



## THIS WEEK IN PARLIAMENT 19 - 23 March 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](mailto:madeleine.moon.mp@parliament.uk)

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Although Brexit was still lurking in the background of Parliament this week, the focus on debates on general topics over the last couple of weeks has allowed other issues to come to the fore.

This week I Chaired a meeting of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Motor Neurone Disease. We heard from a brave young man and his trouble with securing the benefits he needed to be able to stay mobile. The hurdles the Government is making people such as this jump through is unacceptable and unnecessary.

I also Chaired a Committee stage session on The draft National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Regulations 2018. It is good to see that this sort of Legislation is still going through Parliament, despite the workload that Brexit entails.

### Monday

Monday began with [Questions](#) to the Secretary of State for Education before a series of Urgent Questions was put to the Government.

The first of these [Questions](#) concerned Money Laundering and the Governments response.

### Leaving the EU: UK Ports (Customs)

The second [Urgent Question](#) came in light of recent queries over the Government's preparation for the Customs arrangements at UK ports after Brexit. There has been some suggestion that the Government is considering not imposing Customs checks at UK borders and this, along with the gagging acts companies have reportedly been compelled to sign to keep these arrangements a secret, Members were understandably annoyed and concerned.

*[Hilary Benn \(Leeds Central\) \(Lab\)](#): I am grateful to the Minister for that reply, but when was the Transport Secretary proposing to tell the House—or indeed him—about the new policy of not checking goods at Dover after we leave the EU, as opposed to telling the BBC last Thursday:*



*“We don’t check lorries now—we’re not going to be checking lorries in Dover in the future ”?*

*Given that the Government are committed to leaving the customs union, but that all free trade agreements involve some checks at borders, how exactly can this be squared with no checks at all? Which border crossings will be covered by the no-checks policy? Will they just be ro-ro ports, for example? Are the Government confident that World Trade Organisation rules allow for not applying certain customs checks at some ports but not others? Which checks do the Government intend to forgo? Have the Government had any discussions with the French, Belgian or Dutch authorities about whether they intend to apply a reciprocal approach at Calais or other channel ports? Will there be no checks on goods that have arrived in Dover from outside the EU? What risk assessment has been undertaken and will Ministers publish it?*

*When is Parliament going to see the information and analysis that has apparently been shared with businesses — it is reported that they have been required to sign confidentiality agreements—about possible new customs arrangements? Lastly, when are Ministers finally going to realise that if they actually want frictionless trade with the EU and to keep an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the best way to achieve that is to remain in a customs union?*



***The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride):** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for asking a variety of questions about what the Secretary of State for Transport said last Thursday. In addition to the remarks that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, the Secretary of State also said that*

*“we will not in any circumstances create a hard border in Dover that requires us to stop every lorry in the port of Dover”.*

*That is absolutely right. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the discussions that we have had with other authorities in the EU27 are formal discussions, because the negotiations that we have been having with the EU have not been possible. However, some informal discussions have taken place.*

*The right hon. Gentleman raises the issue of confidentiality agreements for those with whom Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is in discussions. As I am sure he will know, this is an entirely normal state of affairs for such discussions. Incidentally, this works both ways, in that while there is confidentiality on the part of those private sector organisations, that is also binding on the Government, as anything of a commercially sensitive nature will not be divulged by the Government either.*

*The right hon. Gentleman raised the issue of Northern Ireland, on which we have made our position extremely clear: there will be no return to the hard border of the past. As we have made it clear to the EU27, we will not accept a situation in which we have a customs border down the Irish sea. We will respect the Belfast agreement, and we are engaged in further discussions with the Irish Government to come to a sensible arrangement that is in the mutual interests of ourselves, of Ireland and of the wider European Union.*

The final [Urgent Question](#) was on the issue of Data Privacy, specifically in regard to reports of the company Cambridge Analytica holding information on millions of people.

The House then moved on to the Second Reading of the Secure Tenancies [Bill](#). The Bill is aimed at providing secure and safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse.

## Welsh Affairs

Continuing with the programme of general affairs [debates](#), this week the subject of discussion was Wales.

***Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab):** The Secretary of State must be concerned by a leaked document from the Government five weeks ago indicating that there would be a 9.5% reduction in Wales's economic growth rate if the Government failed to achieve a deal with our European partners. If the Government are considering the possibility of no deal, he must be extremely concerned about that projection.*

***The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):** The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but he knows that the Government do not comment on leaked documents. Statements have been made that those documents were not complete, nor were they approved by Ministers.*

*I am happy to talk about the strength of the Welsh economy and the opportunities we have to exploit the UK being a global leader in free trade. Wales was the fastest-growing nation in the UK in 2016. We have 98,000 more people in work since 2010, with 44,000 more women in work and unemployment down by 48,000 compared with 2010. That demonstrates the strength of the Welsh economy, in which I have significant confidence.*



The day in the Chamber finished with an Adjournment [debate](#) on the Island Health Trust.

## Tuesday

### Questions to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

[Questions](#) to the Secretary of State ranged from the Social Care System to access to Dentists. However, access to GP Services is an issue affecting everyone in the Country and so clarity was pressed for by Members.

***Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con):** Like many other places throughout the country, Southampton is struggling to recruit and retain GPs. There are many reasons for that, but perhaps one is the practice of discouraging medical students from going into general practice while encouraging them to become specialist consultants. Is my hon. Friend aware of that and of how widespread is it? What is he doing to encourage more people into general practice?*

***The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Steve Brine):** The Secretary of State has already outlined the plans for the new medical schools and the record 3,157 GP training places that were filled. I am aware of the practice that my hon. Friend mentions, and that is why we are working with the profession on a range of measures to boost recruitment into general practice. The existing professionals also have a role to play, and the superb chair of the Royal College of General Practitioners, Helen Stokes-Lampard, is really leading from the front in that respect.*

### Leaving the EU: Fisheries Management

Following the release of the draft Transition Agreement in the Brexit negotiations, concerns have been raised by some Members about the Government committing to remain a part of the Common Fisheries Policy during a transition period. An [Urgent Question](#) was asked of the Government.

***Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab):** I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this urgent question, on the same subject I also submitted one this morning.*

*The truth is that the Tories are treating this industry as expendable. The Secretary of State talked about revival, but the industry cannot revive based on the status quo that the Government have delivered on the CFP. Does he under-*

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

Email: [moonm@parliament.uk](mailto:moonm@parliament.uk)

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



*stand why my constituents will see this as a total sell-out, with us not even having a say at the negotiating table for the next two years?*

***The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):** It is certainly not the case that anyone on the Government side of the House regards fishing communities or the fishing industry as expendable. That is why we are investing more in the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science—our top-level marine scientific advisory body. It is why we are investing more in the Marine Management Organisation, which will be responsible for making sure that our fisheries industry is effective. It is why we are investing more in fisheries protection vessels to ensure that the sea of opportunity that comes outside the CFP can be properly taken advantage of.*

*The idea that we do not care about fisheries and that we are not investing in their future is, I am afraid, simply not true. The hon. Lady may express disappointment, and I express disappointment that we did not secure everything we wanted in these negotiations, but it is vital that we all focus on the bigger prize ahead of us. I completely understand why some people in the House—I exempt the hon. Lady—want to make partisan points, but, honestly, the future of our fishing industry is bigger than that.*

This was followed by a [Business Statement](#) by the Leader of the House and another on [Corporate Governance](#).

The House was then presented with a [Bill](#) on Fire Safety Information, before the passing of the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) [Bill](#).

The day in the Chamber ended with an Adjournment [Debate](#) on the Greater Manchester Metrolink.

### Wednesday

[Questions](#) to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland began the day in the Chamber.

### Prime Ministers Questions

Questions put to the Prime Minister this week focused mostly on spending on Local Government.

***Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab):** The shadow Secretary of State supports councils, thinks they should be properly funded and does not think they should be a vehicle for privatisation.*

*The leader of Surrey County Council, who happens to be a Conservative, has said:*

*“We are facing the most difficult financial crisis in our history.”*

*He did not mince his words, because he went on to say:*

*“The Government cannot...stand idly by while Rome burns.”*

*Council funding has been cut by half since 2010. Households in England now face council tax rises of £1 billion. The Tory leader of the Local Government Association says that*

*“councils will have to continue to cut back services or stop some altogether”*

*due to Government cuts. So as people open their council tax bills, is it not clear what the Conservative message is—pay more to get less?*

***The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May):** The average council tax for a band D property is £100 less under Conservative councils than it is under Labour councils. The right hon. Gentleman says that his shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government is supporting councils, but I wonder whether he supports these coun-*

*cils: Haringey, where the Labour leader was forced out; Brighton, where the Labour leader was forced out; and Cornwall, where the Labour group leader was forced out. What had these people done? They had supported building more homes, providing good local services and tackling anti-Semitism in the Labour party. The message is clear: if you believe in good local services, want to see more homes built and want to tackle anti-Semitism, there is no place for you in the Labour party.*

### **NHS Staff Pay**

In response to an [Urgent Question](#), the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was the Dispatch Box to give a Statement on NHS Pay.

The Statement revealed that the Government would finally give hardworking NHS staff a decent pay rise of 6.5% over the next 3 years.

*[Bambos Charalambous \(Enfield, Southgate\) \(Lab\)](#): NHS trusts are spending £3 billion a year on agency staff to plug gaps in the workforce. Has the pay cap not been totally self-defeating and led to huge amounts of public money going to private staffing agencies?*

*[The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care \(Mr Jeremy Hunt\)](#): What led to the mushrooming agency fee was the realisation, post Mid Staffs, that we needed a lot more nurses. Nursing staff numbers were going down until the Francis report was published, but the report created huge demand among hospitals, which realised they needed to improve patient safety by recruiting more staff. The hon. Gentleman will be please to know, however, that we are bringing down the agency bill, and I expect it to be significantly lower this year.*



The House was then presented with a [Bill](#) on Human Fertilisation and Embryology. Before moving on to more Northern Ireland business with Bills on [Regional Rates and Energy](#) and one on [Assembly Members Pay](#).

The day in Chamber ended with an Adjournment [Debate](#) on Birmingham Commonwealth Games and Shooting.

### **Foreign Affairs Select Committee**

Away from the Chamber the [Foreign Affairs Committee](#) took [evidence](#) from the Secretary of State, Boris Johnson. Questions ranged over several subjects. The overall arch of the session was to determine what the Foreign Office was doing and how the Foreign Secretary sees his Department's role in Government. Particularly prominent were questions on the UK's representation to the EU after Brexit. An issue which is still raw for some Members.

***Stephen Gethins:** Do you think that the permanent representation then will be bigger or smaller than it is at the moment?*

***Boris Johnson:** We have no plans, as far as I understand it, at the moment to increase the permanent representation, but it is already a pretty large body of very capable men and women, as I am sure you know.*

***Stephen Gethins:** May I ask just one more question, Chair? Obviously there will be a big change in the relationship with the 27 other member states. This is obviously not a question for officials but for you, Foreign Secretary: how much planning was done on this, on what we need, before June 2016?*

***Boris Johnson:** To the best of my knowledge, before June 2016—in other words, before the EU referendum—I do not detect evidence of any planning. But—*

***Stephen Gethins:** I said that it was a question not for officials but for you.*

***Boris Johnson:** You will readily appreciate, Mr Gethins, that I was not then a member of the Government.*

## Thursday

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was at the Dispatch Box to answer Members [Questions](#) on Thursday morning, followed immediately by the Attorney General.

### Business of the House

During [Business Questions](#) I took the opportunity to Question the Leader of the House on the Government's approach to assessing people for PIP, highlighting some of the inadequacies in the system.



***Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):** Yesterday, James Douglas, a constituent of the Deputy Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), made a statement to the all-party parliamentary group on motor neurone disease. As the Leader of the House will be aware, a third of people with motor neurone disease will die within the first year of diagnosis. James applied for the personal independence payment. They spent four hours completing the form, and he had a face-to-face assessment. He was awarded zero points. His consultant has now given him a DS1500, which means that he is likely to die within six months. The Scottish Parliament is introducing an amendment that gives the definition of end of life as two years. May we have a debate on how this Parliament could also show that level of compassion, so that people such as James do not have to go through this trauma?*

***The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):** The hon. Lady raises a particular situation that I think we would all be incredibly sympathetic to. I would certainly urge her to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can raise the matter directly with Ministers to see what more can be done.*

Business Questions were followed by a [Statement](#) updating the House on the progress of the Grenfell Tower investigations.

### The Economy

Continuing the [General Debates](#) over the past couple of weeks, the House considered the question of the economy. One of the issues raised was on the fairness of the distribution of wealth throughout the Country.

***Thelma Walker (Colne Valley) (Lab):** Spending on transport is 12 times greater in London than in Yorkshire, and that is having a negative impact on the growth of the economy in the north. Does the Chief Secretary think that is fair?*

***The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** The figure that the hon. Lady has given is not correct. During the current spending review period, we are spending more per head on infrastructure in the north of England than in the south. In the longer term, there will be decisions to be made about which projects we fund in the north, but we are absolutely committed to ensuring that the north has its fair share of transport and infrastructure funding.*

*Since rail privatisation, the number of complaints has fallen by 75%, satisfaction has risen from 76% to 81%, and the days of waiting hours for a train and a stale sandwich from British Rail are long over.*

*Royal Mail was loss-making when it was in public ownership, sucking up resources that could have been spent on services such as the NHS. By contrast, it has been financially healthy in every year since privatisation. If Labour Members think that they could do a better job of running those services, they need to demonstrate how. On current form, I believe that their proposals would mean chaos and confusion, and if we include the £350 billion for the strategic investment board, they would also mean the addition of an eye-watering half a trillion pounds of debt to the UK balance sheet.*

The day in the Chamber ended with an Adjournment [Debate](#) on Phenylketonuria and Kuvan.

### Leaving the EU: NHS

Away from the Chamber, Westminster Hall played host to a [debate](#) to the future of the NHS in regard to Brexit. This debate was held in response to a report by the Health and Social Care Committee on the impact of Brexit on the NHS. You can read the full report [here](#).

***Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD):*** Is the right hon. Gentleman able to say whether his Committee found anything that was positive about Brexit from a health perspective?

***Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab):*** Not that I recall. Maybe when the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), contributes she will have better recall than me. The unanimity of the evidence we heard was very striking indeed.

As well as pursuing the closest possible regulatory alignment, one of our strongest recommendations to the Government is that they must be much more open and clearer about their Brexit contingency planning for a no-deal scenario.



We note and welcome the Prime Minister's most recent statement that the UK will seek associate membership of the European Medicines Agency—although, given that, it is tragic that we are losing the EMA headquarters from London to the Netherlands. We also welcome the recognition shown by both the Health Secretary and his Lords Minister in their evidence of the importance of continued regulatory alignment with the rest of the EU. We noted that that was in contrast to the Foreign Secretary's statement that medicines regulation is one of the areas where he would like to see the UK diverge from the EU. I am pleased that the Health Secretary at least won that argument.

However, we have serious concerns about the Government's lack of a strategy for a no-deal scenario. The Government are still saying that they want a pick-and-mix, cake-and-eat-it relationship with the EU in the future. The image the Prime Minister used in her speech was of three baskets: full alignment in some areas, full divergence in others and something in between for the rest. But if the other 27 EU countries have made anything clear throughout this process, it is that that option is not available. We can have a Norway-style relationship, or we can have a Canada-style relationship, but we cannot have Canada-plus-plus-plus or Norway-minus-minus-minus. It is our choice.

I wish the Government well in their endeavours to achieve their pick-and-mix deal, but given the strong likelihood, if not certainty, that we will not get that, either Ministers will need to do the sensible thing and concede on the customs union and single market, or we will face the danger of crashing out on World Trade Organisation terms. Let me just spell out what our witnesses told us that would mean.

First, it would mean the seizing up of our medicines and medical equipment supply chains. We currently export 45 million patient packets of medicines a month to other EU countries and import 37 million. Any customs, regulatory or other barriers to this trade will affect supplies. Radioisotopes, for example, are vital in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. They have a very short lifespan. Their smooth importation from the continent is time critical. The British Medical Association has warned that any disruption to this trade could lead to the cancellation of patient appointments, operations and vital radiotherapy treatment for cancer. Medicines and medical equipment would also become more expensive and there would be delays in getting them licensed and available for British patients. Switzerland currently gets access to new drugs 157 days later than the EU; Canada, six to 12 months later.

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*Secondly, we would suffer a further haemorrhaging of NHS staff who are EU nationals, exacerbating the staffing crisis that the NHS and social care face.*