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

Parliament returned to its normal rhythm this week of questions to Ministers and debates. The main issues of the week were the public sector pay cap, the ongoing response to the Grenfell Tower fire and the energy cap, which appears to have been set aside. Not covered here, although reported widely was the decision by the Government not to revisit the Hunting Act, so overturning the ban on fox-hunting is firmly off the agenda. I had my first opportunity to ask ministers questions; starting on Tuesday morning in health questions and through to Thursday morning with the chance to raise amongst other things the closure of the Jobcentre in Pyle announced by the Department for Work and Pensions this week. There was a lively debate well attended in Westminster Hall on the state pension age for women which I was able to contribute to, with two constituents in the audience. The Minister replying appeared to suggest women affected by the change could take on apprenticeships...

Monday

The first ‘normal’ Parliamentary week since the election got underway with Home Office questions. By normal, I mean the set routine of Government Ministers answering questions about their department’s activities, consideration of legislation and debates on current issues. In Home Office questions, the interesting question of how Brexit will impact on the availability of labour on seasonal fruit-picking was raised, which follows much in the same vein as concerns over the decrease in numbers of EU nationals wanting to come and work in the NHS, putting pressure on workforce numbers.

Home Office questions

Helen Whately MP (Faversham and Mid Kent, Con):

Every summer farmers in my constituency require thousands of workers to pick their delicious fruit, but only 705 people in the constituency are unemployed and claiming jobseeker’s allowance, so it is very difficult for the farmers to recruit enough workers locally. Will my right hon. Friend consider a permit scheme for seasonal agricultural workers?
Brandon Lewis (Minister for Immigration): My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the excellent fruit that those workers pick in Kent. In terms of quality, it is almost up there with the blackcurrants in Great Yarmouth. While we are still full members of the European Union farmers can benefit from the free movement of labour, but my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will continue to discuss with the sector what will be done after we leave the EU.

Energy Cap

Following the conclusion of questions, there was an Urgent Question regarding the Government’s intention to introduce an energy cap. This proposal was included in the Conservative’s manifesto, but the policy has morphed into Ofgem using its powers to tackle the abuse of standard tariffs, particularly for vulnerable customers. The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, Greg Clark, was forced to come to the Chamber to respond;

Following a two-year inquiry, the Competition and Markets Authority found that energy customers on standard variable tariffs were paying on average £1.4 billion a year more than would be the case in a competitive market. That is completely unacceptable, so my party’s manifesto committed to introduce a safeguard tariff to extend the price protection currently in place for some vulnerable customers—those on pre-payment meters—to more customers on the poorest-value tariffs. The energy regulator, Ofgem, has the powers necessary to impose such a price cap without delay, and I wrote to its chief executive on 21 June to ask it to use its powers to do so. Today, the regulator has replied and announced that it will work with consumer groups to take measures, including extending the current safeguard tariff for those on pre-payment meters to a wider group of consumers, and move urgently to implement these changes.

The Secretary of State went on to say legislation would be considered if the measure did not have the desired effect. However, the watering down of the policy was not missed, including by some on the Government benches;

Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton Test, Lab): I thank the Minister for his response. Does he recall that during the election his party placed the promise of an overall cap on energy prices at the centre of its manifesto? Indeed, does he recall the Prime Minister stating:

“I am making this promise: if I am re-elected on 8 June, I will take action to end this injustice by introducing a cap on unfair energy price rises. It will protect around 17 million families on standard variable tariffs from being exploited with sudden and unjustified increases in bills”?

Does the Secretary of State accept that Ofgem’s response to his letter of 21 June on energy prices falls far short of implementing that promise and that, although there are welcome suggestions on safeguarding tariffs and capping warrant charges for the installation of pre-pay meters, those measures would affect only 2.5 million customers, leaving more than 14 million SVT customers completely unprotected from price rises over the next period? Will he confirm that his letter did not ask Ofgem to consider introducing a general price cap? Will he tell the House why it did not, even though the chief executive officer of Ofgem confirmed earlier this year that it would have the discretionary power to implement an energy price cap?

John Penrose MP (Weston-super-Mare, Con): To build on my right hon. Friend’s most recent answer, some 17 million families are being ripped off by expensive standard variable tariff deals. Ofgem’s
proposals will deal with at most 3 million of them, leaving 14 million still being preyed on by the big six energy firms. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Ofgem’s proposals will be viewed as a great betrayal of those 14 million households? If we are going to create an economy that works for everyone, will he distance himself from this big six stitch-up and pledge to help the millions of households that Ofgem seems set to ignore?

Grenfell Tower

In what has become a dreadfully regular occurrence, the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Sajid Javid came to the House to give an update on the response to the Grenfell Tower fire. One question focused on the suspected cause of the fire, which has echoes of a debate I took part in before the election on Whirlpool tumbler driers and the weakness of the product recall system.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The safety of domestic appliances is a vital element of fire safety in tower blocks—and, indeed, in all homes. This horrendous fire started with a fault in a fridge, so will the Government revisit the decision of March last year to dismiss or delay many of the recommendations of the Lynn Faulds Wood review into product recall, which I commissioned in 2014? In particular, will the Secretary of State recognise that funding for the enforcement of safety regulations through trading standards is inadequate and must be urgently addressed?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is looking at this issue very seriously. He is a member of the taskforce that has been discussing this and many other issues. He is speaking to many manufacturers about what can be done to make sure that, when products are recalled, that happens much more quickly and much more safely.

Guide Dogs

Away from the Chamber, I had the pleasure of meeting guide dog owner Nathan and his guide dog Mason who were taking part in a reception held by Guide Dogs to highlight the problems caused by cars parked on pavements, creating an often dangerous obstacle course for guide dog owners. Guide Dogs are calling for a new law to make pavement parking illegal outside areas where Councils grant exemptions.

Tuesday

Getting to ask a Minister a question is like many things in the House of Commons, a lottery governed entirely by luck and helped by timing. For each question time, Members submit their question ahead of time via an electronic system and a few days later, names are drawn out of a hat and published. If you are one of the lucky ones, the next obstacle is where your name is on the list. For the majority of question times, there will be 24 questions drawn. There are a number of factors which come in to play; questions which are on the same subject are often grouped together and it is not uncommon for a question to be withdrawn if a Member cannot be in the chamber. This means that even if your question is drawn a long
way down the list, it does not automatically mean you will not get heard. If your name does not come out of the hat, there is always the option of making an intervention; at this point there are a number of other considerations. You are more likely to be called if you intervene on an opposition member and of course if you can catch the Speaker’s eye. You can see the order paper with the list of questions here.

### Health Questions

On Tuesday morning, my name came out of the hat at number 18, far enough down the list not to get asked. To mitigate losing the opportunity of asking my question, I went prepared to intervene on someone else and was lucky to be called;

**As the number of GPs goes down, there is increasing pressure on the time they have with their patients. One area being missed is that of suicide and self-harm. We now know there is an increased risk of suicidal behaviour for those on unstable and irregular zero-hour contracts, and that those on employment and support allowance are more than two-thirds more likely to take their own life. What are we doing to advise GPs on that?**

**Steve Brine (Parliamentary-Under Secretary of State for Health):** The hon. Lady, who chairs the all-party group on suicide and self-harm prevention, does a huge amount of work in this area. The GP patient survey last year showed that 85% of respondents rated their GP experience as good. We are investing about £30 million of taxpayers’ money in the releasing time for care programme, which we hope will increase the time GPs can spend with patients on issues such as those she raises, but in my new role I am very happy to meet her.

The follow up from this is a letter to the Minister asking to arrange the promised meeting.

### Select Committees

One aspect of the House which has not restarted since the election is the Select Committees. You can read more about their work here. With each new Parliament, the Select Committees have to be elected from scratch. The process has two parts; firstly the chairs are elected followed by the election of the remaining members. The chairmanship and membership are of the Committees are determined in accordance with the proportion that each party has in the House of Commons. Chairs will be elected next week, followed by members the following week; an arrangement which has caused a certain amount of frustration as the Committees will be reformed as the House rises for the summer recess, curtailing any proper Committee activity until the autumn. A full list of how chairs are allocated by party is available here.

### Wednesday

The issue of the cap on public sector pay dominated much of the proceedings in the House of Commons on Wednesday where it featured heavily in Prime Minister’s Questions and then in a subsequent urgent questions. The Prime Minister set out the Government’s position which was met with a riposte about the Conservative-DUP deal and its financing.

*I understand why people feel strongly about the issue of their pay, but perhaps I can just set out—[Interruption.] For the information of the House, perhaps I can just set out what the current position is. Three public sector pay review bodies reported in March—they covered doctors and dentists, NHS staff including nurses, and the armed forces—and the Government accepted the recommendations of all three.*
The firefighters’ award is not determined by the Government—it is determined by the employers—and is not subject to a pay review body. There are outstanding pay review body reports that cover teachers, prison officers, police officers and those on senior salaries. The Government will consider those reports very carefully and respond to them, but while we do that, we will always recognise that we must ensure that we take decisions with regard to the need to live within our means.

Jeremy Corbyn: We have had seven years of tax cuts for the richest and tax breaks for the biggest corporations. Last year, there was a net loss of 1,700 nurses and midwives to the NHS, and in the first two months of this year alone, 3,264 have left the profession altogether—not a great birthday present for the NHS, is it? Last week, the Chancellor said:

“We all value our public services and the people who provide them to us.”—[Official Report, 29 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 797.]

He went on to laud his own economic record by saying that we had a “fundamentally robust economy”. The Prime Minister found £1 billion to keep her own job; why cannot she find the same amount of money to keep nurses and teachers in their jobs? After all, they serve all of us.

Urgent Question

Urgent Questions can be granted by the Speaker and are tabled to force a Minister to come to the House of Commons to respond to the issue of the day. It is the Parliamentary equivalent of reacting to rolling news. The public sector pay cap was the subject of an urgent question on Wednesday lunchtime. In the context of the Conservatives being a minority government, interventions from Conservative backbenchers are interesting to watch (see also the debate on State Pension Ages later on) as they suddenly find themselves in a position of particular influence as was seen last week on the amendment to the Queen’s Speech on the availability of abortion for women in Northern Ireland. One such contribution was from a working NHS doctor and Conservative MP, Dr. Dan Poulter;

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I draw the House’s attention to my declaration of interest as a working NHS doctor. My right hon. Friend has talked rightly about the effect that increments have on progression pay, and the staff affected have received an increase in their pay. However, in the NHS half a million staff are at the top of their pay scale and have received a real-terms pay cut over the past few years. They work incredibly hard, above and beyond the call of duty. They are the people who gave up their days off to go in when the terrorist attacks happened in London and Manchester. Those people do need a pay rise. Does she recognise that many of those staff are now turning to agency work? The locum and agency bill in the NHS is £4 billion and rising. Does she recognise that part of dealing with the cost of locum and agency staff must be to increase the pay of permanent staff?

Elizabeth Truss (Chief Secretary to the Treasury): I completely agree with my hon. Friend that doctors and other medical staff do a vital job and have faced real challenges. We are reducing the agency spend in the NHS over time. It is important that we look overall at the affordability for the public sector. That is the remit of the independent pay review bodies. They hear evidence from the experts on the frontline and make their recommendations. We accepted the recommendation for doctors that was put to us. We accepted the recommendation for nurses and other NHS workers as well. We respect that pay review body process.
State Pension Age for Women

Westminster Hall debates rarely attract the number of speakers and size of audience that gathered on Wednesday afternoon, but it was a full house for a debate on the State Pension Age for Women. This campaign has been very active for some time raising the unfairness of the state pension age being extended for women born in the 1950s; in many cases the extension by several years and with very little notice. Government Ministers have consistently refused to countenance some form of compensation or transitional arrangement. Given the number of speakers, I was fortunate to get called to make a speech; this is a simple question of justice, of fairness and of righting a wrong that has been done to women of the 1950s generation. I was born in the 1950s—many in the Chamber will not remember them—and women did not work. We were told that we would have to rely on our husband’s pension.

Later, when we went into work, given the opportunity, we were told, “You’re working part-time; you cannot enter a private pension agreement.” We did not work because we did not want to, but because there were no employment opportunities for working women. Some women could not be in teaching if they were married in the early 1950s; they had to give up work.

Now, those same 1950s women are called—I find this quite offensive—the “sandwich generation”: we are the ones looking after grandchildren and our elderly parents. At the same time, we are having to give up work because our pension is not there. Too many women are now living in poverty. Too many women, when they can get work, are having to accept zero-hours contracts, temporary jobs and low pay, no matter what their qualifications or skills base.

It is wrong that a generation of women have been treated in this way, ignored by Government and not even communicated with—the contempt that that generation of women have had to cope with all their working lives has been exacerbated by this Government. It is time for justice for the WASPI women.

As mentioned earlier, contributions by Tory backbenchers are particularly interesting, because pressure from them in the new context of minority government could be a way of getting leverage towards a solution.

Anne Main (St. Albans, Con): It is a complex picture. Not only do my constituents feel that they were not given adequate information about how to plan their future, but they feel cast on the heap, so to speak, now that they are having to look for jobs. Their experience in the jobcentre has been abysmal. People who have been in senior positions are being given advice on how to dress and present themselves at interview and update their CV. There is nearly 0% unemployment in my constituency, so their chances of getting a job are pretty remote and they are finding it incredibly dispiriting to have to take part in that
I would like to mention Daphne—I will not give her second name—who has been instrumental in bringing the issue to my attention in St Albans. What she says reflects the position of many women, and I am actually a WASPI woman as well. She says that generations ago, people did things differently. Daphne started work very young and was only informed of the pension age change in October 2012, two and a half years before she was due to retire. She is married to a man five years older. She says that this was not how she planned to spend her retirement—scraping around trying to get a job, being advised by people at the jobcentre who have absolutely no idea how to get her a job, and feeling a sense of injustice that she was given so little time to plan.

In responding to the debate, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Guy Opperman ended up in a rather awkward position having seemingly implied that the women affected could consider getting back into the labour market via apprenticeships (the text has been truncated slightly). Graham Jones MP asked him to clarify his remark, an invitation which he did not take up;

The fundamental point—at this point I really wish to address the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South—is that the Government have done a massive amount on a progressive basis to get people back into employment or retraining in their pre-pension years.

...Thirdly, we have also extended apprenticeship opportunities—one of the best routes into skilled employment—for people of all ages and gender. For example, in England in 2014 to 2015, 12% of those starting apprenticeships were aged over 45.

Graham Jones (Hyndburn, Lab): On a point of order, Sir Edward. Did the Minister just say that women aged 64 could go on an apprenticeship course? I could not hear because of the noise. Perhaps he could clarify that.

Thursday

Thursday morning proved to be fruitful for me in raising a number of different subjects with Ministers, all of which impact in one way or another of the constituency.

Women and Equalities Questions

The context for my question below is the difficulty caused there being no women’s prison in Wales. The result of which is women serving sentences a long way from home and consequently losing their homes and access to their children.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Many of the women who are imprisoned have mental health problems. Imprisonment and losing their home and possessions set back their chance of recovery. Will the Minister in his reports pay particular attention to the impact of women with mental health problems when they become homeless and lose all that they have managed to pull together?

Dr Lee (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice): Yes, we will. I am aware that a significant proportion of the female population in prison are victims of very difficult circumstances, be they homelessness, coercive relationships and the like. I confirm that the strategy, as I said previously, will concentrate on improving the community offering so that ultimately these women do not commit offences in the first place.
**Urgent Question: Adult Social Care Funding**

*Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):* More care homes may face closure if they cannot access migrant workforces. What steps will the Government take to ensure that migrant workers, who are happy to work in our care homes and who provide excellent standards of care, will still be able to come to the UK after Brexit?

*Steve Brine (Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health):* The Secretary of State has been absolutely clear, including at oral questions earlier this week, that we see the migrant workforce as critical to the NHS, by which we mean in-patient care as well as the social care system—we want to see those protected.

**Jobcentre Closures**

In a written statement on Wednesday, the Department for Work and Pensions published their final decision on proposals to close a number of jobcentres, disappointingly this includes the jobcentre in Pyle.

*Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):* I appreciate that the DWP makes considerable savings from the closure of jobcentres, including the one in Pyle in my constituency, but it is passing on a huge cost to those who will have to fund out of their benefits the costs of travelling by bus to their new jobcentre. According to the Minister, it takes 39 minutes to get from Pyle to Porthcawl, but it is clear that he has never tried to make that journey on a bus. Will he undertaken to ensure that no one travelling from Pyle to Porthcawl is sanctioned because of a bus service that is not regular?

*Mr Gauke (Secretary of State for Work and Pensions):* Those who have been out of work for 13 weeks or more have access to a jobcentre discount card, which reduces their travel costs by half. A lot of people in their daily lives have to travel distances and be somewhere on time. We expect people to spend 35 hours a week searching for work, and that can include allowing good time to travel from home to a jobcentre. I think that is perfectly reasonable, but I repeat that if there are particular circumstances that result in someone missing an appointment, there is discretion regarding sanctions.

**Business Questions**—Business Questions on Thursday mornings allows MPs to raise a subject of their choice;

*Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):* The “Companies & Markets” section of the Financial Times carried an article this Monday on how investment in the car industry has slumped amid Brexit concerns. That issue was raised with me numerous times during the election, as I have a large Ford plant in my constituency. What is clear from the article and from the experience of Ford workers is that new investment is not coming to the plant, and it has slumped by 30% across the UK. The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has said that there will be a devastating impact, and it will “permanently damage” the UK car industry, if this is not addressed when Britain leaves the customs union and the single market. May we have a debate on the impact of Brexit on the automotive industry?

*Andrea Leadsom (Leader of the House):* The hon. Lady raises an important issue for her constituency. The UK has a thriving automotive industry, and I am sure she will be delighted that we are bringing forward measures to support electric vehicles and to be a world leader in that area. She may also be pleased to know that the Department for International Trade figures released today show a record-breaking number of foreign direct investment projects coming into the UK—up 2% on the 2015-16 figure. The direction is absolutely the right one, but she may well wish to raise specific issues for Ford in her constituency through a Westminster Hall debate.