

International

Babies in the House: UK's MPs seek family reforms

British lawmakers eye proxy voting

LONDON: As Prime Minister Theresa May's minority government pushes crucial Brexit legislation through parliament, British MPs cannot afford to miss a vote—even if it means taking their babies with them. Darren Jones found himself caring for his newborn daughter Ophelia when he was called to vote this month against a law that would repeal Britain's membership of the European Union. He took her past the green benches of the House of Commons chamber, and through the so-called division lobbies where MPs cast their votes.

"She slept through the whole thing," the opposition Labor lawmaker said, adding: "Sadly her vote didn't count." When MPs were called last year to authorize the government to start the Brexit process, Conservative MP Chloe Smith broke her maternity leave to vote with her baby Alastair. "Whichever way you look at it, this was a bit of history and it'll be a privilege to be able to tell our son he was there," she said afterwards.

She was hesitant about bringing him into the chamber, but Speaker John Bercow said: "Don't be sheepish about it, the little baby is welcome to come in! There's no problem." However, there are many who believe these MPs should not have to bring their babies in for late-night votes, and are pushing for a change in the rules.

Accused of hiding baby

MPs from across the political divide have joined forces to call a Commons debate on allowing new parents to vote by proxy—asking another MP to vote for them. "It's quite a small change but would have a big impact, and bring the House of Commons up to date," former Labor minister Harriet Harman told AFP.

She had three children in the 1980s while serving as an MP—and the atmosphere was very different. "I was accused

of smuggling my baby through the division lobbies under my coat," she said, saying she received a "horrible, hostile" reaction. She was doing no such thing—"I was still fat from just having had my baby. I shouldn't have been voting at all." The announcement earlier this month by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern that she was pregnant shows how much times have changed. But she still promised to be "available" even while taking time off after having the baby.

New Zealand is among a number of countries, including Germany and in Scandinavia, that offers paid parental leave. This is not yet available in Britain, although Harman is pressing for the change. There are now more than 200 women in the 650-seat Commons, and 17 have had babies since 2010, with at least two others currently pregnant. Men also want to play a more active role in their children's lives, and the motion does not discriminate between mothers and fathers. It also includes adoptions.

Accused of laziness

The whips, who enforce party discipline, often allow MPs to miss votes and debates due to ill-health and for family reasons, but the system is informal and in tight votes, can be limited. It is also private, and some MPs with young children have been criticized for being "lazy" by their political opponents after missing votes or debates.

Proxy voting would allow them to publicly register their position on an issue—particularly important when, with May's fragile Conservative government, every vote is on a knife-edge. "When we have such a balanced parliament it means that MPs have to be here to register their views, and indeed want to be here," Maria Miller, chair of parliament's women



LONDON: A video grab from footage broadcast by the UK Parliament's Parliamentary Recording Unit (PRU) shows Conservative MP Chloe Smith (left) walking to vote in the commons holding her baby. —AFP

and equalities committee said. In Spain, lawmakers can cast votes electronically for reasons of parental absence or serious sickness.

There have long been calls for electronic voting in Britain, where Commons votes are already recorded on iPads, although there is little sign of reform. This week's motion on "baby leave" is not binding but if passed, would

indicate to the parliamentary authorities an appetite for change. The speaker has already revised sitting hours to make them a little more family-friendly, and opened a late-night creche nearby on the site of a popular former bar. "The place needs to work around people having families. You want people who are having families to be part of the debate," said Jones.—AFP

News in brief

Helicopter crashes in US

LOS ANGELES: Three people were killed when a tour and flight-training helicopter crashed into a house in coastal southern California yesterday, witnesses and emergency personnel said. Witnesses described seeing a plume of smoke as the four-seat Robinson 44 craft plunged to the ground and appeared to clip the roof of one home before skidding along the ground at an intersection and smashing into another house. A nearby resident told the local ABC7 news channel it "sounded like a train coming through." Upon arriving at the scene she said she "saw one man out, I'm not sure if he fell out, and there was body parts." "I put my hand on the back of the helicopter and started praying over them. Because I knew at that point there weren't any survivors," she added.—AFP

Headscarf protests 'childish'

TEHRAN: Iran's chief prosecutor has played down recent protests by women removing their headscarves in public, saying they were "trivial" and "childish" moves possibly incited by foreigners. "This is a trivial matter and not a matter of concern," Mohammad Jafar Montazeri said in comments carried by the ISNA news agency yesterday. "This was a childish move by a young girl taking off her scarf, where some are carrying on with their daily lives." He had been asked about one of at least two women detained this week after standing on pillar boxes in busy streets without the mandatory headscarf. Unprecedented images of at least 11 women protesting the same way have been widely shared on social media.—AFP

Three gunned down

PHNOM PENH: Three Cambodians patrolling a protected forest in the remote east were gunned down after seizing a chainsaw from illegal loggers, authorities said yesterday, in violence highlighting the murky world of the country's timber trade. A military officer, a park ranger and an employee of the prominent NGO Wildlife Conservation Society were shot dead on Tuesday as they were leaving Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary in Mondulkiri province, national police spokesman Kirth Chantharith said. He said police suspected Cambodian border forces, who were assigned to investigate a stolen chainsaw, were responsible for the killings. "We suspect it was them who fired" on the group, Kirth Chantharith said, declining to elaborate further. Authorities are still investigating the incident and searching for suspects, he added.—AFP

Vatican rebukes cardinal

VATICAN CITY: The Vatican yesterday rebuked a senior cardinal who said its diplomats were "selling out" Chinese Catholics loyal to the pope as part of a deal aimed at normalizing ties with Beijing's communist government. In a sharply worded statement, the Vatican said it was surprising and regrettable that some people in the Church were "fostering confusion and controversy". It came a day after Cardinal Joseph Zen, the outspoken former archbishop of Hong Kong, caused a stir with a long post on his Facebook page that was highly critical of the Vatican. The statement, which did not name Zen but which official Vatican sources said was prompted by the controversy he began, said it was "surprising and regrettable" that some were promoting "a presumed difference of thought and action" between Pope Francis and his top aides over China strategy.—Reuters

Husband admits grisly killing that gripped France

BESANCON: A French IT worker on Tuesday admitted to killing his wife in a case that has gripped the country since her charred corpse was found in a wood in October. The body of Alexia Daval, a 29-year-old bank employee, was found hidden under tree branches near their town of Gray-la-Ville in eastern France. Her husband Jonathann Daval, 34, had previously insisted that Alexia had gone jogging on October 28 and never come back.

In the days after her death he cut a distraught figure, appearing in tears at a press conference with her parents and leading one of the running outings organized across the country in her memory. But his lawyers told reporters that Daval had finally admitted he killed his wife, though "he says it was an accident, that he did not want to do it, and that he regrets it". "He strangled her," lawyer Randall Schwerdorffer told the press, adding that his client's motivation "was not criminal".

"There were some very strong tensions in their relationship as a couple," he added. "Alexia had an overwhelming personality, so he felt diminished, stifled. At one point too many words were said, a fit of anger proved too much, and he couldn't control himself." Following the announcement, local prosecutor Edwige Roux-Morizot announced



GRAY: In this file photo, Alexia Daval's husband Jonathann Daval walks behind her portrait during a silent march in Gray in memory of Daval, 29, whose burnt body was found three days after her disappearance on October 28 while she went jogging. —AFP

that Daval had been charged with his wife's murder. Schwerdorffer said Daval maintains that he acted alone but he added that his client insists he did not set fire to his wife's body. The murder case shocked the couple's peaceful town, with nearly 10,000 people turning out for a silent march in her memory.

'Marital problems'

Daval, initially questioned as a witness, had told police an argument with his wife turned physical on the day before her disappearance, which he said explained the scratches and bite marks on her hands. Several sources told AFP the couple were

experiencing marital problems. Police arrested Daval on Monday and searched his home after interviewing more than 200 people over the past three months.

Police sources said a neighbor had reported hearing a car leaving the couple's home on the night before Alexia was reported missing—a fact backed up by a tracking device on his work car. Traces of tyres matching those of his car were also discovered close to where Alexia's body was found, Schwerdorffer said. A source close to the inquiry also said the body was covered in a sheet that was thought to come from the couple's home.—AFP

Melania braves public eye after cheating claim

WASHINGTON: First Lady Melania Trump made a very visible return to the public stage Tuesday by attending her husband's maiden State of the Union address, her first official appearance since accusations of infidelity surfaced about the president. The enigmatic wife of Donald Trump emerged publicly for the first time since she fed the Washington rumor mill by cancelling her trip to Davos, Switzerland, leaving her husband to attend last week's World Economic Forum on his own.

Melania's no-show in Davos came on the heels of a bombshell report that Trump had a fling with porn star Stormy Daniels in 2006, just months after his wife gave birth to their son. But for Trump's big night in Congress, Melania arrived smiling and waving, to warm and extended applause—dressed in a crisp cream white pantsuit that stood in contrast to the black donned by Democratic lawmakers in solidarity with the victims of sexual harassment.

Minutes later, her husband took the floor and exchanged waves with his wife. Among Trumps' guests in the first lady's box were a US Marine corporal who

stepped on an explosive device and lost both legs while deployed in Iraq in 2007; first responders who helped save hurricane victims in Louisiana and Texas, and parents of children killed by the gang MS-13.

Breaking with tradition, the first couple arrived separately to the Capitol, because, according to the first lady's spokesperson Stephanie Grisham, she was accompanying guests. Afterwards, the first lady was seen being escorted out of the gallery by a military officer, as Trump spoke with lawmakers and administration officials on the House floor. It was not immediately clear whether the Trumps returned together to the White House.

The Melania mystery

As the 47-year-old wife of a 71-year-old man known for past lewd remarks about women, and whose two past divorces became public spectacles, Melania Trump is dogged by speculation that they lead largely separate lives. Speculation flared anew when The Wall Street Journal reported on January 12 that Trump had paid Daniels \$130,000, one month before the November 2016 election, to keep their adulterous liaison quiet. The porn star was questioned anew about the reports as a guest given star billing Tuesday on late night ABC talk show "Jimmy Kimmel Live!" But Daniels, reportedly bound by the non-disclosure agreement about the alleged fling, revealed little—laughing awkwardly, flashing tight-



WASHINGTON: US First Lady Melania Trump looks on as she arrives for the State of the Union address at the US Capitol in Washington, DC. —AFP

lipped smiles and deflecting Kimmel's questions at every chance.

"I thought this was a talk show, not a horror movie," she said as Kimmel read from the transcript of a 2011 In Touch magazine interview, only recently published and reportedly about the liaison. As for Melania, her opinions and goals have remained a mystery to millions of Americans. She is a

former model who once posed nude in her husband's private jet, and the first foreign-born wife of a US president in nearly 200 years. She spent her first months as first lady living in New York, and refused to move to the White House until her young son Barron finished the school year. She makes few public speeches, and is rarely seen in Washington.—AFP