



THIS WEEK IN PARLIAMENT 27 November - 01 December 2017

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Another busy week in Parliament saw the continuation of the Budget debates and the first test of the new Defence Minister at the dispatch box.

The important issues are being thrown at Parliament thick and fast at the moment, so much so though that it has become difficult to even get into debates. The Chamber is so often packed with Members each wanting to make a contribution that there is simply not the time for everyone to have their say. The enthusiasm to make a valuable contribution is of course great to see, but it does mean that Members have to be careful with their time and pick their moments to speak. Without careful selection of when to intervene it may mean waiting in the Chamber for as much as 6 hours in order to make a 2 minute intervention.

Elsewhere, I chaired another meeting on suicide and self harm prevention and the country witnesses the 100th anniversary of the RAF, a moment in which we can take the chance to recognise the difficult and hard work the RAF do for the UK

Monday

The day began with questions to the Secretary of State for Defence. This was the first exposure to questions for the new Minister, but Members on all sides were not going to go easy on him and made their anger over the Government's further cuts to the Armed Forces heard. I added my voice to the discontent shown by the House.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): When I had the good fortune to sit down with Secretary Mattis to discuss our partnership, what struck me was the value that the United States puts on everything that Britain does, and the contribution our men and equipment make. He was left in no doubt that that commitment—that resolute support that we have always provided to the United States—will always be there.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Despite what the Secretary of State says, Lieutenant General Hodges and James Mattis have both said that we will lose our clout in NATO and our place at the top table if the cuts continue. Will the new Secretary of State commit to stopping the cuts to our capability, and will he make sure that Britain stays at the top table



and that we have the capability to defend ourselves and our allies?



The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The Government's commitment to making sure that we have the very best for our armed forces has always been clear. The rising defence budget, which is going from £36 billion to £40 billion, is evidence of that commitment. [Interruption.] The United States knows quite clearly that we will always be there in support of them, regardless of what the hon. Lady's leader may wish.

The level of discontent shown in the House, and by myself, earned a telling off from Mr Speaker. However, it goes to show the level of anger on all sides to the Government's hollowing out of our Armed Forces.

Mr Speaker: Order. An unseemly habit is developing of Members asking a question and then proceeding to rant from a sedentary position during the course of the reply. I had a letter about that today from a member of the public, who was most aggrieved. I am sure the hon. Lady would not wish to disappoint the person concerned, and that she will recover her usual composure ere long.

I call Bob Stewart—a well-behaved fellow.

Defence questions were followed by an **Urgent Question** on the alleged manipulation of forensic evidence, before a statement on the Government's new **Industrial Strategy**. Finally a **Bill** was presented on application, advice and assistance with Universal Credit, before the third day of debate on the **Budget Resolutions**. The dissatisfaction with the Government's Defence Policy spilled into this debate as well.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Does the Foreign Secretary not recognise that there is a £20 billion to £30 billion black hole in the Ministry of Defence budget? What is the Budget doing about that?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Gentleman knows full well, we are one of the few countries in Europe, or indeed in the world, committed to spending 2% of our GDP on defence. We are increasing our defence spending year on year, as the Chancellor confirmed in this Budget.

We are demonstrating our commitment by deeds as well as words. At this moment, Britain is providing almost a quarter of the troops in NATO's "enhanced forward presence" in the Baltic states and Poland. I visited them in September, and I suggest that the hon. Gentleman does likewise. He will see a battlegroup of 800 personnel in Estonia, and it will make him proud. It was extraordinary to see the gratitude of the Government and the people of Estonia, because they see what Conservative Members understand: the people of Tallinn, Riga, Warsaw and Vilnius enjoy just as much protection from NATO as the residents of Berlin, Paris or London. It is right that they do, and they have an equal right to live in peace and freedom.

I say again that not only is a global Britain in our national interest, but we have an obligation to promote the general good. It is an astonishing fact that, when we include our overseas territories, this country is responsible—in addition to all the other aspects of global Britain that I have described—for 2.6 million square miles of ocean. That area is more than twice the size of India and 30 times bigger than the UK. Britain is responsible for a greater expanse of the world's oceans than are Brazil, Canada or even China. It is possible that some hon. Members are unaware that one third of the world's emperor penguins are British.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): *As we are responsible for so much of the world's oceans, is it really a good idea for the Royal Navy to have only 19 major warships?*

Boris Johnson: *I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave a moment or two ago in respect of the colossal investments that the Government and the country are making in our defence and armed services, of all kinds. We are spending 2.2% of GDP on defence, and very few other countries can match that record. I do not know whether my hon. Friend has noticed, but this country has only recently commissioned two of the biggest warships—each of them is longer than the Palace of Westminster—that this country has ever produced, which is a demonstration of our commitment to the Royal Navy.*

Tuesday

The Debates concerning the Budget continued into Tuesday. The Day began with **questions** being to put the Chancellor. After this an **Urgent Question** had been called on the Sectoral Impact Assessments on leaving the EU. The Government had been forced to publish them, but had done so in a heavily redacted form, an act which had angered many Members.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): *I welcome the willingness of the Secretary of State to appear before the Select Committee—a decision that we made this morning. May I ask the Minister to convey to him our wish that he should do so very speedily indeed?*

Given that it is quite clear that the Select Committee has received edited documents—in other words, they do not contain everything that is in the possession of the Government—may I say to the Minister that that is not in keeping with the motion passed by the House of Commons? I also say to him that I made it very clear to the Secretary of State what procedure the Select Committee would use to consider the reports and, if I may put it like this, I do object to any suggestion that the Select Committee, or I as Chair, cannot be trusted to do our job.



The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): *I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman, and I will certainly communicate his message to the Secretary of State. On the point he makes about the information in the analyses, what the motion referred to was not what existed at the time. What we have tried to do is ensure that there is full information available to his Committee. When he has had the chance to scrutinise that and ask questions of Ministers about that, he will find that information very useful to his scrutiny.*

This heated exchange was followed by a **statement** on the Government's Maternity Safety Strategy and a presentation of a **Bill** on Child Maintenance and the Assessment of Parents Income.

The end of the day saw the Finance Bill presented after a fourth day of debate on the **Budget Resolutions**. The debate focused on issue of taxation and innovation, but the real underlying issue of all of this lay with productivity.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): *It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). Perhaps he could take the Prime Minister to the public sector leadership academy now that he has a bit of time on his hands.*

The key issue of the Budget is productivity, but that is nothing new at all. The productivity gap is now widening. An average worker in Germany produces the same output in four days as we produce in five. The issue is not how we can stretch those who are operating at the high end, albeit that is a good thing, but that we have an extremely long

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tail of low skills, with too many people working below their potential and, often, their skill set. That is set to get even worse with automation, with many more millions of low-skilled workers chasing fewer and fewer jobs. There is very little in the Budget to address this issue, which really does need to be the key driver of Government policy.

[Lucy Frazer \(South East Cambridgeshire\) \(Con\)](#): The hon. Lady says that there is nothing in the Budget about that, but what about T-levels, maths and computer science training, and adult learning? There is a whole raft of measures to upskill our workers.

[Lucy Powell \(Manchester Central\) \(Lab/Co-op\)](#): I will come back to those issues later in my speech. There are some advances, but they are not backed by resources. We have seen huge cuts in post-16 education over the past seven years, which has meant that the gap has widened further and further.

As the Social Mobility Commission again stated today, we do know how to pull up this long tail because we are doing so in London. It requires a pool of talented teachers, resources, and a clear local and national strategy. There was nothing in the Budget on the key issue of teacher retention and recruitment, which is now reaching a crisis point, and nothing on teacher pay or teacher workload. I could not believe it, but nothing was said on school budgets.

Away from the Chamber, the [Defence Select Committee](#) sat and focused on the effects of the closing of arms manufacturing plants on the locally employed civilians, with a particular look at the recent announcements by BAE Systems. For more on this see [here](#).

Wednesday



Wednesday began with [questions](#) to the Secretary of State for International Development. As ever this was followed by Prime Ministers [Questions](#). However, this week the First Secretary of State sat in place of the Prime Minister who was on a trip in the Middle East. Questions ranged from housing as well as crime, but there was a particularly heated exchange over the state of the NHS.

[Emily Thornberry \(Islington South and Finsbury\) \(Lab\)](#): The First Secretary of State looked rather perturbed at my line of questioning, but he does not need to worry; I really am not going there. I was merely wondering whether he remembered the question he asked at Prime Minister's questions almost 17 years ago, when John Prescott stood in for Tony Blair, and whether he could answer the same question today. The question was this:

"what percentage of the new nurses recruited in the past 12 months are now working full time?"

[The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office \(Damian Green\)](#) :I cannot remember asking that question, but I would love to know what the then Deputy Prime Minister answered. I am happy to assure the right hon. Lady that we have more nurses, more midwives and more doctors working in the health service now. The health service is performing more operations now, and certainly more than it was 17 years ago. In particular, in the Budget last week my right hon. Friend the Chancellor was able to announce more than £6 billion extra on health spending, which will make the health service even stronger in future than it is now.

[Emily Thornberry \(Islington South and Finsbury\) \(Lab\)](#): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that response, but since he failed to answer my original question, I will do it for him. According to the Government's latest figures, more than 40% of newly recruited nurses are leaving full-time employment within their first year. It is not just new recruits who are quitting; the overall number of NHS nurses and health visitors is down by 1,500 this year. The numbers are now lower than when this Government came to office. Why does he think that so many nurses are leaving?

The First Secretary of State and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Damian Green): *There are, as I say, more operations being done, and more nurses, more doctors, more midwives. The health service is expanding. We have got 14,900 more doctors, 1,500 more medical school places each year and 10,000 more nurses on our wards, and we have announced an increase of more than 5,000 extra nurse training places every year. In addition, the Chancellor said in his Budget that we would commit to making sure that the nurses' pay increase, the action for change—[Interruption.]* The “Agenda for Change” staffing covered would not come out of other health spending. So nurses can be reassured that the Government will continue to support them both on pay and in terms of numbers. That is why our health service in England is getting better. If the right hon. Lady wants to look at a health service where things are getting worse, she can look to the Labour Government in Wales, and she does not need to take it from me; she can take it from the public, because public satisfaction with the NHS in Wales is lower than in England. That is the effect of a Labour Government on health services.

The day continued with an Urgent Question on the costs of [exiting the EU](#) followed by a [statement](#) on the state of the Railways, an application for an emergency debate on [Yemen](#) and the presentation of a [Bill](#) on Food Insecurities.

The session in the Chamber was finished off by two opposition day debates. One on [EU nationals](#) living in Britain and another on the [state pension age for women](#). This is an issue which has effected many decent hard working women, and so I felt the need to intervene.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): *I despair, because having stood at this Dispatch Box, led for the Opposition in Westminster Hall debates and worked on the Pension Schemes Bill, with the matter before us taking centre stage, I have spoken about this issue, like a lot of other Members, many times. However, it is not the Scottish National party that I blame for that, nor is it members of the Labour party, and it is definitely not the '50s-born women who have been energetic, consistent and strong in pushing this issue.*



The Conservative party is the reason we are debating this topic yet again, but we know that many Conservative MPs pledged their support for these women by making speeches, by taking up photo opportunities, and by becoming members of the all-party group. A few months ago, I stood here and highlighted the fact that there were no fewer than 37 of them. Among them are the hon. Members for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill), for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan), for Salisbury (John Glen), for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones), for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan)—that is just nine of them.

This weak Government continue to stick their head in the sand and hope that the issue will go away. I do not know how many more times I or anyone else has to say this to the Minister: the issue is not going away.

I am frustrated and impatient that we are yet again debating this topic when the Government could do something to fix the problem right now. I do not understand the politics of why the Government refuse to address it. They angered the older generation during the general election, and look what happened: their huge predicted majority failed to materialise, and now they are hanging on by the skin of their teeth.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): *My hon. Friend is making a very good case. As a 1950s woman, I am extremely sympathetic to the 4,000 WASPI women in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that what the Government have failed to understand is that some of these women have been working since they were 15?*

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): *That is most certainly the case, and the Government need to understand*

that. My wife herself has been working since that young age.

For some reason, the Government persist in pushing huge numbers of '50s-born women into financial difficulty and distress. It is time for the Government to put their pride aside and do what is right.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for acknowledging the financial plight of many of these women. Women in my constituency have been forced to sell or remortgage their homes, and to spend the money they had set aside for retirement now so that they can exist, which will increase the poverty they experience in retirement. That has not been acknowledged at all by the Government.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Indeed it has not, and I am sure we will hear many such examples in the debate.

I have heard stories from numerous women affected by the changes of their desperation and fear—and it is fear—about how they will cope in poverty as they wait even longer for their state pension. Does the Minister understand how difficult it is for a woman in her 60s to retrain and gain employment? The job market and the skills needed in today's workplace are very different from what they were 40 years ago.

Thursday

The day began with [questions](#) to the Secretary of State for Transport and an answer to [an Urgent Question](#) on online hate speech. This busy day continued at a pace with the [Business of the House](#) for the coming weeks announced and a [Statement](#) on work, health and disability.

The Chamber then saw two important debates, the first on the current situation in [Yemen](#) before an important [debate](#) on mental health and suicide in the autism community. This is an issue which I have worked on for many years and so I was very pleased to have the opportunity to debate it in the Chamber and raise awareness amongst fellow Members. I was fortunate enough to be able to make several interventions in this debate.



Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The hon. Lady will be aware that the societal body that is most likely to come into contact with someone who is likely to take their own life is the police. The police, and particularly the British Transport police, are doing critical work in assessing how staff can be trained to identify potential suicides and to take action to take people back at a time of crisis in their life in order to prevent them from taking forward a suicide. We should not knock the police too much. They are doing fantastic work in this area.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I wholeheartedly agree. As I said, the police are on the frontline. They face the crux of the matter when it comes to matters of life or death. They are doing their very best with the training and resources that they have, but there requires to be a clearer pathway so that people who are at that crisis stage can access health services—and probably crisis health services—and so that the police have somewhere to ensure that the clinical needs of those people are met. It is unfair for our police to have to take care of people's clinical needs when that is not what their training provides for...

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady recognise that another major problem for families of autistic children is that should one of their children take their own life, the postvention support—the after-suicide support—is not there either, so the social isolation that they experienced in life continues after death and complicates families' grief? That area must also be tackled.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady's excellent point. Should such a tragedy occur and a suicide take place, it is important that the family is supported through that as much as possible.

Some 70% of autistic people are reported to have mental health disorders, such as anxiety or depression. As we have heard, suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the autism community, and that alone tells us that this

issue demands our attention. As the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) pointed out, diagnosis is important because it should be the foundation on which effective support for autistic individuals and their families is built. Similarly, a delay in diagnosis can hinder effective support and prevent intervention strategies from being put in place.

The National Autistic Society Scotland reported in 2013 that 61% of those it had surveyed said they felt relieved when they received a diagnosis, because such a diagnosis can end years of feeling misunderstood and isolated. We have talked a lot about this as a UK issue, but as a Scottish MP, I want to mention the Scottish Government's strategy for autism. The strategy, which is based on research, is working to improve waiting times for diagnosis and assessment to create consistent service standards across Scotland, and is providing training opportunities. The entire autism spectrum needs to be addressed, as well as the whole lifespan of people living with autism in Scotland. This is the logic behind this autism strategy, so it is a very positive step.

We have heard about initiatives such as autism hours in supermarkets and special autism-friendly cinematic screenings, and these are all very important and positive steps. There is a greater awareness and understanding of autism in this country but, as we have recognised today, we still have a long way to go. I will end by saying that we often think of those with autism as finding it difficult to see the world as we see it, but the truth is that we need to see the world as they see it, because if we do so we may then be able to start to make real progress...

***Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):** One of the risks is that, rather than going to their GP, people will look on the internet, where, sadly, they will find far too much information about how to take their own life and what methods to use. Also, if they go into chatrooms to share, they find encouragement to take their own life. This is an area that we must tackle.*

***The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Jackie Doyle-Price):** I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention and the work she does in this area; I know she cares about it a great deal. She is absolutely right that there is a serious vulnerability among people who feel uncomfortable about accessing medical care. We must consider the proximity of the internet where it is possible to buy drugs and where nobody really understands what they are buying. We can do a lot more to enable people to protect themselves. The internet is a great source of information, but it can be less than benign when people want to use it for these purposes...*

The day of debating ended with the issue of [student exchange](#) programmes after we leave the EU.

Friday

This week saw one of the few Fridays of the year when Parliament sits on a Friday. This was due to an amendment being [debated](#) to the proposed boundary changes reducing the amount of MPs from 650 to 600. The debate was mainly focused on the intention behind the changes, whether or not the sole purpose was to cut costs or improve the system.

***Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab):** On the point of reducing the cost of democracy, is it not the case that the Conservatives have stacked the other place with 260 new appointees, increasing the cost of democracy by some £34 million?*

***Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con):** I am glad the hon. Gentleman raised that point. It is certainly the case that there are more Members of the House of Lords, because at present, although they can retire, funnily enough when it is suggested to someone who has a life appointment with a considerable income attached to it that they should retire, very few choose to do so—although, to be fair, more of them have been retiring recently than previously. To repeat what I said in my ad-*



mittedly slightly too long intervention, although there are more Members of the House of Lords, we made an attempt to reform the other place, but Parliament was not completely sold on the idea; and the fact is that the cost of running the House of Lords has fallen since 2010, not increased. It is true that there are more Members of the House of Lords, but the running costs have fallen because of the savings made.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Is the right hon. Gentleman therefore saying that the cost of politics and the number of Members are not linked? His argument that the simple way to cut costs in this place is to reduce the number of MPs is undermined by his own evidence.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): Not at all. I have made the point that the other place has managed to reduce its costs, but importantly, its Members do not have any constituents to represent. It has made some savings. I have suggested that we could save costs by reducing the size of this House quite modestly. We would still remain a very large lower House of Parliament compared with many others.

