

Jeremy Corbyn response to the Queen's Speech

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ***

Jeremy

Corbyn MP, Leader of the Labour Party, responding in the House of Commons to the Queen's Speech, said:

By tradition at the beginning of each parliamentary session we commemorate the Members of the House we have lost in the last year.

Sadly, Mr Speaker, this year we must also mark the passing of those we have lost in the horrific events of recent days and weeks.

The fire at Grenfell Tower in west London has killed at least 79 people. What makes it both a tragedy and an outrage is that every single one of those deaths could have been avoided. Something has gone horrifically wrong. The north Kensington community are demanding answers and they are entitled to them.

Thousands of people living in tower blocks around the country need urgent reassurance and the emergency services, especially the Fire & Rescue Service in this case, deserve our deep respect and support.

I also want to pay tribute to my Honourable Friend for Kensington who has in recent days demonstrated so clearly why her local community put their faith in her. Her determination to ensure every family is re-housed locally is exemplary.

Lessons must be learned in the public inquiry and a disaster that never should have happened must never happen again.

The terrorist attacks in Manchester, at London Bridge and at Finsbury Park took innocent lives, caused dozens of injuries and traumatised hundreds of people, with a wilful and callous disregard for human life.

The attack in the early hours of Monday in my own constituency is a reminder to us all that hate has no creed, that violence has no religion and that we must stand up to hatred whoever the target and stand together against those who would drive us apart.

Our communities and our country are strongest when we are united.

As our late colleague Jo Cox said: "we have far more in common than that which divides us".

It is just over a year ago that Jo was taken from us by someone driven by hatred. Jo was driven by love and by an infectious energy. It was in the spirit of that energy and passion for people, life and justice that so many events were held in her memory around the country last weekend.

Muslim Welfare House in my constituency near the site of that vile attack just a day later had held a Great Get Together event at the weekend.

Earlier this year we also lost the Father of the House, Sir Gerald Kaufman, who had served his constituents for nearly 47 years and previously worked for Harold Wilson in Downing Street.

Gerald was an iconic and irascible figure in the Labour Party. He came from a proud Jewish background and campaigned to bring peace to the Middle East throughout his life, and it was my pleasure to travel with him in that quest, to many countries in the region. I loved the lengthy conversations we had.

Both Gerald and Jo will be fondly remembered by all who knew them and worked with them.

I congratulate the mover and seconder of the Queen's Speech motion. First, I congratulate the Right Honourable Member for Newbury, on his speech.

I want to thank him for taking time out from his considerable responsibilities, looking after his extensive property portfolio and tending to his directorship of the UK Water Partnership.

I hope one day a Labour Government may soon be able to come to the aid of his Newbury constituents, by taking water into public ownership and to the aid of his tenants by putting a responsibility on landlords to ensure all homes are fit for human habitation.

I know the Right Honourable member will also continue diligently to pursue his other interests in Parliament; his interest in defence, in Africa and in rural affairs.

I turn now to the seconder of today's loyal address: the Honourable Member for Spelthorne, whose speech was typically articulate and erudite, as would befit a former winner of University Challenge.

Benjamin Disraeli once said: "If I want to read a book I write one". Well Mr Speaker, it seems that the honourable gentleman has taken the maxim to new levels, writing or co-writing six books during the seven years he's been a member.

Having looked through his back catalogue perhaps the one book that stands out is his 2011 book: 'After the Coalition'. Now I don't want to cut across his present literary representation but perhaps a sequel may be in the offing – though I understand the latest Coalition may already be in some chaos.

And nothing emphasises that chaos more than this Queen's Speech. A threadbare legislative programme from a government that has lost its majority and apparently run out of ideas altogether.

This would be a thin legislative programme even if it was for one year but for two years it is woefully inadequate.

Mr Speaker, it is therefore appropriate to start by welcoming what is not in the speech.

Firstly there is no mention of scrapping the Winter Fuel Allowance for millions of pensioners through means-testing. Can the Prime Minister reassure us that Conservative plan has now been withdrawn?

Mercifully, neither is there any mention of ditching the Triple Lock. Pensioners across Britain will also be grateful to know whether that Tory election commitment has also been binned?

And older people and their families might also be keen for some clarity around her government's policy on social care. Whether it's still what was originally set out in the Conservative manifesto, whether it's what it was later amended to, or whether it is now something else entirely?

The Prime Minister might also like to confirm that the food is not after all going to be taken from the mouths of infants and that younger primary school children will continue to receive universal free school meals?

On the subject of schools, there was nothing about new grammar schools in the Gracious Speech. Does she now agree with her predecessor that it is "delusional to think that a policy of expanding a number of grammar schools is either a good idea, a sellable idea or even the right idea."

Mr Speaker, the good news may even extend to our furry friends. If the Prime Minister can guarantee that the barbaric practice of fox hunting will remain banned?

Mr Speaker, the government has recently embarked on what are likely to be very difficult negotiations, which the whole House will want to scrutinise.

Unfortunately there have already been some leaks with the other side in this process expressing dismay at the weakness of the government's negotiating skills.

But enough about the coalition of chaos with the Democratic Unionist

Party, we must get on to the even more crucial business of Brexit.

Labour accepted from the beginning the decision of the referendum. We are leaving the European Union – the question is how and on what terms?

This government could have begun negotiations on a far better footing had ministers accepted the will of the House in July last year and granted full rights to EU nationals.

I hope the now minority government will indeed listen to the wisdom of this House a bit more and work in partnership with our European neighbours

It is in all our interests that we get a Brexit deal that puts jobs and the economy first. No deal is not better than a bad deal, it is a bad deal and not viable for Britain.

We need full access to the Single Market and customs arrangements that provide Britain, as the Brexit Secretary has pledged, and I quote, with the “exact same benefits” as now.

Neither must arbitrary targets for immigration be prioritised over the jobs and living standards of the people of this country.

Let’s decide our immigration policy on the basis of the needs of our communities and our economy: not to the tune of the dog-whistle cynicism of Lynton Crosby, or the hate campaigns of some sections of our press, whose idea of patriotism is to base themselves in an overseas tax haven.

And while we’re on that subject, let’s have no more dangerous threats of turning Britain itself into a tax haven, which would threaten people’s jobs and public services here, far more than in mainland Europe.

We do not yet know the official title for the Government’s much trumpeted Great Repeal Bill. But if we are about ‘taking back control’ then Parliament must be able to scrutinise legislation thoroughly. Thankfully the thin gruel of this Gracious Speech allows plenty of time for longer debates and greater scrutiny.

That must include ensuring that the Human Rights Act, and our commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights, remain intact.

It is our determination that by working with the devolved administrations, responsibilities such as agriculture and fisheries will be devolved to those administrations and not hoarded in Whitehall.

And on the subject of devolved administrations, may I also wish the Prime Minister every success in reconvening talks with all parties to restore the Stormont Assembly in Belfast as soon as possible.

We also very much hope that any deal done in this place respects the overriding priority of the Good Friday Agreement.

Mr Speaker, a state visit from the Spanish head of state was announced for July. But can the Prime Minister update the House on whether we can still expect the US head of state this year?

Mr Speaker, I said earlier that public service workers, such as our fire service, police and NHS staff, receive huge praise when they respond to terrorist attacks and other major incidents.

But it is not good enough to be grateful to our public service workers only at moments of crisis and disaster. They deserve dignity. The dignity of fully funded services, the dignity of not seeing their jobs cut and their living standards fall.

There are now 20,000 fewer police officers than when the Conservatives came to office and when the police raised this with the then Home Secretary she accused them of crying wolf.

I hope the current Prime Minister will correct the mistakes of the former Home Secretary. The Gracious Speech promises them "all the powers they need" but what the police and security services deserve, and the public demand, is that they have all the resources they need.

What has been briefed to the media yesterday about scrapping the changes to the police funding formula is insufficient, as that will only move funding between rural and urban forces when the real issue is that £2.3 billion has been cut from police budgets in the last five years.

Our firefighters did an outstanding job at the Grenfell Tower fire but those firefighters worked incredibly long shifts, in part because there are 600 fewer firefighters in London; ten fewer fire stations in London. Cuts and closures forced through by the previous Mayor of London.

We welcome the public inquiry but we can take action now and I pay tribute to Croydon Council for its commitment this week to install sprinklers in all tower blocks of ten storeys or more.

But such minimal fire safety measures cannot be left to a postcode lottery. So will the Government make available emergency funds for councils to both check cladding and to install sprinklers?

The Government should also have committed to a Public Safety Bill to implement the recommendations of the 2013 inquiry into the Lakanal House fire and reverse its guidance that removed the requirement to install sprinklers in new school buildings.

It could still do so, and it would do so with opposition support,

additional to any recommendations from the Grenfell Tower inquiry.

The Prime Minister says that legal support will be made available to the families affected by the Grenfell Tower fire. But they should have had access to legal aid beforehand, when they were raising their desperate concerns about fire safety, and were ignored, by a negligent Conservative council.

The lessons of the failed austerity programme must urgently be learned. We cannot have social housing on the cheap and we cannot have public services on the cheap.

So will the Prime Minister now halt the cuts to the police, cuts that the former Met Commissioner this week called "an absurdity"?

The cuts have affected our prisons too and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons has expressed his concern at the lack of a Prisons and Courts Reform Bill. One that could have implemented the Labour manifesto pledge to employ another 3,000 prison officers.

Our children's schools are facing budget cuts. Can the Prime Minister confirm whether cuts to per pupil funding are going ahead? And can she clarify to the House the status of the National Funding Formula?

The Gracious Speech mentioned legislation to protect the victims of domestic violence but does that mean restoring legal aid in such cases, or restoring the funding to re-open the many refuges that have closed?

We welcome reform of mental health legislation to give it greater priority, and we would welcome an assurance that no mental health trust will see its budget cut this year, like 40 per cent of them did last year.

Will she call time on the public sector pay cap, which means nurses are 14 per cent worse off today than they were seven years ago.

As the Prime Minister is aware, some nurses and other public service workers have been forced to resort to using food banks, alongside over a million other people in this country.

With rising inflation, the effects of low pay and falling real incomes are going to hit even more families. The six million workers earning less than the living wage; the millions of people in insecure work; those subject to the benefits freeze and the five and half million public servants.

Labour won almost 13 million votes at the election because we offered hope and opportunity for all and real change for our country.

The Prime Minister began the election campaign by warning that: "If I

lose just six seats I will lose this election". When it came to it, she lost more than four times that many seats to Labour.

From Cardiff to Canterbury, from Stockton to Kensington, people chose hope over fear. And they sent an unequivocal message: that austerity must be brought to an end.

Seven years of Conservative rule has left wages falling, inflation rising, the pound falling, personal debt rising and the economy slowing.

By no stretch of the imagination could any of that be described as strong or stable.

If you want to boost pay, the most effective means is through strong and independent trade unions. Workers collectively defending and improving their pay and conditions. So we would repeal the Trade Union Act and strengthen collective bargaining.

Across Britain people have shown they believe there is a better way. In recent years this Government has thrown away tens of billions of pounds in tax giveaways to the very richest and to big business.

It has done so while closing Sure Start centres, closing libraries, tipping social care in crisis and the NHS into record deficit.

Under Conservative rule, school budgets are being cut, college courses have closed and students are being saddled with a lifetime of debt while per patient funding in the NHS is set to fall for the first time its history.

Our manifesto, For the Many, Not the Few, and its popular policies, set out a very different path, which caught the imagination of millions.

A way for the public really to take back control so that our key utilities and our railways are taken into public ownership and are run in the interests of the many; not to pay the dividends of the few.

We would end austerity by making very different choices:

By asking the highest five per cent of earners to pay a little bit more, while still keeping the top ten percentage points lower than it was for most of Margaret Thatcher's time in office.

By asking big businesses to pay a little more in tax, while still retaining a lower corporation tax rate than any other G7 nation currently has.

Austerity and inequality are choices. They are not necessities. They are not unfortunate outcomes. They are a choice to make life worse for the many; to maintain the privilege of a few.

If this government rejects austerity, challenges inequality, invests to expand and rebalance our economy, then it will have our support.

But if it continues down this path of deliberately making people worse off. Of deepening division and of neglecting communities that deserve support and respect, then we will oppose them every step of the way.

Mr Speaker, this is a government without a majority, without a mandate, without a serious legislative programme, led by a Prime Minister who has lost her political authority, and is struggling to stitch together a deal to stay in office.

We will use every opportunity to vote down government policies that failed to win public support and we will use every opportunity to win support for our programme.

Labour is not merely an Opposition: we are a government in waiting, with a policy programme that enthused and engaged millions of people; many for the first time.

We are ready to offer real strong and stable leadership in the interests of the many not the few. And we will test this government's Brexit strategy, and what legislation comes forward, against that standard.

This election engaged more people than for a generation, a tribute to our democracy.

In the election, Labour set out a vision of what this country could be. It could be more equal, it could be more prosperous, it could have opportunity for all. That is what we will be putting forward in this Parliament, and fighting for in this Parliament, what we will be demanding in this Parliament.