

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Gentleman has adopted a sensible, careful and practical approach to that terrible tragedy, and I admire the way in which he has represented the interests of his constituents. Each such terrible incident generally turns on the particular facts of the case, and no two national disasters necessarily involve the same issues; but I will consider the hon. Gentleman's suggestion carefully.

Mr. Brooks Newmark (Braintree) (Con): You will be well aware, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that for quite some time the *East Anglian Daily Times* has been running a campaign entitled "Save our post offices". The Leader of the House has assured us that the Government support rural post offices, but in my constituency they are being closed year after year. All that we are asking for is a debate on the subject, so that we can agree on whether there is or is not a problem. May we have such a debate?

Mr. Hoon: I have made clear the Government's support for rural postal services, and I have made clear in the context of the specific issue that has been raised why I believe that the Government's policy is right. I am sure that there will be opportunities to debate these matters in due course.

James Brokenshire (Hornchurch) (Con): May I press the point about the future of post office services? I am

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disappointed by the right hon. Gentleman's apparent reluctance to grant Government time for a debate on the subject. In the past two years 2,500 sub-post offices have closed, five of them in my constituency. This is a serious issue, which is of real concern to communities throughout the country, and the change that the Government have made in the Post Office card account has thrown further doubt on the future of local post office services. We need a debate; may we have one soon, please?

Mr. Hoon: I have referred to the importance of the issue, and to the possibility of a debate in due course. [Hon. Members: "When?"] In the fullness of time.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will fairly recognise that the process of change in relation to the provision of post office facilities in rural areas has been going on for a long time. I will not trade with him the number of closures that took place under the last Conservative Government—although if he continues to press me, I might.

Mr. Mark Lancaster (North-East Milton Keynes) (Con): May we have a further debate on the future of ambulance trusts in the United Kingdom? I am particularly interested in the future of the excellent Two Shires Ambulance Trust, which covers Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. The consultation period does not end until 25 March, and on many occasions the Prime Minister has assured the House that he will take full account of people's views. Can the Leader of the House explain why posts in the new ambulance trust were advertised in *The Sunday Times* on 19 January, before the completion of any consultation?

Mr. Hoon: I am sure that that was designed to make clear our commitment to providing ambulance services that are cost-effective and of the high quality that we expect from such a vital emergency service. I assume that the hon. Gentleman supports the Government's approach in wanting high-quality and cost-effective services. We should be united on that particular policy.

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Orders of the Day

Children and Adoption Bill [*Relevant documents: Report of the Joint Committee on the Draft Children (Contact) and Adoption Bill, Session 2004–05, HC 400, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 6583. Fourth Report from the Constitutional Affairs Committee, Session 2004–05, Family Justice: the Operation of the Family Courts, HC 116, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 6507. Fifth Report from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, Session 2005–06, Legislative Scrutiny: Second Progress Report, HC 767.*] **Order for Second Reading read.**

12.26 pm

The Minister for Children and Families (Beverley Hughes): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I hope that we can all welcome the Bill. It was the subject of much debate in the other place, and I think that it has come to us changed for the better. I hope that Members on both sides of the House will be able to support what it offers: much-needed help for children who are often in extremely challenging circumstances, both in this country and abroad.

As I am sure Members will know, every year between 150,000 and 250,000 parental couples separate. One in four of the 12 million children in this country will experience the separation of their parents at some point during their childhood. For every one of those children that separation is a painful and difficult time, and represents the breakdown of their families. It is a difficult time for the parents as well, and we should offer them support; but I firmly believe that our focus should be on the needs of the children, who are often lost in the conflict between the adults.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I welcome what my hon. Friend is saying, but does she accept that one of the huge costs of the separation of parents is often incurred by the children? That burden is increased when one of the separated parents is not allowed access. The Bill makes useful suggestions for strengthening the courts' power to insist that access be granted when it can be granted safely. Would it be possible to arrange through the normal channels for us to have plenty of time on Report to discuss suggestions from Members on both sides of the House on how we might add to the powers of courts to ensure that the needs of children to see both their parents are observed?

Beverley Hughes: I am aware of my right hon. Friend's considerable expertise and commitment to ensuring that our arrangements to deal with those difficult issues for children are the best that we could possibly have. There is a range of potential provisions, only one of which consists of legislation. What we can do before parents go to court, and what we can do in relation to the nature of the decisions that courts make on access and contact, are equally important. However—I am sure that this will be a subject of debate, as it was in the other place, as we go through the detail of the Bill—we would not want any different legal model

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to compromise the interests and welfare of the child, which are paramount. Having said that, it is our view—this is enshrined in case law—that for most children it will be in their best interests,

subject to safety issues, to have continuing contact with both their parents. That is something that we want to facilitate. Indeed, when the Bill was debated in the other place, that was one thing on which both sides were agreed. Children need to have the love, close interest and involvement of both their parents wherever it is safe and in their best interests. We should make every effort to support families in achieving that.

Mr. Field: I thank my right hon. Friend for what she has just said.

Beverley Hughes: I can only thank my right hon. Friend for thanking me. That was a most straightforward intervention. I am grateful to him for those remarks.

I will come to the provisions of the Bill in detail shortly. It is important to remember at the outset that the provisions deal only with the 10 per cent. of separating families who turn to the courts for help in resolving arrangements for contact with children. However, the Bill does not sit in isolation. Just as important is the action that we are taking to help parents to agree a way forward without the need for court intervention if they can.

It will not surprise any hon. Member, all of whom have a great interest in this matter, to hear that parents who agree contact arrangements between themselves, without the courts being involved, tend to be much more satisfied with those arrangements. Therefore, where we can, we want to take steps to help more people to agree their own arrangements without going to court. We have announced a programme of work, including producing new parenting plans to help in working out those arrangements, access to specialist legal advice through a telephone helpline, which is working well, and stronger encouragement towards mediation to help parents to avoid the need for a court-based solution.

As we know, however much success we have with those arrangements, there will always be a minority of cases where people need to turn to the courts for help. Those will be the most difficult, most emotionally harrowing and most highly contested cases. They will be the cases that probably will not resolve themselves if left to continue and where the ongoing conflict could risk harm to the welfare of the child or children involved. Where the court is called upon, we must ensure that the intervention does not entrench the conflict any further, but offers a positive way forward for everyone, and most of all that the court proceedings and the solution remain uncompromisingly focused on the needs of the child or children.