

Press release: Minister for Europe delivers key speech at Ukraine conference

Two months on from the London Ukraine Reform Conference, Sir Alan Duncan will travel to Ukraine where he will meet representatives of the Ukrainian government, including the Vice Prime Minister for European Integration Ivanna Klympush-Tsyntsadze. He will also hear about the deteriorating human rights situation in Crimea, illegally annexed by Russia, when he meets with Crimean human rights defenders.

Sir Alan will deliver a keynote speech at the Yalta European Strategy (YES) Forum, an annual conference focusing on Ukraine's European future. He will reaffirm that the UK government will continue to support the Ukrainian people and government in their efforts to implement an ambitious programme of political and economic reform.

Ahead of his visit, Sir Alan said:

I am delighted to make my first trip to Ukraine and I'm looking forward to following up on the priority reform areas discussed at the London Ukraine Reform Conference. It's clear that Ukraine's security and success matters to the UK, Europe and beyond. I urge the Ukrainian government to push forward their ambitious reform programme, particularly on anti-corruption, pensions, healthcare and the judiciary.

My message to the Ukrainian people and government is that we stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you in upholding Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. As the UK leaves the EU, our political and practical support will not diminish. We remain committed to Ukraine over the long term, and fully support Ukraine's path towards greater integration with Europe.

I will also meet Crimean human rights defenders to discuss the deteriorating human rights situation in Crimea. The UK does not, and will not, recognise the illegal annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia. Crimea is Ukraine.

Speech: International Day of Democracy

15th September marks the United Nations International Day of Democracy. I wanted to take this opportunity to restate the UK's strong support for democracy and human rights at a time when civil society is under increased threat in many parts of the world. If democracy is to flourish in Britain, Rwanda and the world, we need to discover a mutual trust—a trust of citizens in their politicians and, perhaps most difficult of all, a trust of politicians in their citizens. Democracy, like any important moral consideration, is not a state but an activity, a way of behaving. It is an active, living contract between the politician and the citizen. If the International Day of Democracy is about anything, it is about citizens.

Democracy carries risks, of course, including that of over-promising or blaming all of a country's ills on a particular group of people but adopting the citizen-based approach that democracy implies is the safest best for long-term stable and effective government. There is a strong correlation between societies that are secure and prosperous and those that enjoy participative democracy.

The UK supports democracy worldwide because we believe it is the system of government that best allows for individual freedom. It rests on foundations that have to be built over time: strong institutions, responsible and accountable government, a free and responsible press, the rule of law and equal rights for men and women. The UK supports a wide range of democracy initiatives, including funding NGOs that increase citizen participation, promoting inclusion of marginalised groups, providing training for legal professionals, promoting freedom of expression and helping strengthen parliaments.

We all need to recognise that different societies have different responses to democracy. Rwanda has unique circumstances and history which has shaped the political system we see today. Models of democracy also cannot and should not be imposed by others and necessarily need time to take root. Democracy is an evolutionary process rather than a fixed end result. No model is perfect, and all remain works in progress.

Elections are rightly seen as important barometers of a country's democratic credentials. I was lucky enough to be an official observer in Muhanga district during the August Presidential elections and was pleased to see the people of Rwanda participating peacefully and in great numbers, with a result which I believe reflected the will of most Rwandans. I was particularly encouraged to see broader media coverage than in the last elections, and some instances of the obstruction of opposition candidates reported and addressed rapidly by the National Election Commission and the government.

I was concerned, however, by the lack of clarity in the registration process for candidates which appear to have made it impossible for certain credible candidates to register. Along with other international observers, I personally saw irregularities with the counting of ballots and vote

tabulation. I know that the National Electoral Commission is committed to improving the system and I very much hope that Rwanda will take the opportunity to continue to amend its electoral processes in advance of the 2018 parliamentary elections as part of the democratic journey here. This is important not just for its own sake but for people's faith in the process.

I am concerned by the arrests and legal challenges in recent weeks. While Rwanda's political situation and recent terrible history is unique, it is concerning to see the targeting of opposition figures.

As diplomats, we are often (rightly) accused of focussing too much on the short term. If I step back, the progress Rwanda has made towards becoming a modern democracy during my four years in Kigali is clear. The transformation since the horrors of 1994 are nothing short of incredible. The UK is proud to be a friend and partner of Rwanda, and to play its part in assisting with Rwanda's democratic development.

End.

Press release: Foreign Secretary condemns new North Korea missile test

North Korea has conducted yet another illegal missile launch. The UK and the international community have condemned the aggressive and illegal actions of the North Korean regime, and the succession of missile and nuclear tests. We stand firmly by Japan and our other international partners.

We are working to mobilise world opinion with the aim of achieving a diplomatic solution to the situation on the Korean peninsula.

This week the most stringent UN sanctions regime placed on any nation in the 21st century was imposed on North Korea, after being unanimously agreed at the UN Security Council. These measures now need to be robustly enforced. We urge all states to play their part in changing the course North Korea is taking.

Press release: Attorney General seeks evidence on the impact of social media

on criminal trials

Judges, solicitors and victims' groups are being asked to submit evidence about the impact of social media on criminal trials in a Call for Evidence launched by Attorney General Jeremy Wright QC MP today. The Call for Evidence asks for experience of trials being affected by social media commentary and evidence of anonymity orders and reporting restrictions being breached on social media. The purpose of the Call for Evidence is to ascertain whether the risks posed by social media to the administration of justice are increasing, and whether any further action needs to be taken.

The Attorney General Jeremy Wright QC MP said:

“Every defendant in this country is entitled to a fair trial where a verdict is delivered based on the evidence heard in court. Our Contempt of Court laws are designed to prevent trial by media, however, are they able to protect against trials by social media? I am looking for expert evidence on whether the increasing influence and ubiquity of social media is having an impact on criminal trials and if so, whether the criminal justice system has the tools it needs to manage that risk.”

The Contempt of Court Act 1981 sets out what can be published in order to ensure that legal proceedings are fair and that the rights of those involved in them are properly protected. It is a Contempt of Court to publish anything that creates a “substantial risk that the course of justice in the proceedings in question will be seriously impeded or prejudiced, even if there is no intent to cause such prejudice”.

Social media platforms allow individuals to reach thousands of people via a single post, making their views readily accessible to a potentially vast audience. Whilst the traditional mainstream media are well aware of the boundaries set out in the 1981 Act and the consequences of stepping outside them, social media presents new challenges to these fair trial protections.

The evidence submitted to this Call for Evidence will form the basis of a report prepared by the Attorney General's Office and inform a consideration of what changes, if any, are needed to strike a balance between the rights of the individual to express their views via social media and the protection of fairness in criminal proceedings.

The Call for Evidence is open until 8 December 2017.

Press release: More money in Severn

Crossing drivers' pockets in 2018

Drivers using the Severn Crossings will have more money in their pockets from January next year thanks to the UK Government's decision to reduce the bridge tolls for the first time, Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns announced today (15 September 2017).

Following the return of the Severn Crossings to public ownership on 8 January next year, the tolls will be reduced for all drivers in line with the commitment made by the UK Government in Budget 2015.

This will be the first time the tolls have decreased since their introduction in 1966. The normal annual inflation increase (due 1 January 2018) will also not be applied.

From 8 Jan 2018:

- Cars will pay £5.60 instead of £6.70.
- Small buses or vans will pay £11.20 down from £13.40
- Lorries and coaches will pay £16.70 instead of £20

The announcement comes hot on the heels of the [21 July](#) confirmation that the UK Government will abolish the tolls altogether at the end of 2018, strengthening the economic links and prospects of South Wales and the South West of England.

The Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns will announce the news to an audience of Welsh business representatives at the CBI Wales Regional Council meeting in Newport where he will also outline how the UK Government is working to deliver a EU exit that works for the whole of the UK.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

For so many years, the tolls on both Severn Crossings have been seen as an economic and symbolic barrier to Wales' future prosperity. Our decision to reduce the tolls – before abolishing them altogether – will cut costs for businesses, for commuters and tourists alike – helping boost jobs and trade in Wales and across the South-West.

This is yet another strong indicator that Wales is open for business and of the UK Government's commitment to making the right decisions for Wales' future as part of a strong United Kingdom.

It is estimated that the abolishing of the tolls will boost the economy of South Wales by around £100 million a year* and regular motorists could save over £1,400 per year**.

The UK Government is also today publishing its response to the [consultation](#)

on its proposals to reduce the Severn Crossing tolls launched earlier this year. In view of the responses received, the Government is confirming that it will not press ahead with halving the tolls but instead commit to abolishing the tolls entirely at the end of 2018.

Notes to Editors

1. *Welsh Government: The Impact of the Severn Tolls on the Welsh Economy, 30 May 2012
2. **Based on a monthly tag charge of £117.92 over 12 months
3. On 13 January, the Government launched a consultation, setting out a series of proposals designed to deliver improvements at the Crossings. This consultation ran for eight weeks until 10 March.
4. The consultation response can be found [here](#) from 0930hrs on Friday 15 September.
5. The Severn Bridge was built in 1966 and a second crossing was completed 30 years later.
6. When the bridges come under public ownership, they will be run by Highways England. Previously it has been run by Severn River Crossing plc.
7. The first Severn Bridge was opened in September 1966, providing a direct link from the M4 motorway into Wales, with a toll in place for use of the bridge to pay for the cost of construction. It continually operated above capacity and in 1986 the then Government stated that a second bridge would be constructed.
8. In 1988 it was announced that tenders would be invited from private consortia to fund, build and operate the second bridge and take over the operation of the first bridge. In 1990 the concession was awarded to Severn River Crossing PLC ("SRC"). Construction work also started in April 1992 and the second bridge was opened in June 1996.