



THIS WEEK IN PARLIAMENT 05 - 09 February 2018

Welcome to my *This Week in Parliament*, my weekly newsletter on events and developments in Parliament. **Your feedback is always welcome!**

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It has been an interesting week in Parliament. The centenary of Women’s Suffrage has given us all a chance to pause and reflect on what our Democracy stands for and the goals it attempts to achieve for all in our society.

However, the relentless pace of Westminster doesn't allow pause for too long.

I was away from the House this week, attending a NATO Parliamentary Assembly gathering in Washington D.C. NATO is becoming an increasingly important outlet for the UK to express our views and wishes to our partners and allies around the world, and so it is vital that the UK delegation has a strong showing at all these events, in order to demonstrate the UK’s strength and commitment to the alliance.

Monday

The week began with [questions](#) the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, before a glut of Urgent Questions stepped up the pace in the Chamber.

Urgent Questions

The first of these [Urgent Questions](#) was in regard to a recent immigration White Paper. The Government’s response was then swiftly followed by a further [question](#) on the NHS Winter Crisis and the Government’s reaction to a resolution passed by the House in January.

The Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Care (Stephen Barclay): Winter is challenging for health services worldwide. With a high number of flu cases this year, we have seen an increase of about 35% in accident and emergency attendances for flu—triple what it was last year—with about 3,000 hospital beds occupied as a result of flu and a further 700 because of norovirus. The NHS saw 1,200 more patients at A&E compared with this time last year. The guidance issued by the national emergency pressures panel sought to free up capacity for emergencies given the high number of flu cases, including from two dominant strains of flu co-circulating this year.



It is important to remind the House that the deferment of operations referred to in that guidance applies to about 13% of hospital beds dealing with elective patients, of which about half were protected within the guidance in respect of cancer and other urgent elective treatments. The guidance was updated on 26 January to confirm that further deferment of hospital operations is no longer needed. In terms of the impact that the guidance has had on operations, we will not know that until mid-March, when that data will be published and placed in the Library for the benefit of those on both sides of the House.



Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new Minister to his place. However, the Secretary of State should have been here giving an oral statement, because those were the terms of the motion endorsed by the whole House.

The reason that motion was endorsed is that this winter, in recent weeks, over 95% of hospital beds have been full, we have seen the highest-ever number of A&E diverts, 50,000 elective operations have been cancelled, and urgent operations have been cancelled too. The crisis that our NHS is now in is so deep, and the underfunding so severe, that on Friday NHS England was forced to announce that the target of seeing 95% of A&E patients within four hours is now effectively abandoned until March 2019. If the Secretary of State had come to the House last Thursday, he could have been questioned on the NHS guidance.

Last year, more than 2.5 million patients waited longer than they should have done in A&E. Does the Minister expect that number to rise or fall this year? The 18-week target has already been abandoned. Is it not unprecedented that patients will have to accept, even before the financial year starts, that the NHS will not deliver on key constitutional standards of care? The waiting time standards are legal duties contained in the NHS constitution. What legal advice have Ministers received, or will they be seeking to amend the NHS constitution?

On Saturday, thousands of us took to the streets to demand a fully-funded, universal public national health service—and by the way, we will take no lessons from Donald Trump, who wants to deny healthcare to millions with a system that checks your purse before it checks your pulse. The NHS model is not broke but it does need funding. If this Government will not give it the funding it needs, then the next Labour Government will.

The Government was then summoned once again to the dispatch box to answer another [Urgent Question](#) on Grenfell Tower.

Rail Update

The Secretary of State for Transport came to the House to make a [statement](#) updating Members on rail franchising in the Country. Members were keen to express their concern over the way the franchising of networks was being carried out and the long term effects it would have on the rail network.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I think it is the Secretary of State who has the short memory, so I will remind him that this is the third time in 11 years that a private sector franchise on the east coast line has failed. Can he explain to the House why his Department prevented East Coast, a public company that ran the railway superbly for both passengers and the taxpayer, from bidding for this contract? Will he today commit to changing the rules so that public sector companies can bid for these franchises?

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): The key point to remember is that this is a franchise that has increased the number of services, increased the number of staff it employs, improved its passenger satisfaction rating and is providing a larger payment to the taxpayer, notwithstanding the troubles I have set out today. That, to me, suggests that it is getting something right. I want to be absolutely clear—[Interruption] Notwithstanding the

sedentary comments, it is really important for me to pay tribute to the hard work of the staff who work on the east coast main line, who have done a good job in improving the quality of service for passengers. It is not their fault that their company got the financing of this wrong.

A [motion](#) on Social Security then provided the House with a segway into the main business of the day, the Third Reading of a [Bill](#) on Smart Meters.

The day in the Chamber ended with an Adjournment [debate](#) on Jobcentre Closures.

Tuesday

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was in the House to answer [questions](#) from Members to begin the day. The quick fire question and answer session was followed by an [Urgent Question](#) on Public Service Delivery in Northamptonshire.

Women's Suffrage Centenary

The Home Secretary and Minister for Women and Equalities were at the Dispatch Box to make a [statement](#) on the 100th anniversary of Women getting the vote. Debate quickly turned to the progress of women and equal rights in the last 100 years.

[Dame Cheryl Gillan \(Chesham and Amersham\) \(Con\)](#): It is a privilege to have served in this House for nearly 26 years now. Every day, as I take my seat on this Bench, I look across at the memorial to Jo Cox on the other side of the Chamber, and I remember that there is a huge capacity in this House to work cross-party and to bring about positive change, which all of us want to do. I am therefore very pleased that the Minister has come to the Dispatch Box to make a statement on such an auspicious day, particularly to pay tribute to the people who gave us the equal suffrage that we now enjoy.

As we take stock, however, we must not forget that women are still under-represented in this place and in other fields—such as science and engineering, and the top levels of business—and that women still do not get equal pay for equal work. Much of the stereotyping of male and female roles begins in the classroom. What message will my right hon. Friend send to teachers today to ensure real equality of opportunity and aspiration for all our students in the future, irrespective of gender?

[The Minister for Women and Equalities \(Amber Rudd\)](#): I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments. She is herself such an inspiration for many women coming into Parliament, who can see her extraordinary achievements. In answer to her question, a pack is going to be made available for teachers in schools to build on the celebrations that we are having here and to make girls in schools aware of the changes that have taken place over the 100 years.

I also say to teachers in schools that I know they want what we want, which is more equality of opportunity for girls as they go into the workplace. One thing we need to be better at is encouraging more girls to go into STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths. At the moment, only 30% of STEM subjects at A-level are taken by women. We need to do better at that and encourage them to get more involved in STEM subjects so that they have more opportunities in adult life.



After this statement, a [Bill](#) was presented to the House on energy performance in Domestic Properties.

Space Industry Bill

The [Bill](#) on the Space Industry, originating in the House of Lords, was Read for the third time in the Commons and passed. The Bill is aimed at helping the British Space Industry become a leader on the international stage and Members were keen to ensure it had the provisions to allow this.

[Layla Moran \(Oxford West and Abingdon\) \(LD\)](#): I rise to speak to new clause 1, which is in my name and those of my right hon. and hon. Friends and would require the publication of an assessment of the impacts of leaving the EU on the space industry. I do not wish to take up too much of the House's time rehashing the arguments about the impact of Brexit on the space industry, as many such arguments were made on Second Reading, in Committee and in the other place, but I briefly want to place on the record the industry's continuing concerns, which should require the Government to publish an assessment of the sort set out in new clause 1. I will take each of the areas that I would like to see in such a report in turn, starting with research and development and Horizon 2020.



The Minister is a former Science Minister, so I do not need to explain to him the importance of certainty for scientists in the space industry. Sadly, however, we still do not have that certainty so many months later. The UK is a net beneficiary of EU space funding, contributing 12.5% of the total budget but winning contracts worth 14% of total spend. The British space industry needs a guarantee of continued access to research and development funding, expertise and facilities currently provided at EU level after the UK leaves the EU. Of course, the European Commission also provides space-related research funding through Horizon 2020, and the Government have said they will guarantee successful bids made by UK participants before exit. However, beyond that the sector has had only warm words, and it needs certainly beyond the next few years. The Government's science and innovation discussion paper states that the UK would "welcome discussion" on remaining a participant in certain EU science and innovation programmes.

[Mr Jim Cunningham \(Coventry South\) \(Lab\)](#): If the guarantee is only for another two years, there will be a profound effect on research and development, particularly in universities. If there is no guarantee beyond that, there will be a great deal of uncertainty for both universities and the industry.

A Backbench Business [motion](#) on Housing, Planning and the Green Belt followed by an Adjournment [Debate](#) on Autism and education ended the day in the Chamber.

Defence Committee

Away from the Chamber, the Defence Select Committee held an evidence [session](#) focusing on The Government's Brexit position and the future of the UK's role in Defence in Europe. The Committee wanted to know the UK's current position with regards to Europe and the direction we are heading - as opposed to the direction we perhaps ought to be heading.

[Johnny Mercer \(Plymouth Moor View\) \(Con\)](#): Can I start with you, Freddie, please? The UK has suggested a "deep and special partnership" with the European Union. What does that actually mean?

[Earl Howe](#): I think the words "deep and special" have been carefully chosen, in that we are clear that the kind of third party relationships that already exist between non-member states and the EU are inadequate in terms of our country's best interests. So it means that we want to achieve an agreement which facilitates a really deep partnership in, I think, three areas: first of all, meaningful discussion and consultation on foreign policy; co-ordination, where it is more effective to work side by side than alone; and in particular, in the area of defence co-operation, in

areas like EU operations, industrial co-operation, research, capability development—those areas where we are very clear it is in our country's interest—

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth Moor View) (Con): So, those relationships that you currently describe as inadequate: can I ask you to expand on that more specifically?

Earl Howe: Certainly. We can see at present non-EU member states with framework partnership agreements which only allow limited engagement with the Commission and with member states. For example on operations and missions there is only a limited degree of prior engagement that countries like Norway have with the planning process and the extent to which they are kept in the loop thereafter is also limited. So if the UK is going to achieve a position where we are able if we choose to take part in EU operations and missions and put our people's lives on the line in the process it is not unreasonable to expect that we should be allowed a greater degree of involvement along the way. Quite how that looks at the end is for negotiation, but that is the broad aim.

Johnny Mercer (Plymouth Moor View) (Con): So what's in it for the European Union? What's deep and special about it?

Earl Howe: Well, we have a long history of partnership in Europe on the industrial front. We are recognised to be a key player in European defence. We are a key member of NATO and a member of the P5. Our influence is acknowledged to be considerable. One of the things we are doing in our discussions with our counterparts in the EU is to impress upon them what we are already contributing in the EU context, and therefore what they would lose if we did not have a tailor-made, bespoke partnership.

Wednesday

Northern Ireland [questions](#) set the tone for the day. These were then followed, as always on a Wednesday, by Prime Minister's Questions.

Prime Ministers Questions

In another heated affair the Prime Minister caused concern amongst Members from all parties when she appeared to refuse to rule out opening the NHS up to private firms as part of negotiations on a future trade deal with the US.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister knows that one of the key objectives of American trade negotiators in any future deal after Brexit is to secure access for American companies to do business in the NHS. Will she give an absolute guarantee that the NHS will be excluded from the scope of those negotiations? Will she also confirm that she has made it absolutely clear to President Trump in her conversations with him that the NHS is not for sale?

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): We are starting the discussions with the American Administration, first of all looking at what we can already do to increase trade between the US and the United Kingdom—even before the possibility of any free trade agreement. The right hon. Gentleman does not know what the American Administration are going to say about their requirements for that free trade agreement. We will go into those negotiations to get the best possible deal for the United Kingdom.

An [Urgent Question](#) was then put to the Government asking for its response to the Taylor Review which has looked into modern working practices.

The House then Read a [Bill](#) on Homelessness for the first time and the provisions for end of life care provided by the State.

The day in the Chamber then begun to wind down, first of all with two motions. The [first](#) on the Police Grant Report and the [second](#) on Local Government Finance.



Finally, the Chamber hosted an Adjournment [Debate](#) on Woodlands Hospice in Aintree.

European Free Trade Association

Away from the Chamber, a [debate](#) was held in Westminster Hall on the idea of the UK joining the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) after Brexit.

EFTA membership is one of the many ideas which has been floated as a workable model after Brexit, Members arguing that it would provide Britain with the least amount of economic pain, still giving the Country some access to the EU markets whilst allowing some divergence in our trade policy.

[Dr Rupa Huq \(Ealing Central and Acton\) \(Lab\)](#): As a fellow London MP, I am sure the hon. Gentleman receives numerous representations from constituents on EU citizens and financial passporting rights. Those people probably think the best course of action would be not to leave at all. Since that is not realistic, will he do all he can to exert pressure on the high command of his party and his namesake the Chancellor—sadly, he is not in the high command anymore—to ensure we have a pragmatic, not a purist Brexit? That way, if the arrangements are ready-made, some of the bumps can be avoided.

[Stephen Kinnock \(Aberavon\) \(Lab\)](#): rose—

[Stephen Hammond \(Wimbledon\) \(Con\)](#): I see the hon. Gentleman also wishes to intervene. If he does so at this stage, maybe I could answer both points.

[Stephen Kinnock \(Aberavon\) \(Lab\)](#): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and he is making a powerful speech. Is it not the case that the European economic area option ticks many of the leave boxes—no European Court of Justice jurisdiction, the ability to control the inward flow of immigration and the ability to strike trade deals with third countries—but also delivers the certainty that business is so desperately calling out for, because it is a well-established, well-understood agreement that has existed since 1993, but with no ever-closer union built into it? Is it not by definition the form of Brexit that ticks the boxes in line with what the vast majority—we might call it the silent majority—of the British people want in this debate?



[Stephen Hammond \(Wimbledon\) \(Con\)](#): In response to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq), it is, of course, not my decision who is in the high command, but I understand her sentiments. I absolutely hear her point about financial services. That is why I was very pleased to see the Government taking the initiative and offering unilateral passporting to financial services. Of course, that will work to the greater benefit only if we are able to ensure that the European Union agrees the terms as well, but it was a good start. I wholeheartedly agree with her that the Government's commitment on EU citizens must be made real and be part of the deal.

The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) is absolutely right. In terms of my hon. Friends who are Brexiteers—a few of them are in the Chamber today—I was discussing with one of them last night that the EFTA arrangements are something we can build a consensus around in this country. That is a sensible option, suiting both sides of the argument, and I would welcome any of the pragmatic leavers, including a number who advanced this case during the referendum, joining the cause and arguing for EFTA.

Welsh Grand Committee

Wednesday also saw the [sitting](#) of the Welsh Grand Committee. This event saw the coming together of all Welsh MP's to discuss all matters directly affecting Wales. The Committee also saw a first for Parliament, MP's were permitted to debate in Welsh or English.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Mae'r Ysgrifennydd Gwladol yn gwneud pwynt diddorol iawn. Wrth gwrs, mae yna ryw gynnydd wedi bod yng nghyllideb Llywodraeth Cymru, ond a yw e'n hapus, fodd bynnag, gyda sut mae'r cynnydd yna'n cymharu gyda'r cynnydd yng nghyllideb yr Alban, neu hwnnw yng nghyllideb Gogledd Iwerddon yn sgil y gyntundeb rhwng Llywodraeth y Deyrnas Unedig a phlaid yr Unoliaethwyr Democrataidd?

(Translation) The Secretary of State makes an interesting point. Yes, there has been an increase in the Welsh Government budget, but is he happy about how that compares with the increase in Scotland or Northern Ireland, given the deal between the UK Government and the Democratic Unionist party?

Ysgrifennydd Gwladol Cymru/the Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): Yr unig ffordd gallaf ymateb yw trwy gyfeirio at beth ddywedodd Llywodraeth Cymru a Gerry Holtham ar y pryd. Dywedodd Gerry Holtham ei fod yn "setliad teg iawn", ac fe wnaeth Llywodraeth Cymru eu hunain gyhoeddi, yn y Cynulliad, y byddai'r fargen hon yn darparu cyllid tymor hir teg i Gymru. Dyna beth ddywedodd Gweinidogion y Cynulliad ym Mae Caerdydd.

(Translation) I can only go back to what the Welsh Government and Gerry Holtham said at the time. He said it was a very fair settlement, and the Welsh Government said in the Assembly that the deal would provide fair, long-term funding for Wales. That is what the Assembly's Ministers said in Cardiff Bay.

Thursday

Two [question](#) sessions back to back saw the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport before the House. Amongst Members concerns was the direction the British Film Industry would take after Brexit.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to maintain the level of funding for the film industry after the UK leaves the EU.

The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): The UK film industry is worth £4 billion a year to the UK economy. The Government are committed to supporting the industry and are consulting stakeholders to ensure that the sector continues to thrive after we leave the EU. The Prime Minister has made it clear that, where possible, we will continue to participate in EU programmes where there is mutual benefit to the UK and the EU, as there is in the case of Creative Europe, for example.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Blaenau Gwent's stunning scenery makes us an ideal location for UK films and television series, and the Creative Europe programme has supported the cinema distribution of more than 100 UK films in European markets in recent years. Will the Government ensure our continued participation in Creative Europe after we leave the EU, because it has been such a success?



The Minister of State, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Margot James): I agree that Creative Europe has been a success and that the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Blaenau Gwent is a wonderful location, which has been used for many broadcasting opportunities. We are very committed to our role in Creative Europe. We recognise its value, and the Treasury has committed to honouring all applications, even those that are likely to require funding post-Brexit. We can be optimistic, although of course during negotiations there can be no guarantees.

The Minister was swiftly followed by the Attorney General at the [Dispatch Box](#).

These sessions were followed by a couple of Urgent Questions. The [first](#) was relating to Motability amid concerns over their cash availability. The Second [question](#) was relating the decision taken in Bermuda to reverse legislation on same-sex marriage.

As always on a Thursday, this was followed by the [Business](#) of The House and a [statement](#) on the publication of a report on an Independent Complaints and Grievance Policy. A further [statement](#) on a review conducted with NHS improvement in mind was made.

State Pension Age

The Government came to the Chamber to make statement on the State Pension age, an issue which has dragged on for many years. Members are keen to see a resolution for many people who have experienced unfair and abrupt changes to their retirement plans.

[Carolyn Harris \(Swansea East\) \(Lab\)](#): Having heard the statement, I can only assume that the Minister really does not get this, because the strength of feeling, not just among the 1950s women, but among colleagues, is extremely high—they are angry. Maybe I can offer some help. If he agreed to meet me and his hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), we could share with him the findings of a consultation we have recently undertaken on behalf of the all-party parliamentary group on state pension inequality for women. We could talk him through the problem and encourage him to do the right thing by acknowledging the problem and coming up with a respectful answer.



[The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions \(Guy Opperman\)](#): With respect, this matter has been debated since 1995—long before the hon. Lady and I arrived in this House—and successive Governments have taken a similar view on the appropriateness of the action, based on affordability, workability and the applicable equality legislation.

Following these statements, the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee gave a [statement](#) on a report on Environmental Sustainability. The Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee was then given the time to make a [statement](#) on assessment reviews of the Universal Credit Project.

In addition, there were two backbench business debates, the first of which was on [Community Bank Closures](#). This is something I have had meetings on with representatives of Natwest to voice my concerns about their branch closure in Porthcawl.

[Ruth Smeeth](#)

There was a time when the local bank was thought of as the heart of the community—perhaps it still is—so what happens to a community when it loses its heart? What happens when the monetary circulation of a town is cut off mid-beat? What happens when the last financial lifeline disappears and leaves the elderly and vulnerable without support? The world we live in is not the same as it was 10 years ago, let alone 40 or 50 years ago. Times change, technologies change, and we must change with them. But we must also do more to ensure that as the world moves, we do not leave behind those who find it hardest to keep up. We must recognise that there remains a place for community banking, local lending and face-to-face advice. That means we need the banks to take some ownership and responsibility for their loyal customer base. They need to be imaginative and consider sector and community-wide solutions, not pass the buck and blame their customers. If they will not do it voluntarily, we will have to force them to.

The banking sector has options. Banks could launch community banks that share counter facilities, like they do in parts of Spain. They could invest in multi-functional ATMs so that customers can pay in money directly, in their local communities. They could fund more extensively community-based financial education to assist people with online banking. They could even fund access to broadband in some of the harder to reach communities, so that their customers could access online banking. Yet all we have had from the sector is silence...



Finally, as is often custom before a recess, the Government released a number of [Written Statements](#). One of the stand out Statements was that a Chair to the public inquiry on the Contaminated Blood scandal was finally appointed. The inquiry was announced last July and has been scuppered by delays, with most of us hoping a Chair would have been announced before Christmas.