

Stopping the small boats

I am pleased to report one of the hotels being used for migrants in my constituency will be vacated by the Home Office soon. The Minister reported progress with stemming the flow. He argued that it was not fair that groups of young men sought to circumvent the legal ways of entry and to take more of the places available for asylum seekers by refusing to use the legal channels.

He was able to tell us that numbers crossing from the continent are down by a fifth this year compared to last. The French authorities have co-operated more in stopping boats from departing French shores. The new arrangements with Albania have stopped most of the flow from there and have enabled the return of many to that safe country. The government awaits the result of the appeal to the Supreme Court over sending people to Rwanda who seek illegal entry to the UK. The processing of claims has been improved.

They have intensified work to find, charge and prosecute the illegal gangs operating the boats. It is good there has been some progress but clearly more is needed by pursuing all these options, and processing claims more rapidly.

Dear Colleague on extending the fare cap

23 October 2023

Dear Colleague,

£2 Fare Cap extension & support for Community Transport Operators

Extending the £2 Bus Fare Cap

I write regarding the Government's announcement today, confirming additional support for bus users as we extend the £2 bus fare cap until the end of 2024 and increase the funding available for Community Transport Operators. Buses are the most popular form of public transport in our country, playing a vital part in levelling up.

On 1 January, the Government introduced the £2 bus fare cap as part of our Help for Households to help passengers save on their travel costs at a time of increased cost of living. First launched for three months, the scheme has proven hugely popular and was extended until 31 October, and was planned to be followed by a £2.50 cap until November 2024, with £335 million committed to deliver these caps, save passengers money, and grow the economy. In England outside London, the local bus fares index decreased by 7.4% between June 2022 and June 2023, whereas in Scotland, Wales and London, where the

buses are devolved, fares increased by 10.3%, 6.3% and 6.0%, respectively.

I am pleased to confirm that using the savings from HS2, we will extend the £2 fare, right across England until the end of December 2024. This means the government has invested nearly £600 million in capping bus fares. With over 140 bus operators running more than 5,000 routes in the scheme, maintaining the cap at £2 will ensure passengers all over the country can continue to save significant sums of their regular travel costs until 2025 and help encourage greater bus usage. My officials are working with bus operators to confirm their continued participation in the scheme from 1 November, and further updates will be provided on GOV.UK in due course.

Supporting Community Transport Operators

Our support for buses includes community transport too. Community transport offers transport for people who have difficulty using, or no access to, regular bus services or other public transport. Funding until June 2023 supported community transport operators during the COVID-19 pandemic by paying operators the same level of the Bus Service Operators Grant as they received pre-COVID, regardless of services run. This has allowed operators to run services that might otherwise have been cancelled.

I am also announcing today that the Government will continue to provide increased financial support to these community transport operators to help protect these key services by uplifting their bus service operator grant claims by 60%. This significant support will be available to operators (including in London) for claims from 1 July 2023 to the end of March 2025. This enhanced funding is part of Government's annual Bus Service Operators Grant payments to support bus services in England outside of London, which includes up to £213 million for commercial bus operators and £42 million for Local Authorities.

I hope you will agree that the measures we have confirmed today will make a real difference to some of the most vulnerable in our society, helping people get around more easily and for less. This Government remains determined that people should have access to affordable and reliable bus services, and this funding will help us progress these aims as we continue to deliver on our commitments in the National Bus Strategy.

I look forward to keeping you updated as we continue to deliver on the vision for better bus services for passengers across England.

Yours sincerely,

The Rt Hon Mark Harper MP
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT

What should the Prime Minister put in the King's speech?

If all goes as planned Parliament will end the current session this week and prepare for a King's speech and a State Opening.

Given the state of the polls and recent by elections I assume this Parliament has at least a year to run before the next election to give the PM more time to demonstrate the competence he talks about and to deliver his five pledges.

The main opportunities he has to show the change he says the public wants rest on the year's legislative agenda to be set out in the King's speech, and changes made in the November and April budgets to come. I will be presenting detailed proposals for the budget shortly. Today I am interested in your ideas for legislation.

My own priorities are unlikely to appear. I would like to see

1 A small boats Bill to make clear to UK courts that Parliament does not want Human Rights Law to impede decisions and removals of illegal migrants from the UK

2. The completion of the Northern Ireland Protocol Bill to remove the problems with the Windsor Framework, restoring UK government of NI.

3. Restoration of the full EU Retained Law Bill with more EU law repeals and amendments.

4 Tax Reduction and Simplification Bill

5. A Wider Ownership Bill setting out more ways to promote ownership of homes, shares and businesses

6. A public sector productivity Bill creating opportunities for state employees to buy out their managerial and administrative tasks in government through an employee buy out.

7 A privatisation Bill to facilitate the sale of all remaining shares in Nat West and to sell Channel 4. Bill to be fast tracked to complete sales next year.

8. A People's BBC Bill as discussed here before

Covid Lockdowns

I do not have a worthwhile view on the efficacy of the vaccines or of the balance of good and harm from them . I have not read enough of the literature and have no medical training . Yesterday I reported the NHS line and the questions raised by some MP s over the vaccines.I have myself raised other big issues over the way government responded to the pandemic. At the time I raised queries about the statistics presented for infections and deaths.I did not presume to advise my constituents as some non medically qualified MP s did over getting vaccinated. If asked I suggested they talked to a medical adviser they trusted.

During the covid period I did have strong views on the economic damage done by extensive lockdowns. I worked with a small group of MP s to press for Parliament to be up and running and then for the earlier return of an active in person Parliament. I saw the need for more scrutiny of the wide ranging actions being taken to direct the economy and to spend large new budgets on healthcare. I argued for concentrating protections on the vulnerable and helping them safely avoid contact with possible disease carriers, rather than getting most of us to avoid contacts outside our own family or bubble. I voted and argued for less extensive lockdowns.

I also pressed for more work on the possible approval and use of existing medicines to blunt the virus and help with symptoms for those infected. I argued for isolation hospitals to be separate from other general hospitals, for the Nightingale capacity to be used, for more use of the private sector hospitals for non covid patients, for better air flow and air cleansing in hospitals and other public buildings. I have subsequently sent in these issues for the Covid Enquiry to consider when they can spare time from examining the issues over how Ministers behaved. To produce a good report they need to examine the scientific work, forecasts , NHS management of greatly increased resource and medical advice offered as it evolved during the waves of the virus.

I have not published all contributions from yesterday. The share prices of pharmaceutical companies generally have fallen this year for a variety of reasons. The lawsuits I see raised as contributors to share declines are about infringement of patents, rather than harms from covid vaccines. Governments often issued some exemptions from liability to speed introduction of vaccines that they thought would save lives.

Governments and medical experts continue to recommend a range of covid vaccines, and have made decisions now about which ones they prefer to use. Anyone thinking of having vaccinations can now find plenty of information about side effects and about what has happened to a small proportion of people who have experienced greater harm than a sore arm and feeling a bit under the weather for a few days. Those who do dislike these vaccines can make their own decisions as they are free to do and can study outcomes so far from using these treatments.

Vaccines harm and compensation

On Friday Parliament debated the issues surrounding vaccines and in particular the various covid vaccines. Christopher Chope produced a private members bill to improve payments to anyone badly affected by vaccine. The Minister reminded the House that anyone can claim a one off £120,000 payment if they have proof of disability and harm from taking an NHS vaccine. This applies to any vaccine including one against covid. The government added the anti covid treatments to the list of those items covered. The Minister explained that the one off payment does not exclude benefit payments for disability and sickness which may be necessary for anyone badly affected by a vaccine as well as by other more usual causes of disability and ill health. The one off payment is not compensation. The Minister argued that such incidence was unusual for covid and for other approved vaccines. It is unlikely the Bill will pass as it seems that the government and the Opposition disagree with it, thinking current arrangements to make payments are sufficient subject to admin improvements to ensure prompt payment.

The Adjournment debate is a half hour debate at the end of the day's business when a single member can be allotted the time to make a case they think important and hear a Minister's reply. Andrew Bridgen secured this slot to point out that there were too many excess deaths continuing in the UK and to argue these were related to the covid vaccination of most people.

The Minister drawing on her NHS medical advice agreed that excess deaths were continuing at higher levels than before covid, but denied this resulted from the vaccinations. She argued that because 93.6% of the population had been vaccinated it was true most people dying were those who had the vaccine. It did not prove or mean the vaccine caused those deaths. Nor did she detect a lower death rate amongst the minority who had not been vaccinated. She said there was some inconclusive evidence that non vaccinated people suffered a higher death rate than vaccinated. She argued that there were a variety of causes of continuing excess deaths, including the backlog of treatments, bad outbreaks of flu, and a range of other killers running higher.

Work on the sudden death of young people from blood clots we are told has revealed a small number of cases brought on by vaccines, but we are told more people die of blood clots from contracting covid. The Opposition supported the government in the debate of the Chope Bill and made clear their belief in the efficacy and success of the vaccines administered by the NHS.

I set this out as I know some constituents and readers are concerned about these matters. I have no medical knowledge or evidence to challenge the NHS/Ministerial view that these vaccines like all such treatments adversely affected a small number of people per million injected but are not the main cause of the current continuing spate of excess deaths. I offer people the

chance to debate this further but will not publish contributions that potentially libel the NHS or drug companies based on coincidence or circumstantial evidence with no proof of causation. It was of course open to people not to take the vaccine if they did not like what was said about possible side effects, or about the balance between possible harms and possible benefits of taking it. The authorities always said there could be some side effects and put in place a reporting system to monitor them. The issue for some Health staff is different if they had to take it. Everyone was aware these vaccines were developed at pace and approved to offer some defence against the virus when understanding of it was evolving.

I followed the debate carefully but did not contribute as I do not have any special knowledge or evidence to present to disagree with the NHS view. The argument that excess deaths today result from the vaccine need to show strong evidence of more excess deaths for the vaccinated than the unvaccinated and to show causes of death are clearly linked to the vaccine impact rather than resulting from higher levels of death from a range of causes from dementia to flu.