



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY

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From the Minister of State for Social Security and the Disabled

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*Prime Minister**18/06 1986**This is well done.**Dear Tim,**Content?**DRS
18/7.*

As agreed at the meeting earlier this week, my Minister will be making a statement in the House on Monday relating to Supplementary Benefit single payments.

I would be grateful if you would obtain the Prime Minister's approval of the attached draft.

Copies go to private secretaries to the Lord President, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Lord Chancellor, the Lord Privy Seal, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Chief Secretary, the Chief Whip, the Solicitor General, the Attorney General, and the Secretaries of State for Employment, Energy, Environment, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and Sir Robert Armstrong.

*Yours ever,**Colin*

C A H PHILLIPS
Private Secretary

DRAFT STATEMENT ON SINGLE PAYMENTS

Mr Speaker, with permission, I should like to make a statement about single payments of supplementary benefit.

I first simply set some facts before the House. Between 1974 and 1979, under the previous government, what were then called exceptional needs payments rose from 0.8 million to 1.1 million, and their cost from £11.5 million to £38 million. This increase was already a matter of concern, which was reflected in the review carried out in 1977-78 one of whose objectives was to control the growth of such payment.⁵

In 1980 the present government made changes which it was hoped would overcome the problem, and which indeed took account of the recommendations of that earlier review. Initially, they appeared to have had some success. But this has proved only temporary. By 1983 the number of payments was virtually double the 1979 figure, at nearly 2 million, and expenditure had virtually quadrupled, to over £140 million. By 1985 both figures had more than doubled again, to more than 4 million payments at a cost of over £300 million. And the growth shows no sign of diminishing.

This trend cannot be explained by any increase in the number of claimants: the rate of payments per claimant has itself more than doubled since 1979. Nor can it be explained by changes in weekly benefit levels: the weekly scale rates rose in real terms by some 6 per cent between November 1978 and November 1985, and there have been other significant improvements; for example in some of the payments for children, in regular additional heating payments - especially to pensioners, and in the rules concerning help for the long-term sick and disabled.

Against this background, our firm conclusion in the recent social security review was that the present system of single payments could be neither justified nor sustained. It is incompatible with sensible planning and

efficient administration: although only some 5 per cent of supplementary benefit expenditure, it accounts for, nearly 50 per cent of the decisions, and over 50 per cent of appeal hearings.

More fundamentally, it is clearly not achieving what Parliament intended. Despite elaborate regulations and adjudications, wide discrepancies occur from one area to another. It is increasingly perceived as unfair by others on incomes little or no higher than supplementary benefit, to whom no comparable help is available. There is unacceptable scope for exploitation and abuse, yet at the same time insufficient flexibility to meet the real needs of genuine claimants.

As the House knows, Mr Speaker, it is for these reasons that the government have brought forward in the current Social Security Bill proposals for an improved structure of regular weekly income support, coupled with a clearly distinct Social Fund designed to give appropriate help with genuine special occasional needs in a more practical, manageable and flexible way. We believe those proposals are essential to the proper working of the benefit system as a whole.

But they cannot for nearly two years, and meanwhile the growing unworkability of the present single payments system cannot simply be ignored. In February, therefore, we put for consultation to the Social Security Advisory Committee draft regulations meeting a number of changes within the existing structure, as an interim measure. The principle elements were to restrict furniture and bedding payments to more clearly defined categories of need, paying particular attention to the needs of pensioners, the sick and disabled, and those leaving hospital after a long stay; to introduce ~~time~~ ^{time} rules for repeat claims for the same items; to set standard sums for specific items such as cookers, and standard amounts to cover a range of miscellaneous household items which can at present be individually listed; and to introduce a standard pattern of help with maternity needs.

We have now given very careful consideration to the Committee's Report, which is laid before Parliament today together with my rt hon Friend's response.

Their Report clearly recognises the difficulties to which the Government is seeking to respond. It also recognises the effort which has been made to take account of the needs of those thought to be most vulnerable, and welcomes in principle the introduction of standard payments and lump sums. While making it plain that they do not endorse the proposals as a whole, they have at the same time suggested a number of specific modifications they would wish to see if the Government should decide to proceed.

Mr Speaker, I must in turn make plain to the House that in the Government's view the Committee have not given sufficient weight to the considerations I outlined earlier in my statement. Moreover, those considerations have been greatly strengthened by the continued escalation of single payments in recent months. The most recent figures, for the four weeks to 3 June, were equivalent to an annual rate of 5½ million payments and at least £400 million. Many local authorities and other bodies are mounting campaigns to stimulate further claims. Apart from anything else, the consequent growing burden on DHSS offices, despite the additional staff we are making available, is seriously detrimental to the interests of claimants themselves. To give the House just one example, a Sheffield office with 21,000 claimants recently received 2500 claims for furniture in four days, and 400 claims for bedding in only a few weeks.

The Government therefore propose to proceed with new regulations, but with a number of important modifications to meet detailed suggestions which the Committee have made. These include further steps to protect the position of refugees, women who have been subject to domestic violence, and young people leaving local authority care; a lengthening of the qualifying period for maternity payments; the extension of lump sum payments for miscellaneous items to childless couples setting up home; and, perhaps most important, a

doubling of that lump sum from £25 to £50 for each dependant. Regulations incorporating those changes have been laid today, with a view to bringing them into effect on 11 August.

—
/Piece on severe weather, when agreed, to be added; and conclusion./—

Lord Port of Hampstead: My Lords, the Minister has failed to recognise that a woman is working part time and yet spending the rest of her time looking after a child. I cannot understand why the Government do not appreciate what they are doing. The woman is now left with a choice of staying at home full time and not entering the labour market or taking jobs with such short hours that she does not go beyond the limit which would allow for her pension to be taken care of. I cannot believe that any government seriously want that. The Government seem to want that. I cannot believe that your Lordships want that. I shall divide the House.

3.28 p.m.

On Question, Whether the said amendment (No. 4) shall be agreed to?

Their Lordships divided: Contents, 78; Not-Contents, 128.

DIVISION NO. 1

CONTENTS

Addington, L.	Kennet, L.
Airedale, L.	Leatherland, L.
Amherst, E.	Listowel, E.
Ardwick, L.	Llewelyn-Davies of Hastoe, B.
Attlee, E.	Lloyd of Kilgeran, L.
Banks, L.	Lockwood, B. [Teller]
Blease, L.	Lovell-Davis, L.
Blyton, L.	McNair, L.
Briginshaw, L.	Mishcon, L.
Brockway, L.	Molloy, L.
Bruce of Donington, L.	Morton of Shuna, L.
Burton of Coventry, B.	Mulley, L.
Caradon, L.	Nicol, B.
Carmichael of Kelvingrove, L.	Oram, L.
David, B.	Paget of Northampton, L.
Davies, L.	Phillips, B.
Davies of Penrhys, L.	Pitt of Hampstead, L. [Teller]
Dean of Beswick, L.	Ponsonby of Shulbrede, L.
Denington, B.	Rochester, L.
Diamond, L.	Sainsbury, L.
Donaldson of Kingsbridge, L.	Seear, B.
Elwyn-Jones, L.	Shepherd, L.
Ennals, L.	Silkin of Dulwich, L.
Ewart-Biggs, B.	Stallard, L.
Ezra, L.	Stedman, B.
Fisher of Rednal, B.	Stewart of Fulham, L.
Gallacher, L.	Stoddart of Swindon, L.
Graham of Edmonton, L.	Strabolgi, L.
Grimond, L.	Strauss, L.
Hampton, L.	Taylor of Blackburn, L.
Hatch of Lusby, L.	Taylor of Gryfe, L.
Hayter, L.	Taylor of Mansfield, L.
Hooson, L.	Tordoff, L.
Hughes, L.	Underhill, L.
Hunt, L.	Wallace of Coslany, L.
Jeger, B.	Wedderburn of Charlton, L.
Jenkins of Putney, L.	Wells-Pestell, L.
Kaldor, L.	Wigoder, L.
Kearton, L.	Williams of Elvel, L.

NOT-CONTENTS

Abercorn, D.	Boardman, L.
Ailesbury, M.	Boyd-Carpenter, L.
Alexander of Tunis, E.	Brabazon of Tara, L.
Auckland, L.	Brocket, L.
Bauer, L.	Brougham and Vaux, L.
Belhaven and Stenton, L.	Bruce-Gardyne, L.
Beloff, L.	Butterworth, L.
Belstead, L.	Byron, L.
Birdwood, L.	Caithness, E.
Blake, L.	Cameron of Lochbroom, L.
Blyth, L.	Campbell of Alloway, L.

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Carnegie of Lour, B.	Macleod of Borve, B.
Carnock, L.	Margadale, L.
Chelmer, L.	Maude of Stratford-upon-Avon, L.
Colville of Culross, V.	Merrivale, L.
Constantine of Stanmore, L.	Mersey, V.
Cowley, E.	Milverton, L.
Cullen of Ashbourne, L.	Monk Bretton, L.
Davidson, V.	Montgomery of Alamein, V.
De Freyne, L.	Morris, L.
Denham, L. [Teller]	Mowbray and Stourton, L.
Denning, L.	Munster, E.
Digby, L.	Murton of Lindisfarne, L.
Drumalbyn, L.	Newall, L.
Dudley, B.	Nugent of Guildford, L.
Ebbisham, L.	Pender, L.
Effingham, E.	Penrhyn, L.
Ellenborough, L.	Peyton of Yeovil, L.
Elles, B.	Plummer of St. Marylebone, L.
Elliot of Harwood, B.	Portland, D.
Elliott of Morpeth, L.	Reay, L.
Elton, L.	Reigate, L.
Fraser of Kilmorack, L.	Reilly, L.
Gainford, L.	Richardson, L.
Gardner of Parkes, B.	Romney, E.
Glanusk, L.	St. Davids, V.
Glenarthur, L.	Saint Oswald, L.
Gray of Contin, L.	Salisbury, M.
Gridley, L.	Saltoun of Abernethy, Ly.
Grimthorpe, L.	Sandford, L.
Hailsham of Saint Marylebone, L.	Selkirk, E.
Halsbury, E.	Sempill, Ly.
Hanson, L.	Shannon, E.
Harmar-Nicholls, L.	Sharples, B.
Henderson of Brompton, L.	Skelmersdale, L.
Hesketh, L.	Somers, L.
Hives, L.	Stodart of Leaston, L.
Home of the Hirsell, L.	Strathspey, L.
Hood, V.	Sudeley, L.
Hooper, B.	Swinton, E. [Teller]
Hylton-Foster, B.	Terrington, L.
Jessel, L.	Teviot, L.
Kimball, L.	Tranmire, L.
Kimberley, E.	Trumpington, B.
Kinloss, Ly.	Tweedsmuir, L.
Kinnaird, L.	Vaux of Harrowden, L.
Kitchener, E.	Vickers, B.
Lane-Fox, B.	Vivian, L.
Lauderdale, E.	Waldegrave, E.
Layton, L.	Whitelaw, V.
Lindsey and Abingdon, E.	Wynford, L.
Long, V.	Young, B.
Lucas of Chilworth, L.	Zouche of Haryngworth, L.
Lyell, L.	
McFadzean, L.	

Resolved in the negative, and amendment disagreed to accordingly.

The Lord Chancellor (Lord Hailsham of Saint Marylebone): My Lords, I understand that the Statement has now been cleared, so I shall not call Amendment No. 5 for the time being.

Supplementary Benefit: Single Payments

3.37 p.m.

Baroness Trumpington: My Lords, with the leave of the House, I should like to repeat a Statement on single payments being made in another place. The Statement is as follows:

"Mr Speaker, with permission, I should like to make a Statement about single payments of supplementary benefit.

[BARONESS TRUMPINGTON.]

"I first simply set some facts before the House. Between 1974 and 1979, under the previous Government, what were then called exceptional needs payments rose from 0.8 million to 1.1 million, and their cost from £11.5 million to £38 million. These numbers were already a matter of concern, and one of the objectives of the review carried out in 1976-78 was better control of such payments. In 1980, the present Government made changes which it was hoped would overcome the problem, and which indeed took account of the recommendations of that earlier review. Initially, they appeared to have had some success. But by 1983 the number of payments was virtually double the 1979 figure at nearly 2 million, and expenditure had almost quadrupled, to over £140 million. By 1985, both figures had more than doubled again, to more than 4 million payments at a cost of over £300 million. And the growth shows no sign of diminishing.

"This trend cannot be explained by the increase in the number of claimants: the rate of payments per claimant has itself more than doubled since 1979. Nor can it be explained by changes in weekly benefit levels: the weekly scale rates rose in real terms by some 6 per cent. between November 1978 and November 1985. There have also been other significant improvements: for example, in some of the payments for children: in the amount and scope of regular additional heating payments, especially for pensioners; and in the rules concerning benefit for the long-term sick and disabled.

"Against this background, our firm conclusion in the recent social security review was that the present system of single payments could be neither justified nor sustained. It is incompatible with sensible planning and efficient administration, as is shown by the fact that, although only some 5 per cent. of supplementary benefit expenditure, it accounts for nearly 50 per cent. of all supplementary benefit decisions and over 50 per cent. of appeal hearings.

"More fundamentally, it is clearly not achieving what Parliament intended. Despite elaborate regulations and adjudication, wide discrepancies occur from one area to another. It is increasingly perceived as unfair by others, on incomes little or no higher than supplementary benefit, to whom no comparable help is available. There is unacceptable scope for exploitation and abuse, yet, at the same time, insufficient flexibility to meet the real needs of genuine claimants.

"As the House knows, it is for these reasons that the Government have brought forward in the current Social Security Bill proposals for an improved structure of regular weekly income support, coupled with a clearly distinct social fund designed to give appropriate help with genuine special occasional needs in a more practical, manageable and flexible way. We believe those proposals are essential to the proper working of the benefit system as a whole.

"Meanwhile, however, the growing unworkability of the present single payments system could not simply be ignored. In February, therefore, we put for

consultation to the Social Security Advisory Committee draft regulations making a number of changes within the existing structure as an interim measure. The principal elements were to restrict furniture and bedding payments to more clearly defined categories of need, paying particular attention to the needs of pensioners, the sick and disabled, and those leaving hospital after a long stay; to introduce time rules for repeat claims for items of furniture; to set standard sums for specific items such as cookers, and standard amounts to cover a range of miscellaneous household items which can at present be individually listed; and to introduce a standard pattern of help with maternity needs.

"We have now given very careful consideration to the committee's report, which is laid before Parliament today together with my right honourable friend's response. The report clearly recognises the difficulties to which the Government are seeking to respond. It also recognises the effort which has been made to take account of the needs of those thought to be most vulnerable, and welcomes in principle the introduction of standard payments and lump sums. While making it plain that the committee do not endorse the proposals as a whole, it nevertheless suggests a number of specific modifications they would wish to see if the Government should decide to proceed.

"For the reasons I have given, the Government continue to believe that action is needed. Moreover, those considerations have been greatly strengthened by the continued escalation of single payments in recent months. The most recent figures, for the four weeks to 3rd June, were equivalent to an annual rate of 5½ million payments and at least £400 million. Many local authorities and other bodies are mounting campaigns to stimulate further claims; for example, by circulating leaflets containing extensive 'tick lists' of items under some such slogans as 'Closing down sale'. Apart from anything else, the consequent growing burden on DHSS offices, despite the additional staff we are making available, is seriously detrimental to the interests of claimants themselves.

"The Government therefore propose to proceed with new regulations, but with a number of important modifications to meet detailed suggestions which the committee have made. These include further steps to protect the position of refugees, women who have been subject to domestic violence and young people leaving local authority care; a lengthening of the qualifying period for maternity payments; the extension of lump sum payments for miscellaneous items to childless claimants setting up home; and, perhaps most important, a doubling of that lump sum from £25 to £50 for each dependant. Regulations incorporating those changes have been laid today with a view to bringing them into effect on 11th August".

That, my Lords, concludes the Statement.

Baroness Jeger: My Lords, my first comment must be that the fact that we have this Statement today indicates the tremendous disarray in which the Government find themselves in regard to social security. We are now in the middle of the Third

Reading of the Social Security Bill, which, in the Government's view, is supposed to put everything right, and suddenly we have this very extensive and important Statement thrust upon us. I must protest on behalf of my noble friends and myself.

I wonder whether it has occurred to the Government that the reason for the increase in demands since 1979 and the fact that the demands have doubled might have something to do with Tory Government policies, with increasing poverty and with increasing unemployment. It is not for the Government to complain that costs have gone up: it is for those who suffer from the Government's policies to complain that their needs and their impoverishment have increased. I thought that the Minister seemed to be, in repeating the Statement, reproving the local authorities and claimants' committees who seek to bring their rights to the attention of claimants. The fact that more people are becoming aware of their rights and are asking for them is not a matter of regret on this side of the House, and I am sorry if it is a matter of regret on the other side.

I must ask one or two questions, although, in view of all the business we have to do today, I promise I will not make a Second Reading speech. However, there are some very puzzling points here. I must first ask the noble Baroness if this list of single payments is likely to be transferred into the social fund when that comes into effect. I read in the Green Paper, volume 1, paragraph 13.6:

"Payments from this fund will not be governed by detailed regulations".

I hope I am not anticipating what is going to happen to the social fund, about which there is some confusion, but if the Minister could give me guidance I would appreciate it.

I must next ask the Minister whether there will be any appeal against the allocation of these amounts. Will there be any special help during severe weather? We know the muddle that exists in the Government's policies on helping people to keep warm in severe weather. Also, I appreciate there have been some concessions, but I have to ask the Minister whether people from board and lodging accommodation will get the chance of a house. Will they be given the necessary assistance?

I also wonder, when the increase in these amounts is discussed, whether the Government are putting on the credit side the fact that, by making single payments to many families who have been homeless or people coming out of institutions, there has been a net saving in the cost of their institutional care or board and lodging care. I therefore do not regard those figures as being entirely a debit in the Government's finances.

Additionally, I cannot think why 11th August has been fixed. There is no Royal wedding that I know about, and there is no special magic that I can see about 11th August. I am sure that the Minister will tell me why that date was chosen. However, I imagine that there will be a great rush between now and 11th August by all the claimants who will find out that they have a right to ask for these benefits, and I only hope that the Government will take on extra staff to deal with them! Seriously, my Lords, this is no way to undertake the revision of such a serious matter.

HL 33 B2

I thought that the Statement was only just about fair to the Social Security Advisory Committee and of course I received its long report only a few minutes ago. However, I always first look at the end. At the end I read:

"The Government's response has been to propose much tighter conditions of eligibility and a greatly limited range of items. This response, because it seeks to attack the symptoms (increased public expenditure) without fully analysing the causes, must necessarily run the risk of causing widespread hardship amongst claimants who are already living at what is generally recognised as the poverty level".

We all say "Hear, hear" to that—at least most of us would, I am sure.

Lord Banks: My Lords, we on these Benches are grateful to the noble Baroness for repeating the Statement made in another place. I should like to make it clear at the beginning of my comments that we on these Benches would certainly be against abuse. If abuse is proved, we should certainly want to see it tackled. However, it is very difficult to tell how much the increase is due to the increase in poverty, as the noble Baroness, Lady Jeger, suggested—due, for example, to unemployment—and how much is due, as I noticed in a quick glance in the past few minutes that the Social Security Advisory Committee suggests, to a reservoir of unmet needs which is only now being fully appreciated.

It seems to me that those are weighty matters which ought to be investigated very thoroughly. The views of the Social Security Advisory Committee have been published only today along with the regulations. We have not had a chance to look at those to see precisely what they are saying, or to consider them in any detail. However, it is here that the advisory committee has criticised the impact of the changes on some of the poorest people. On the other hand, the Government are intent on going ahead with their regulations with certain modifications and one must ask why there is the rush. Why should the public and Members of Parliament not have the opportunity to consider the views of the Social Security Advisory Committee at greater length? Why is there not a proper time for reflection?

There is then the important point raised by the noble Baroness, Lady Jeger, as to whether these regulations which are now being issued will form part of the regulations controlling the social fund. That would seem to be contrary to what we have understood was going to be the position. The rush with which this matter is being pushed through without adequate time for general consideration of the report of the Social Security Advisory Committee is something about which we too would wish to protest.

Baroness Trumpington: My Lords, let me start with the noble Baroness, Lady Jeger, who said that we were rushing things through—as indeed did the noble Lord, Lord Banks. We announced our proposals on 24th February 1986, but we did not receive the report of the Social Security Advisory Committee until 22nd May. Since then we have been giving careful consideration to the committee's report and to the representations which it received. We have made a number of significant changes to our original proposals. However, we could not bring them before the House until we had

[BARONESS TRUMPINGTON.]

concluded our considerations, and these considerations have taken time to prepare.

The noble Baroness, Lady Jeger, asked about exceptionally severe weather payments. Those proposals do not alter Regulation 26, which deals with payments for exceptionally severe weather. In the light of last winter's experience, the Government are looking at this issue most carefully and plan to bring forward before next winter proposals which would also deal with those who pay for fuel by slot meter.

With regard to the right of appeal against amounts, all decisions as to whether or not a claimant is entitled to a single payment will be made by adjudication officers. All decisions will still carry the right of appeal, but disputes about amounts payable should arise much less often. The noble Baroness asked about widespread hardship and the view of the Social Security Advisory Committee. But let us be clear about the sums of money that will still be available. A lone parent with two children setting up home for the first time following a breakdown of marriage could receive furniture and bedding payments of up to £800. An unemployed couple could get over £250 to replace a cooker and a bed after a year on benefit. Those are not insignificant sums when compared with the position of other low income groups.

The noble Baroness also asked me whether the list is to be transferred to the social fund. I must tell her that no decisions have yet been taken on what items will be in the social fund. Appeal rights would continue. With regard to board and lodging claimants receiving assistance, yes, they will receive assistance if they qualify or, for instance, have a good reason as defined in regulations, or are leaving special care hostels.

On the question of staff to cope with further claims before 11th August, it is the department's aim to continue to match staffing of local offices to the workload through a complementing system which has been agreed with the trade unions. This system is underpinned by regular complementing reviews which are intended to adjust the basic complement. Previous complement reviews have had to be abandoned due to industrial disputes which so affected working patterns that the results would not have reflected how work is done in local offices. Because of the exceptional pressures which have built up in local offices, 5,000 more staff have been made available than would have been justified by the strict application of the complementing system for the current year. This addition was made pending the results of the complement review now taking place.

The noble Baroness, Lady Jeger, asked: why 11th August? The noble Baroness will know that there is normally a three-week period between laying regulations and their coming into effect. Three weeks from today is 11th August. The noble Lord, Lord Banks, asked why the Government were laying these important regulations so late. We would answer that we announced our proposals on 24th February, as I have already said. I think that I have already answered that question. I welcome the remarks made by the noble Lord, Lord Banks, against abuse, which were not quite followed through by the noble Baroness, Lady Jeger.

Lord Ennals: My Lords, may I assure the noble Baroness that this side of the House has always been—when it was on that side of the House also—as opposed to abuse as that side of the House has ever been?

I want to ask one question. Why was not the Social Security Advisory Committee's report published so that we could all see it, consider it, and have it in our hands at the time when this important Statement was made? The report has some very critical comments in it. Surely those should have been available to your Lordships as well as to those in another place and to the public at large?

Baroness Trumpington: My Lords, I thought I had answered that we received it on a certain date—I am looking back at my notes—and that we have been having complicated discussions on our views. But it has been published, as is the normal practice, today.

Lord Ennals: My Lords, today!

Baroness Trumpington: My Lords, yes, indeed; today. Perhaps I may clarify this point. The noble Baroness, Lady Jeger, said earlier that they were telling people what they were entitled to. I have a splendid letter from a lady in the North, who wrote to the social security office saying that she had been urged to claim for all manner of things. She did not want to claim for more than three very modest items. The form filled in was clearly not filled in by her, but by somebody else. She wished to disclaim that form and claim merely for the three items that she needed.

Baroness Jeger: My Lords, before the noble Baroness sits down, can she tell us how many such letters she has received? Was it only one letter and, if so, is it not rather an abuse of the argument to refer to one letter? I could refer to many other letters.

Lord Wigoder: My Lords, the Statement refers to the wide discrepancies that occur between one area and another. Am I right in thinking that the Government regard this as being totally undesirable? Am I also right in calculating that the great majority of those discrepancies arise as between the decisions of adjudication officers and not as between decisions of various independent review tribunals?

Baroness Trumpington: My Lords, for the sake of speed I shall write to the noble Lord on that matter.

Baroness Macleod of Borve: My Lords, can my noble friend the Minister say whether the amounts we are talking about are to be grants or loans?

Baroness Trumpington: My Lords, as the single payments scheme is in operation until the social fund takes over, the single payments scheme will proceed as it is now.

Friend think that it is unfair, unreasonable and unkind that groups of schoolchildren and pensioners who have saved up for a long time to come to Parliament for pre-arranged visits should have their tours disrupted because of one of these occasions? Cannot such meetings be held in a Committee room? As the last three visits have been by representatives of Spain, France and Italy and none have been by representatives of the Commonwealth, will my right hon. Friend tell us exactly who selects the people who come to these privileged occasions?

Mr. Biffen: That is a touching reference by my hon. Friend to the Commonwealth. Doubtless, he will elaborate at some time on who he thinks would be suitable to make an address in the Royal Gallery. The Heads of State who are invited here for this accolade are relatively few. There have been about 10 during the past 20-odd years. The Government, of course, give the invitation but they do so knowing that they speak for the British people at large. It would be a poor day when that proper degree of pomp and ceremony which should be associated with Government was relegated because of schoolchildren's parties.

Mr. Williams: The right hon. Gentleman is missing the important point. Many hon. Members have experienced this problem showing parties around this year. It must be borne in mind that these groups of pensioners, schoolchildren and so on are coming on a once in a lifetime visit arranged months in advance and, in many cases, at considerable expense. They deserve some consideration. Because it seems that the only rooms that need to be closed are the Royal Robing Room the Royal Gallery and the Prince's Chamber, it is inconceivable that we cannot arrange these visits so as not to close the line of route for a full week in advance.

Mr. Biffen: That point is, of course, frequently considered by those who are responsible for looking after such visits.*[Interruption.]* There are various serious responsibilities concerning security—a problem that has been compounded in recent years. I know that it is inconvenient that we must close down the line of route for about a week, but I do not believe that that period would reasonably be shortened without giving rise to other hazards which I do not believe the House would wish to undertake.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Stipends

22. **Mr. Greenway** asked the hon. Member for Wokingham, as representing the Church Commissioners, what was the total amount paid out by the Church Commissioners in 1985 for the stipends of bishops and clergy; what information he has as to the amount contributed by church congregations for this purpose; how these figures compared in real terms with those for 1975; and if he will make a statement.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner represent Church Commissioners (Sir William van Straubenzee): The total was £76.3 million in 1985. This included £33.9 million from church congregations. The

figures for 1975—when payment arrangements were different—were £21.3 million and £1.4 million respectively. That is an increase in real terms of 30 per cent. and 769 per cent.

Mr. Greenway: Are not those figures impressive? Will my hon. Friend give the comparative size of the congregations who contributed the sums mentioned in 1975? What was the average size of the congregation per ordained clergyman then compared with now? Does he think that the congregations get value for money?

Sir William van Straubenzee: The Church Commissioners do not keep statistics of the type requested because they are not responsible for those matters. I was able to give only the broad figures for which my hon. Friend asked and I am grateful to him because they show two things. First, the gross figures are substantial. Secondly the fact that contributions from church congregations have increased by 769 per cent. in that comparatively short period shows the enormous increase in voluntary giving that is willingly undertaken.

Mr. Teddy Taylor: Do bishops get a secretarial allowance?

Sir William van Straubenzee: The Church Commissioners pay the salaries of secretarial help for bishops.

WALES

Foreign Languages (O-Level Results)

16. **Mr. Grist** asked the Secretary of State for Wales what proportion of 16-year-old school pupils in Wales achieve grades A to C at O-level in foreign languages.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Wyn Roberts): An answer cannot be given in the precise terms requested. In 1985, there were 13,566 16-year old pupils in Welsh schools. In the same year, there were 4,141 passes at grades A to C in foreign languages. However, some pupils taking or re-taking O-levels were over 16, and some sat more than one foreign language examination.

Mr. Grist: Does my hon. Friend nevertheless agree that the overall figures for Wales, as in the rest of the United Kingdom, are deeply disturbing and quite extraordinarily poor in a European context? What will his Department do to try to persuade young people of the value of foreign languages in economic as well as in cultural terms?

Mr. Roberts: My hon. Friend will know that my right hon. Friends have published a draft statement of policy on foreign languages in the school curriculum. I agree that there is plenty of scope for further teaching and learning of foreign languages. There is spare teaching capacity in foreign languages and new opportunities are presented by the advanced secondary courses. Further, many sixth forms undertaking foreign languages are comparatively empty.

Single Payments

3.30 pm

The Minister for Social Security (Mr. Tony Newton): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a statement about single payments of supplementary benefit.

I first simply set some facts before the House. Between 1974 and 1979, under the previous Government, what were then called exceptional needs payments rose from 0.8 million to 1.1 million, and their cost from £11.5 million to £38 million. These numbers were already a matter of concern, and of the objectives of the review carried out from 1976 to 1978 was better control of such payments.

In 1980 the present Government made changes which it was hoped would overcome the problem, and which indeed took account of the recommendations of that earlier review. Initially they appeared to have had some success, but by 1983 the number of payments was virtually double the 1979 figure, at nearly 2 million, and expenditure had almost quadrupled, to over £140 million. By 1985 both figures had more than doubled again—to more than 4 million payments at a cost of over £300 million—and the growth shows no sign of diminishing.

This trend cannot be explained by the increase in the number of claimants. The rate of payments per claimant has itself more than doubled since 1979. Nor can it be explained by changes in weekly benefit levels. The weekly scale rates rose in real terms by some 6 per cent. between November 1978 and November 1985. There have also been other significant improvements—for example, in some of the payments for children; in the amount and scope of regular additional heating payments, especially for pensioners; and in the rules concerning benefit for the long-term sick and disabled.

Against that background, our firm conclusion in the recent social security review was that the present system of single payments could be neither justified nor sustained. It is incompatible with sensible planning and efficient administration, as is shown by the fact that although only some 5 per cent. of supplementary benefit expenditure goes into single payments, it accounts for nearly 50 per cent. of all supplementary benefit decisions and over 50 per cent. of appeal hearings.

More fundamentally, it is clearly not achieving what Parliament intended. Despite elaborate regulations and adjudication, wide discrepancies occur from one area to another. It is increasingly perceived as unfair by others on incomes little or no higher than supplementary benefit, to whom no comparable help is available. There is unacceptable scope for exploitation and abuse, yet at the same time insufficient flexibility to meet the real needs of genuine claimants.

As the House knows, it is for these reasons that the Government have brought forward in the current Social Security Bill proposals for an improved structure of regular weekly income support, coupled with a clearly distinct social fund designed to give appropriate help with genuine special occasional needs in a more practical, manageable and flexible way. We believe those proposals are essential to the proper working of the benefit system as a whole.

Meanwhile, however, the growing unworkability of the present single payments system could not simply be ignored. In February, therefore, we put for consultation to

the Social Security Advisory Committee draft regulations making a number of changes within the existing structure, as an interim measure. The principal elements were to restrict furniture and bedding payments to more clearly defined categories of need; paying particular attention to the needs of pensioners, the sick and disabled, and those leaving hospital after a long stay; to introduce time rules for repeat claims for items of furniture; to set standard sums for specific items such as cookers, and standard amounts to cover a range of miscellaneous household items which can at present be individually listed; and to introduce a standard pattern of help with maternity needs.

We have now given very careful consideration to the committee's report, which is laid before Parliament today, together with my right hon. Friend's response. The report clearly recognises the difficulties to which the Government are seeking to respond. It also recognises the effort that has been made to take account of the needs of those thought to be most vulnerable, and welcomes in principle the introduction of standard payments and lump sums. While making it plain that the committee does not endorse the proposals as a whole, it nevertheless suggests a number of specific modifications which it would wish to see if the Government should decide to proceed.

For the reasons that I have given, the Government continue to believe that action is needed. Moreover, those considerations have been greatly strengthened by the continued escalation of single payments in recent months. The most recent figures, for the four weeks to 3 June, were equivalent to an annual rate of 5½ million payments and at least £400 million. Many local authorities and other bodies are mounting campaigns to stimulate further claims, for example by circulating leaflets containing extensive "tick lists" of items under some such slogan as "Closing Down Sale". Apart from anything else, the consequent growing burden on DHSS offices, despite the additional staff that we are making available, is seriously detrimental to the interests of claimants themselves.

The Government therefore propose to proceed with new regulations, but with a number of important modifications to meet detailed suggestions which the Committee has made. These include further steps to protect the position of refugees, women who have been subject to domestic violence, and young people leaving local authority care; a lengthening of the qualifying period for maternity payments; the extension of lump sum payments for miscellaneous items to childless claimants setting up home; and, perhaps most important, a doubling of that lump sum from £25 to £50 for each dependant. Regulations incorporating those changes have been laid today, with a view to bringing them into effect on 11 August.

Mr. Michael Meacher (Oldham, West): Does it not indicate the extreme and justified embarrassment of the Government that they have for weeks put off laying this measure—one of the harshest in all their years in office—until after the Newcastle-under-Lyme by-election, and that they are now trying to rush it through in the last weeks before the recess? Indeed, I understand that they are proposing to table it for debate on Wednesday—the day of the royal wedding—in order, they hope, to minimise public awareness. Is it not characteristic of the Government that they have chosen a day of national festivities to hammer the poor with extra rates payments

of £300 million, and now cuts in single payments, which, on the figures that the Minister gave today, amount to no less than £180 million?

Will the Minister acknowledge that supplementary benefit levels are insufficient to pay for—and were never intended to pay for—major items such as furniture, bedding, blankets, cookers, fridges and clothes, and that the effect of these regulations must therefore be to push many families more deeply into poverty?

Does the Minister accept that cutting back expenditure on single payments to the 1984 level, as the Government intend, is wholly arbitrary and it fails to take account of the causes of the growth in demand for single payments, namely, the rise in unemployment, the growing number of long-term claimants, who inevitably have higher needs, and the steady erosion of claimants' other resources, such as savings or spouse's earnings?

Will the Minister acknowledge that the Government's SSAC said:

"The representations we received suggest that while some of this growth may be attributable to increasing awareness among claimants of their legal rights it may equally be accounted for by the existence of a reservoir of unmet need which is only now being recognised. The Government's response has been to propose much tighter conditions of eligibility and a greatly limited range of items. This response, because it seeks to attack the symptoms (increased public expenditure) without fully analysing the causes, must necessarily run the risk of causing widespread hardship amongst claimants who are already living at what is generally recognised as the poverty level."

—? Those are the committee's words.

Will the Minister acknowledge that his criticism today of local authority take-up campaigns implies a lack of concern about the real problem of under-claiming that exists and shows that in the Government's view a high level of unmet need is acceptable? Will he confirm that the SSAC opposes these plans to reduce help for buying furniture, for meeting the costs of newly born babies and for making urgent payments to people in need? Will he confirm that the definition of chronically sick and physically, or mentally, disabled is being made much more restrictive in order to limit claims? Will the Minister confirm that the Government's revised list for help with furniture now omits tables, chairs, cupboards, floor coverings and carpets? Will he acknowledge that financing the repair or replacement of those items without assistance or recompense will chiefly hit lone-parents and unemployed people? Is he aware that scrapping regulation 28, by which back payments can be made where benefit has been underpaid, will have damaging effects, as will withdrawing protection from pensioners and many other vulnerable claimants during extremely cold weather?

Is the Minister aware that the modifications to the original draft regulations which he has made today, in the face of deep hostility from the SSAC are minuscule and cosmetic? Is he aware that these regulations will cause intense and widespread hardship? Is he aware that this is the latest and, perhaps, the harshest measure to be brought in by the Government, taking the country back to a restrictive and inadequately financed system of poor law support, which we in the Labour party unequivocally reject?

Mr. Newton: It will not surprise the hon. Member for Oldham, West (Mr. Meacher) to know that I accept little of what he said. We have made it clear that we expect about £100 million to be saved in a full year compared with the expenditure in 1985-86. However, it is difficult to

make firm estimates in this area at present precisely because of the rapid escalation in expenditure that is going on.

I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's suggestions about the creation of intense and widespread hardship. As the Social Security Advisory Committee acknowledged—I did not attempt to disguise the fact that it does not endorse the proposals as a whole—a deliberate and careful attempt has been made to protect those whom we see to be priority claimants and cases, to ensure that they continue to receive help.

Let me give the House one example to set against what the hon. Gentleman said. A lone-parent, with two children, setting up home after a marriage breakdown will still be able to get help of about £800 to assist in that connection. That is not unreasonable. It is a sensible provision for those most in need.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): The Government gave it all away to the rich last Thursday, on the Finance Bill.

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) must not interrupt from a sedentary position.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The Government do not care.

Mr. Speaker: Order.

Mr. Newton: In view of the glowing terms in which the hon. Member for Oldham, West referred to the take-up campaigns of local authorities, I should tell the House that I have in my hand the "tick list" that was submitted by a claimant in the Strathclyde region. [Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) will listen for a moment, he may—[Interruption.]

Mr. Speaker: Order. If the hon. Member for Workington cannot contain himself, I shall have to ask him to leave, and I should not want to do that.

Mr. Newton: I have in my hand the "tick list" that was submitted by a claimant in the Strathclyde region, listing literally dozens of items for which she was making a claim, starting with four single beds, bedding for the whole family, three fires, three fire guards and four hot-water bottles. Also, I have the letter that that claimant wrote to the local DHSS office a few days later, which said that her social worker had been to visit her and told her that she could claim, had filled in the form, posted it and had given her a copy. The claimant wrote:

"Most of the things I don't need, so I am writing to let you know the items I do need, and could you ignore the letters he has sent?"

Mr. Martin M. Brandon-Bravo (Nottingham, North): Does my hon. Friend not regard the multi-purpose forms to which he referred in his opening statement, which is similar to the one issued by the North British Housing Association, which begins

"Dear Manager, Pay me a grant for these things", as a total abuse of the purpose of the single payment? Is it not a fact that this kind of leaflet and this kind of approach clog up the whole system of both the normal payment and the appeals procedure, to the detriment of the very people whom the system was designed to help? In the light of what has been happening during the last 12 months, is there not an unanswerable case for the new system that my hon. Friend is proposing?

Mr. Newton: I agree with my hon. Friend. I have some examples here, including the one that the Oldham social services department is circulating under the heading:

"Claim it while you can."

One local office in Sheffield, serving 21,000 claimants, recently received 4,000 claims for bedding within a few weeks and 2,500 claims for furniture within four days. What is happening is clogging up the system, is detrimental to the interests of claimants themselves and needs to be checked.

Mr. David Alton (Liverpool, Mossley Hill): Does not this latest attempt to shift the benefit goal posts augur badly for the new family credit system, which will no doubt be abolished if too many claimants take it up? Does the Minister not agree that this is just grinding the poor further into the ground? How will the poor contrast this decision to save £100 million with the decision to give away £1.5 billion in tax cuts? How will the poor contrast this decision to try to pick up a few petty offences with the government's failure to do nothing about racketeers and profiteers who are abusing hundreds of millions of pounds of housing benefit?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman should be aware that family credit has nothing whatever to do with this, except in one sense, namely, that the object of family credit is to do more to help low-paid families in work and to create a fairer system between those in low-paid employment and those on benefit. That is part of our purpose with these proposals.

Mr. Roger Sims (Chislehurst): Is my hon. Friend aware that the state of affairs that he has described cannot be allowed to continue and that his proposals will be warmly welcomed on this side of the House? Does he not think that the abuse of the single payments system, as demonstrated by the campaigns in the benefit shops that have been set up all over the country, illustrates the logic and the fairness of incorporating these resources into the proposed income support scheme? Would that not ensure that what is, after all, taxpayers' money goes to the people who are really in need and not to those who simply know how to manipulate the system?

Mr. Newton: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I agree with every word that he has said.

Mr. Max Madden (Bradford, West): How does the Minister have the brass neck to come to the House and make this statement, thereby saving £100 million which will rob the poor of money that they desperately need for items with which to exist, and blame the poor for claiming what is theirs by right? How many Treasury Ministers have attacked sleazy accountants for running seminars to advise people on how to save considerable sums of money through tax avoidance schemes? How many Ministers have blamed the rich for exerting their rights and claiming their rights by every legitimate means? Why does the hon. Gentleman come to the House to attack those who are properly advising the poor on their rights and how to claim them? Is it not a disgrace to come to the House with this statement which is robbing the poor of £100 million, when the Government have given millions upon millions to the richest people, who do not deserve it and do not need it?

Mr. Newton: I am saying no more than that the system is manifestly lending itself to manipulation and exploitation on a scale beyond what Parliament ever

intended, and that is not in the interests of claimants and is leading to delays in the proper processing of genuinely urgent applications. I do not believe that any Government would continue to live with this situation.

Mr. Tony Favell (Stockport): Will my hon. Friend remind the Labour party that single payments do not drop off trees, and that the recipients rely on their neighbours to provide them?

Mr. Newton: I agree with my hon. Friend. One of the problems here is the perceived unfairness by those who cannot obtain these payments so readily. It is right to try to restore the balance between different groups in their claims on the taxpayer.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): I represent an area where an increasing number of people are living on supplementary benefit, and where there has been a consistent rise in unemployment and all to do with it. Why are the Government not merely taking this £100 million from the poor people who need it, but not allowing an appeals procedure for the social fund so that an appeal can be made against any decisions taken?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman's question does not arise from the statement, but will be the subject of debate in the House later this week.

Mr. Tim Smith (Beaconsfield): For all this synthetic excitement from the Labour Benches, is it not clear from the figures that my hon. Friend gave, showing that the number of claims has doubled in two years, that the taxpayer is being ripped off by this gross abuse of the system? What checks are carried out before claims are made, and afterwards to see that the money is properly spent?

Mr. Newton: Our staff attempt to carry out proper checks, but not the least of the difficulties with the growing exploitation of the system and the burden that it is placing on officers is that it becomes increasingly difficult to administer the system properly. We are not prepared to tolerate that.

Mr. James Lamond (Oldham, Central and Royton): The Minister said that he had a circular from the social services department at Oldham, which has—correctly been circulated to clients and those making claims for assistance. Why has the hon. Gentleman been so illogical as to claim that the system is clogged up—as it is, in Oldham—but not to deal with it properly by ensuring that there are sufficient staff to deal with the problem? Has not the lack of staff been pointed out time and again by the unions representing staff working in social service departments? Why has the hon. Gentleman sought instead to clear up the backlog by choking off those who are correctly asking for single payments, while, happily for him, by coincidence, reducing costs to the Government by taking £100 million from the poorest people?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that we are in the process of putting a substantial number of additional staff into the social security system—some 5,000 in all—compared with what had been planned, because of the pressures on that system. I say to the House in all seriousness, because I believe that, in the end, it would be the view that Ministers in another Government would have had to take, that no system can sensibly cope with this kind of payment rising at the rate of 1 million payments a year.

Mr. Nigel Forman (Carshalton and Wallington): Will my hon. Friend confirm that, in making these regrettable but necessary changes, he has followed the advice of the SSAC on many of the most salient points? Furthermore, if these changes are made in advance of the full implementation of the social fund, what will be the bridging arrangements between now and then?

Mr. Newton: As I made clear in the statement, the measures are seen as a means of ensuring the continued workability of the existing single payments system, pending the introduction of the social fund. That is a sensible approach, and it underlines the Government's proposals.

Mr. Gordon Wilson (Dundee, East): Does the Minister accept that most applicants for such payments come from the areas of greatest deprivation, which have the highest numbers of long-term unemployed people? Does he not realise that they require certain items to furnish their houses? Does the hon. Gentleman not have any constituency experience of people coming to him for help? Would it not be better to deal with what is clogging up the system instead of abolishing it altogether?

Mr. Newton: The hon. Gentleman would be wrong to think that there is a clear correlation between deprivation and the number of applicants. One of the least satisfactory aspects of the system is the extraordinary variation to be found between areas when measured in payments per claimant. The rate of single payments per thousand claimants varies from 481 in one region to 1,540 in another. In Scotland, which will be of interest to the hon. Gentleman, the number of claimants per 100 unemployed varies from 38 in some offices to 291 elsewhere. Such variations must call into question the fairness of the present system and whether it is being operated sensibly.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Grantham): Does my hon. Friend agree that an eightfold increase in the value of the payments between 1979 and today is wholly unacceptable? Does he further agree that, as a general rule, such payments should be used for unforeseeable and exceptional needs, and that there is considerable evidence that claims are being made that do not fall within the general purpose of the regulations?

Mr. Newton: My hon. Friend is right. That is one reason why I am concerned that the interests of those claimants with genuine, unforeseeable, one-off needs are in danger of being swamped by some of the things that are happening throughout the country.

Mr. Hugh Brown (Glasgow Provan): Many of us appreciate the fact that the regulations are to be debated on Wednesday, the day of the royal wedding. That must have been thought up by the Government's dirty tricks department, but may I ask a constructive question? I accept that there are abuses. The Minister referred to Strathclyde, and I should not be surprised if the letter referred to the office covering my constituency. Some of us recognise that there is a problem, but would it not be better to hold constructive talks with local authority representatives, with a view to looking at the take-up campaigns, which are legitimate, and at the abuses? One difficulty is that regional directors do not have the political know-how to deal with such situations.

Mr. Newton: We try to talk constructively to local authorities when they are considering take-up campaigns,

to ensure that they are conducted responsibly and in a well targeted way, but that does not work with all local authorities, and some are easier to talk to than others.

Mr. Michael Hirst (Strathkelvin and Bearsden): Does my hon. Friend agree that voluntary insulation groups have done a good job in insulating annually about 500,000 homes of the most disadvantaged members of society, often with help from a single payment? In view of his statement, can he offer any reassurance about the future of voluntary insulation groups?

Mr. Newton: The regulations that have been laid today do not affect single payments for draught-proofing. I have made it clear several times that we would not wish to make changes in that respect without being assured that there were adequate alternative arrangements to ensure the continuation and, indeed, development of those very valuable groups. We are discussing that with the other Departments involved.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Instead of attacking local authorities and claimants' organisations which legitimately seek money from the DHSS, why does the Minister not improve the advice services of the DHSS? Is it not an abuse to say that those who are eligible to claim money, and legitimately do so, will henceforth be prevented from doing so for single payments? Will the Minister tell us when he last went through the indignity of trying to get a single payment to buy a secondhand cooker or an old bed or clothing or furniture? Has he been through that indignity? It is a disgrace that this week, when millions will be spent on the royal wedding, the Minister should come here to make the poor pay for the tax cuts and for the wedding that we are about to see.

Mr. Newton: We have significantly improved the DHSS advice services, and we attach great importance to that. Everyone recognises the value of the DHSS Freephone service, which is now operating throughout the country. One of the things welcomed by the Social Security Advisory Committee is the proposed introduction of standard lump sums for such items as cookers. That will improve the position of claimants.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Bearing in mind that this is an Opposition day, I shall allow questions to continue for a further five minutes, and then we must move on.

Mr. Michael Stern (Bristol, North-West): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the most welcome aspects of these regulations is the standardisation of payments? I hope he will agree that that will deal with a number of the racketeers who batten on to people who receive single payments. The effect of the regulations could be that more money will reach the people who need it.

Mr. Newton: I certainly agree. I think the Social Security Advisory Committee has recognised that our proposals are a real gain and will help to avoid some of the problems to which my hon. Friend has drawn attention.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Does the Minister recall that earlier this year in the Select Committee on Social Services, he warned us when we were pressing for more money to help disabled people and to provide care for old people that that could be achieved only at the expense of other items? In view of the Government's climb down on invalid care allowance and the passing of

[Mr. Dafydd Wigley]

the Disabled Persons (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act 1986, are these regulations being rushed through, so that the poor will have to pay for those two provisions? It is a matter of Peter paying Paul, and of the poor being clobbered on this occasion.

Mr. Newton: No, it is not. I know that the hon. Gentleman's anxiety is totally genuine, but I had hoped he would recognise the trouble that we have taken in the regulations to protect sick and disabled people, about whom he and we are concerned.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Cannock and Burntwood): Can my hon. Friend tell the House what proportion of those who are eligible to make single payment claims are doing so, and of those what proportion are repeat payments? I assure my hon. Friend that his statement will be welcomed by a large number of people.

Mr. Newton: Off the cuff I cannot give my hon. Friend the figures that he requires. It is certainly the case that alongside the regional and local office variations about which I spoke there are some astonishing variations between the numbers of claimants who receive a single payments the numbers who receive many single payments and those who receive no payments at all.

Mr. Don Dixon (Jarrow): The Minister said that refugees would not be affected by this robbery. Is he aware that in my area the vast majority affected by these cuts will be the industrial refugees, who are in that position because of the chaos inflicted by Government policies? Is he aware of the inquisition that people have to go through to get these single payments?

Mr. Newton: It is right that for single payments and for weekly payments of supplementary benefit local offices should seek to check that claims are genuine. I have not so far spoken about the removal of the so-called suitable alternative furnished accommodation rule, which has been generally welcomed. That rule was widely seen as disadvantaging many unemployed people who were trying to move out of board-and-lodging accommodation.

Mr. Peter Bruinvels (Leicester, East): Does my hon. Friend accept that the careful and thrifty people in my constituency deeply resent these single payments, the absence of checks and the fact that beds are supplied every 18 months? Leicester city council has launched a scurrilous campaign aimed at giving more to just one section of society, while those who are entitled to more do not get it because the council does not care about them.

Mr. Newton: I note what my hon. Friend says, and I am not entirely surprised in view of the amount that Leicester city council must have expended in producing this "Closing Down Sale" leaflet, which is littered with massive "tick lists". I am sure that that will arouse in many people just the kind of resentment about which my hon. Friend has spoken.

Mr. Jim Craigen (Glasgow, Maryhill): The regulations about which the Minister complains were introduced by this Government. Are we to assume that the upsurge in the number of single payment claims is a reflection of the social and economic policies that the Government are pursuing? Is the Minister asking the House to believe that the one example that he cited from Strathclyde—he did

not tell us whether the person would have been eligible for the items claimed—convinced him to do what he is proposing?

Mr. Newton: If some social workers are filling in forms for people, getting the people to sign them and sending them off, and if it then emerges within a matter of hours that the claimants themselves did not perceive that they had those needs, that in itself is a form of manipulation of the poor. I do not suggest that all social workers do that.

Mr. George Park (Coventry, North-East): Will the Minister accept that as unemployment stretches into years, inevitably household goods wear out and cannot be replaced on the amounts available through supplementary benefit? He is adding to the great hardship already suffered by some people. What happens when the cash limited social fund runs out part way through a financial year? Do people have to reapply at the beginning of the next financial year and hope that their names are further up the list?

Mr. Newton: As I have said, the social fund will be a matter for debate later in the week. The anxiety reflected in the first part of the hon. Gentleman's question is precisely why we have more generous rules in these regulations for those who have been on benefit for more than a year.

Mr. Peter Pike (Burnley): Will the Minister accept that already many thousands of people do not get the single payments that they need because of the way in which the regulations operate? His statement is an appalling attack on the poorest and the most deprived sections of the community. The Government should accept that they are the guilty ones, because they created the unemployment and the deprivation. The Secretary of State for Social Services should use his influence in the Cabinet to deal with the real problems facing the country. The Government should not pursue this attack on poor and deprived people.

Mr. Newton: The statement means that as soon as the new regulations are in effect those claimants with genuine needs that ought to be met will have a better chance of getting them dealt with promptly and efficiently, because their claims will not be buried in this torrent of deliberately stimulated claims.

Mr. Harry Ewing (Falkirk, East): Will the Minister confirm the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mr. Craigen), that he, the Minister, voted for the regulations about which he is now so critical? Can the Minister explain to claimants the difference between those who take full advantage of the Chancellor's tax laws by employing a well-paid and well-heeled accountant, and social security claimants who are advised by well qualified social workers so that they can take advantage, of which they have more need, of these regulations?

Mr. Newton: It is appropriate for the Government to make sure that tax laws and social security laws operate in the way that they were intended, and that they are not wide open to abuse. Successive Governments have done that. We are determined to tackle abuse on both fronts.

Mr. D. N. Campbell-Savours (Workington): Why does the Minister not listen to his own electorate? Does he

not realise that millions of his supporters believe that by penalising poor people and giving money to the rich under Finance Bills the Government are wrong? They believe that that is wrong, and they object. Why do Government Back Benchers not stand up and represent middle-class opinion? Those people feel deeply ashamed of what the Government are doing. They know that the Government are wrong, and in all conscience they often write to their Members of Parliament and tell them that they object. They go to Conservative conferences to object, and yet the Government ignore them. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman must not make a speech.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The Government ignored them because they do not care.

Mr. Newton: I shall confine myself to saying that I had not hitherto seen the hon. Gentleman as a classic representative of middle-class opinion.

Business of the House

4.10 pm

The Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Commons (Mr. John Biffen): With permission, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a short statement about the business for Wednesday 23 July. The business for that day will now be as follows:

Consideration of any Lords amendments which may be received to the Social Security Bill.

Motion relating to the Supplementary Benefit (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations.

Consideration of any Lords amendments which may be received to the Wages Bill and the Agriculture Bill and Lords amendments to the Dockyard Services Bill.

Mr. Peter Shore (Bethnal Green and Stepney): I note the change of business that has just been announced, and I have three questions to ask the Leader of the House. First, is not his statement further evidence of the truly chaotic state of affairs in the planning of Government business? Although we welcome the Government's capitulation on the amendments proposed in the other place to the Dockyard Services Bill, does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that four Bills and an order on one day is an abuse of the legislative process?

Secondly, on the supplementary benefits order that we have just been discussing, which sharply limits single payments to the very poorest, does not the right hon. Gentleman understand how offensive it is that this squalid measure and the Social Services Bill that precedes it should be timed to coincide with a glittering state occasion, when the focus of the press will inevitably be not on the House of Commons but on Westminster abbey?

Thirdly, since the right hon. Gentleman obviously believes that all relevant business must be completed before the recess, will he reconsider the date of the summer recess so that the House can debate the major report from the Select Committee on Defence on the Westland affair, which is due to be published at 11 o'clock on Thursday?

Mr. Biffen: The right hon. Gentleman questions the nature of the business. I do not accept his strictures and I answer him in the same terms as I did the Leader of the Opposition.

As to the second point on the supplementary benefits order, given the nature of business for this week, Wednesday was the most convenient day to debate it. It is perverse constantly to draw attention to the royal wedding in relation to business which we should conduct anyway as a working Parliament.

Finally, I note the right hon. Gentleman's anxiety that Parliament should sit beyond this week and into the future. The motion for the recess will soon be tabled. It will be debatable, and the right hon. Gentleman can put his points then.

Sir John Biggs-Davison (Epping Forest): Am I right in thinking that the royal wedding is in the morning?

Mr. Biffen: Yes.

Sir John Biggs-Davison: If so, what is the difficulty for right hon. and hon. Members to attend and debate the business in this place?

Mr. Biffen: I have shrunk from making that monumentally simple observation because I hoped that hon. Members would conclude that this line of argument was farcical.

Mr. David Alton (Liverpool, Mossley Hill): Given the continuing havoc in the Commonwealth following our failure to impose sanctions, does the Leader of the House agree that before the House rises on Friday there should be an urgent statement on the matter in the House? Would that not give Her Majesty's Government the opportunity to answer the serious allegations made yesterday in *The Sunday Times*?

Mr. Biffen: I take account of the hon. Gentleman's request and will pass it to the appropriate quarter.

Mr. Bill Walker (Tayside, North): When my right hon. Friend considers the changes that may or may not be made in this week's business, will he remember that we would rather work late this week, finish on Friday and have our holidays with our children, who, in Scotland have been on holiday for some weeks?

Mr. Biffen: That is a very good home-spun observation which will undoubtedly be put to the test when we debate the recess motion.

Mr. Robert Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Has the right hon. Gentleman had a chance to see the Channel 4 television broadcast which went out on Thursday night entitled, "All the Prime Minister's Men"—

Mr. Speaker: Order. We are dealing with the business for this week.

Mr. Wareing: I am coming to that, Mr. Speaker. In view of the allegations made in that programme that the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) issued a document to the Cabinet entitled, "It took a riot", following the Toxteth riot in Liverpool—

Mr. Speaker: Order. This widens the debate very much beyond the change of business for Wednesday.

Mr. Wareing: I shall come directly to the point. Is it not time that we had an urgent debate on the murder of Merseyside, which was opted for by the Government as a result of the response to that report in the Cabinet by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs.

Mr. Biffen: I did not see that television programme. I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government have enough business on for the remainder of this week. I cannot accommodate the debate that he suggests, but he will have the chance, as a private Member to raise the matter on Thursday or Friday.

Several Hon. Members rose—

Mr. Speaker: Order. May I again remind the House that this is an Opposition day and that such exchanges take time out of that period? I shall call those hon. Members who have been rising, provided that they keep their questions brief and to the point.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): On the Dockyard Services Bill, will the Leader of the House do the penance of reading the speech of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Mr. Gow) on Friday? Is it not a classic case of filibustering? Before he talks about my torpedoing myself, will he admit, uncynically, that the Government had continued—

Mr. Speaker: Order. That is just what I was hoping would not happen. The hon. Gentleman's question has nothing to do with the business statement.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Does the right hon. Gentleman realise that he has responsibilities to the House as a whole, not simply to the Government of which he is a member? If there is a strong demand, certainly from the Opposition, for the report of the Select Committee on Defence on Westland to be debated, will he recognise the need for this to be seriously considered? Is it not scandalous that the House will go into recess for 10 or 11 weeks while a report will be published and widely debated in the media, yet hon. Members will have no opportunity to debate it in the House?

Mr. Biffen: It is because I have a responsibility to the House as a whole that I believe we should go into recess on Friday. If the hon. Gentleman genuinely disagrees with the proposition, doubtless he will vote against it, as will others.

Mr. Speaker: Order. May I pre-empt further questions on that report, which is not due to be published until Thursday and so will not be affected by this statement.

Mr. Max Madden (Bradford, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman arrange for the Home Secretary to make an early statement on the appalling conditions which many visitors at Heathrow are facing? Many men, women and children are being kept for up to 24 hours without food or drink. Others have been taken to police cells and to prisons. I remind the hon. Gentleman that they have committed no crimes. The position at Heathrow is a disgrace. It does great damage to our efforts to promote Britain as a tourist centre and it is an example of grotesque maladministration by the Home Office.

Mr. Biffen: The hon. Gentleman raised the matter with me on Thursday, when I said that I would have the matter investigated. I stand by those words and I also stand by the comments I made then—that I disagreed with the premise on which the hon. Gentleman based his remarks.

Mr. Seamus Mallon (Newry and Armagh): The right hon. Gentleman will be aware of the many attempts to secure a statement on the Stalker affair by the Home Secretary or the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. Will he prevail upon either of those gentlemen to make such a statement so that the matter will not rest in abeyance until 21 October?

Mr. Biffen: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the inquiry is continuing and that, under United Kingdom practice, it would be improper for a statement to be made now.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Since on Wednesday the House will be debating the Social Security Bill, which prevents claimants from having access to tribunals and making appeals, which will cause those who have lost limbs in industrial accidents to lose anything up to 14 per cent. in compensation, and which is an all-out onslaught on working people and supplementary benefits, would it not be a good idea if, before the debate started, the Leader of the House would encourage the Minister responsible to tell the House what supplementary benefits and grants will be included in the Civil List for the royal family in the following year and give an estimate of the cost of the royal wedding on that day?

STATEMENT ON SINGLE PAYMENTS

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Mr Speaker, with permission, I should like to make a statement about single payments of supplementary benefit.

I first simply set some facts before the House. Between 1974 and 1979, under the previous government, what were then called exceptional needs payments rose from 0.8 million to 1.1 million, and their cost from £11.5 million to £38 million. These numbers were already a matter of concern, and one of the objectives of the review carried out in 1976-78 was better control of such payments.

In 1980 the present government made changes which it was hoped would overcome the problem, and which indeed took account of the recommendations of that earlier review. Initially, they appeared to have had some success. But by 1983 the number of payments was virtually double the 1979 figure, at nearly 2 million, and *expenditure had* almost quadrupled, to over £140 million. By 1985 both figures had more than doubled again, to more than 4 million payments at a cost of over £300 million. And the growth shows no sign of diminishing.

This trend cannot be explained by the increase in the number of claimants: the rate of payments per claimant has itself more than doubled since 1979. Nor can it be explained by changes in weekly benefit levels: the weekly scale rates rose in real terms by some 6 per cent between November 1978 and November 1985. There have also been other significant improvements: for example in some of the payments for children; in the amount and scope of regular additional heating payments, especially for pensioners; and in the rules concerning benefit for the long-term sick and disabled.

Against this background, our firm conclusion in the recent social security review was that the present system of single payments could be neither justified nor sustained. It is incompatible with sensible planning and efficient administration, as is shown by the fact that, although only some 5 per cent of supplementary benefit expenditure, it accounts for nearly 50 per cent of all supplementary benefit decisions and over 50 per cent of appeal hearings.

More fundamentally, it is clearly not achieving what Parliament intended. Despite elaborate regulations and adjudication, wide discrepancies occur from one area to another. It is increasingly perceived as unfair by others on incomes little or no higher than supplementary benefit, to whom no comparable help is available. There is unacceptable scope for exploitation and abuse, yet at the same time insufficient flexibility to meet the real needs of genuine claimants.

As the House knows, Mr Speaker, it is for these reasons that the government have brought forward in the current Social Security Bill proposals for an improved structure of regular weekly income support, coupled with a clearly distinct Social Fund designed to give appropriate help with genuine special occasional needs in a more practical, manageable and flexible way. We believe those proposals are essential to the proper working of the benefit system as a whole.

Meanwhile, however the growing unworkability of the present single payments system could not simply be ignored. In February, therefore, we put for consultation to the Social Security Advisory Committee draft regulations making a number of changes within the existing structure, as an interim measure. The principle elements were to restrict furniture and bedding payments to more clearly defined categories of need, paying particular attention to the needs of pensioners, the sick and disabled, and those leaving hospital after a long stay; to introduce time rules for repeat claims for items of furniture to set standard sums for specific items such as cookers, and standard amounts to cover a range of miscellaneous household items which can at present be individually listed; and to introduce a standard pattern of help with maternity needs.

We have now given very careful consideration to the Committee's Report, which is laid before Parliament today together with my rt hon Friend's response.

The Report clearly recognises the difficulties to which the Government is seeking to respond. It also recognises the effort which has been made to take account of the needs of those thought to be most vulnerable, and welcomes in principle the introduction of standard payments and lump sums. While making it plain that the Committee do not endorse the proposals as a whole, it nevertheless suggests a number of specific modifications they would wish to see if the Government should decide to proceed.

Mr Speaker, for the reasons I have given, the Government continue to believe that action is needed. Moreover, those considerations have been greatly strengthened by the continued escalation of single payments in recent months. The most recent figures, for the four weeks to 3 June, were equivalent to an annual rate of 5½ million payments and at least £400 million. Many local authorities and other bodies are mounting campaigns to stimulate further claims, for example by circulating leaflets containing extensive 'tick lists' of items under some such slogans as 'Closing Down Sale'. Apart from anything else, the consequent growing burden on DHSS offices, despite the additional staff we are making available, is seriously detrimental to the interests of claimants themselves.

The Government therefore propose to proceed with new regulations, but with a number of important modifications to meet detailed suggestions which the Committee have made. These include further steps to protect the position of refugees, women who have been subject to domestic violence, and young people leaving local authority care; a lengthening of the qualifying period for maternity payments; the extension of lump sum payments for miscellaneous items to childless claimants setting up home; and, perhaps most important, a doubling of that lump sum from £25 to £50 for each dependant. Regulations incorporating those changes have been laid today, with a view to bringing them into effect on 11 August.