



Alan Campbell MP Weekly Update

Friday 8th June 2018



Commons News

Abortion in Northern Ireland

On Tuesday, there was an emergency debate in the House of Commons on sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861, which relate to abortion. This was followed on Thursday by an urgent question on a Supreme Court judgement on abortion law in Northern Ireland.

Last month the Republic of Ireland voted in a referendum to repeal the eight amendment to its constitution, which prevents abortion. This decision has highlighted the situation in Northern Ireland, which has one of the most restrictive legal regimes governing abortion in Europe. Tuesday's emergency debate was in response to these developments.

On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland said the Government believed that the question of any future reform in Northern Ireland must be debated and decided by the people of Northern Ireland and their locally elected, accountable politicians. She therefore stated that the Government's priority remained to urgently re-establish strong and inclusive devolved government in the region at the earliest opportunity.

On Thursday, the Secretary of State was asked to make a further statement on this issue after the Supreme Court rejected an appeal by the Northern Irish Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) over the legality of Northern Ireland's abortion law on the grounds that the NIHRC did not have the required standing to bring the case.

The Secretary of State noted that the appeal had been dismissed and re-emphasised that it was a matter for the devolved Government of Northern Ireland.

However, a majority of the Supreme Court's judges said the existing law on abortion in Northern Ireland was incompatible with human rights law. While I was therefore disappointed that the judgment foundered on a technicality,

I believe the Supreme Court was nevertheless clear that the law must change.

PIP

On Monday, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions responded to an urgent question on the Government's withdrawal of its appeals in relation to Personal Independence Payment (PIP) claimants with chronic conditions.

Last week, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) withdrew from a court case with two chronically ill people arguing they needed a higher PIP award.

The Secretary of State confirmed that the DWP would pay the higher award and backdate any money owed.

For the second time this year, the Secretary of State has been forced to acknowledge that her department made a serious error in assessing claims for PIP. The previous error resulted in potentially 220,000 people being underpaid.

It caused misery that should have been avoided. This time the error relates to activity three of the daily living component, which focuses on managing therapy or monitoring a health condition.

The DWP has again got the law wrong on interpreting its own PIP guidance, leading to possibly thousands of disabled people not getting the crucial support they need.

Rail Timetabling

On Monday, the Transport Secretary gave a statement on problems with the new rail timetable, which have particularly affected GTR and Northern routes.

The Transport Secretary acknowledged that the timetable change had resulted in unacceptable disruption for passengers. He apologised and said the rail industry had collectively failed to deliver for the passengers it serves. He said that a special compensation scheme would be introduced for passengers on affected routes. The Transport Secretary also announced an inquiry into the failure of the new rail timetable, with a final report expected by the end of the year. He said the Department for Transport would assess if GTR and Northern had met their contractual obligations in the planning and delivery of the timetable change and committed to enforcement action if necessary.

Rural Crime and Public Services

On Wednesday, the House of Commons debated an Opposition motion on rural crime and public services. The motion noted concern at the high level of rural crime and called on the Government to ensure that the personal, social and economic costs of crime and anti-social behaviour in rural areas are fully understood and acted upon. It also called on the Government to ensure that rural communities are not disadvantaged in the delivery or quality of public services.

Community policing beats are essential to preventing, detecting and tackling crime in rural areas. However, nearly 400 police stations have closed in England and Wales since 2010. Particularly in large rural areas, this means officers must drive long distances when taking offenders into custody, removing the officer from the streets for a considerable period of time. In addition, due to the sparsity of social, mental health and general health services, rural police forces have taken on an increased role as an auxiliary social and emergency service.

Airports National Policy Statement and Heathrow

On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Transport made a statement on the proposed expansion of Heathrow airport.

He presented the Government's final proposal for an airports national policy statement (NPS), which outlined its support for plans to deliver a new runway at Heathrow, with a target date of 2026.

I will continue to look at the case particularly its importance to the North East.

The Government had many opportunities to bring this to the attention of Parliament, yet this statement effectively indemnifying HAL has only been unearthed at this critical stage.

I am concerned the Government has allowed HAL a risk-free investment while exposing itself to either massive cost recovery or crushing litigation before the decision has even been taken.

Before the process for securing detailed development consent for a third runway at Heathrow begins, the House of Commons must vote on the NPS.

I will scrutinise the revised NPS in detail in the coming days and follow the framework tests I have described, as well as the evidence of the Transport Committee's recommendations.

I will not, however, rely on the Secretary of State for Transport's assurances, which – given his handling of the disastrous implementation of the new rail timetables, as well as the revelation on potential taxpayer liabilities – I do not believe are worth the paper they are printed on.

Proposed Media Mergers

On Tuesday, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport made a statement on two proposed media mergers.

Comcast, the US broadcasting and cable TV firm, has launched a bid of £22bn to take over Sky. Last month, the Secretary of State said he was minded not to intervene as the proposed merger did not meet the threshold for intervention. On Tuesday, he confirmed he would not be issuing an intervention notice.

Regarding the other proposed merger, last year 21st Century Fox, which already owns 39% of Sky, had its bid to assume full control of the company referred to the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA). The CMA published its final report on 1 May. It concluded that the proposed merger may be expected to operate against the public interest on grounds of media plurality, but not concerning broadcasting standards.

The Secretary of State said on Tuesday that the CMA recommended divesting Sky News to Disney as proposed by Fox to ensure that Sky News remains independent. Alternatively, Sky News could be sold to another buyer with an agreement to ensure it is funded for at least ten years. The Secretary of State said that discussions will now take place between the Government and the parties involved to finalise details on an acceptable solution.

US Steel and Aluminium Tariffs (Government Statement)

On Monday, the International Trade Secretary made a statement on US steel and aluminium tariffs.

On Thursday 31 May, the US President announced that the US would impose tariffs of 25% on steel imports and a 10% tariff on aluminium imports from the EU. Canada and Mexico will be subject to the same tariffs.

The International Trade Secretary expressed deep disappointment at the US decision, which he said was unjustified and had weak foundations in international law. He said that as a member of the EU, the UK would work with the European Commission and member states on a European response to the tariffs. He outlined that this response would involve duties on US imports to the EU, measures to protect against displacement effects of the tariffs and pursuing a dispute at the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

President Trump's protectionist tariffs put at risk some 34,000 jobs in the UK steel industry and 3,500 in the aluminium industry. Unfortunately, the Government has a record of failure when it comes to defending our steel industry. When China began dumping its excess steel on the European market in 2015, the Government opposed the EU taking stronger defence measures. This crisis led to the loss of companies such as SSI and of 1,700 jobs at Redcar.

All UK steel producers want is a fair and level playing field. The UK and EU must therefore stand up to the US President's bullying behaviour and restore the integrity of the rules-based trading system. The Government should give consent to the EU's countervailing measures and enable them to come into effect on 20 June. It should support maximal measures to defend the immediate interests of our steel industry. Finally, it should confirm that it would continue with the WTO dispute against the US after we leave the EU.

Ivory Bill (Second Reading)

On Monday, the House of Commons considered the Ivory Bill. The Ivory Bill will ban the commercial use of all ivory – with a few exemptions – to help conserve elephant populations by reducing poaching. Numbers of elephants in the wild have declined by almost a third in the past decade, with around 20,000 elephants killed every year due to the global demand for ivory.

The decline in elephant populations demonstrates that a ban on the international trade in new ivory agreed by the international community decades ago has simply not stopped the illegal trade. There is now broad consensus that legal domestic ivory markets contribute to illegal poaching by fuelling the demand for ivory and providing a hiding place for the laundering of illegal ivory.

At the 2017 general election I stood on a manifesto which pledged to introduce an outright ban on the ivory trade. I therefore welcome this action to tackle the international trade in ivory, although it is long overdue.

By introducing a comprehensive ban, the UK can send a clear message at home and internationally that the only ivory we will value is on a live elephant in the wild. The UK can also show international leadership by encouraging other countries with a history of ivory trade to close their domestic ivory markets.

The Bill passed its second reading. It will now progress to committee stage, where I hope provisions such as ensuring proper enforcement and penalties and clarifying definitions for any exemptions will be strengthened.

Retail Sector (Opposition Day Debate)

On Wednesday, the House of Commons considered an Opposition motion on the retail sector.

The retail sector is one of the largest employers in the UK and contributed £94.6 billion to the UK economy in 2016. However, it is undergoing a period of transformation that will impact millions of workers across the UK.

21,000 jobs were lost in the sector in the first three months of 2018 due to store closures and company administrations. Even more have been announced since. Toys R Us and Maplin collapsed on the same day in February, putting 5,500 jobs at risk.

Card Factory, Moss Bros, Laura Ashley, Carpetright and Mothercare have all issued profit warnings this year. Marks & Spencer announced last month that it would close 14 branches this year and 100 stores by 2022. Just this week, House of Fraser confirmed store closures across the country, putting another 6,000 jobs at risk.

It is therefore disappointing that the Government's industrial strategy contains only three references to the retail sector. This lack of focus on our high streets is undermining one of the biggest employers and industrial sectors in the UK.

I believe we need to support retail by placing it at the heart of our industrial strategy.

The Government must step up to the challenge of rescuing our high streets and urgently publish a strategy for the retail sector.

Non-Domestic Rating (Nursery Grounds) Bill

On Tuesday, the House of Commons debated the Non-Domestic Rating (Nursery Grounds) Bill at second reading.

I welcome the provisions in this Bill which will resolve anomalies across the business rates system and bring clarity to business, the Valuation Office Agency and local authorities. I agree with the principle of the Bill that land and buildings associated with the operation of plant nurseries should not be liable for business rate payments.

However, I believe the spirit the Government has approached this matter with is not necessarily reflected in the state of towns and city centres. While I recognise that support is being given to small businesses through small business rate relief, many town centre locations are just above the threshold and do not qualify for any relief.

Many businesses on the high street find it a struggle to make ends meet, particularly when their online competitors have a distinct advantage with lower overheads. I am pleased that Ministers are considering digital taxation. However, without a real and direct strategy to deal with the decline of our town centres and high streets, the Government's efforts will all be for nothing.

Turkey (Backbench Business Debate)

On Thursday, MPs discussed early elections, human rights and the political situation in Turkey.

Turkey is a country with which we have a close friendship and shared interests. However, in the 15 months since MPs last debated the human rights and political situation in Turkey, things have got considerably worse there.

I condemn the ongoing human rights violations in Turkey, including the use of torture, as well as the rolling back of human rights, the arrest of journalists and the increasingly authoritarian regime of the Turkish Government and President Erdoğan's AK Party. Turkey now arrests and imprisons more journalists per head of the population than anywhere else in the world, including China and other authoritarian regimes. I believe this practice is a disgrace and must be reversed.

I hope that the UK, as a close friend of Turkey, will continue to emphasise how important Turkey is to the rest of Europe, the region and the world, and that we see a reversal of the slide into authoritarianism.

Tuberculosis (Backbench Business Debate)

On Thursday, MPs debated a backbench business motion on ending tuberculosis (TB). 10.4 million people around the world are infected with TB and more than two billion people, one third of the world's population, are infected with the bacteria that can lead to TB.

TB is curable and has been for more than 50 years.

Every death from TB can and should have been avoided, yet I believe the global response against this disease has been one of failure. Not a failure of the doctors, nurses, scientists and civil society groups who have been working tirelessly in a system stacked against them, but a failure of political will.

This September, the UN will host the first ever high-level meeting on TB.

I hope that the UK Government will demonstrate its commitment to ending TB and demand a meaningful political declaration that affects change.