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

Monday

Defence Questions

The week began with questions to the Secretary of State for Defence. Questions ranged from the campaign against Daesh to mental health support for veterans. The main focus of attention, however, was this week’s NATO Summit and the publication of the Modernising Defence Programme.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): It is very troubling indeed that the UK risks going to this NATO summit without being able to offer certainty to allies about our future defence capabilities. The past few months have seen unprecedented leaks from the MDP, speculation about cuts, outlandish briefings to the media and even a reported threat to bring down the Prime Minister, although I gather the Defence Secretary may now have to join a queue for that. The MDP review will ultimately be a futile exercise, however, unless it is properly funded. Can he tell us what assurances he has had from the Chancellor that the Treasury will provide additional funds, as required?

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): What we see is a Conservative Government who this year committed an extra £800 million over the budget that was going to go to the Ministry of Defence to support our armed forces. We are undertaking the modernising defence programme to look at the threats this nation faces and to make sure we have the best equipped and best trained...
armed forces to deal with those threats. The Government have committed money to our armed forces; we have a rising defence budget. We are a very proud nation in the sense that we can see we have been hitting 2% in the past and will continue to do so going forward.

Leaving the EU

Following the Cabinet Agreement at Chequers on Friday and the resignation of both the Brexit Secretary and the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister came to the House to give a Statement. Members were concerned that the compromised reach represented the worst of both worlds and not the best.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s plan is still a fudge, on immigration, on the European Court of Justice and on the “customs facilitated partnership maximum arrangement”—nobody understands what it is. She has kept trying to pander to different parts of the Conservative party, and today has shown that it just is not working. Will she instead put a plan for negotiations to the whole House of Commons for approval? When she is in such a mess she cannot just keep standing there saying, “Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed.” It has.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I did not say nothing has changed; I said our position had evolved. We have set out more details in our position, and I believe that it is the position that is absolutely right for the United Kingdom. It is the best Brexit deal for Britain; it gives us delivery on Brexit, protects jobs, and ensures that we maintain our commitment to Northern Ireland in relation to the border and that can have a smooth and orderly Brexit.

Amesbury Update

The Home Secretary then came to the House to give an update on the incident in Amesbury. The Minister laid out the Government’s understanding of events to Members, clarifying how this tragedy could have occurred months after the incident in Salisbury.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On the Russians feeding poison to the rest of the world, is it still the Government’s working assumption that the only credible explanation for what happened earlier this year was that the Russian state was directly involved in ordering the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal? If that is the case, is not the most likely explanation still that the Russians have been so careless about the way in which Novichoks have been used in the United Kingdom that this murder lies at the door of the Kremlin?

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): It is absolutely still the Government’s view that there is no other plausible explanation than that the Kremlin was responsible for the attack on Yulia and Sergei Skripal on 4 March. With this latest incident, we must be led by the evidence and see what the facts are as the police continue their investigation, but frankly it is hard to see that there is any other plausible explanation.

The House then moved on to the Second and Third Reading of the Northern Ireland Budget. The day in the Chamber ended with an Adjournment Debate on Parks.

Public Accounts Committee

The Committee held a session looking into the Government’s handling of Universal Credit. Taking evidence from
the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Work and Pensions, the Committee wished to press for more information following the report on Universal Credit from the National Audit Office.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab (Co-op)): A question for both Ms Greenhill and Mr Kirkham. You are the treasurers of your local authorities, aren’t you? In terms of your internal budgeting, how much are you setting aside, or did you set aside initially, either in reserves, or through reducing collection rates or estimates of income to compensate for the impact of Universal Credit?

Tony Kirkham, Director of Resources, Newcastle City Council: In relation to our council tax collection rate, we have the best in the core cities. We previously had the best in the north-east as well. We basically lost 1% in collection through Universal Credit, so you are looking at about £1 million. We have written off £500,000 of that in 2017. At the same time, we lost £300,000 in the various different grants for supporting this type of activity. I have had to make that good out of council’s money, because we have not seen that downturn in activity.

Wearing my other hat, the ALMO Your Homes Newcastle set aside £4 million as part of the HRA for welfare reform. To date, we have spent £2.1 million of that.

Tuesday
Justice Questions
The day began with questions to the Secretary of State for Justice. The questions ranged from access to education to drones over prisons. Concerns about the UK justice system post-Brexit were high up on the agenda.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): We know from the Chequers agreement that the Prime Minister is relaxing her red lines on the European Court of Justice. The Scottish Government stated in the paper that I mentioned that they would welcome ECJ jurisdiction on data protection matters to maintain data sharing for justice and law enforcement purposes. Just last week, the Exiting the European Union Committee recommended that the ECJ should continue to have jurisdiction over aspects of data protection after we exit the EU. Does the Minister agree with the Scottish Government and the Select Committee that that would be a good thing?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The Prime Minister has made it clear that the ECJ will no longer have direct jurisdiction in this country. Where we continue to operate common rules, it will of course be appropriate that this country can look to the ECJ jurisprudence to decide the way forward.

The House moved on to the First Reading of a Bill on Bathing Waters. Then hearing the Third Reading of the Bill on Non-Domestic Rating (Nursery Grounds).

Opposition Day
Leaving the EU: Negotiations
This week’s Opposition Day was allocated to the Liberal Democrats who held a debate on the progress of the UK’s negotiations with the EU. Concerns in the debate centre on the forthcoming content of the Government White Paper on their new negotiating position, Members asking for more detail.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): On the subject of the deal, one thing that confused us in the Prime Minister’s comments on the Chequers statement was this: if the EU puts forward a new rule and Parliament gets a chance to vote on it—the Prime Minister is very proud of that—what happens if this House votes against it? That has not been made clear. Will the Minister make that clear now?
The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Prime Minister took two hours of questions on the detail yesterday, and I really think there is very little I can add to the understanding of that. I am deeply sorry if the right hon. Gentleman does not yet understand the position, but the Prime Minister did go through it in detail.

The day in the Chamber ended with a Motion on the House of Commons Commission (External Members) and an Adjournment Debate on NHS Trusts: Accountability.

Home Affairs Committee

The Secretary of State was in front of the Committee this week. The session was held to take evidence from the Minister on his Departments work in relation to Brexit. Future migration arrangements were high on the agenda.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): Okay. In the past we have heard from your predecessors that the future system would allow for visa free access for EEA visitors and students. Is that still the case?

The Secretary of State for the Home Office (Sajid Javid): I would refer against to the statement that came out from the Government this weekend. That did refer to having a system in place with the EU, in terms of visitors both from the EU, the EU 27, to us and vice versa. We want to make it as simple as possible and have a visa free process. We want to look at the continued use of e-Gates, for example, to smooth the process as much as possible. Also, in terms of business visitors, making sure that when you have business people crossing borders that it is straightforward, it can be visa free, and that will be an aspect that is partly covered in the White Paper coming this week. Again, I stress that that is what you would look to do in any good, deep and comprehensive trade agreement, which is what we are aiming for.

For example, if you look at CETA—so the Canada-EU free-trade agreement—labour mobility provisions are included in that agreement, which of course apply to the UK today. That is a good example of the kind of mobility that you can have that is contained in trade agreements.

Wednesday

Prime Minister’s Questions

The Secretary of State for Scotland was first up to the Dispatch Box this week. Following the Chequers agreement and subsequent resignations from the Cabinet, questions this week were conducted under a charged atmosphere, the Prime Ministers Deputy attending on her behalf as she was at the NATO Summit in Brussels.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for that answer, but who does he think he is kidding? Even Donald Trump can see that the Government are in turmoil, and he has not even got to Britain yet.

May I ask the Minister once again the question I asked him at PMQs in December 2016, when he compared Labour’s shadow Cabinet to “Mutiny on the Bounty” remade by the “Carry On” team. By those standards, what would he describe his lot now as—perhaps “Reservoir Dogs” remade by the Chuckle Brothers? But let me take him back to our first PMQs in 2016, when I asked him how it was possible to retain frictionless trade with Europe without remaining in a customs union. I got no answer then. Let me try again today. Can he explain how frictionless trade is going to be achieved under this Government’s Chequers plan?
This week in Parliament

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The right hon. Lady will see the detail in the White Paper but, if she had been listening to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on Monday, she would have heard the Prime Minister explain very clearly that we believe a combination of the common rulebook on goods and on agri-food, coupled with the facilitated customs arrangement that we are proposing, will provide just that. What is more, that takes full account of the wish of United Kingdom business to ensure that frictionless trade will continue. If the right hon. Lady disagrees, will she stand up and say what her alternative proposal is?

Afghanistan

The Secretary of State for Defence then came to the House to give a Statement on Afghanistan, including the UK’s roles and commitments there. There was support across the House, but Members were keen to ensure the Government was clear as to why the UK is there.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In supporting the Defence Secretary’s statement and the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith), I urge the Defence Secretary to redouble his efforts to explain to the British public why we are doing what we are doing, and how it impacts on the security of our citizens in this country. There is a lot more to be done on that. I know that he is trying, but I urge him to redouble his efforts to explain it to the British people.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, because an unstable Afghanistan leads to threats here in Britain. We saw how the ungoverned spaces that developed in Iraq and Syria were used to promote terrorist attacks on the streets of Britain. We have to deal with that at source, and we will do everything we can to explain to the British people the threat that such an Afghanistan presents.

This was followed by the First Reading of a Bill on the National Health Service.

Opposition Day

Another allotted day for opposition debates saw a Motion on the handling of Universal Credit.

Defence Industry and Shipbuilding

The House then moved on to a Motion on Defence procurement. The debate focus on the benefits a well-considered Defence Industrial Strategy could bring to the economy.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) talks about the benefits to his constituency, but what about the people who live near Woodford, the BAE Systems site in Manchester, who in 2010 watched as the Nimrod MRA4 programme, 94% complete, was smashed up by JCBs and Britain’s capacity to build large fixed-wing aircraft permanently destroyed? Was that not the total destruction of British industrial capability—something we are trying to avoid in this debate today?

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and now I shall conclude, as I am sure that hon. Members are thinking about what they will be watching later this evening.

When I was very young, I remember not only the excitement of England winning the World Cup in 1966, but the I’m Backing Britain campaign. Before they go off to support
the English football team this evening, I urge Members from across the House to recognise that the order for the fleet solid support ships represent a prime example of one that can and should be awarded here. I urge Members to back British industry and to vote to build them in Britain.

The day in the Chamber ended with an Adjournment Debate on the Fishing Industry.

Defence Committee

Away from the Chamber, the Defence Committee held an evidence session, alongside our French counterparts, a first for a UK Committee, looking into a Future Anti-Ship Missile Programme. I took the opportunity to question the Minister on the viability and timetabling of the programme.

Thursday

The day began with Questions to various Departments, top of the list was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

This was swiftly followed by an Urgent Question on Immigration: Pausing the Hostile Environment.

Visit of President Trump: Policing

With the arrival of President Trump on Thursday afternoon, an Urgent Question was asked on the Policing arrangements as protests were expected. Members were concerned about the short term drafting of Police Officers from all over the Country and the conditions they would be expected to work under.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The photos of the accommodation in Essex that awaits officers who have been drafted to the capital are shameful. I have no doubt that in an emergency situation our brave officers would not think twice about using such accommodation, but this is not an emergency and planning for this visit has taken place over three months. The Minister said that the situation is being managed, but can he assure officers that they will not be sleeping on mats in sports halls this evening?

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): That is certainly not my wish. The comments I have seen from the National Police Chiefs Council make it quite clear that it considers the situation to be unacceptable, and Essex police are working on a better solution.

The House then moved on to Business Questions.

EU: Future Relationship White Paper

With the publication of the Government White Paper of the agreement made in Chequers over the weekend, the new Secretary of State was in the House to make a Statement. Despite it being a welcome development that the Government have finally produced a White Paper, Members were concerned that the proposal had no majority for agreement in Parliament or with the EU.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The problem still remains that there is no majority for this in the House of Commons—to be honest, the sooner we have a vote on it the better, because it will save the Government a lot of time. I welcome the right hon. Gentleman to his post. I have found him to be a very good Minister to do business with. I hope, however, that today has shown that the more the Government try to use the powers of the Executive to skirt around the side of Parliament, the less likely they are to achieve an agreement in the House that can eventually be sold to the European Union. I urge him to work with all Members of the House to try to get a better deal. Otherwise, we will fall out of the European Union without a deal, and that will harm our security.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Dominic Raab): I respect the hon. Gentleman’s views, and even though we differ on this issue, we agree on many other things. I will certainly take up the offer to work with
him in future as the negotiations and legislation unfold. I say gently, however, that all Labour and Conservative Members stood at the last election on manifestos that committed to leaving the EU. We cannot leave the EU and stay in the single market and the customs union. No amount of haggling over procedural or process points can mask the divisions among Labour Members, or their failure to take a decision about what their position on Brexit should be.

The House then heard a Statement from the Foreign Affairs Committee on Global Britain and the Western Balkans.

Moving on to Backbench Business, the issues of Forced Adoption in the UK and Carillion were debated. The day in the Chamber ending with an Adjournment Debate on Rail Passenger Comfort.