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Topical Questions

Volume 715: debated on Thursday 9 June 2022

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Alex Norris >

(Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op)

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T1. If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities. ([900348 \(Unique identification number\)](#))

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster >

(Steve Barclay)

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Mr Speaker, I feel I should have started with a birthday tribute; I think the credit for that goes to the Opposition Front Bench.

After the wonderful platinum jubilee, which I know colleagues across the House enjoyed, I pay tribute to the work of civil servants across government, who played a key role in facilitating it. As part of the platinum jubilee celebrations, a civic honours competition was held for city status. The Government were pleased to announce that Her Majesty the Queen had commended city status to Bangor, Colchester, Doncaster, Douglas, Dunfermline, Milton Keynes, Stanley and Wrexham, and that lord mayoralty status was granted to Southampton. I know Members will take great interest in those awards.

Colleagues will have seen the work of our armed forces, as part of our work for the jubilee. One of our first actions on taking office was to create the Office for Veterans' Affairs to co-ordinate support across government. As we approach Armed Forces Week later this month, the Cabinet Office remains focused on our goal to ensure that the UK is the best place in the world to be a veteran by 2028.

Alex Norris >

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Our constituents face ridiculous backlogs for passports, driving licences, decisions from the Home Office and much more across Government. I am afraid that my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) did not get an answer to her question: we are told that this will get better, but we are also told that we can afford to cut 91,000 civil servants—how are those two things compatible?

Steve Barclay >

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Let me take that question on directly. First, the situation has got better, and the response has been addressed in Prime Minister's questions and in other questions today. To be specific about how we are dealing with this, we are looking at business and the scope of machine learning and technology. At the moment, only a very small proportion of the passport application process is automated. If the photo is taken in a booth as opposed to at home, that significantly increases the level of automation that can be delivered and

that, in turn, reduces the number of staff who are manually required. It is such a luddite approach from Opposition Members to suggest, when businesses such as Amazon are showing exactly what technology can deliver, that the Government who are there to serve the taxpayer and the public should not embrace the same technology that we see in our best companies.

Felicity Buchan >

(Kensington) (Con)

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T3. Many of my constituents are frustrated that, while there are delays in getting passports and driving licences renewed, many civil servants continue to work from home. Will the Minister update the House on his progress in getting civil servants back behind their desks? (900351 (Unique identification number))

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General >

(Michael Ellis)

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Since the pandemic began, civil servants have been delivering the Government's priorities both from the workplace and occasionally from home. I have written to all Secretaries of State outlining their abilities to ensure that Departments return to pre-pandemic occupancy levels, and my right hon. Friend the Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency has done so, too. *[Official Report, 16 June 2022, Vol. 716, c. 6MC.]* We are willing to assist in any way we can. I add, by the way, that the vast majority of passport applications continue to be processed well within 10 weeks.

Angela Rayner >

(Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab)

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May I say what a luddite approach it is not to see home working as something that can be efficient? We in the Opposition can see that.

Less than a year since his last outsource government review was published, Lord Maude has again been appointed to lead a review of the civil service, a role that he performed in Government for five long years. Will the Minister tell us what value for money and performance measurement has taken place since the conclusion of Lord Maude's last review; what tender process has been conducted to award Francis Maude Associates that work; and what conflict-of-interest assessment has taken place? Or are Ministers lining the pockets of their mates with the public's hard-earned money once again?

Steve Barclay >

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Usually, one would expect the House to value corporate memory and experience and the fact that the reforms initially put forward by Lord Maude were a cornerstone of the declaration of civil service reform, signed by the Cabinet Secretary and my predecessor as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). If one looks, for example, at the changes in Government relating to functions and the role of developing functional expertise—whether that is in the Government Property Agency or is about commercial contracts or digital and IT—one can see the value for money that is delivered by bringing in that expertise. This is about learning from the best in the private sector. That is why it is a luddite approach to see any change that brings in technology and new ways of working as a threat to the trade unions that support Opposition Members.

Andrew Jones >

(Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)

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T4. It is clear from the exchanges in the House this morning that not just my constituents, but many constituents are experiencing delays with passport processing, visa applications and driving licence renewals. I know that Ministers have replied on this issue already, but will the Minister reassure me and my constituents that the planned reduction in the civil service will not impact on the

capacity of the processing done by those teams, and that the recruitment taking place—particularly in the Passport Office—will be directed into the frontline to speed up the application process? (900352 (Unique identification number))

Steve Barclay >

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My hon. Friend will know, having been a senior business figure before coming to the House, that it is about linking resource to outcomes. We have increased resource in the Passport Office on a temporary basis; we have put in 650 staff since April last year to address the surge in applications as a result of the backlog from covid.

At the same time, there needs to be a change in how we deliver public services, and particularly in how we digitalise access to them. Too often, the same information has to be entered multiple times when addressing things from the Government. We will streamline that through the single sign-on process, and the Passport Office will be one of the beneficiaries of that programme.

Kate Osamor >

(Edmonton) (Lab/Co-op)

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T2. The Minister will be aware that the worst covid outcomes have disproportionately been felt among communities from ethnic minority backgrounds. What steps will his Department take to ensure that those health disparities are examined under the terms of reference set out? (900349 (Unique identification number))

Steve Barclay >

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The hon. Lady raises an extremely important point. In the work of the equalities unit in the Cabinet Office, a key focus is on variations in the data across social groups, place and economic background, so that we can learn the right lessons. I am sure that, as part of the inquiry review, Judge Hallett will be looking closely at the data, particularly where there are variations within it.

Mr Speaker >

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I call David Duguid. Not here, again.

Chris Stephens >

(Glasgow South West) (SNP)

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T5. May I press the Paymaster General on his earlier answer about contaminated **blood**? More than 400 **infected** people have died since the **infected blood** inquiry was announced. Sir Robert Francis's report suggests that the Government should offer "substantial interim payments". How soon will the Government respond to that report and implement its recommendations for those affected? (900354 (Unique identification number))

Michael Ellis >

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As I said earlier, Sir Robert will give evidence on 11 and 12 July. The Government will want to hear what he has to say. We will study it very carefully and will act as expeditiously as possible after that.

Tim Loughton >

(East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)

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I was grateful for the recent meeting with the Minister for Brexit Opportunities about the Procurement Bill, along with other hon. Members sanctioned by China. Given the further revelations and documents about the extent of abuse, torture and human rights violations in Xinjiang and other parts of China, will the Government now commit to a full audit of all public service contracts with any Chinese firms that are in any way implicated in those abuses? Will the Government's default position be to award no contracts to any companies in any way implicated in those forms of abuse?

Steve Barclay >

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I very much recognise the considerable interest in and concern about that issue across the House. A cornerstone of our procurement legislation is much greater transparency about the £300 billion of taxpayer spend consequent on that legislation each year. That transparency will better enable the House to have discussions about exactly the point that my hon. Friend raises.

Kirsten Oswald >

(East Renfrewshire) (SNP)

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T7. As a consequence of smothering Brexit red tape, a third of UK exporters to the EU have simply stopped trading. Contrary to the frankly ridiculous answer that my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O'Hara) received, that has hammered the economy, cost thousands of jobs and undermined economic recovery from the pandemic. How can the UK Government claim that Brexit is slashing red tape when it is plainly Brexit-derived trade barriers that are driving businesses into the ground? (900356 (Unique identification number))

Steve Barclay >

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That is a very straightforward question to answer. It is the freedoms that we have from our exit from the European Union, on things like the £300 billion of procurement that we have just heard about, that allow us to put clauses in our legislation about social value, targeting procurement to better benefit small and medium-sized enterprises, particularly where that reduces food miles or allows social value around disability employment, an issue that was raised earlier. Those are the social value provisions in the procurement legislation that we are able to have as a consequence of our exit from the EU.

Mr Peter Bone >

(Wellingborough) (Con)

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Will the Brexit Minister tell us which Departments are co-operating with him wholeheartedly and which are dragging their feet? Does he plan to report, perhaps quarterly, on the progress that each Department has made?

The Minister for Brexit Opportunities and Government Efficiency >

(Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg)

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My hon. Friend tempts me, but I remind him that the Government speak with one voice. What I will say is that yesterday there was a meeting between Ministers and the Secretary of State for Transport. His Department has, I think, 375 bits of retained EU law, and he is tackling those with great enthusiasm. We need to ensure that people know what the rules are, so that they can point to one and ask, "Is this really necessary?" and I am working with all Departments to do that.

Andrew Gwynne >

(Denton and Reddish) (Lab)

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T8. As a former member of the Home Affairs Committee, I still take great interest in its work. I am reliably informed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) that yesterday the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration told the Committee that he had asked to meet the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to talk about the cross-Government approach to channel crossings and had been refused a meeting, and that the Home Secretary had cancelled requested meetings with him six times. Is this an acceptable approach to such a serious issue, and when will there be a meeting? (900357 (Unique identification number))

Steve Barclay >

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One of the purposes of Cabinet Office questions is to enable Ministers to respond to issues as they arise. Obviously I have a range of external meetings that reflect the responsibilities that we have discussed in the House, not least my roundtable on food security and resilience, an issue that was raised earlier. As for the wider approach to illegal immigration, that is a policy matter for the Home Secretary, who leads external engagement on the issue, but of course the Cabinet Office plays a supporting role in relation to Home Office colleagues.

Dame Diana Johnson >

(Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab)

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I just want to make it clear that the Government's approach to the study conducted by Sir Robert Francis was to publish it at the same time as their own response. That is what we were told—although the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated **blood** and many campaign groups had asked the Government for openness and transparency, and for the report to be published when it was given to the Government. Given that two people are dying every week as a result of the contaminated **blood** scandal, may I press the Minister on this issue? Do the Government accept that there is a strong moral case for **compensation** to be paid, irrespective of any legal liability, and for interim payments of at least £100,000 per individual to start now?

Michael Ellis >

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Let me start by commending the right hon. Lady for her work in this area. I know how hard she has been working for some time. As she knows, the study was published this week and a statement was made in the House. The study makes recommendations for a framework for **compensation** and redress for the victims of **infected blood**, which can be ready for implementation on the conclusion of the inquiry that the Government initiated, should the inquiry's findings and recommendations require it. I cannot second-guess what the outcome will be—that is the reason for the inquiry—but Sir Robert has rightly put the views and experiences of the **infected** and affected, who have suffered so much and for so long, at the heart of his study, and we will expedite this as far as we possibly can.

Ian Lavery >

(Wansbeck) (Lab)

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Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Dame Diana Johnson) about the contaminated **blood** scandal, I emphasise that the victims of the scandal need reassurance. We have not had much reassurance this morning. When will the interim payments be made, and do the Government support recommendation 14 of Sir Robert Francis's report?

Michael Ellis >

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The Government have committed themselves to providing support for those who have been **infected** and affected, and ex gratia support has been given to those affected by this issue since 1988. As I have said, Sir Robert has made a number of recommendations about **compensation**, which need careful consideration. It would be remiss of the Government to rush that. It is most important that we are able to reflect on his evidence, which he is due to give in four or five weeks' time, and we will do so after that.

Jessica Morden >

(Newport East) (Lab)

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On, again, the subject of the contaminated **blood** report, may I reiterate the need to support the families who lost loved ones, such as the Smith family from Newport, who lost Colin, aged just seven, after he was **infected by blood** from an Arkansas prison? Will the Minister ensure that that aspect of Sir Robert Francis's report is acted on? As others have said, this is long, long overdue.

Michael Ellis > [Share](#)

The hon. Lady is right to raise that case, and there are many tragic and appalling cases that are similar to it. This is why the Government launched the inquiry, it is why they asked Sir Robert Francis to write his report, and it is why they are acting in a way in which previous Governments over the course of decades have not acted. We will process the matter just as soon as we reasonably, practicably can.

Chris Bryant >

(Rhondda) (Lab)

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I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker—the happiest of birthdays.

Why are the Government so bloated? In the UK, we have more Government Ministers than France, Germany and Italy put together, and more than India, Canada and Australia put together. When I arrived in this House in 2001, the Prime Minister made do with one Parliamentary Private Secretary. This Prime Minister has four PPSs; Mrs Thatcher had only one. Why is this Prime Minister so much less efficient than either Tony Blair or Mrs Thatcher? Is it not time, if we are going to have a cull of civil servants, that we had a cull of Ministers? At least one quarter of the Front Bench should go. Would somebody like to name one?

Steve Barclay > [Share](#)

I used to think that the hon. Gentleman liked to have the opportunity to question Ministers, and it is good for him to have such a range to choose from. The key issue is how we are delivering for the public. That is what we as a Government are focused on and that is what the transformation programme will deliver.

Christian Matheson >

(City of Chester) (Lab)

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I welcome the Minister's reply to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) a few moments ago about the need to join up Government information so that people do not have to put their data into Government systems all the time. Does that mean that the Minister will be moving forward with plans for automatic electoral registration?

Steve Barclay > [Share](#)

The scope of the single sign-on programme has already been set in terms of the 75 services within the scope of how we make doing business easier. This is about looking at where data is entered—for example, for a passport or a driving licence—and how we then enable that to facilitate access to other services, such as access to benefits, so that we make the customer journey for our constituents as frictionless as possible. I think that that is of interest across the House.

Margaret Ferrier >

(Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Ind)

Centrica's veteran action pathway provides veterans with a secure role, training and support. It is a really positive opportunity for veterans looking to re-enter the civilian workforce. How are the Government supporting the private sector to develop initiatives like this that specifically focus on supporting veterans?

The Minister for Defence People and Veterans >

(Leo Docherty)

We are supporting the private sector by giving a national insurance contribution holiday to those such as Centrica that employ service leavers, and we commend them for doing so. We know that military service gives people fantastic skills for life.

Mr Speaker >

We now come to the urgent question. I have allowed the sub judice waiver before, and that will continue.