



THIS WEEK IN PARLIAMENT



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Welcome to my *This Week in Parliament*, my weekly newsletter on events and developments in Parliament. **Let me know what you think of the new layout!**

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A variety of issues were covered in the House this week; ranging from Aleppo to Brexit. In between, there were two debates on the acceleration of the State Pension Age, and calls for financial assistance for children's funerals . I was able to make several contributions; raising the good work being done at HMP Parc, calling for greater transparency in international aid and taking part in a Defence Select Committee evidence session with a Defence Minister to follow up an inquiry I led on the duty of care during training exercises.

Monday

No one will have not felt moved by the awful pictures of the destruction of Aleppo and the humanitarian disaster which is unfolding. The House has debated Aleppo and the wider conflict in Syria several times in the past few months; always returning to the same question—what the UK and others can do to bring an end to the conflict and in the shorter-term, how to help alleviate the suffering of civilians. Not a question that anyone has a simple answer to. An urgent question about the situation in Aleppo highlighted the potential dangers of making air drops, but also the frustration that so little progress is being made.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South, Lab): *The Government have always said that airdrops are a last resort and I understand that, but Gareth Bayley, the UK special representative for Syria, has tweeted about Aleppo today, saying:*

"Situation in #Aleppo could not be more dire: every hospital out of service; official food stocks run out; nowhere for civilians to run".

He called Aleppo "a coffin". Does the Minister agree that the Government need an urgent strategy to protect civilians? When hundreds of thousands of civilians are being starved and bombed into submission, we must consider airdrops. It is time for the last resort.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham, Con): *I have organised airdrops in a benign environment. That is the ideal situation, because airdrops are not high but low, and aircraft carrying them out are very vulnerable. If the House wants airdrops to be carried out*



in a non-benign environment, it must expect our aircraft to be brought down. If that is the risk that this Parliament wishes to take, let it please, in future, vote for it—and everyone in the House should take responsibility for that vote when an RAF aircraft containing seven or eight people is brought to the ground and everyone is killed: that is the responsibility that the House will have to bear.

Tobias Ellwood (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs): My hon. Friend, with the experience that he brings to the House, articulates the challenges that we face. We must work with the United Nations, and receive its advice on how best to get the aid in. I do not rule out the use of airdrops, but it must be a last resort when we are unable to get the trucks in by gaining permissions on the ground.

Children's Funeral Costs

Monday finished as it started with another tough, but important debate; this time on the cost of children's funerals and a call for this cost to be absorbed by the state. The debate was led by Carolyn Harris MP (Swansea East, Lab), who spoke movingly from personal experience, having lost her son Martin at the age of 8.



It is a very small amount of money that I am asking the Government to put in. For £10 million, the fees for children's funerals could be covered right across the country. This is an easy and a small ask, but it would impact greatly on the cost of a funeral and in no small way give comfort to bereaved parents. At Prime Minister's questions recently the Prime Minister suggested that the social fund could be used to help, but I say to the Prime Minister that at the darkest moment of a parent's life, I could not even fill a kettle, let alone fill in a 35-page application form. I have subsequently written to the Prime Minister asking that she consider my request, but I have not yet received a reply.

Royal Society Pairing Scheme



Away from the Chamber, I joined an event to celebrate a scheme run by the Royal Society which pairs MPs with scientists living or working in their constituencies. The scientist spends a week shadowing the MP and vice versa. I have been lucky enough to be paired on two different occasions, on the first with Dr Dafydd Evans, Department of Computer Science at Cardiff University and the second, with Dr Theo Tryfonas, Faculty of Engineering at the University of Bristol. Both have offered me an insight into what scientists do and the importance of the science sector to policy-making and its contribution to the economy.

Tuesday

Tuesday had an international flavour for me; a meeting with a delegation of Iraqi MPs who were visiting Parliament to see how our systems work and a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Afghanistan (which I chair) about what the next four years holds for the country following a conference in

Brussels in October at which the international community, including the UK, pledged further funds. However, the day started with an evidence session of the Defence Select Committee, following up an inquiry I led on military exercises and the duty of care, which stemmed from the deaths of four reserves during a training exercise in the Brecon Beacons.

The report 'Beyond Endurance: military exercises and the duty of care' is available [here](#) as well as more information about the inquiry.

The inquiry found that the Ministry of Defence is exempt from the Corporate Manslaughter and Homicide Act 2007, which means they cannot be prosecuted in the event that serving personnel die during exercises, while individuals can. From my exchange with the Minister, it is clear that the Ministry of Defence are not to be persuaded on this important point. As well as this, I put on record a report I received from a member of the public, which had given the inquiry its original impetus. ;

Mrs Moon: *Is this not a get-out clause for those who make the rules, and should provide the resources, oversight and accountability, to not be held accountable and to just push it further down the chain of command?*

Mark Lancaster (Minister of State): *No, it is not. The reason for that is because of the various levels we have of duty holder, from four star to two star to commanding officer. I think those are appropriate levels for the duty holder. How can senior management be perceived as somehow getting out of it when they are the ones who are the appropriate senior duty holder, and therefore responsible? I think that is a much more powerful model than simply the faceless corporation being fined.*



Mrs Moon: *May I very quickly tell you this story? A member of the public came to me. Their daughter had been out on the Brecon Beacons and had come across a soldier there—special forces. She offered to get him to her home and call help. He said, "I am not allowed to do that. I will stay here; they will find me eventually." She went home and her father was very concerned about this. He went out and the man was in a worse condition. He rang the barracks in Brecon. They said, "Oh, that is the special forces people; they are nothing to do with us." They remained really worried and rang the ambulance and the police force. At that point a message got through to special forces. They went out. The ambulance was there. The senior officer from special forces was blatantly angry at the member of the public who called for help and assistance. They didn't speak; they didn't thank; blanked. The ambulance person who took the personnel who had been injured away said to the member of the public, "He'd have been dead in an hour if you hadn't done that; well done mate."*

Now, I'm sorry, but that isn't around duty holder concepts. It is about communication and knowing where your people are—tracking where they are. That was a near miss. I would hope that that is the sort of

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between-the-cracks incompetence that seems to be the critical thing that needs to be dealt with—would you not agree?

Air Marshal Richard Garwood: I can't comment on that anecdote

Mrs Moon: I know that you can't comment on that individual case.

Air Marshal Richard Garwood: Having seen the work that has gone on in the specialist military units regarding this issue, it could not happen again like that.

Mrs Moon: You are confident about that?

Air Marshal Richard Garwood: I am, yes.

International Development

The focus on Brexit of recent months has meant an apparent tailing off in the amount of legislation being considered by the House, but on Tuesday afternoon, the [Commonwealth Development Corporation Bill](#) was given its Second Reading. This stage in the process is where the aims of the Bill are debated and voted upon, before detailed analysis clause by clause is carried out by a committee before the Bill returns to the House for a further debate, the Third Reading.

The Commonwealth Development Corporation was created in 1948 with the primary aim of alleviating poverty. It operates at arms length from government, although the Department for International Development has oversight. Over the years, it has been through several guises and has on several occasions been criticised for its use of funds and a lack of transparency. A 1999 Act put a limit on how much money the Government could allocate to it (£1.5bn). This new Bill seeks to raise that limit to £6bn and give the Government power to increase contributions to £12bn without the need for further legislation. There are concerns that by increasing the limit, the Government is attempting to privatise a significant proportion of the international aid budget and whether the CDC offers the best value for money. I was able to [contribute to the debate](#) (the NAO report I made reference to is available [here](#)),

I have seen the NAO's report, and what concerns me is the fact that it states: "It remains a significant challenge for CDC to demonstrate its ultimate objective of creating jobs and making a lasting difference to people's lives in some of the world's poorest places. Given the Department's plans to invest further in CDC, a clearer picture of actual development impact would help to demonstrate...value for money". Is that not the central problem? Does it not lie at the heart of the Bill?

Wednesday

Questions to Welsh Ministers was the first item on the agenda on Wednesday morning. I was one of the fortunate few whose name was drawn out of the hat to ask a question. I used the opportunity to raise the highly successful [Invisible Walls Project at HMP Parc](#) and the need for its funding to continue.



Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab) 5. What assessment he has made of the effect of recent changes in the number of prison officers on the prison estate in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): We are committed to transforming prisons into places of safety and reform. We recently announced a major overhaul of the prison system, and in the autumn statement we announced funding for 2,500 extra front-line officers across the UK.

Mrs Moon: The Minister will be aware that it is not just numbers of prison officers, but the skill base they bring with them that is important. Parc prison has a wonderful record with its “invisible walls” scheme in building links between prisoners and their families. More than 500 children a week visit their fathers, and 69% of inmates have contact with their families. Will he work with me to get the Treasury and the Ministry of Justice to provide funding so that the scheme carries on after 2017?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work she does with Parc prison in Bridgend. The relationship she has with Parc prison is indicative of the way an MP should work with such a facility. I pay particular tribute to Parc as a prison that has highlighted the importance of ensuring that family ties are maintained while prisoners are serving a sentence. The good practice shown in Parc should be repeated across the prison estate, and I would be delighted to co-operate with her in pushing this issue forward.

Welsh Questions also featured an [exchange about Ford](#) at Bridgend and what is being done to ensure the automotive sector continues to thrive in the UK post-Brexit. This echoes concerns I have raised in recent questions and on a visit to the plant a few weeks ago;



Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central, Lab): The Secretary of State referred earlier to the importance of the automotive industry in Wales. Ford announced in September that it would guarantee around a third of the jobs in its 1,800-strong workforce at Bridgend. Those jobs are vital to the local community and to the supply chain in Wales, but we are still concerned about the lack of commitment post-2020. The lack of any plan from the Government for Brexit is exacerbating the uncertainty and causing doubts about the plant’s future, so will the Secretary of State today commit his Government to giving Ford the same deal that they gave to Nissan in order to secure the future of the Bridgend plant and Ford’s presence in the UK post-Brexit?

Alan Cairns (Secretary of State for Wales): The hon. Lady has raised an important point. My understanding of the situation is that Ford is continuing with more than £100 million-worth of new investment in the plant. That demonstrates the confidence that Ford has, not only in the Bridgend plant but in the UK economy. This builds on the strength of the automotive sector, which is extremely important to the Welsh economy and to the UK economy as a whole.

State Pension Age: Women

The plight of women born in the 1950s who have been affected by an acceleration in the [State Pension Age](#) with little notice to adjust their financial plans for retirement has been raised in the House on a number of occasions in recent weeks, largely in questions to Ministers. In a rare coincidence, it was subject to two debates this week; one on Wednesday afternoon and a second on Thursday afternoon.

[Ian Blackford MP](#), who opened the debate, summarised the problem;

The DWP wrote to women to inform them about changes in legislation that go back to the Pensions Act 1995, but it did not start the formal period of notification for 14 years. To take 14 years to begin informing people that the pension that they had paid in for was being deferred—that is quite something. Can we imagine the outcry if a private pension provider behaved in such a way? There would be an outcry in this House and, no doubt, legal action. This is quite stunning when we consider that entitlement to a state pension is earned through national insurance contributions, which many women have made for more than 40 years.

He went on to give an illustration:

A woman born on 6 April 1953, who under the previous legislation would have retired on 6 April 2013, received a letter from the Department for Work and Pensions in January 2012 with the bombshell that she would now be retiring on 6 July 2016. That is three years and three months later than she might have expected, but she received only 15 months' notice.



The WASPI (Women Against State Pension Inequality) campaign is calling for transitional arrangements to be put in place for the estimated 2.6 million women to be affected. However, the Government has consistently refused to entertain the idea, preferring to focus on what it is doing;

Damien Green (The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions): *Supporting older claimants to remain in the labour market, and tackling the barriers to their doing so, is a key priority for the Government. To support that aim, we have abolished the default retirement age, so most people can now retire when the time is right for them, and we have extended the right to request flexible working for all. Flexible working is particularly important for this group of people, who may well have caring responsibilities.*

Thursday

A week does not go by without Brexit being discussed in one form or another. On Thursday morning, the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU, David Davis responded to questions from Members during which he made mention of the UK possibly paying to retain access to the Single Market, which received significant press coverage. Many questions turned on the same theme; requesting more information about the Government's plans, negotiating position and preparations. We may know more once the Supreme Court rules on the Government's appeal regarding Parliamentary approval being required to invoke Article 50.



Keir Starmer MP (Holborn, St. Pancras, Lab): *The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have repeatedly said that there will be no running commentary on their article 50 plans, yet there is one. It is being provided by leaked memos, notes caught on camera and the near-constant comments of the Foreign Secretary to anyone who will listen to him. This is serious because it is damaging the prospects of the negotiations getting off to a good start. The Secretary of State must realise that this is going to continue throughout the two years unless and until he discloses to this House the basic plan the Government are adopting. So my question is simple: when is he going to do so?*

David Davis MP: *The answer is the same one I have given the hon. Gentleman before to exactly the same question, which is that we have already set out the strategic aims—he knows that. He is also aware that we do not want to cut down the options available on things such as the old issue of market access. At this stage, we do not wish to go into great detail on the justice and home affairs front, on which I suspect that we absolutely agree, because we want to get the best possible outcome for Britain. The dominating factor here is not what is in the newspapers, but what is the best outcome for Britain in the long run.*