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Topical Questions

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Lee Anderson >

(Ashfield) (Con)

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T1. If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities. (901065 (Unique identification number))

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster >

(Kit Malthouse)

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I am delighted to have been appointed Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, taking over this key role from my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who is the new Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. He is now looking after the nation's health and I am making sure that the Cabinet Office is match fit so that, in this time of flux in the body politic, the heart of Government is delivering and pumping strongly, primed to pursue our manifesto commitments and support the Prime Minister's priorities, and ready for the incoming Administration.

I am extremely lucky to be supported in this task by some of the most doughty buttresses in our political system. I am also pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) sits alongside us once again, making his welcome return to the Front Bench as the United Kingdom's first Minister for Veterans' Affairs to attend Cabinet.

Lee Anderson >

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Not every civil servant and local government officer is back at work after the pandemic, which is creating backlogs and is a waste of taxpayers' money, so what more can we do to ensure that every local government officer and civil servant is back in the office as soon as possible?

Kit Malthouse >

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My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. He is right to say that we want to see as many people as possible back in the office, not just because it is more efficient and we think it is a better way for government to operate, but because we all, importantly, have a duty to the young. It is impossible for them to acquire the skills and abilities they need when they are working remotely. I own a young man in his 20s, my son, so I know how debilitating it would be for those who are starting their career to operate from their bedrooms, and those of us in senior positions have a moral duty to be present, in person, with them to give them the skills and abilities they need to advance their careers.

Mr Speaker >

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We now come to shadow Secretary of State, Angela Rayner.

Angela Rayner >

(Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)

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I welcome the new Ministers to their places on the Treasury Bench for what could be their first and last Cabinet Office orals. It is a pleasure to be here with them. Last week, the Prime Minister finally admitted to meeting former KGB agent Alexander Lebedev, a man who was sanctioned by the Canadian Government. This was directly after a top-level NATO meeting and just weeks after a chemical attack by Russian agents on British soil. No officials or security were present. I have written to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster but am yet to receive a reply, so I hope he will answer my questions now. Did the Prime Minister take any papers from the NATO meeting? Was his phone compromised? Why do Foreign Office records show the presence of an unidentified guest? Given his responsibilities for national security and ministerial standards, does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster believe this was inappropriate conduct by the Prime Minister?

Kit Malthouse >

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I am in receipt of the right hon. Lady's letter. Obviously, a number of those questions have to be answered by No. 10. We will forward it to No. 10 and will be replying in due course.

Angela Rayner >

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I really hope that that "due course" is very quick, because this is an issue of national security, which is obviously of concern to many of our constituents. Let me move on to another very serious issue. Yesterday, our country reached the dark milestone of 200,000 covid deaths, which is a tragedy for our country and all those who have lost loved ones. The Prime Minister delayed the start of the public inquiry into the Government's handling of the pandemic, with the hearings not expected until 2023, making a full inquiry unlikely before the next election. This week, reports suggest that the Government are trying to block evidence to the inquiry, with Ministers fearful that they could be sued for damages and officials apparently making evidence that could be withheld. There can be no hint of a cover-up or excuses for Ministers dodging scrutiny. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster deny those reports that have been put in the press? If not, how can he assure us and the public that the process will be independent?

Mr Speaker >

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May I remind you that this is topical questions?

Kit Malthouse >

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The right hon. Lady has her very own brand of toxic, which she attempts to pump into everything that the Government do. *[Interruption.]* No, no, we cannot conduct debate in this House on the, "When did you stop beating your wife?" questions. This inquiry will be independently chaired and thoroughly conducted. It will have statutory powers to summon evidence and witnesses, in the way that others have done. We are determined to learn the lessons of the covid pandemic, notwithstanding some of the enormous, difficult but nevertheless globally important decisions that the Prime Minister had to take, not least acquiring vaccines and researching vaccines before anybody else. Nobody thinks that everything that happened during the pandemic was perfect, but to start her contemplation of this issue by maligning the motives of those Ministers who put their shoulders to the wheel at a time of national emergency is, frankly, disgraceful.

Bob Blackman >

(Harrow East) (Con)

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Just to correct Opposition Members, let me say that we will have a new leader by 5 September—

Mr Speaker >

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Order. We are getting out of hand. These are topical questions and you should be short and to the point. Do you want to ask your question or not? If not, I will move on.

Bob Blackman >

(Harrow East) (Con)

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T3. . The Procurement Bill is being scrutinised in the other place. One issue is how we ensure that new, small businesses get the opportunity to bid for government business, get contracts and demonstrate value for money. What measures will my right hon. Friend take to make sure that we do that? (901067 (Unique identification number))

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency >

(Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg)

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This is a key part of the Procurement Bill. It is simplifying the system so that, instead of 350 pieces of EU law and four different regimes, there will be one UK law and one regime. There will be a pipeline that makes it known to small businesses when contracts are becoming available, giving them a better chance to get involved. Payment terms for small businesses will be improved. Many things in the Bill will be specifically designed to help small and medium-sized enterprises.

Grahame Morris >

(Easington) (Lab)

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T2. Clearly, this Government cannot organise the processing of passports or driving licences on time. There are repeated errors in issuing visas to the correct location. Ambulances are stacked outside A&E units. NHS dentist appointments are as rare as hen's teeth, and now the Minister wants to close the Seaham Department for Work and Pensions office in my constituency. Can the Cabinet Ministers join the dots, and recognise that cutting and undermining jobs in the public service is not the answer? (901066 (Unique identification number))

Mr Rees-Mogg >

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The reason that some DWP offices will not be needed is that unemployment did not rise in the way that was anticipated. We have the lowest level of unemployment in this country since 1974, and the highest number of people in payroll work, and it is only right that the estate of DWP meets the requirements of the DWP. We get huge efficiencies by implementing technology better. That has become clear in many Government activities. Labour party members always want to keep people on the payroll and then they do not want them to go into work: they either want to be on the picket lines helping them to strike, or they want to have them working at home.

David Simmonds >

(Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con)

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T7. The two local authorities that serve my constituents—Hillingdon and Harrow—have shared with me how they quantify the savings from efficiency programmes, which helps to mitigate my constituents' council tax and also to reinvest in frontline services. Can my right hon. Friend share with me what approach central Government are taking to demonstrate how savings from efficiency are helping to keep taxes down and focus money on the frontline? (901071 (Unique identification number))

Mr Rees-Mogg >[Share](#)

Again, this is a very important point to raise. Central Government—the Cabinet Office’s Crown Commercial Service—is saving into the billions of pounds across Government, which is money that is then available for Departments. That saves those Department’s budgets and ensures more efficient procurement. We are also cracking down on fraud. I am looking forward to the launch of the public sector fraud authority, which hopes to be able to save £180 million in the first year of its operation.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy >

(Streatham) (Lab)

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T4. This week, the Public and Commercial Services Union called on the Government to launch a public inquiry into racism and bullying in the Cabinet Office. It has more than 80 members of staff formally complaining about racial bullying or profiling, the Government giving a six-figure pay-out to a top civil service for racial discrimination and the former Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Dame Helen MacNamara, warning of a systematic problem with race in the Department. I know the Government claim that there is not institutional racism in the entire country, but it is clear that the Cabinet Office has a problem. Before the Minister refers to the review into racism, which has been branded a whitewash, I ask him what steps he is taking to facilitate the public inquiry that the PCS union has asked for? (901068 (Unique identification number))

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General >

(Michael Ellis)

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The Cabinet Office is conducting its own review of the matter, as the hon. Lady referred to. Any incident of racism is unacceptable anywhere, and every effort will be made to alleviate and extinguish the problem to which she refers. The Cabinet Office makes every concerted effort possible, and Ministers will continue to do that to eliminate the pernicious problem to which she refers. I do not accept the premise of her question that the Cabinet Office has an endemic problem in this area, but any example is serious.

Geraint Davies >

(Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op)

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T5. On average, two children in every class have a developmental language disorder, which means that they have a two-to-three year language delay. As chair of the all-party group on speech and language difficulties, I arranged a meeting with a Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education. It was then cancelled because he was made Education Secretary. What process is in place to ensure that MPs’ meetings with Ministers are sustained, given that they have the support of the civil servants, in order that disadvantaged groups, such as those children with speech disorders, are not further disadvantaged? (901069 (Unique identification number))

Kit Malthouse >[Share](#)

As new Ministers take their positions over the summer, their diaries will naturally be reviewed. If the hon. Gentleman experiences significant delays in achieving the promised meeting, he should write to me.

Debbie Abrahams >

(Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab)

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T6. The VIP lane for personal protective equipment procurement and the unlawful activities associated with it was one of the early scandals of this Government, but both the Serious Fraud Office and the National Crime Agency are unable to adequately investigate reports of potential Government procurement fraud. Will the procurement Bill establish a corrupt practices investigation unit to help

to investigate potential frauds associated with public procurement? (901070 (Unique identification number))

Mr Rees-Mogg >

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As I mentioned, the public sector fraud authority will be announced shortly, but I think this attack on PPE is simply misplaced. The fact is that everybody in the country was calling for PPE—*[Interruption.]* In the world, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General helpfully points out. There was a dire and urgent need. Contracts were issued quickly to build up supplies, and there was not ministerial involvement in the award of contracts. Some 19.8 billion pieces of PPE were delivered; it was a successful effort to meet a dire need where the socialists opposite would have dithered and delayed.

Patricia Gibson >

(North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP)

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T8. Money Saving Expert Martin Lewis has warned that in the UK we may reach a point this winter where we have heat banks, the equivalent of food banks, where people spend their days in public buildings because they cannot afford to heat their homes. Does the Secretary of State share my alarm that that could happen in the 21st century, especially when Scotland is one of the most energy-rich countries in the world? (901072 (Unique identification number))

Kit Malthouse >

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We all share the hon. Lady's deep concern about the impact of energy prices on all citizens across the UK. As she knows and as I explained earlier, the Government are taking urgent and significant steps to help to alleviate that. In the autumn, there will be a £400 rebate on every electricity bill across the land to assist with those costs. However, as she knows, we are subject to a global energy market and we are working hard to see how we can be less vulnerable to those fluctuations and create more energy self-sufficiency.

Ruth Jones >

(Newport West) (Lab)

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T9. The news that Ministers who resigned last week will receive nearly £17,000 in severance pay has outraged the people of Newport West. Nowhere in the real world do people get such amounts of money for resigning a job, no matter how sensible the decision might be. I have a long list of things we could do with that money in Newport West, so will the Minister make time to meet me next week to discuss it? (901073 (Unique identification number))

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office >

(Mrs Heather Wheeler)

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I am afraid the hon. Lady should have listened to the answers given at the urgent question the other day—*[Interruption.]* That is absolutely fine, thank you very much. She can read *Hansard*; we went into great detail. It is a matter of statute.

Dame Diana Johnson >

(Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

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T10. After all the decades of cover-up and the appalling treatment of those who were infected by receiving contaminated blood, will the Minister now say that interim payments will be made to those people, as recommended by his adviser Sir Robert Francis in his recent review, where he said there was a “compelling case” for them to be paid? Four hundred and nineteen people have died since the announcement of the inquiry. Time is pressing. (901074 (Unique identification number))

Michael Ellis >[Share](#)

I heard what the review said and I thank the right hon. Lady for her continued diligence in this area. The **infected blood** scandal is an appalling tragedy that should simply never have happened. The Government are considering the recommendations and I can assure her that the matter is being given expeditious consideration. We will respond to the recommendations made by Sir Robert Francis QC in his study of a frame- work for **compensation** for victims just as soon as possible.

Owen Thompson >

(Midlothian) (SNP)

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I listened with interest to the excellent question from the hon. Member for Bracknell (James Sunderland) and I welcome the Minister's answer. Given that his predecessor for veterans, the Minister for Defence People, the hon. Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty), declined to uphold and totally disregarded the decision of this House to hold an inquiry, can I press this Minister further to expand a little more on what he suggested to the hon. Member for Bracknell earlier?

The Minister for Veterans' Affairs >

(Johnny Mercer)

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My line on Veterans UK has always been the same: it has an incredibly difficult job after years of under-investment by Governments of all colours. It needs to improve its output, and I will be working closely with my colleagues and others—I did receive the hon. Gentleman's letter this week—to ensure that veterans receive a better service from Veterans UK, conscious of the staff who work incredibly hard in that organisation.