



THIS WEEK IN PARLIAMENT 22 - 26 January 2018

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

House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA
Westminster: 020 7219 0814
Bridgend: 01656 750 002
madeleine.moon.mp@parliament.uk

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This was yet another week dominated by Brexit and Defence. The progress of the Nuclear safeguards Bill through Parliament once again highlighted many unseen knock on effects of Brexit and David Davis' performance in front of the Exiting the European Union select Committee left many Members once again with their heads in their hands.

The pressure Members have brought to bare over Defence has, however, produced some potentially positive results. Another active week saw three debates in relation to the Government's handling of the Military and the Government finally announce a fresh review of the Armed Forces. This offers Members the opportunity to further pressure the Government into giving the Military the attention it so desperately needs.

Monday

The week began with [questions](#) to the Secretary of State for Housing Communities and Local Government. This was immediately followed by the Government coming to the Dispatch Box to answer an [Urgent Question](#) on Private Sector Pensions.



Financial Guidance and Claims Bill

The Financial Guidance [Bill](#) was in the House for its Second Reading. The Bill aims to simplify the process of getting financial guidance for the general public. Opposition Members were keen to ensure that the new guidance bodies the Bill proposed were fit for purpose and able to help the people most in need of support.

[Mr Chris Leslie \(Nottingham East\) \(Lab/Co-op\)](#): It is vital that we all work across party lines on financial guidance. I encourage the Secretary of State to place on the new financial guidance body a duty to promote financial resilience. Every year in Britain, 2 million people have unforeseen sickness absence. They cannot cope as their income suddenly falls. Eight out of 10 people in this country have very little savings, or none at all. It would be a real step forward to have a body that promotes financial resilience.

[The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions \(Ms Esther McVey\)](#): The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Once the new body

is set up, it will be able to see what is needed in the public arena and shape and craft what it does going forward. That is important, as is debt advice for vulnerable people, who need to be able to plan a path for their future.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The fact that household debt in this country now stands at £1.9 trillion shows just how important it is to give people knowledge and understanding about the management of their finances. I welcome the Bill. Will the Secretary of State assure us that it will help constituents such as mine in Taunton Deane, who currently have to go to a plethora of bodies to get advice, to make the decisions that we hope will prevent them from getting into debt?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): My hon. Friend raises a very good point about how to help those who are most vulnerable—how to help them to get out of debt. Debts are at high levels, but they are lower than they were in the first quarter of 2010. The latest figures, in the third quarter of 2017, showed that they had gone down, but they are still high, and we need to help people understand their finances. Understanding really is key to this—they need to understand what is going out, what is coming in and how to get life on a firmer footer, so that they can go forward with confidence.

This Second Reading was followed by an Adjournment [Debate](#) on the Ambulance Service in the North West.

Leaving The European Union

As part of my duties as a Member, I am often called to Chair debates in Westminster Hall. Many of these debates are the result of petitions by the public which reach 100,000 signatures. In this case a petition on Leaving the EU immediately with no deal had reached the required threshold and I was fortunate to be called to Chair the subsequent [debate](#).

The debate was well attended and well fought over by both sides. However, a rare consensus emerged over a Brexit issue, when both sides largely agreed that pulling out of the negotiations with no deal would be a mistake and detrimental to the interests of the UK.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a responsibility for the public, industry and the Government to make the case that, if we were to crash out, the impact would be immediate in, for example, the car industry, which is a big factor in my constituency? Switching to World Trade Organisation rules immediately would lead to an increased tariff of 10% on that industry's products, which would have a very damaging effect.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, but I challenge the language he used—"crash out"—as it goes back to what I was saying about a sense of optimism. We are right to plan for no deal, because it would be patently ridiculous if we did not have every avenue covered as we seek to build our relationships with the rest of the EU; but saying that we will "crash out" suggests that there will be no planning at all, and I just do not share the pessimism of that view. Regarding the car industry, the hon. Gentleman gives a strong argument for why we need to do a deal and why countries such as Germany, which sells 10% of its cars to us, would want to do a deal with us. We can set our tariffs as we see fit, whether that is 10% or not, if we leave without a deal, but then we would have to have an equal tariff with other countries, unless we have a free trade agreement with them.

Tuesday

A busy Tuesday began with [questions](#) to the Secretary of State for Justice, before the Government came to the dispatch box for a series of questions and statements.

Personal Independence Payment

The first of these summoning's was to answer an [Urgent Question](#) on the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) scheme the Government has introduced in an effort to change the way benefits payments are made.

Members wanted to ask the Government about a recent High Court Ruling in regard to PIP and people with mental health problems.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): How many staff in the Department for Work and Pensions will be directly deployed on the rectification process? I ask because the evidence is that the number of staff in the DWP used to complete any kind of task involving a complaint or a rectification is directly relevant to how long it



takes them to complete the process.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): Again, we have to consider these key practical points. We are actively recruiting hundreds of staff for this at the moment.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): As for the comments from the United Nations, how do the figures that my right hon. Friend has given compare internationally?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): My right hon. Friend raises another good point. The UK is one of the most generous countries in the world when it comes to supporting its disabled people. In the G7, only Germany spends more. We spend what is deemed appropriate and available, which is more than £50 billion. I reiterate that we are one of the most generous countries in the world.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Vulnerable people with severe mental health problems in my constituency have had to resort to a distressing appeals process in order to secure the support they are entitled to. This is wholly inappropriate. Pursuant to the answer that the Secretary of State gave to the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), may I ask when we can expect to see some progress from her Department to ensure that individuals are assessed for psychological conditions by mental health clinicians in the first instance?

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Ms Esther McVey): We are constantly reviewing the numbers to support who is coming forward if we need further decisions or clarifications for people. That is part of the ongoing day-to-day process to make sure that we get this benefit right.

This question was immediately followed by a [statement](#) regarding the Sky/Fox merger. The House was then presented with a [Bill](#) on Pedicabs in London.

Nuclear Safeguards Bill

One of the unforeseen effects of Brexit has been the calling into question of the UK's membership of EURATOM. This organisation oversees the safe control of nuclear material across its members, although not directly a part of the EU, the UK's membership is linked to EU membership. The [Bill](#), in the House for its Third Reading, has been introduced by the Government to replace the safeguards as the Government feels the UK should leave EURATOM as well as the EU.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): The treaty on Euratom membership is part of the set of treaties described in the treaty of Lisbon. Therefore, as we leave the European Union, we will, de facto, leave our membership of Euratom. It is as simple as that.



Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I am afraid that it is not as simple as that. A considerable body of legal opinion states that, because Euratom was founded by a treaty other than the treaty of Rome—it was, in fact, founded before the EU came together—it can and should be dealt with separately. Although arrangements relating to association with and membership of various EU bodies have changed over time as a result of changes in EU regulations, that has not been the case with Euratom. The articles relating to associate membership and arrangements are identical to those that were in place when Euratom was founded. There is no case to answer as far as separate arrangements for Euratom are concerned.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a strong case for associate membership. He will recall a Westminster Hall debate that I held only last year, during which there was broad consensus on the issue, including among Conservative Members. I think that the Minister was the only Member who did not agree. The only rea-

To get in touch, write to me at: 47 Nolton Street Bridgend, CF31 3AA Call: 01656 750002

Email: moonm@parliament.uk

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/madeleine.moon>; or visit www.madeleinemoonmp.com

sons the Government have given relate to the legal position and the European Court of Justice. If Conservative Members were not whipped, they would understand the logic of the very sensible new clause.

***Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for making that strong point. I recall that even the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) suggested during that debate that associate membership of Euratom could be effective in continuing those arrangements, which have served us so well over many years.*

After the Bill passed its Third Reading, the House preceded to consider an amendment made by the Lords to a Telecommunications Infrastructure [Bill](#). Members then debated two motions on appointments to the [Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority](#) and the [Electoral Commission](#).

The day in the Chamber ended with an adjournment [debate](#) on Neuroblastoma.

Defence Committee

Away from the Chamber, the Defence Committee took [evidence](#) from experts on the developing situation in North Korea in order to assess the threat and the role the UK could play in the region. For more on the work of the Defence Committee see [here](#).

Wednesday

The Secretary of State for Scotland was in the Chamber to answer [questions](#) from Members before the Prime Minister stepped up to the dispatch box.

Once again the spotlight fell on the NHS as the Prime Minister was pushed on the Government's funding of the Health Service, a pertinent point given the Foreign Secretary's demands this week.

***Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab):** A Labour Government would not be underfunding the NHS. A Labour Government would not be privatising the NHS. A Labour Government would not be underfunding social care. A Labour Government would be committed to an NHS free at the point of use as a human right.*

According to a whistleblower, as many as—[Interruption.] Hang on, hang on. According to a whistleblower, as many as 80 patients were harmed or died following significant ambulance delays over a three-week period this winter. This is a very serious situation, and the Prime Minister must be aware of it. What investigation is the Department of Health carrying out into these deeply alarming reports?

***The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** When we hear reports of that sort, of course they are very alarming. That is why the Department of Health makes sure that investigations do take place. That may be undertaken by the Department of Health or by the particular trust involved—the ambulance trust or the hospital. These issues are properly investigated, because we do not want to see this happening; we do want to see people being properly cared for. If there are lessons to be learned, then they will be learned, because our support for our NHS is about providing it with the funding, the doctors, the nurses, the treatments and the capabilities that it needs in order to be able to deliver for patients. That is why we are backing the NHS with more funding. It is why we are ensuring that it gets the best treatments; survival rates for cancer are higher than they have ever been before. It is why we are ensuring that we have better joined-up services across the NHS and social care so that people who do not need to go into hospital are able to be cared for at home. And it is why we are ensuring that we are reducing waste in the NHS so that taxpayers' money is spent as effectively as may be on patient care. That is a plan for the NHS, but it is a plan that puts patients first.*



PMQ's was followed by the answer to an [Urgent Question](#) on the recent revelations about the Presidents Club Dinner. After this, a [Bill](#) was presented to the House regarding Multi-employer Pension Schemes.

Opposition day this week focused on [Refugees and Human Rights](#) before a [debate](#) was held on Carillion and Public Sector Outsourcing.

The session ended with an Adjournment by [debate](#) on the South-eastern Rail Franchise.

British Armed Forces: Size and Strength

Away from the Chamber, Westminster Hall played host to a [debate](#) on the Armed Forces. Members from all parties attended to continue the recent pressure on the Government, and to voice the concern from across the House about the Government's handling of the Armed Forces.

Members were concerned that the Military is shrinking and struggling to recruit, posing a big danger to national security.

[Wayne David \(Caerphilly\) \(Lab\)](#): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in articulating his argument, it is important to stress that he has the support of all Members?



[Leo Docherty](#): I absolutely acknowledge that. Defence is not really a party political issue; it is an issue of national security, and I am heartened by the fact that Members from all parts of the House are here engaging in this debate.

The second set of problems with the plan laid out in SDSR 2015 relate to timing. As the name implies, joint force 2025 is some years away. We have a capability gap, and delivering that capability is some years off. It is also important to remember that this is not the generation of a new capability. The force laid out in SDSR 2015 is essentially making up for ground lost in 2010, when the MOD suffered a 8% reduction in budget and our fighting power was reduced by about 25%. We have to put things in context: having a deployable war-fighting division as laid out in SDSR 2015 is nothing new. We deployed a division of 45,000 soldiers to Iraq in 2003 and a division of 53,000 men in Operation Granby at the Gulf war in 1991. We are essentially making up for ground that we lost in 2010,

and it is important to bear that in mind. It is also important to bear in mind that with joint force 2025, there is not much fat in the system—it is quite a bare-bones approach.

We have to reconcile ourselves to the situation we find ourselves in today, and I would be interested in the Minister's comments. My judgment is that we cannot credibly claim to be able to deploy a war-fighting division within six months. That is some years off. We also lack the air defence that is particularly important to protect our enhanced force presence in Estonia. The Minister will perhaps mention that.

Defence Sub-Committee

The Defence Committee held a Sub-Committee [session](#) looking into the Defence issues facing Britain in the High North and Arctic. The Arctic plays an increasingly important role in UK security and as such the Committee is keen to highlight its significance. For more on the work of the Committee see [here](#).

Exiting the European Union Committee

The Committee held a [session](#) in which the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, David Davis, gave evidence of the progress of negotiations. Members of the Committee were keen to question the Secretary of State over comments he made in articles he had written before he became a Minister which would seem to contradict his current position. For more on the work of the Committee see [here](#).

Thursday

Thursday was started by a flurry of [questions](#) on a wide range of topics, not just to Ministers, but to various Commissions as well. Following the Secretary of State, questions were put to the Public Accounts Commission, the House of Commons Commission, the Speaker's Electoral Commission Committee and finally the Church Commissioners.

This fast moving session was followed by [Business Questions](#) and then a much anticipated [statement](#) from the Secretary of State for Defence. The statement announced that review would be carried out of the state of Britain's Defence, separate from the ongoing National Security and Capability Review, although it has been dressed up as a modernising programme by the Government.

Members were keen to find out whether this review would mean more money for Defence or more cuts.

[John Spellar \(Warley\) \(Lab\)](#): My reaction to this much heralded, hokey-cokey statement is, is that it? Although the voice was Williamson's, the hands were clearly Hammond's. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the programme is still fiscally neutral? Why does it not say that increases in security expenditure will not be at the expense of defence? Why does it rehash the same old tired call for so-called and unspecified "efficiencies"? Why will he not just confirm that the winner is in fact the Treasury and its view that there are no votes in defence? In spite of his warm words, will not the real losers be our superb troops, our excellent defence industry, and the defence and security of our nation?



[The Secretary of State for Defence \(Gavin Williamson\)](#): I apologise if the right hon. Gentleman did not hear me. There is not the constraint of the programme being fiscally neutral; we are looking at what we can do and how we can deliver it to the best of our ability. I am very grateful to both the Chancellor and the Prime Minister for all they have done to work towards the position where we can put forward this programme and have the opportunity to look at the needs of our defence industry and establishment.

[Mr Keith Simpson \(Broadland\) \(Con\)](#): I have every sympathy with the Secretary of State: over the last two days when this was going to be announced, it was the old Army motto "knickers on, knickers off", which many of us are familiar with.

A number of colleagues, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), have pointed to the crucial matter of money. Twenty years ago, the Labour Government carried out an enormous strategic defence review, which on the whole was well received, but it was never funded. Has the Secretary of State any confidence at all that his recommendations will actually be funded by the Treasury?

[The Secretary of State for Defence \(Gavin Williamson\)](#): Yes; I very much hope that the recommendations of the programme will be listened to closely by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor. Its whole aim is to give the armed forces the opportunity clearly to set out our case for the resources that we need going forward.

A Select Committee [Statement](#) was then made on Ministers' and Officials' Conflicts of Interest.

Backbench Business

Back Bench Business this week saw two important debates, the first a motion on [Joint Enterprise](#), was immediately followed by a [debate](#) on whether the Government should proscribe Hezbollah.

The consensus amongst Members was that this is a vicious organisation which has no place in politics. However, although the military wing has been banned, the political element has not been, Members questioned the Government's reasoning for this.

[John Spellar \(Warley\) \(Lab\)](#): Do not the various elements that my right hon. Friend is describing show the indivisible

nature of Hezbollah? It does not have separate wings but is one criminal terrorist entity.

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is a distinction that Hezbollah not only does not recognise but denies.

As the House will be aware, the British Government have long held the view that Hezbollah's military wing is involved in conducting and supporting terrorism. In 2001, the Hezbollah External Security Organisation was added to the list of proscribed organisations. In 2008, this proscription was extended by a reference to the

"military wing of Hezbollah, including the Jihad Council and all units reporting to it (including the Hezbollah External Security Organisation)".



Hezbollah's political wing, however, is not proscribed, even though this distinction is not one that Hezbollah itself has ever recognised.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case and we are grateful to her for bringing this to the House. Does she not agree that it should make both the Government Front-Bench team and our Opposition Front-Bench team deeply uneasy that they are effectively in an alliance in refusing to recognise the bogus distinction between the so-called military wing and the rest?

Joan Ryan (Enfield North) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend. I am hoping that both Front-Bench teams will take note of my speech and come forward with policy decisions that support proscribing Hezbollah in its entirety.

The day in the Chamber ended with an Adjournment [Debate](#) on Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council.

Fatalities In Northern Ireland and British Military Personnel

Away from the Chamber, a recently published report by the Defence Select Committee on British Military Personnel and Northern Ireland was the subject of [debate](#) in Westminster Hall.

Members were keen to stress, in line with the conclusions of the report, the difficult nature of the task asked of British Soldiers in Northern Ireland and the care that needs to be taken when examining cases of fatalities.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

As ever, it is a privilege to follow my Chair on the Defence Committee, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), and to be rejoined by some of our former colleagues who served on the Committee in the previous Parliament, because we discussed this issue. I do not intend to speak for long, but I want to talk about the people and why we need to handle the situation so delicately.

Many colleagues will want to be aware that families touched by this issue are sitting in the Public Gallery. Every time we look at the issue of Northern Ireland, we need to remember that this is about people—people on all sides of all communities—as well as service personnel, including those who are serving now, those who may want to serve in future and those who served during the troubles. This impacts on every part of our military. I am speaking today as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces covenant, and our responsibility to the covenant is mentioned in the report's conclusions and recommendations.

Given the political situation in Northern Ireland, not for a decade has there been a more difficult time to raise the issue we are discussing. I do not envy the new Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my neighbouring MP, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who has to deal with some of the challenges. None of us wants to make her job more difficult as, in the months ahead, we work towards a political settlement in Northern Ireland.

The issue, however, has an impact on people throughout the country, including those of our constituents who are ex-serving personnel. There is not a veterans' brunch or breakfast that I visit at which people, including members of my own political party who served during the troubles, do not regularly—by which I mean monthly—express their concerns to me about what it might mean for them as they approach their 70s and 80s. They are concerned that legal action may be hanging over their shoulders. As hard as it is for the families who are still suffering the legacy of the troubles, it is also hard for those people who served during that time. We have a responsibility to them, as well as to the families, to give them reassurance going forward.

There is also a knock-on effect for those who may be looking to serve in future. We saw such an effect from Iraq, with the Iraq Historic Allegations Team. If we are continually looking to judicial responses and the law, people will simply stop signing up because of fears about what will happen to them even 30 or 40 years after their service.

The issue is not straightforward by any stretch of the imagination, but it was right for the Defence Committee to explore it and I am proud of our report. That report raises the issue and adds to the burden on the Minister, for which I apologise, but the issue is one we can ignore no longer. We need a settlement that is agreed by all parties, whichever side of the conflict and the troubles they were on.

Our brave service personnel were acting under orders. We asked them to do many things for us; we need to have their backs when they need us. As delicate as the subject is, I hope that everyone will approach it in the same way as the right hon. Member for New Forest East, who led the debate. We need to move forward and we look to the Minister for guidance. I hope that the report's recommendations will be followed.

