

Harriet Harman's response to the Queen's Speech



Mr Speaker, I'm sure the whole House will join with me in paying tribute, as I know the Prime Minister will shortly, to those members of our armed forces who have lost their lives in Afghanistan since the House last met.

From 1st Battalion, The Royal Welsh
Fusilier Jonathan Burgess
From 1st Battalion, the Mercian Regiment
Corporal Harvey Holmes
From 21 Engineer Regiment
Sapper Daryn Roy
From 21 Engineer Regiment
Lance Corporal Barry Buxton
From 40 Commando, Royal Marines
Corporal Christopher Harrison
From 40 Commando, Royal Marines
Corporal Stephen Walker

We salute their bravery, we honour their sacrifice and we remain steadfast in support of our troops.

There are some things where whoever is in government, whoever is in opposition; the country expects us all to work together. So we will genuinely work with the government

- In support of our troops, their wives and families and
- In support of the peace in Northern Ireland

As we did when we were in opposition before.

And we remember today the two members of this House who died towards the end of the last parliament - David Taylor and Ashok Kumar - and pay tribute to the contribution that they made.

Mr Speaker, I want to congratulate the mover and seconder of the Queen's Speech.

To assist new members can I explain that the seconder is by tradition a rising star, someone who's on their way up and the mover is someone of great distinction whose career is not ahead of them but behind them.

But having heard a typically spry speech from the Right Hon member for Hitchin and Harpenden I want to challenge that notion and I want to invite him to join my campaign "you're not past it when you're

past 60”.

I suspect that he'll always be best known for his musical interventions in Tory Party conferences - his trade mark Gilbert and Sullivan routine. I thank him for not inflicting a song on us today and I hope that his “little list” will not be the blue print for the new government. But, I do want to pay tribute to his work on international development. His work contributed to this government promising to keep development aid a high priority and I think there will be support across the House for that.

I congratulate the Hon member for Bath on seconding the Queens speech. He was first elected in 1992 when he snatched his seat from Chris Pattern who was then chair of the Tory party. On that night he became the living embodiment of consensus politics by achieving the distinction of becoming the first MP whose election was cheered simultaneously in all three party HQ's. Even so, no-one would have predicted then that he would now stand before us speaking in support of a Queens Speech of a Tory Prime Minister.

He performed that task well. He is also a musical performer. At last year's Lib/Dem conference – with eerie foresight - he played the Johnny Cash classic “walk the line”. I suggest that this time he goes to the Tory conference to play another Cash classic – “ring of fire”.

He's had a longstanding interest in science. And again with a self-knowledge that we can only envy he wrote a noted scientific publication “science with gas”

Congratulations

I want to congratulate the new Prime Minister and his government

On the steps of Downing Street he acknowledged that we had left Britain

“more open at home and more compassionate abroad”.

I thank him for the generosity of his words.

These are achievements of the last government which I hope members on all sides of the House can recognise and which I hope the new Prime Minister will protect – from the 1st ever National Minimum Wage, to the creation of civil partnerships; from the Sure Start Children's Centres in every community to the shortest waiting times in the NHS since records began.

Those are achievements of which Labour members are rightly proud and, in particular I want to pay tribute to the former Prime Minister My Rt Hon friend the Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath.

We will be effective opposition

We will be an effective opposition. We will not oppose for the sake of it. That's not what the public wants. But, we will not pull our punches. Though we are in opposition, we will be powerful in the public interest

We will be determined – to prevent unfairness
We will speak up – for the public services that matter
We will be vigilant – protecting jobs and businesses

The economy

As the government acknowledges, their most important domestic task is the economy.

The new Government takes over an economy in which recovery is already underway and where government action has blunted the impact of the recession.

Economic growth has returned.

There are too many people out of work but unemployment is still half the level seen in the 1990's recession.

And repossessions have been at half the rate that people suffered then.

But the recovery cannot be taken for granted.

The challenge now for the government is to embed and secure the economic recovery with new manufacturing and an even greater role for the low carbon sector.

Where the Government takes steps to do that, we will back them. But taking support away from businesses risks slower growth for the future. As the new Business Secretary consistently argued, before taking up his new post, now is not the time for leaving firms to sink or swim.

We all agree with cutting waste. But cancelling 10,000 university places is not cutting waste; it's cutting our capacity for future economic growth. Cancelling 40,000 jobs for young people under the Future Jobs Fund is not cutting waste; it's blighting their prospects.

The country does face a very serious challenge to reduce our deficit.

What the country needs to know is that the Government will do that in a fair way;

- without damaging frontline services; and,
- without putting future growth at risk.

And the country will want to see that it is not they who are left bearing the cost of holding the coalition together.

Before the election, the leader of the Tory party – now the Prime Minister was telling us all that the Lib/Dem promises were simply unaffordable.

At the very same time the Lib/Dem leader now his deputy - warned that the Tories' tax and spending promises could only be paid for by increasing VAT or cutting frontline services.

It's the combination of the two of them that worries me.

While the happy couple are enjoying the thrill of the rose garden the in-laws are saying that they are just not right for each other.

We keep telling them you can't pay couples to stay together. It is clear that it will take more than £3 a week tax break to keep this marriage together.

Tough decisions will be needed. And the British public will need to see that those decisions are taken fairly, and taken transparently.

Respecting parliament

And despite what we have heard about accountability and the new politics their decision to announce £6bn cuts in a press conference rather than to this House was a poor start. When I was at Highshore School in my constituency on Friday they were asking me whether they will be able to go ahead with their new rebuild. They - and people all around the country - want answers not a press conference.

Education

On education, today in the Queens Speech they pledge to help the education of children in poor families with a pupil premium. But they mustn't cut the programme which provides lap tops for children in poor families. We will look at the detail of the Bill to ensure it will help not hinder the development of strong schools in all areas that benefit the whole community

Europe

On Europe, it's in this country's interest that we have strong relations. It appears that Euro-phobic Tories and Europhile Lib/dems have cancelled each other out.

The Prime Minister must be clearly relieved that his coalition partners have given him cover to renege on the pledge he made to repatriate powers over social policy, employment and justice from the EU by the end of this parliament.

But having promised, following ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, that he would "not let matters rest

there”, will he confirm that that is precisely what he now intends to do?

The government intends to legislate to establish a “referendum lock” for future treaty change on transfers of power.

But what would the question be? Conservative manifesto wanted a “yes or no” to Treaty change The Lib/ Dems manifesto said the question should be “in or out” of the EU. The problem is not that they want different questions – the problem is they want different answers.

Political reform

The Queens Speech says the government will take forward political reform.

By devolving power to Scotland and Wales, and enacting the Freedom of Information and Human Rights Acts, our Labour government can rightly claim to have been a reforming administration. But we there should be further change.

Where the new government strengthens our democracy – we will support them.

Where they give more power to the House to hold government to account - we will support them.

We support a referendum on the voting system that would promise to increase democratic participation and choice. . I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister for the ease with which he’s persuaded the Tories to have a bill on electoral reform.

We agree with a right of voters to recall Members guilty of serious wrong doing.

We agree that the House of Lords should be elected.
We support the idea of fixed-term parliaments - it should be 4 years, not 5.

But we will insist that if the government loses the confidence of parliament – even by one vote – then that government has lost its mandate and there must be the opportunity for fresh elections.

These coalition partners - lacking confidence in each other - are already preparing for the day when they shrink back from their loveless embrace..

We will not support a 55% rule which would allow the government to cling on to office having lost the support of the House. They have no mandate for this change.

It would be morally unacceptable for seats to be cut and boundaries redrawn on the basis of an electoral register from which 3 and a half million people are missing. It would be unacceptable for individual voter registration to be brought in without the essential safeguards to maximise voter enrolment.

And we object to the Lib/Dem request that they should keep the public funding that goes to opposition parties. Some say that the Liberal Democrats like to be all things to all people. But even they can’t be both in government and in opposition. They can’t fudge this one. They are in government - they can’t claim Short money. We’re all familiar with the notion of clinging on to the trappings of power. But the Liberal Democrats are surely the first party to attempt to cling onto the trappings of opposition

We will support completing the reforms proposed by the Wright Committee but we deplore their decision to demote the Leader of the Commons from being a member of the cabinet – especially in the case of the Rht Hon Member for North West Hampshire who played a significant part in bringing forward the Wright Committee reforms.

The deputy minister has proclaimed a progressive agenda on political reform
But it is not progressive to politicise the police by putting them under the control of an elected police commissioner, it’s not progressive to scrap the Human Rights Act, pack the Lords and rig the commons. That’s not new politics. And if that’s what they try and do, we will oppose them.

Crime and civil liberties

The Queens Speech includes bills on crime, civil liberties and security. The new government takes over with crime falling. The safety of the public is the highest priority. And we will judge each proposal on its merit.

Where - as is so often the case - there is a balance to be struck we urge the government to take no risks and give the benefit of the doubt to the victim.

So, on keeping DNA records – why don't they retain the records they have and then - in 2012 - review the evidence to decide whether it is safe to dispose of them earlier? If that shows that there is no need to retain DNA longer than 3 years we will not object. But if the evidence shows that 6 years is necessary - then give the victims the benefit of the doubt.

And, in respect of the victim, we ask them to think again, too, on their plans to change the rules for prosecuting rape cases - their proposal for anonymity for rape defendants. The reality is that it is often only after many rapes that a defendant is finally brought to court. And it is when previous victims see the name and details of the defendant that they too find the courage to come forward. Police and prosecutors say that is essential in helping get a conviction.

To make only rape defendants anonymous sends a message to the jury that uniquely a rape victim is not to be believed. And it sends a message to the woman who's been raped - we don't believe you.

We have made progress on bringing rapists to justice. Don't turn the clock back.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, Government benefits from strong opposition

Our new team in opposition – our front bench and our backbenches – include wisdom, experience, youth and diversity - With more Labour women and Black and Asian Members than the rest of the House put together

The new government has a great privilege and a heavy duty.

They have said they stand for freedom, fairness, and responsibility. These are principles with which the whole country would agree. And we will make sure they live up to them.