happily abandoned.

You would have thought such serious matters would be carefully considered and scrutinised by the elected House of Commons. You would be wrong. I have been working for some considerable time now on behalf of a constituent who, very sadly, lost his son to a diving accident in 2004. He was very disturbed by the inordinate delay, over four years, in bringing investigations into his son’s death to a conclusion, the lack of co-ordination between the police, the prosecuting authorities and the Health & Safety Executive, and the way in which he and his family were treated by the coroner presiding at the eventual inquest. We have had a prolonged exchange of letters with ministers and others, and I had tabled some amendments to the bill to enable such investigations to be conducted more promptly.

We didn’t have a chance to discuss my amendments. We didn’t have a chance to discuss anything to do with the changes to the coroner’s system at all. As a result of a government “guillotine”, that whole section of the bill went completely unscrutinised by the House of Commons. As usual, we must hope that the House of Lords do a better job, but I sometimes wonder if people understand what an outrage this all is. If we can’t debate important changes to the law in our elected House of Commons, can we really say we live in a democracy at all?

And then to cap it all, we have another slew of allegations about what some MPs seem to think is acceptable claims on public money. They’re all at it, scream the headlines, and even the most scrupulous colleagues get smeared as a result. Well, I’m just about fed up with it. How can any London MP justify taking taxpayers money to pay for a second home? Not a single one of my party colleagues who represent outer London seats takes a penny. So why would someone on a minister’s salary feel the need to do so? Expenses are there to pay for what is necessary to do the job, not a penny more, not a penny less. I am sick and tired of hearing about those who manipulate and, frankly, abuse the system for their own benefit. There are plenty of MPs who don’t, and it’s time we threw the book at those who do.

***The un-named Labour MP who scuppered my Fuel Poverty bill was Emily Thornberry, MP for Islington South & Finsbury***

**MP EXPENSES**

**Thursday 2nd April 2009**

I certainly hadn’t intended to write about the thorny subject of MPs expenses again this week, but national headlines of an unsavoury nature, combined with the annual publication of all MPs claims for last year on Monday, means that it’s unavoidable.

It’s hard not to sound ridiculously defensive, but I think it’s important to understand what is called “expenses” which wouldn’t in any other job. MPs expenses pay for the office we use, the computers we write letters on, the paper, all the running costs of providing a service to our constituents. The biggest single cost is in employing staff, the people who answer the phone, type the letters, chase up the errant government department or the unresponsive council department.

Secondly, there are travel costs. Curiously, those who have large rural constituencies or represent constituencies which are remote or a long way from London tend to cost more. My colleague Alistair Carmichael, who represents Orkney & Shetland, regularly has the highest travel costs, unsurprisingly, and equally regularly gets a call at this time of year asking him to justify his exorbitant expenditure from some spotty reporter in London who has to travel no further than Maida Vale. I suppose Alistair could always row a boat out to visit his constituents, but barring that it’s hard to see how he could reduce the costs of travel and still do his job.

I have a slightly higher travel costs than some MPs because I represent nine hundred square miles of rural Somerset and I don’t believe in sitting in an office in Frome and not getting round the patch. I think most sensible people understand and value that.

Which brings us to the most controversial expense, the so-called second home allowance. This is where most people are, rightly in my view, upset when they see abuse. I agree. Those of us in constituencies some distance from London have no alternative but to have accommodation in London. Unless we only want MPs who are London based or are rich enough to own two homes, that needs to be paid for. But I can see no justification for using the allowance to provide a second home for those who represent constituencies in London (and I’m very glad to see none of my party colleagues do claim it); I see no justification for using the allowance to buy a second home by funding mortgage payments, although many do, unless the property becomes the property of the House of Commons at the end of an MPs stint rather than an unearned nest-egg; and I see no justification for using it to buy furniture and other goods, let alone pay-for-view films or a bath plug, for heaven’s sake.

For the record, I do not claim for anything that goes into my own pocket. I claim for the rental of a flat, and the council tax on that property. Occasionally, when I remember, I might claim an electricity bill for the flat. Nothing else. I claim re-imbursement for the travel I actually do, and the rest of my “expenses” goes on paying staff salary and office costs.

Some years ago, I argued that we shouldn’t claim for second homes at all. The rental agreement for a flat should be between the House of Commons authorities and the landlord, and should go nowhere near a member’s bank account, just like staff salaries. There’s no shortage of private rented furnished accommodation in London, after all. As I have repeatedly said, the allowance system should provide what an MP needs to do the job effectively, not a penny more, not a penny less. Then perhaps we would have none of these lurid headlines, and a few less MPs who, sadly, cannot distinguish between what is allowed under the rules and what is right from the point of view of taxpayers who pay the bill.

On to an entirely different matter. I have written before about the perils of bovine tuberculosis and the disastrous effect it is having on local farming, and for that matter the exorbitant cost of putting down infected and suspected cattle. It’s time something effective was done to eradicate the disease, and that means dealing with infection in wild species which act as vectors. But even worse than losing a pedigree herd to TB is losing it as a result of badly administered and dubious tests, but that is what is happening. I have been involved with several cases recently where cattle have been found positive by a blood test which is increasingly seen as unreliable. So much so that its use has been abandoned in Australia and New Zealand.

Latest victim is Mr David Hubbert who farms at Long Sutton and who will lose another 58 of his brown swiss cows next week unless we can persuade officials to relent. Other than the blood test, on the basis of other tests it seems very likely that the cattle do not have TB. Mr Hubbert has tackled the source of other potential infections. But that won’t stop the slaughter of his herd and the loss of fine dairy animals, a massive blow to his family business, and a substantial cost to the taxpayer even though the compensation is less than half the value of the cattle.

I am going to the top at the ministry to try to get the decision stayed, but I’m not hopeful. We all appreciate the need to deal effectively with animal diseases, but relying on tests that can’t be trusted and carrying on despite evidence to the contrary is simply barking.

**PRYING EYES**

**Thursday 9th April 2009**

I wonder if the beleaguered Home Secretary still believes the oft-repeated adage “If you’ve got nothing to hide, then you’ve got nothing to fear”. At least it may be more obvious now why she was among those MPs who voted to keep details of expenses secret when I and others argued for greater openness. And surely only a malevolent spirit could have arranged for this week of all weeks to be the time when someone rearranged a Home Office web-site so that a link to what was supposed to be a technical inquiry led instead to a Japanese porn-site.

But I’m afraid that my sympathy for the Home Office is in short supply, given the approach to our personal liberties they have adopted over recent years. Of course I know and recognise the threat from terrorism; having been caught up in 9/11 and the 7/7 bombings in Aldgate it would be strange if I did not. I want our police and security services to be every bit as vigilant and professional as in the most part they are, and I think we should be very grateful for the work they do to keep us safe.

It doesn’t mean, however, that I agree with an approach that threatens to criminalise people in this country for almost every action they take and every thought they think. That strays very close to the totalitarian approach to which Britain as a country has always been viscerally opposed.

Some of the elements of this approach are well-documented. Identity cards, for instance, are in my view an unnecessary waste of money, which will fail to deter a single terrorist. The billions committed to their introduction could be very much better spent elsewhere. I see no reason, again, for snooping on the use of social websites such as Facebook. I realise that many readers won’t be regular users of these sites, and those who do will find it difficult to understand why any policeman should be interested in largely fatuous comments and pictures of the previous week’s party! But there is a principle involved - why should private communications be subject to state supervision?

For every officially sanctioned action, though, there is also the over-zealous use of powers for inappropriate purposes. I have written previously about the scandal of the arrest and subsequent conviction of a young lady for reading out the names of the war-dead at the Cenotaph, for instance. Or the use of anti-terrorism powers to eject a heckling pensioner from the Labour Party conference. But there are even more asinine and inappropriate uses of these police powers appearing all the time. Consider these, for example.

A Manchester man was arrested under suspicion of photographing a sewer cover. He was held for two days, had his DNA taken and stored, and then released without charge. An air passenger who orders a vegetarian meal is flagged as a potential terrorist suspect. A Southport teenager was arrested after handing in a mobile phone he had found, to a police station, held for four hours, questioned and had his DNA, fingerprints and photo taken. His alleged offence was “theft by finding” - even though he had handed it in as soon as possible. Merseyside Police have now withdrawn the case. Three anglers were arrested under anti-terror laws after using laser pens to frighten ducks away from their bait hooks. Two were held overnight, DNA tested, fingerprinted and then released without charge. They were told they had been arrested for “endangering aircraft”.

Local councils are using anti-terror powers to spy on those suspected of ‘crimes’ such as putting their bins out on the wrong day. The legislation, which allows secret filming and even the trailing of suspects by undercover officials, has been used by councils at least 10,333 times over the past five years. 91 per cent of cases were found to have done no wrong. Anti-terrorism guidelines advise guards to be on the look-out for suspicious behaviour. Included in the list of activities to watch out for are people who indulge in “simple observation such as staring or quickly looking away”.

At the protests against the Kingsnorth power station in Kent, police confiscated balloons,blankets, a walking stick, a clown outfit and soap, all items clearly intended to assist in acts of terrorism. Finally, how about music as a crime against the state? A jazz musician in Wales was arrested by armed police as part of a major anti-terror raid. The 63-year old was arrested and strip-searched just yards from his home; his partner and daughter had infra-red sights trained at them and were told they would be shot if they moved. No charges were ever brought against him. Police it seems interpreted soundproofing equipment and wiring from his musical studio as a potential sign of illicit activity.

I promise you all these apparently absurd cases are fact. My point is, of course, not to belittle the perfectly justified vigilance against actions which endanger us all, but to point out that if laws are drawn too wide, then they will almost certainly be misused through ignorance or indolence. If we are not careful, the result is an over-intrusive state which criminalises almost every activity we lawfully engage in. And if you’re reading this and thinking, well it certainly won’t happen to me, I can only say the same thought probably occurred to blameless anglers, saxophonists, vegetarians and a teenager apparently too honest for his own good.

***Home Secretary Jacqui Smith had been the centre of a scandal when she had claimed on expenses for a TV bill which included two porn films, apparently accessed by her husband. The use by a council of a spy camera in a Heinz tin enabled me to say in parliament “For Ealing Council, Beans means Fines”.***

**PAYING FOR EDUCATION**

**Thursday 16th April 2009**

The financial year for local authorities and for schools and colleges starts on April 1st. Over recent years, the government have boasted of their introduction of three-year funding packages to ensure a higher level of certainty and provide for better forward financial planning. Imagine, therefore, the shock and surprise this year when, on the last day of March, the very day before the start of the new year, schools with sixth forms across the country received a letter from the Learning and Skills Council, which funds 16-19 year olds’ education, telling them that they were to have their budgets cut with immediate effect.

There was no prior warning or consultation. Indeed, schools had been led to believe that an earlier assessment of funding had been the final figure. Instead, they were told that in the case of school sixth forms they were to be funded on the basis of 3.71% fewer students than they had anticipated, and in the case of further education colleges 1.98%. In case those percentage figures sound as though they’re not that big, let me translate them into hard cash. It means that across Somerset the eight secondary schools with sixth forms will lose a total of £342,393. In my constituency area, Frome Community College will lose £74,464 and Sexey’s School £35,773. That’s a lot of money, and means that almost certainly there will be reductions in the number and scope of courses offered.

This is quite extraordinarily bad management, and leaves principals and head teachers with a real headache. It’s not the first time the LSC has caused problems this year, either, with any number of colleges left high and dry with major building projects to which they have committed but for which there is now no funding because the agency got its sums wrong. I have already taken up, along with my colleague David Laws, the Member of Parliament for Yeovil, the situation in Yeovil College, for instance, where ambitious redevelopment plans were put on hold while we tried to get some sense out of LSC funders.

The chief executive of the agency resigned a few weeks ago, and quite rightly too, but it does beg the question what on earth the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills, the bizarrely named government department with oversight of this area, thought they were doing and how they allowed this fiasco to take place. I think I would be more reassured if I saw ministers directly intervening to sort this business out, but so far I have been disappointed. It is one of the principal problems of delivering services by these “arms-length” agencies that it is difficult to get anyone to actually take responsibility when things go wrong.

And of course Somerset schools would be better placed to weather such adjustments in funding if they were fairly funded in the first place. Why a child in Somerset should attract funding of well over a thousand pounds a year less than their equivalent in, say, a leafy London suburb, is quite impossible to defend in any sensible and fair system, and yet that is what has happened now for so many years that it is clear that no-one has intention of changing the system. But it is fundamentally wrong, and the fact that our schools in general perform so well with diminished resources is a huge credit to teachers and governors across the county.

In a letter to schools minister Jim Knight bitterly complaining about the latest cut-backs, one local headteacher points out that schools are being encouraged to increase post-16 student participation. That must be right, particularly in the context of a recession where competition for employment is intense and youngsters need to be as well equipped with either academic or vocational skills as possible. Where I am less sure of the drift of national policy it is in the field of higher education.

Universities are demanding yet higher tuition fees. At the same time, a generation of young people is being encumbered with debt, in some cases on a heroic scale. When I went to university, I was lucky enough to do so in an era when fees were paid by the state as an investment in the future, and a grant system helped with living expenses. I am quite convinced that a large number of well-qualified students would never have gone to college if they hadn’t had that support. That is why I was so vehemently against, and remain resolutely opposed to, the current fees and loans system.

But what is making things worse is something which I’m afraid not so many are prepared to say baldly, which is that the government’s target of 50% of school-leavers going into university means that many are entering higher education who will get little benefit from it. Of course I want to extend opportunity, but forcing kids into useless courses in second-rate institutions to saddle themselves with debt for a meaningless qualification is not the way to do it. And, frankly, the country can't afford it.

In my judgment it’s a conspiracy against those from less well-off families. The middle-classes know well which are respected universities and valued degrees. Those without that sort of family support do not, and find themselves pursuing courses which do them little good, either educationally or in career terms. And, sadly, it is not necessarily the least able who find themselves in the less appropriate placements. We would do better to reduce the number of places but increase the opportunity for able students whatever their background to successfully compete for them. That way the currency of the university degree is not debased, as I fear it is at the moment.

**A BUDGET OF GLOOM**

**Thursday 30th April 2009**

I’m afraid my wishes for the budget last week were very far wide of the mark. Far from the fundamental changes to personal taxation to put more money into the pockets of those on middle and low incomes, we had a purely political gesture on top-rate taxpayers which will raise relatively small extra money for the exchequer but fails to close the loopholes by which some of the highest earners in the country pay the lowest share of tax. The budget was an exercise in gloom, punctuated by totally unsubstantiated hopes for early growth, and all we can really take from it is the extent to which this country is now in the economic mire.

As I wrote last week, I missed the chancellor’s statement itself, though not the subsequent debate, because I went to visit Countess Gytha’s school in Queen Camel to share with them the celebrations for the reopening of their classrooms after the disastrous floods in December. The contractors and the authorities deserve a lot of credit for working so fast to get them back in dry surroundings so quickly, as do the staff and the children of the school, who have had to work in far from ideal conditions over the last term.

But getting classrooms back into action is only part of the story. As I said when I visited the school after the flooding, it’s quite obvious that this is a situation which is likely to recur, and we owe it to all concerned to make sure they aren’t put in the same position again, which means moving the school site away from the present position on beside the river. Since then a lot of people have worked very hard to make that a reality, including the staff and governors, and the local county councillor Henry Hobhouse. I was particularly pleased when I attended the Children’s Parliament in County Hall a few weeks ago to see a group of children from Countess Gytha’s put in an impassioned and articulate plea for their school, a presentation which walked away with the prize.

Well, it was all worth it, because on Wednesday last week I was able to announce that the re-building of the school on a new site is now agreed as a priority for the next financial year. Of course, there are still lots of hurdles to overcome, not least he possibility of a freeze on council spending in the light of the economic situation, but at least a clear intention on the part of the county council is there. I’m now seeking a meeting with the Minister for Schools to see if we can unlock some future spending and bring it forward so an even earlier start can be made, but we must wait and see if that comes off. Meanwhile, I think it’s fair to say that people connected with the school are quite pleased.

We had a statement in the house of commons on Monday about the latest scare, that of swine flu originating from Mexico. It is right that we should be concerned, but that doesn’t mean spreading alarm. The anxiety, of course, is that we might see the start of a pandemic, a global epidemic of an infectious disease leading to mass deaths. There are estimated to have been thirteen such pandemics since 1700, and there were three flu pandemics in the twentieth century. Spanish Influenza in 1918 killed, incredibly, between forty and fifty million people worldwide. Asian Influenza in 1957 killed two million, and Hong Kong Influenza in 1968 caused one million deaths. So the fear is real.

I took up this issue in parliament about five or six years ago, when I initiated a debate on our country’s preparedness. I’m very happy to say that I think we are now much better equipped to first of all identify, and then to deal with, such an outbreak, and the government deserve credit for that.. We have stockpiles of what are called retro-virals, medicines which treat the symptoms of flu, and we have well established contingency plans. That was certainly not the case a decade or so ago. The world is well set up to develop an immunisation programme, although it does take time because a new strain has to be worked on from scratch and you cannot, whatever the level of resources, do so overnight.

But if we are relatively well equipped to deal with a major infection, it would still have devastating effects. The balance, it seems to me, is not to over react when we do not yet know whether the particular strain is highly infectious between humans or not, we do not know its level of resistance, and we do not even know if reporting of cases in some countries is accurate. A few hundred, even a few thousand cases, do not make a pandemic. Bear in mind that “ordinary” flu kills between 500,000 and a million people worldwide every year. In Britain, up to ten to fifteen per cent of the population are infected, and sadly, about twelve thousand people die. So it is illogical to panic about a new strain until we have a sound scientific basis, and the economic consequences could be catastrophic.

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

**BEAN AND GONE**

**Thursday 21st May 2009**

I am getting increasingly obsessed with the Martock Bean. It’s a pretty recent obsession – it started when I attended the re-opening of the Market House in Martock last Friday – but I really want to know more about what appears to be a lost local tradition, and I really want to grow some in what I laughingly describe as my garden. I like the idea of serving a soup or a salad made from a truly local, and unique, delicacy. And I read all about them on a poster in the Market House.

Apparently, it all goes back to the Roman occupation of Britain two thousand years ago. The Martock Bean, or *Vicia faba “Martock”* to give it its posh name, is a variety of broad bean, with one very basic distinction from its modern cousins, the fact that the bean itself is black. That came in useful, as a handful of black and more traditional white beans were used in voting, a black bean meaning a no vote and a white vote standing for a yes vote, a practice eventually leading to the “blackballing” of a candidate in later years. In Martock and the surrounding area they grew in profusion, allowing for the occasional ”beanfeast”.

Martock obviously gained quite a reputation for the richness of its diet, mainly based on the eponymous bean, as in 1633 Thomas Gerard wrote that Martock was "seated in the fattest place of the Earth of this Countie, …. which makes ye inhabitants soe fatt in their purses...". Apparently, Martock was a prosperous place "inhabited by wealthy and substantial men". And, so the 18th century saying went, you could "take a Martock man by the collar and shake him, and you will hear the beans rattle in his belly". More importantly for the present, it was the affluence based on the bean that in turn allowed the erection of the glorious ham-stone buildings we see today. And a prime example is the Market House.

As a result of the work that’s been done, the Market House is now better than ever, with a glass fronted community information centre which marries perfectly with the historic stone building and will not only be an ornament to the community but of lasting value. The parish council and everybody associated with the project deserve an enormous amount of credit for what has been achieved, and I was particularly pleased that Doug Campbell, who has done so much for Martock as the local county councillor for more years than either he or I would wish to remember, was able to open the building officially just weeks before he stands down. That just leaves me to find out where I can get some Martock beans. Nobody seems to know in Martock, even Patrick Palmer, who I was sure would be able to tell me. It looks as though the Henry Doubleday Research Centre might keep them, and there’s also some talk of a supplier in East Pennard. I’m on their trail!

On Sunday I called into the Rose & Crown, or Eli’s as everyone knows it, in Huish Episcopi, which is now fully back in action after the floods at the beginning of the year. It was good to see it in such good order, but if I’m honest my prime purpose, rather than inspecting the paintwork, was simply to get dry after having got soaked to the skin and beyond, if that’s possible, on the rain-sodden streets of Langport. When people complain about the manifold sins of politicians, they might like to consider what it is that drives otherwise sane and sensible people to use their days of rest at the weekends, as volunteers, to try to communicate with their fellow citizens on the basis that they simply want to do something for the benefit of their community. And at the moment, although most people are as welcoming and civil as they ever were, there are some who at the first opportunity want to air the view in no uncertain terms, thanks to the antics of some MPs, that everyone connected with politics, whether it’s at local or national level, is a crook of the first order. It’s a little dispiriting, if understandable.

It was with that in mind that I returned to Westminster on Monday resolved to ensure that even bigger changes in the way we do things in Parliament were put in train. And I’m afraid that meant that the present Speaker had to go, and I would be one of those who had to tell him so. As you will know by now, what I and a few other MPs said was taken to heart, and Michael Martin announced his resignation on Tuesday.

Woe betide members of parliament if they think that his resignation is enough to get them off the hook, though. He shouldn’t be used as a scapegoat for the extraordinary and, on occasions, near criminal behaviour of others. Personally, he is a kind, gentle and generous man. He had to go, simply because he was not the right person to lead the reforms that are now needed. Indeed, in many ways he represented the clique of old timers and stooges who have consistently blocked the sort of reforms and transparency of the system that some of us have been advocating for years. Now we need a new broom, a genuinely radical approach to what has borne all the hallmarks of a gentleman’s club run for the benefit of its members, and quickly. My fear is that the damage already inflicted will take years to repair.

**LONG TERM CARE**

**Thursday 16th July 2009**

Back in 1997 Tony Blair identified an issue which caused many people a great deal of concern. He didn’t want to live, he said, in a country in which the only way pensioners could get long-term care in old age was by selling their homes. Many facing the same agonising decision, either for themselves or on behalf of elderly loved ones, felt the same way. And yet twelve years later nothing has changed. In Scotland, the system is different, and the Scottish government picks up the bill for both nursing and social care, but in England the differentiation is still made. And it causes more heartache and upset than almost any other aspect of social policy.

I was intrigued when I heard, therefore, that the government planned to publish yet another green paper on the subject this Tuesday. I must say I treated it with a bit of cynicism, as we have already had a Royal Commission on the subject, the so-called Sutherland Commission in 1999, and a further green paper in 1999. We also had a closely argued report by Sir Derek Wanless in 2007. All these reports warned that the present situation is unsustainable and, what’s more, unfair, and needed fundamental reform. The problem is that it still hasn’t happened.

The secretary of state set out some interesting figures. Male life expectancy, the average life-span, is now seventy-eight years, compared with just sixt-six in 1948. There are now more people aged over sixty-five than there are under eighteen. And while in the 1940s there were eight working adults for every retired person, that has now dropped to four, and by 2050 it will be down to just two.

He also spelt out the costs of providing long term care. The average for a typical sixty-five year old will be about £30,000, but that disguises a wide range. For a fifth of us, the figure is less than £1,000, for a further fifth it rises to over £50,000. And for those who need the most care, those with dementia for instance, it can rise to over £200,000.

It’s not surprising that the answers to dealing with this are difficult, but I think the secretary of state is right to say we can’t go on ignoring it. It simply can’t be right to refuse to help anyone because they’re in possession of assets over the current, very arbitrary, threshold of £23,000. And trying to distinguish between what are the costs of nursing and the costs of providing personal care for an elderly person with a debilitating condition such as Alzheimer’s is more than just arbitrary, it’s inhumane and unfair.

What is also clear under the present system is just how much we rely on those who care for immediate members of their own families, providing a level of support and help which is heroic in its scale. And yet the system continually lets down carers and provides scant recognition not only of the huge contribution they make to looking after those in their care but also the massive saving to the public purse as a result.

The green paper, a consultative paper rather than a firm policy proposal, sets out three different options for paying for long term care in the future and providing a degree of equity in what is provided. Each is based on different proportions of taxpayer or support coupled with contributions from the individual. The first suggests a partnership model, where the state pays a fixed proportion of the costs and the individual finds the rest, with safeguards for those on lower incomes. The second, described as a voluntary insurance model, again suggests a fixed proportion paid by the state, topped up by a contribution paid through insurance. The third requires everyone to pay into a state insurance scheme, either during their working life, or as a lump sum on retirement, or from their estate after their death.

The government would like to develop a consensus in favour of one of these options. I’m not sure how easy that will be, as there are sure to be sharply differing views. But I do think the time for passing the buck has long past, and we need to have a common policy capable of surviving any future change of government. Just like the longer-term future of pensions, this is a matter which ought to transcend political differences and require us all to try to reach agreement. The alternative is the current grossly unfair arrangements which in any case become unaffordable in an all too foreseeable future.

Sadly, working together and across political divides is something we are not terribly good at, and the experience of two decades of neglect of this crucial subject shows how easy it is to decide it’s too difficult to address. The political equivalent of “nimby”, not in my back yard, is “nimto”, not in my term of office. But the decisions are not going to get any easier by putting them off, especially with a rapidly enlarging elderly population.

And of course, whatever some would have us believe, we are almost certainly entering a period of austerity in public spending, as I was discussing in a meeting I spoke at in Somerton on Saturday. I cannot see a massive increase in local government spending, which is what is needed if social care is to be brought up to the standards of health care, in the immediate future with the eye-wateringly large holes there are now are in the public finances. So we have to make tough decisions about where our priorities are. Looking after the elderly, respecting their dignity and providing for their needs is surely one.

**WHAT I DID ON MY “HOLS”**

**Thursday 30th July 2009**

I’ve had a couple of letters and e-mails this week from constituents asking me to fill out a survey from an organisation called 38 degrees. What they want to know is how I intend to spend the three months during which parliament is not sitting, and whether I will be working in my constituency. I’ve explained that I don’t fill in surveys and circulars, because I have made it a rule over the years not to do so; we receive so many that if I did there wouldn’t be any time to do my job, so it’s easier and fairer to say no to all rather than appearing to pick and choose. But I have no problem with letting people know what I do, although a quick call to my office is usually the better way of finding out.

I suppose the reason for the survey, which I suspect will quickly turn into a campaign, is the suspicion that either MPs disappear to sun themselves on foreign beaches for a quarter of the year, or alternatively spend the summer months working on their second and third jobs. It may be that some do precisely that, but from my experience it is very unusual, despite what some newspapers would like people to believe. Most of the colleagues who I know, from all parties, work pretty hard and pretty consistently through the recess, and are very frustrated at being away from Westminster for so long, feeling, as I do, that it can’t be right for the government to carry on with no scrutiny for such a long period.

That is particularly the case this year, with British troops engaged in a very bloody conflict in Afghanistan and the prospects of further developments in the swine flu epidemic, not to mention the economic crisis which seems to have almost been forgotten. But then, I cannot remember a year when pressing issues did not emerge over the summer months, and it is almost a running gag trying to guess which MP desperate for media coverage will be first to demand the recall of parliament.

The newspapers and the media are all for delving a little further into what we do, of course. The misdemeanours of some MPs over recent months have proved to be good copy. But even with the current public enemy number one status of those elected to parliament, does it not strike anyone as going a bit far to ask readers, as one newspaper has done, for photos of their MP on their holidays? Does anyone not feel that may be just a little intrusive, and maybe just a tad unfair on their families? Maybe not, any more.

Anyway, how will I be spending the summer months? Well, firstly, I don’t have a second job. Never have done, don’t intend to. I do actually intend to take a couple of weeks or so away on my family holidays, and I see no reason to apologise to anyone for doing so. Up until then, I’ve been working in my office in Frome or visiting some of the constituents and organisations I’ve being trying to find time to see over recent weeks. Actually, catching up with the backlog is what most of us use the next few weeks for. It’s astonishing how many constituents don’t seem to understand that when parliament is sitting, that is to say from Monday lunchtime to Thursday night or Friday morning, we can’t be back in the constituency at the same time, so visits and meetings are pretty well limited to the weekends during “term time”. That always means there are quite a few people who we need to catch up with over the summer.

I’m spending a little while this week visiting Marston Magna, Rimpton & Corton Denham along with my colleague David Laws, the MP for Yeovil. Like me, David does a tour of his smaller villages each summer, and these three villages are ones which the Boundary Commission have decided will move from his to my constituency after the next election . That means that, while he is their MP right at the moment, if there are any problems which may be longer-term, then it makes sense for me to be at least aware of them so that I can take over in due course.

My own village tour I’m starting a week or so after I come back from holiday. I will be visiting about a hundred or so of the almost one hundred and thirty smaller communities in my constituency. I have done this tour every year since 1997, and I remember that when I started it seemed to many people to be a little strange. In some of the villages the whole parish council turned out to meet me. I’m afraid that doesn’t happen quite so often now, but it is still a very useful exercise in talking to people and hearing first hand about local problems and issues, and it keeps me in contact with communities right across the constituency. Sitting in an office in Frome and expecting people in Beercrocombe or Weston Bampfylde to come and see me would be pretty futile.

Apart from that, there is the routine casework, the correspondence, which curiously usually goes up in early autumn, a meeting of the South West Regional Grand Committee down in Exeter, and the four days of the party conference. For a few weeks it will be a pretty normal nine to five existence, although the weekends will still have a few engagements booked in, I have no doubts. Then in October we’re back to Westminster, supposedly refreshed and eager to make things hot for the government. I love being back in Somerset, but I get very twitchy if I’m away from parliament for too long. But I’m not sure my timetable over the summer will easily fit into the survey form, so maybe it’s just as well I didn’t fill it in.

**WHICH WAY TO THE PUB?**

**Thursday 6th August 2009**

I wonder how the holiday industry is getting on this year. Purely from conversations I’ve had over recent weeks, I get the sense that people are slightly lowering their sights this time round. The number of long-haul flights will, I suspect, be down, and more people are opting either for a holiday in western Europe or rediscovering holidaying in Britain. That ought to be a real opportunity for our local tourism industry, and I hope we are taking advantage of it.

Somerset has far too often been overlooked as a holiday destination for the more obvious charms (and crowds) of the further south west. But more recently, we seem to have carved out a niche in the holiday market, not for the large numbers who seek out the seaside resorts, although I’m sure Weston-super-mare, Burnham-on-sea and Minehead are still working on a broad spectrum approach, but rather for those looking for a rather different mix. It’s based on history, culture, quality of life and good food, and it attracts an increasing number of people, probably those with a slightly higher level of disposable income, who appreciate what we have to offer.

Of course that sometimes puts some strain on the infrastructure, by which I mean that the average country lane isn’t too good at accommodating too much extra traffic; we still have a shortage of overnight accommodation, albeit what we have is usually of a good quality; there is sometimes concern about the numbers out walking on agricultural land; and of course weekend cottages take a lot of useable properties out of the local market. But I’m sure there’s a net benefit to the local economy, and we should certainly be using every opportunity to market our area and attract people here. And perhaps we should be doing more to develop opportunities for visitors. Improving our network of bridleways for recreational riding, for instance, would be a good move.

One of the selling points we have, however, is our village pubs, and I have written before how worried I am about the now very rapid decline in the numbers which remain open. There are a variety of reasons, not least the propensity of governments to tax drink in pubs as though that was the problem with binge-drinking (hint; it isn’t, when booze is half the price in the local supermarket). But I wonder if we are doing enough to draw people into those which are making a go of it.

One argument I’m having with the highways authority is about the rules which they place on putting up the little brown tourist direction signs telling people there is a pub just off the main roads. Now, I accept the argument that you don’t want a proliferation of signs littering the countryside. However, these signs are attached, normally, to the existing fingerpost, so don’t add to the clutter. The rule at the moment seems to be that if a pub is not in a village, if it’s out in open countryside, then a sign can be erected. If however it’s in a village which is already denoted on a sign, then it can’t.

That seems perverse. I would suggest a rule which says that if a pub, or for that matter a rural post-office, is within, say, two or three miles of an A road it would make sense to indicate that it’s there. It would be helpful to tourists looking for a place to stop for a drink or a meal, it would help preserve some of the pubs which are struggling, and it would ensure that at least things were fair for all rather than the rather futile arguments we have at present. And in any case, when a sign is refused I find that the more go-ahead or determined establishments find a way of getting a sign of their own up anyway, legally or illegally, so I’m not sure even the original premise, of reducing the number of signs, holds good. So how about doing something helpful, county council?

For those who are going to continental Europe this year, a word of warning. You may have seen advice that you should carry with you a European Health Insurance Card. This is the card which ensures that if you fall ill or have an accident, you can get basic health care as a reciprocal arrangement with the NHS. It’s certainly a good idea to have one, otherwise you might end up having to pay first and then trying to reclaim costs later.

The warning though is that the EHIC card is free. For nothing. You’re entitled to it. So don’t pay £9.95 for it, as you will be asked to do if you go on certain internet sites. These sites look official. They come up first if you search on google. They provide all the official information, and an on-line form to fill in. And they then charge you nearly ten pounds for forwarding your completed form to the NHS. If you go on the health service site, or the one for the department of health, you will find the same information, the same application form, but with one key difference. You won’t be charged.

After I raised this in parliament the secretary of state is looking into it. I doubt if any crime has been committed, because the websites do tell you how to apply for a free card and warn you of their charges before you commit. But a lot of people will, I’m sure, be paying in ignorance, and they’re being ripped off. Don’t be one of them.

**EXAM TIME**

**Thursday 13th August 2009**

The next week or so will see a steady increase in tension in households across the country as anxious parents and even more anxious teenagers await the arrival of exam results. The television screens will then be filled with groups of excitable and inevitably female and photogenic students celebrating their results. Presumably the boys and the less visually appealing do also get good results occasionally, but for some reason the camera is never there to capture the happy moment. Odd, that!

We will then be regaled with the tired arguments that are trotted out each year as to why exams have become easier, that they aren’t what they used to be, and no-one will give a thought to the feelings of those who have worked really hard to pass the only exams they can take, because they’re the only exams on offer. There’s also likely to be more heartache this year as the competition for university places is higher and the easy expectation that you can miss your grades and still find a place might not be as true as it was.

Sometimes the concern about the levels expected in exams can be justified. Certainly, the sort of exam questions which my generation faced at A level (and I’ve looked back at my forty-year old papers to check) look more like the standards of undergraduate exam papers now. But there’s also a huge amount of technique and information which we didn’t have to grapple with. The world of IT has thrown up new challenges, new ways of processing information and acquiring and manipulating knowledge which we certainly didn’t know anything about for the simple reason that it hadn’t been invented yet.

But there is another reason why things are different. The concentration nowadays is very much on coursework as well as exams. Indeed, sometimes the mark in GCSE or A level exams, or indeed in university written papers, is a minor factor in the total grading compared with the continuing assessment throughout the length of a course. This has its advantages. It means the circumstances at the time of the exam become less important; those who suffer from hay fever, for instance, have less to fear. It means those who struggle with exam nerves and fail to show what they can do under those circumstances can be more confident. And it makes it more difficult for the idle but clever student to coast through a year’s work and then bluff their way through an exam with some last minute’s revision and an abundance of native wit.

But sometimes there is a concern that coursework is not as fair as it should be. I admit I was quite shocked by a letter I received a couple of weeks ago. It was anonymous, for reasons which will become clear. “Recently”, it said, “I was up until the early hours rewriting my child’s GCSE coursework from scratch. I know this is wrong, but as a parent, I have a choice between staying within the rules on the one hand, and on the other, ensuring that my child is marked fairly alongside other children who have similar ‘help’ from their parents.” It concludes, “The net effect of this situation is that GCSE coursework is now testing the parents rather than the students.”

Now, there are many responses I could make to that letter, although as it was anonymous I couldn’t. The first is that doing the whole of your child’s coursework from scratch doesn’t mean your child is going to be marked fairly. It means your child’s work is not going to be marked at all. Nor do I actually think parents who want to help their children do commonly interfere to that extent; they may make suggestions, or point in particular directions, but there is a vast difference between that and rewriting work already completed. Did the child actually understand why the original work was not up to scratch? Could they learn from their errors? I doubt it.

But it does raise the issue of the extent to which the ambitious and educated parent can provide real assistance, and whether those who don’t have access to articulate and supportive help and support at home, or even the use of a decent computer to download what is apparently necessary, are actually quite seriously disadvantaged. I know schools try to make appropriate allowance for this, but with the emphasis on coursework done, not at school using the facilities available to all, but at home where there are clear inequalities, I wonder if it really is as fair as we like to think.

Of course, it was always thus. Middle class kids always had the advantage in parental support, access to books, time and space to concentrate properly on homework. But with the work done at home now representing a significant part of the exam marking, I just hope that teachers have the opportunity to properly assess the real skills and abilities of students based on what they can do when they have equal access to facilities, which basically means during the school day. I have always argued that the assessment throughout a year by a competent and professional teacher is worth a lot more than any snapshot assessments through testing and exams. But whatever the relative weight we attach to exams or coursework, it’s important we test the student, not their parents’ ability to stay up all night rewriting coursework, or even their capacity to provide a quiet room with a computer and an informed mind to help.

**BLUE SKY THINKING**

**Thursday 24th September 2009**

Here’s a good idea. Why not a device on the filler caps of diesel cars to prevent the unwary motorist filling them inadvertently with lead-free petrol? After all, if you make the mistake you will not only have a car that doesn’t work, but a hefty bill at the garage as well, as cricket correspondent Jonathan Agnew of the BBC found a few weeks ago when he did just that on his way to commentate on a test match. Or how about a tool to make sure that you mark out and fit handles, keyholes or what have you on doors in the right place every time, rather than leaving it to your accuracy and steady hand on the tape measure? Or here’s an idea for children. Giant-size interlocking bricks, so you can build your own castle, wendy-house or pirates’ ship in the garden or in your living room.

Before you rush away to go into manufacture, I should warn you that these ideas are already in production, and covered by patent. What they share is the fact that they were dreamt up by local inventors who not only had the concept but also the drive and the gumption to secure funding, protect their inventions from copying, interest manufacturers, and see their inventions into production. I had the chance to see the fruits of their efforts, and a whole lot more which I can’t write about because they aren’t yet at the point where they are protected by patent, when I was invited to a meeting of the South West Inventors club in Yeovil last week.

I’m not sure what my preconceptions were before visiting. I suppose we all have a picture in our minds of the wacky inventor, beavering away in his garden shed, interrupted by occasional minor explosions causing ever greater havoc to his already distressed hairstyle and less than elegant dress sense. Unsurprisingly, the inventors I met didn’t live up to that stereotype. They were serious minded, sensible people who each had ideas which they thought met a need, and sometimes were of such stunning simplicity and obvious utility that it’s hard to believe they haven’t already been snapped up. Certainly there’s no shortage of creativity or determination.

But talking to many of them, it is quite clear there is a missing link. Sometimes it’s funding at an early stage, to the point where you can develop a working prototype. Often it’s finding the right business partner to exploit the product. And dealing with the big corporations, either in Britain or elsewhere, must be a daunting process if you do not have the big battalions of corporate lawyers behind you to protect your interests. And of course some inventions will simply never make it, either because the market was never there, or because someone has beaten you to it or come up with a better idea.

I found the evening fascinating, but it also prompted questions. Surely we need to harness this creativity and turn it into a productive part of our economy, but it’s hard to see where the support is at the moment. Many people will have seen the annoyingly named “Dragons’ Den” on the television (annoying to a pedant like me because dragons don’t live in dens, they live in lairs, whatever the loss of alliteration!). It’s a great way of putting people with a business concept in touch with those with the money to back the idea. But it’s such a tiny contribution.

How about if we had a dragon’s den in every part of the country? What if we had an easier route for local investment, so that people could take out equity in local businesses at start-up? What if the economic development agencies made more of an effort to help business start-up and provide seed-corn funding for the development of concepts to working models? And what if there was a pool of legal and intellectual property advice available to the inventor without support to get past square one? Surely we should be supporting and nurturing invention, and it’s economically essential we do. The inventors club is a good example of self help and mutual support, but it can only go so far. I think we can go further, both nationally and locally.

One last postscript to my village tour, which I completed last week. About nine months ago I raised in parliament the issue of bleeding canker, a disease which attacks horse chestnuts. I was told at the time it was ridiculous to be bothering about such a minor issue. Well, I can only report from my tour that the infection of trees now seems almost endemic. Barely a single conker tree was free of disease, and many, often really well-loved trees in prominent places such as village greens and churchyards, are doomed to be felled. A sad example is the tree next to the church in Isle Abbotts, a beautiful tree but soon to go. It’s a great shame.

Lastly, an interesting bit of history which I picked up from the blog-site of a former conservative candidate, Iain Dale. It’s from a book, published in 1935, entitled "Rules and Conduct for Agents in a Parliamentary Election Campaign", which says:

"A Candidates' Agent should ensure that motor cars are available to transport voters to and from the place of poll. This is particularly important in rural constituencies which contain high numbers of farmers, crofters, woodsmen, countryfolk and the physically lame. It is advisable that a flatbed truck is procured onto which even the most severely crippled can be hoisted and transported to the voting place."

I must remember to ensure a flatbed truck is available for my more rural constituents at the next election!

**CUTTING THE CLOTH**

**Thursday 1st October 2009**

Last week it was the Liberal Democrats, this week the Labour Party, and next week the Conservatives. The party conference season is upon us, and many will find it hard to stifle a big yawn. That’s a shame because, however much party politics at the moment is a massive turn-off for many people, the discussions that are going on in a variety of seaside resorts over these few weeks are going to prove crucial to the future of the country. Even setting aside the fact that so much is stage-managed and rehearsed to avoid any possibility of dissent or even genuine debate (and the fact that my party quaintly, in the view of some, continues to have its policy discussions openly and democratically simply feeds the appetite of media whose only interest is in writing about “splits”), we are in such a dire position as a country that policies at the moment matter very much indeed.

The biggest issue for the medium term, and this is not to downplay the fact that we continue to fight a bloody war in Afghanistan, is how we are to repair the quite massive hole in our national finances. The deficit is staggeringly large, rising at £5,500 every second at the last count, and tax revenue cannot possibly meet such a demand, even if we have a quick return to what we assume as “normal” patterns of economic growth. The question, then, if politicians have an ounce of honesty about them, is not whether there will be cuts in public expenditure, but how they are to be managed.

I learnt long ago, during years of managing the budget of the county council, that the worst possible way of addressing such issues is either to pretend there is no problem, or to apply a simple salami slice to all budgets on the assumption that everything will turn out alright. It won’t. You need to identify those areas of expenditure which you can simply do without, and cut them out. End of story. Then you need to look, at those lower priority policies which are doing something worthwhile, to see if they can be delivered more cost-effectively without losing the benefit. Thirdly, there are areas of spend which we simply cannot afford to reduce, and which may even need enhancement, even in reduced circumstances. There is nothing wrong with that, provided the sums are properly worked out.

Where there is a problem is if those in charge simply won’t acknowledge the dilemma, or the seriousness of the situation. It is not good enough to say that everything can go on as before, because it is basically dishonest. Nor is it good enough to announce a few trivial intentions in order to catch the headlines, but to stay resolutely silent about the much deeper cuts already pencilled in on a list held in the back pocket. That is no less dishonest, and leads one to suspect the worst.

So what is to be done? Well, let’s have an open discussion about what might be ditched. I’d start with some fairly easy targets, such as ID cards and the NHS database plans, which I’ve opposed for some time. I’d also not renew Trident, as I see no utility in a programme which prevents us from providing our troops in the field with the kit they need and costs a fortune to fulfil a function which is largely outdated. Interestingly, I was speaking to a senior serving army officer recently who held the same view. I wouldn’t go ahead with a projected build of huge mega-prisons, when there is little evidence that they will be effective in reducing levels of crime. There is a lengthy list of such items which we ought to be considering. But not to have that debate, either before or during the next general election, is to take the people of this country for fools, which I sincerely hope they are not.

More locally, I was very pleased to be there to watch the Mayor of Wincanton David Marsh cut the first sod, as the ceremony is infelicitously called, of the new development at New Barns Farm. Not every recent development in Wincanton has been welcomed with open arms, in fact some have been strongly opposed, and with good reason. But this will provide not only good quality affordable housing, green spaces, play areas, and additional employment land, but also the site for the new primary school and even an extension to the cemetery. As someone pointed out, truly a cradle to grave provision. And in a very nice touch, one which I think is a first in the country, the roads will be named in honour of the war dead of Wincanton, so that, as Tony Goddard of the Royal British Legion said, they will indeed not be forgotten.

A much sadder occasion was the funeral of someone who certainly will live on in our memory. Dr Harriet Rhys-Davies was a remarkable woman, and the packed church in Milborne Port spoke vividly of the affection and respect in which she was held. She must have delivered a large majority of the babies born in the area, but her work as a GP was but a part of her work for the community. I have good reason to thank her as she “nannied” me during my election campaign in 1997, making sure I did as I was told (and believe me, when Harriet told you what to do, you did it!) and keeping me in order. I have seldom met someone with such firm principles and indomitable nature. She will be sadly missed.

**DEFENCE AND TRADE**

**Thursday 8th October 2009**

The defence industry is extraordinarily important to the south west. Everyone knows Westland in Yeovil, of course, but the concentration of sub-contractors and supply companies means that if global sales of, particularly, aerospace products were to decline then there would be a serious gap in our regional economy. Nine out of ten of the largest aerospace companies in the United Kingdom have major facilities here. They are supported by around seven hundred supply companies, many of which you would be hard pushed to name but which are providing essential jobs and inward investment. Add to that forty-three thousand skilled engineers and designers, and you have a major economic interest.

So it’s a brave and perhaps foolhardy MP who criticises the way those companies operate, and normally I do not, working closely, for instance, with my colleague David Laws in Yeovil when it comes to the interests of the helicopter industry. However, I have very clear views about which countries we should be doing business with, and the use to which offensive armaments are put, and I was one of those who instigated in parliament some ten years ago a system of parliamentary scrutiny of arms sales to try to sound the alarm bells when things were done which are clearly against the national interest; far too often our troops have found themselves over the years facing down the barrel of guns supplied from this country and other western European manufacturers.

However, I also think that sales should be conducted in an open and, as far as possible in a murky world, ethical way, and officially this country takes the same view. That is why we signed up to a variety of international treaties committing us to fight corrupt practices in business just as in government, although I am disappointed in the lack of progress in bringing in effective legislation and I tried to speed up the process myself by introducing a Corruption Bill in the Commons a year or so ago, only to see it founder in the face of government indifference.

That is why the allegations against British Aerospace that have been in the national press as a result of comments from the head of the Serious Fraud office are so disturbing, and why investigations need to be pursued to their conclusion and charges brought if appropriate. It is important not only from the point of view of those companies who are trying to trade ethically, but as far as I can see British Aerospace as well, whose reputation is being damaged while the suspicions of corrupt practice remain.

I was one of those who led calls a few years ago for the completion of the investigations into the sale of equipment by British Aerospace to Saudi Arabia. The Saudi ruling family objected, hardly surprisingly, and wanted the investigations halted. What I found disgraceful is that the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, instead of saying that the British judicial system is not the plaything of either British politicians or foreign despots and could not be influenced by outside pressure, proved precisely the opposite by intervening and, forgetting the independent role of the office, the Attorney General caved in and stopped the investigations. That much is history.

The current issue, though, is the sale of a multi-million pound military air traffic control system to Tanzania. The levels of apparent impropriety here are several. Firstly, Tanzania did not need a military control system because it had no military planes to control. Secondly, if the idea was that it could be used for civil purposes, they were sold a pup because, we are told, it is entirely unsuitable for that purpose. Thirdly, even if it was the right system, could that possibly have been a priority for a very poor and highly indebted third world country? And fourthly, Tanzania is a country to which we provide a significant amount of overseas development aid. It seems as though that money simply went through a revolving door, minus appropriate “commissions”, to return to the UK through the balance sheet of British Aerospace.

No corrupt practice has been proved, it should be emphasised. But nor will it be if the present Attorney General Baroness Scotland, who has other problems at the moment, sees fit to again discontinue investigation. There will be those who say that the national interest is best served by doing precisely that. Others will say if we don’t pay kickbacks, there are many others who will, not least our friends across the English Channel. But those are precisely the reasons why corruption is so difficult to eradicate and bedevils so many trading relations. We need to be hard-headed enough to this time see the investigations through to the end, whatever the discomfort in doing so. And perhaps we also need to live up to the treaty obligations we have freely, as a country, entered into, and try to persuade others, and their arms manufacturers, to do the same. As a west country MP I don’t want to damage a major local industry, but nor do I want to see it damage itself, and that’s what I suspect is happening at the moment.

***Robin Cook and Claire Short had both opposed the sale, but were over-ruled by Tony Blair. BAE eventually admitted one offence and were fined £500,000, with £250,000 costs.***

**AVOIDING HARM**

**Thursday 15th October 2009**

We are, I hope, all equally determined to ensure the safety of our children from abuse, barring those deranged individuals whose motivations I do not wish to think about. It is therefore simply not good enough as an argument, if any measure to provide additional safeguards is questioned, to say that those who exercise honest doubts about its efficacy or proportionality “don’t care about child safety”. Sadly, far too often that is precisely the reaction as the bureaucrats invent more and more precautionary hoops for everyone to jump through.

As parliament reassembled on Monday after the long, too long, summer break, first thing on the agenda was questions to the secretary of state for children, who bears responsibility for enforcing the new vetting and barring scheme through the Independent Safeguarding Authority. And it wasn’t long before he faced questioning on the way in which the new regulations are being enforced.

There is, of course, a very strong argument for ensuring that those who have care of children, whether it is in the classroom or as paid childminders, are properly checked to ensure they are appropriate to carry out that role, and I don’t think anyone argued with the need for Criminal Record Bureau checks, although whether that process needed to be repeated constantly for any individual who carried out, say, a voluntary as well as a paid role was always questionable.

The advent of the ISA has at least signalled the end of that anomaly. But it has brought in a host of others, largely because of the vagueness of definition. Coupled with the increasing insistence of Ofsted on carrying out an inspection role where it has never previously existed, we have a classic case of over-regulation. This was graphically illustrated by the case of two women police officers who arranged to care for each other’s children on a reciprocal basis, and were told that this couldn’t be tolerated. Police officers, for heaven sake, although actually the same should apply to any other parents who exercise their discretion to arrange care for their children.

One of the problems is that the definition includes any contact with children which is “frequent and intensive”. Ministers have been asked whether this applies to MPs attending school prize-givings. Apparently it doesn’t. If it applies to shared lifts, how frequent does it have to be before it is considered necessary to apply for vetting? The guidelines are now being looked at again, but doubts remain, and the sad thing is that all this bureaucracy and unnecessary checking is probably doing nothing to safeguard children from harm. It merely adds to the costs and the burden on voluntary activity, and dissuades people from offering help. At the end of the day, that is not going to help kids, just reduce their opportunities.

On Monday we also debated the new Health Bill, and again we have measures to protect children, this time against the very real dangers of tobacco. Again, I don’t want to minimise the risks of smoking, and we ought to do whatever is appropriate to persuade children it’s a very stupid thing to do. This is literally a matter of life and death. So I had no problem agreeing with measures to reduce opportunities for under-age sales, either directly or through “proxies”, and preventing kids getting cigarettes from vending machines. But the proposal pushed through by a majority vote, to require tobacco products to be sold “under the counter”, and necessitating small retailers to pay for covering up their displays, is simply not justified. It will put extra costs on a sector which is already struggling, and there is no evidence to suggest it will deter smoking. But it’s “for the sake of the children”, and that moral justification trumps evidence or, on occasion, common sense.

Lastly, on the same theme, we have those who choose to educate their children at home. There aren’t many, but nevertheless a significant group of parents decide that they can do a better job of educating their children than the local primary school. Whether they are right or wrong is not a matter for me to judge, as long as the children are not deprived of the opportunity to learn as a result. But again, the government feel the need to intervene, this time in the shape of a report known as the Badman Review. It is subject to consultation at the moment, but ministers have already indicated they will accept key findings.

And the findings are, of course, more regulation and inspection. Now, I accept that there should be some knowledge on the part of the authorities that children are being educated at home and outside of the education system. Notification means that no child is completely forgotten about. But equally, a rigid system of inspection, curriculum and all the rest is not what is required, and actually negates many of the reasons the parents have taken on the considerable burden of home education in the first place. I hope that the result of the review in the end is not that all home-educators, along with all those who help with the baby-sitting, offer a lift, coach the soccer team, work with the youth club, offer places to overseas children on twinning visits, or offer all the other possible, and overwhelmingly positive areas of support to children, are treated from the start as potential child-abusers, to be checked, vetted, regulated and registered. It’s not a symptom of a healthy society, and it’s probably doing very little to help children in genuine danger.

**NOT SO SHELTERED HOUSING**

**Thursday 22nd October 2009**

Last week I visited some residents of Elizabeth Court, a sheltered housing scheme in Martock, along with their county councillor John Bailey. They were concerned that the warden, once full-time and resident on site but now and for some time past part-time, is being taken away and replaced with a distance response system. I listened to their worries, and said that I would take them up in Parliament at the first opportunity. I must say, I didn’t think I’d get the chance just a few days later, when a Devon MP, Geoffrey Cox, secured what is called an “adjournment” debate on exactly that issue.

Needless to say, this is not just something that affects Martock, or even just Somerset. The same discussions are going on all over the country, as more and more local authorities, housing associations and private schemes are removing the residential wardens and replacing them with other arrangements. Despite the fact that there are many more elderly people in the country, and they are on average living much longer, the number of sheltered houses has actually dropped substantially over the last few years. It’s estimated that there are 50,000 less now, 470,000 at the last count, than the 520,000 there were five years ago. That is not because the houses themselves are being bulldozed, it’s because many fewer can be described as “sheltered accommodation” under the normal meaning of the words. And it’s suggested that from a mere five per cent who are covered by what is described as “floating support”, that is occasional visits from support staff who are on call only for emergencies, two years ago, there will be nearly forty per cent in three years’ time.

Why is this happening? Well, it’s easy to identify the start of the process. It was a court case on behalf of twenty sheltered housing wardens in the London Borough of Barnet back in 2003. They claimed that their work fell foul of the European Working Time Directive because, although they were contracted to work thirty-seven hours each week, in fact they were required to work something nearer a hundred hours a week. The court agreed, and awarded them hefty compensation. Immediately, councils and housing associations starting removing residential wardens so they weren’t caught out in the same way, and you can understand why.

If that is a negative, then to be fair I ought to point out the positive reasons as well, and every member in the debate on Tuesday was keen to stress the care that some local authorities, using funds described as “Supporting People”, have taken to ensure cover. Somerset is, I think, one. As I said, many of the people in sheltered accommodation are now rather older, and frailer, than they were. There are fewer in the younger age-group who can act as good neighbours in times of trouble. And wardens could not have all the skills necessary for all eventualities. For some, then, specialist response is a good thing.

And yet. I know from conversations with constituents how concerned they are about what they see as a marked reduction in service, either for themselves or on behalf of elderly relatives. Residents feel more vulnerable, and more anxious. They do not believe response will be quick enough if there is an emergency. They may well be right; in a case which was picked up by the national media over the summer, an elderly constituent of mine in Holcombe, in the north of the constituency, had a serious fall and fractured his hip. He was eventually found by a neighbour. Four years earlier, it would have been the warden who dealt with the situation, but now there isn’t one.

Quite apart from that feeling of anxiety about the sort of medical or other emergency that might befall, there are all the other things which residential wardens, or certainly the good ones, used to do. This falls into the category of “value added”, and for some will be an illustration of how people in caring roles are often exploited, but it’s a familiar story. I remember making similar points when talking about policemen on the beat rather than emergency response teams, local sub post offices rather than remote services, school caretakers rather than contracted maintenance, you name it. Just because on paper something appears to be more efficient doesn’t necessarily make it better, because what it leaves out is the human dimension, and the intangible benefits that brings. And in any case, many cost savings are illusory, because it simply shifts the costs elsewhere. In the case of sheltered accommodation, probably to the hard-pressed NHS.

The answer is not obvious. We all want the best for elderly and vulnerable people. In the case of tenants of housing associations or residents of private schemes, I suspect they are not getting what was advertised when they first contemplated moving into sheltered accommodation, and what they signed on the dotted line for. That is a contractual point and is being tested in the courts at the moment. But surely the key is to talk through the options with residents and see what they think is best for their safety and peace of mind, rather than prescribe an outcome which they find profoundly worrying.

I suspect that, as we try to encourage independent living and cater for an ageing population, we actually need more accommodation of this kind rather than less. Much of what is in use is becoming increasingly dated and unfit for purpose, which raises a new issue. But in any case, we need care systems which work both to deal with problems but also provide reassurance day to day. Maybe we should be seeking relationships with nearby long-term care homes to provide regular points of contact. That would be one way of making sure trained staff were at hand. Or maybe we should simply occasionally accept that having an on-site warden who is capable and trusted is, after all, the best option.

**SOMETIMES PRIVILEGE MATTERS**

**Thursday 29th October 2009**

It’s not every week that I deliberately embroil myself with Messrs Carter Ruck, probably the most famous libel lawyers in the country. But I did this week, in an attempt to ensure that, whatever else was subject to legal injunctions and the like, at least everyone is free to report, without fear or favour, what goes on in parliament.

I will skip over the details of the case, partly because they aren’t relevant, and partly because I don’t want to give the lawyers who I’m sure give excellent advice to this newspaper, any problems. Suffice it to say that the issue involved the Guardian newspaper, who wished to print information about a company, Trafigura, who are clients of Carter Ruck. The solicitors went to the high court to secure an injunction to prevent the Guardian saying anything of the kind. Not only that, but it was in the form of what is known as a “super-injunction”, which means that you are not only forbidden to publish the original material, but also to say that the injunction even exists, let alone its terms. The court hearing is held in secret, and the parties to the hearing are disguised in the official record.

All that is bad enough, you might think, but doesn’t directly involve parliament. But an MP put down a question on the subject last week to be answered by a Minister. As usual, it was printed in the official parliamentary records. When the Guardian wanted to make a reference to that question, they were warned that it would be a contempt of court and a breach of the injunction if they did. That’s where I came in. I put down an urgent question on the subject a week ago last Tuesday, and raised a point of order, but by then the gagging order had been abandoned, partly because as a result of their actions the story was now circulating the world on blogs and twitter.

Why did I get involved? Because there is a pretty fundamental right in question here. All members of parliament exercise a very special right, that of “privilege”. It was granted as part of the Bill of Rights way back in 1689, and what it means is that we can say anything we like in parliament without running the danger of libel action or other constraints through legal process outside. Basically, the courts can’t touch us for anything we say in parliament, and that’s a very important freedom indeed, so that we can speak up on behalf of our constituents when they are being dealt a raw hand by those much more powerful or rich than themselves.

That right is not in question. But there is a secondary right, also won at great personal risk and sacrifice in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the right to report what is said in the chamber of the commons. Those who defended that right, usually against parliament itself, found themselves prosecuted and sent to the Tower of London. That is precisely what happened to the great radical John Wilkes and his unlikely ally, the chief magistrate of London, Brass Crosby, from whose unusual first name we probably get the expression “bold as brass”. But the battle was eventually won, and as a result anything said in parliament can be reported outside. Again, an important right in a democracy.

So how could such a long-established constitutional position be overturned by a modern injunction? Well, I’m not sure it can. In the debate on the subject last Wednesday, I quoted the 1840 Parliamentary Papers Act, which, in the delightful prose style of the time, says: “It shall and may be lawful for any person or persons who now is or are, or hereafter shall be, a defendant or defendants in any civil or criminal proceeding commenced or prosecuted in any manner soever, for or on account or in respect of the publication of any such report, paper, votes, or proceedings by such person or persons, or by his, her, or their servant or servants, by or under the authority of either House of Parliament”- which seems to cover most cases -to apply to the Speaker or the Clerk of the House for a certificate that such a report is a report authorised by Parliament. If that is presented to the court, “such court or judge shall thereupon immediately stay such civil or criminal proceeding; and the same, and every writ or process issued therein, shall be and shall be deemed and taken to be finally put an end to, determined and superseded by virtue of this Act.” In other words, this is the original “get out of jail free” card.

I hope we established the true position. But it worries me, quite apart from the situation on parliamentary reporting. The reason for getting stuffy about that is not to be pompous as an MP, but because democracy in this country depends on people being able to know what goes on in parliament. But shouldn’t we also be concerned about court sessions, in private, preventing information coming out that it is convenient for a big corporation to keep hidden, and then for even the existence of a gagging order to be kept secret? Do companies, as opposed to individuals, have a “right to privacy” that goes beyond commercial confidentiality anyway? Just how many of these “super-injunctions” are granted, and for what reasons? And should this entire area of law have grown up without it ever being subject to any decision by parliament or government? I think these are quite serious questions, which need answers.

**PRESIDENT BLAIR?**

**Thursday 5th November 2009**

Pull hard, they said. You need to pull it hard. So I did. I pulled the bell-rope at the cemetery chapel in Castle Cary for all I was worth, expecting it to toll the bell and formally mark the opening of the restored building. The bell rang, once, twice, three times, and then the rope snapped, and I was left rather sheepishly holding a length of bell-rope no longer attached to a bell. As I said at the time, the chapel was by now well and truly open, but slightly broken!

Despite the mishap with the bell, the friends of the chapel, the town council, and a host of donors and helpers have made a really good job of restoring the building back to its Victorian best, although now with the thoroughly modern addition of a wind generator and photo-voltaic panels to make it energy self-sufficient. A brilliant job done, and congratulations to all concerned.

If there’s a success story for the town council in Castle Cary, the story is rather different in Somerton, and it’s a shame the town is hitting the national headlines for the wrong reasons. Over the last few days, virtually the whole town council has resigned en masse, leaving just three members in place. That is less than is legally required to form a quorum, so for the moment the council cannot take any decisions, even authorise payments to staff. It’s not a happy position.

There has been a degree of ill-feeling in the town for some time, and some derogatory comments have been bandied about which councillors were far from happy with. Then a major row erupted a couple of weeks ago over a planning application, and that seems to have precipitated the mass resignation. It is ironic, if entirely understandable, that some who have contacted me because they were deeply concerned about goings-on in the council are now equally concerned by the vacuum left by the resignations.

So what happens next. Well, the responsibility lies with South Somerset District Council, and I have been in contact with Council Leader Tim Carroll over the weekend. The District Council has powers (under Section 91 of the Local Government Act 1972, if you’re really interested) to appoint “temporary councillors” to act in the period until a new raft of councillors can be elected, and I understand it intends to do so at the first opportunity, which is likely to be the meeting of council on 19th November. I’m also told that the Town Clerk has the authority to advertise the vacancies, which means that elections can be held in mid-December. That means the temporary councillors will only have to attend a couple of meetings. It’s good to know the District Council is acting so promptly.

It also means there’s an opportunity for people in Somerton to stand for a newly created Town Council. I do hope the places are contested, and there’s some enthusiasm for taking on the role. Co-opting a new slate of councillors without any contest, given the history over recent times, would not be in the interests of the town, and there’s obviously no lack of interest in local decision-making. So, let’s hope there are volunteers ready and waiting to have themselves put forward and help the community.

Meanwhile, back in parliament, I asked last week for a debate on the Presidency of the European Union Council. I think we ought to know what the British government thinks the post entails, and at least some reason for so vigorously supporting Tony Blair for the role despite the misgivings of many people in this country, let alone abroad.

The role of President only comes into being if and when the Lisbon Treaty is finally ratified, which looks as though it may be sooner rather than later now the Czechs have been brought onside. But there is a real difference of opinion as to what such a president will actually do. Some see it as merely a matter of presiding at meetings of the council of ministers, what has been described as a “chairmanic” role. Others, including the Foreign Secretary, say it should be someone who will “stop the traffic in Washington, Moscow or Beijing”. I have to say that I am very much of the former view. We need a boring old chairman, not a traffic-stopper. We don’t need a President with a capital P, because the EU is not a state.

But whatever the role, why would Tony Blair be the right man to do it? Some say having a British politician in a leading role is necessarily in the interests of the UK. I’m not sure that’s true. Others say that he has name recognition in the USA and elsewhere. That’s right, but I’m not sure it’s a positive in large parts of the world where he is blamed as much as George Bush for the Iraq war and its consequences. And he has hardly been effective as a mediator in his capacity as peace envoy to the Middle East.

But the biggest problem for me is that, yet again, the British people have had absolutely no say in his candidature. It hasn’t even been put to parliament, and apart from grumbling, there is little we can do to either support or object to his nomination. A lot of people don’t want Mr Blair as president of the EU council. I am one of them.

***Tony Blair had the support of Nicolas Sarkozy, but was opposed by Angela Merkel, and when he also lost support from Spain and Sweden, didn’t pursue the bid.***

**THE WEARING OF THE POPPY**

**Thursday 12th November 2009**

I spotted the first on the lapel of a government minister in the second week of October this year. Within a week every minister and most government ministers, not to mention every reporter and newsreader on the television, was sporting a poppy. I’m afraid I stick to what I have always considered the proper period for the wearing of Remembrance Day poppies, which starts on 1st November and ends the day after the 11th. And I refuse to accept that wearing a poppy earlier, or for that matter wearing a larger poppy, mean that you “care even more”.

Having said that, it was obvious to me, attending as I usually do at Bruton, Wincanton and Frome during the day, that far from dwindling as the wartime generation passes on, in a year when the last survivors of the first world war died and many of those actively involved in the second are no longer with us, the number of people observing and participating in Remembrance Day parades and services is increasing, and many involved are of a younger generation who perhaps are more mindful of what is happening to their own generation, to the deaths and casualties of Iraq and, now, Afghanistan.

To link the proper respect we show for those who have made such sacrifices in conflict on their country’s behalf with a political message about current government policy would be crude and inappropriate, and I hope my further comments will not be read as such. But it is impossible to divorce entirely one’s thoughts at such a time from the difficult decisions that now have to be made about Britain’s current military entanglements, and it is inevitable when the names of recently killed servicemen are read out in sombre tones at war memorials across the country that we examine the reasons we are at war, and the future.

I called for a full debate in parliament last week on, not just the military, but as importantly the foreign policy aspects of the Afghanistan conflict. In doing so, I was only reflecting the discussions that have been going on across the country for some time, and yet parliament has never had the opportunity to endorse or otherwise our involvement in Afghanistan, and barring the listing of the week’s dead at Prime Ministers Questions has had no recent opportunity to debate the issue. And yet the clear illegitimacy of President Karzai’s administration in Kabul, on the back of massive electoral fraud and in the absence of any popular mandate from the bulk of the Afghan people, raises very complex questions of what exactly we and our allies are trying to achieve.

The arguments for going into Afghanistan originally were at least clear. Al Quaeda was using a supportive Taleban regime to establish training bases which threatened the safety of the United Kingdom and other western countries. Then attention was diverted, unforgivably in my opinion, towards Iraq and a conflict that had nothing to do with combating terrorism. As a result, the job in Afghanistan was unfinished. Al Quaeda remains a threat, but is now ensconced in the tribal areas of Pakistan, and elements of the Taleban are fighting to re-establish themselves in areas of Afghanistan which history shows are almost impossible for a foreign occupying power to hold indefinitely. Read the accounts of the exploits of the Somerset Light Infantry in the Afghan wars of the Victorian era if you don’t believe me.

And so our young men and women are put at huge risk. However bravely and professionally they act, they are prey to the sniping, bombs and the booby traps of an implacable enemy. And they are propping up a ramshackle Afghan state military and police which are years away from providing a credible security force. Meanwhile, many of our allies in NATO refuse to send substantial forces or insist they must not fight in exposed positions. This is not a sustainable position.

Yet the consequences of pulling out are just as unpalatable. Quite apart from the impression given of a hard-won defeat, not dissimilar to the position of US forces after Vietnam, it is clear that Afghanistan will return to internal conflict and, probably, return of Taleban rule. Far worse for our security, however, is the possibility in that scenario of Pakistan collapsing, which would not only free Al Quaeda from restraint, but also mean that a fundamentalist failed state would have been created with access to nuclear armaments.

The alternative may be to strengthen the forces available in Afghanistan by insisting that allies step up to the mark. There is also an arguable case for switching from a strategy of winning and holding land to a tactic of search and destroy of enemy operatives. At the same time, this country needs to take the conflict a lot more seriously, with the formation of a war cabinet, and sufficient resources to ensure that never again shall our troops go into action under-protected or over-exposed. Then we might avoid the unedifying spectacle of the training of Territorial Army units being summarily cut and then re-instated in a U-turn as a result of political pressure rather than proper planning. Most importantly a clear and consistent objective of the mission needs to be set out and kept to by government, including a programme for eventual withdrawal.

None of these are particularly attractive options. Much will depend on the position, eventually, of President Obama’s decision on troop numbers. But to simply carry on with such little sense of direction is an insult and a clear and present danger to the forces we deploy. It also makes a mockery of all the pious hopes expressed over the last week.

**A POINTLESS EXERCISE IN POMP?**

**Thursday 19th November 2009**

The Queen’s speech marks the official opening of the parliamentary session, amid all the pomp and ceremony that several hundred years of tradition can muster. Although I am sure that Her Majesty on occasions winces at the stuff she is expected to read out (written, of course, by the government of the day), nevertheless the whole occasion has a certain charm and a great deal of circumstance. And the symbolic shutting of the door of the House of Commons in the face of Black Rod, representing the refusal of the elected house to accept the whim of any unconstitutional monarch, still has resonance.

But the purpose of the Queen’s speech is to set out the government’s legislative programme. And there is one thing of which we can be absolutely sure, which is that we are required to have a general election within the next six months, which means that few if any of the measures contained in the speech will ever become law. So what on earth is the point of it? Aren’t we just wasting our time?

The answer is, of course, yes. Ministers know perfectly well that what they propose over the next few weeks won’t get onto the statute book. What we have instead is a series of glorified press releases, where they hope that opposition parties can be portrayed as being on the “wrong” side of some fatuous argument or other, content in the knowledge that they can posture in any way they like without ever having to carry what they say through into law. It is the start of a six-month long election campaign.

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

Instead, we shall go through the motions doing very little that is of value for months to come. If that is the case, then I repeat my view that it would be better to have a general election as soon as possible. Of course, if we had a rational system the term of each parliament would be fixed, as it is for every other democratic body in the country. Why should the prime minister of the day choose, or for that matter, delay the date for their own convenience? I brought forward a bill to provide for fixed term parliaments a year or so ago. Needless to say, it made no progress, because it’s not in the interests of the majority. But isn’t that exactly what’s wrong?

On an entirely different matter, if you had an activity in which over four million people in the country regularly participated, which employed a further two hundred and seventy thousand, and which attracted over six million spectators, wouldn’t you want to nurture and support it? Those figures are the numbers who enjoy horse riding each year, the number who work across the equine sector, and the number who attend horse-racing events. And they will all be affected if a government proposal which amounts to a tax on horses goes ahead.

Here in Somerset we are home to some of the finest racing stables in the country, and I have attended Wincanton races when I can (which, sadly, is not very often nowadays) for as long as I remember. It’s an important industry in the area. But it is recreational riding that I want to concentrate on, which we ought to be encouraging by, for instance, developing our system of bridleways in the county.

But as everyone knows, keeping a horse is not a cheap hobby, and anything that needlessly increases those costs should be resisted. I have repeatedly tried to change the law on absolute liability as it applies to horses, for instance, because of the effect it has on insurance premiums, particularly for livery stables and riding schools. But the government have now come up with a new idea which will impose, effectively, a direct tax on horse ownership.

The suggestion is included in a consultation document issued by the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) on the control of animal diseases. The paper proposes setting up a new independent body to ensure the health of the animal population, separate from the ministry’s responsibilities. And it suggests that the costs of this new body should be shared by each and every animal owner by means of an annual levy.

The proposals beg all sorts of questions. Is it sensible to be setting up yet another quango? Can the estimated administrative costs of setting up the new body, said to be £14.3 million, possibly be justified? And what sort of arithmetic makes it a good idea to spend £2.3 million every year in the cost of collecting a levy of just £4.3 million? How, in any case, did the department come to the view that the horse sector should pay 20% of the total costs, apportioned between every horse owner?

I think we need some answers, but until they are forthcoming, and a clear need for this new bureaucracy explained, I think we should resist what appears to be simply another tax on riders.

**FIT FOR THE FUTURE?**

**Thursday 26th November 2009**

I’m paying another visit to the new community hospital in Frome on Thursday, in the company of my colleague and party leader Nick Clegg, and I’m very pleased to hear that two of the outstanding issues relating to the hospital may now be on the way to being solved.

Firstly, the hours during which treatment can be given for minor injuries is going to be extended; this was an annoyance to people who found that they had to trek off to Bath to deal with some misfortune which couldn’t be dealt with at the brand new hospital in the evening. Secondly, the local GPs practice are publishing plans for a new surgery next to the hospital, which is what we hoped for in the first place but which was cut out for budgetary reasons.

That has led me to thinking about how we deliver health services properly in a rural area like ours. There are many people in cities who are quick to jump up and down if any change is made to the pretty extensive provision they enjoy, for instance, of accident and emergency departments. What would they think of the fact that if you live around Bruton, for instance, you face between a three-quarters to an hour’s drive to either the Royal United at Bath or Yeovil General for treatment? And that’s once an ambulance has arrived, which may be many miles away at the time you call. That’s why it’s so important to keep the smaller ambulance stations open, and why it’s important to ensure paramedics carry essential life-saving drugs and equipment, such as the haemostatins for cardiac arrests which I successfully argued for some time ago. It’s also, incidentally, why there should be government support for our excellent air ambulance service, rather than relying on charitable giving.

But quite apart from emergencies, the provision of primary care services is also more difficult in a sparsely populated area. Doctors’ surgeries are further away, which means that GP surgery dispensaries are a godsend for many patients, and I’m glad we persuaded the government to drop the plans to close them. I know from visits to dispensaries such as the one at Langport how much they are appreciated. Domiciliary visits become more important, but are often not high in the list of priorities. I remember years ago, when I was in practice as an optician, we used to be paid nothing at all for carrying out a home visit, but I also know how important they were for some people who were stuck at home and unable to visit the surgery.

Having talked recently to local doctors, I also know there are still concerns about out of hours cover. Once upon a time that was all arranged by the GPs themselves, using a co-operative system where they covered for each other and shared the burden of attending a patient in distress in the early hours of the morning. Then the contracts were changed, and it’s all centrally procured. It wasn’t, to be honest, very good, but has got better. But problems remain, and that is neither a criticism of the doctors who provide the service or, indeed, the Somerset Primary Care Trust, which does a pretty good job. It’s simply that the resources don’t match the needs of a huge geographical area. I’m raising this with ministers at the moment, because I don’t think the pressures in rural areas are properly understood.

The key, very often is access and proximity. We are very lucky that our local general hospital at Yeovil is, by any measure, very good. What we need is local community hospitals to back that up, and that’s why I have always strongly supported the Verrington at Wincanton, where I hope we will see further improvements in facilities and provision, and why I look forward to the completion of the new South Petherton hospital. It’s important to treat minor cases closer to where people live, and to offer recuperation where it is convenient both for patients and visitors, and where a valuable acute care bed is not being made unavailable to more urgent cases.

The trend across the country over recent years has been to concentrate health care in fewer and fewer large units, which are inevitably more remote. Of course, for some specialist areas of care, that is inevitable, and I doubt if anyone worries unduly about being referred to the new Oncology Centre at Taunton, for instance, for specialist cancer care. But in Somerset we seem to be taking a more considered view about local provision, by building and replacing local community hospitals and expanding services in the community. That is as it should be. I’m afraid that our geography and our pattern of settlement don’t lend themselves to the alternative, and certainly our public transport systems don’t. But there is still more that could be done; using high street practices such as pharmacists or optometrists to provide a wider range of diagnostic tests, for instance. The more we make quality health care more readily available the better, particularly with a rapidly aging population.

Sometimes, that will mean bringing the practitioner closer to the patient. When that is not possible, then we need to make it easier for the patient to get to the practitioner, whether that is for an appointment or eyes, teeth or tests, whether it is picking up a prescription, or whether it is admission for more serious treatments or interventions. One thing is certain. What is “the norm” in a city area just won’t work in the countryside. But there, that’s true of so many areas of policy.

**IS AN ACT PASSED IN 1944 RIGHT FOR TODAY?**

**Thursday 10th December 2009**

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

The law says the distance must be measured by the shortest available route, and that is defined as a route safe for a child accompanied by a responsible adult. A lot of parents think that to allow their children to walk along a busy road is often anything but responsible. That’s why we get many appeals against decisions, and those who can’t get school transport end up either driving the kids to school or paying for a bus place, provided there is a spare place available. For some parents neither option is affordable, and they face a real problem, made even worse if they have children at different ages needing to be taken to separate schools.

There is a department at County Hall who deal with the appeals, and they have plenty to do every autumn. Some people can’t understand why the distance limit can’t be fudged just a little bit – it can be very galling if, like in my village of Witham Friary, half the village who live on the far side of the railway bridge from the school qualify for free transport, and the other half don’t. But of course, once the limit has been set, you can’t make exceptions, otherwise you’d never stop.

A more contentious issue is when a road is simply too dangerous for a child to walk along every morning and evening. That’s the dilemma facing parents in one village who came to see me last week. The road between their village and the school is considered too dangerous for school buses – they use another route. But at the same time it’s considered safe for children to walk. Something wrong there? They think so, and I agree.

But of course, what’s really wrong is relying on a law sixty-six years old that doesn’t relate to modern conditions. I think for the safety of children, and because of the effects on congestion and the environment of the daily “school run”, it’s time it was changed. I certainly don’t want to discourage kids from walking or cycling to school if they live close by, but I don’t think the 1944 Act reflects the current dangers on our roads, or the lifestyles of parents, many of whom need to get to work and can’t amble with children down mythical deserted country lanes to get them to school on time and in safety.

On a very different matter, I wrote a couple of weeks ago about my current thoughts on the conflict in Afghanistan, and indicated that it was time for a significant change in policy direction. Since then, we have had announcements from both our Prime Minister and President Obama, and it looks as though there will be a more focussed approach, although I still have some reservations. I don’t mind admitting that my thinking on the subject has been influenced by what is in my opinion a very good analysis by a Conservative MP, Adam Holloway, the member of parliament for Gravesham in Kent. Mr Holloway and I do not agree on everything, as you might expect, but he speaks with a good deal of authority on defence issues as a former Grenadier Guardsman and someone who has exceptionally good contacts with the intelligence community, and I respect his opinions.

He wrote a particularly good paper, I thought, setting out why the military objectives in Afghanistan could never be fulfilled, and certainly would be insufficient, in the absence of carefully targeted political initiatives and reconstruction. I agreed, and it was reflected in what I had to say. Now Mr Holloway has written another article, this time about Iraq, and come up with a shocking revelation. It appears, from his account, that one of the strongest pieces of “evidence” for the claim that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction primed to use “within forty five minutes” as Prime Minister Blair told the Commons in the notorious dodgy dossier, was a conversation overheard in the back of a Baghdad taxi.

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

This is potent stuff. It is consistent with a lot of the evidence coming to light in the Chilcott Inquiry. Some people say there is no value in raking over the past history of a war that took place years ago, but I think we are, finally, entitled to know the truth, and that lessons have been learnt. And if one of the lessons is that deliberate duplicity on the part of politicians took place, we should know about that too. Certainly, nothing I have heard so far has done anything other than reinforce my view that I was right to oppose the Iraq War, and speak against it, at the time, and I wish others in parliament had done the same.