

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for inviting me to speak this evening.

It is a rare privilege to be a Member of Parliament, but a unique one to represent such a singular constituency as the Cities of London and Westminster. My constituency finds itself at the engine room of the UK's economy, with over a million people employed in its boundaries. It is also at the centre of a number of its most substantial crises. In 2007, the financial crisis started in the City of London, leading to a spike in unemployment, a crash in the housing market, and triggering fifteen years of austerity which we are only now reversing. The impacts of this are felt in another crisis which we face every day in rough sleeping and homelessness. Westminster alone has over 2,000 people sleeping rough and spends 65 million pounds a year on temporary accommodation, with similar rates in the City of London.

And it is the heart of its politics. I am often described as the Member of Parliament for Parliament, but I am also in many ways the MP for political protest and demonstrations, whether those be the marches around the conflict in Gaza, strikes by prominent trade unions, or, as we saw over the summer, the devastating riots which rocked communities across the country.

Responding to these riots was one of the first things which I had to do as a Member of Parliament. Having spent over two years knocking on doors, speaking with constituents and holding meetings around the actions which I could do to unite people across my constituency, suddenly we saw the flip side of that, as a few violent individuals sought to sow hatred and division while capitalising on a horrific attack.

After the excitement and optimism of winning the election just days before, these riots could not have been more of a sign of the instability in which we find ourselves. We are now in a world where disinformation can spread like wildfire, and the pace and nimbleness of violence can far exceed the capacity of our public services to respond. In contrast, previous Governments have been slow to pass even the most common sense reforms of our public services, with many of the services which people rely on barely fit for the 20th century, let alone the 21st.

This evening I will make the case that this Government delivering change in uncertain times by placing renewal of the social contract at the very heart of our programme not only because this is crucial for restoring confidence in public services but also as a vital objective in its own right. And I will argue that alongside the Government's programme, there is a central role for individual politicians, local and national, in restoring faith in democratic processes.

SOCIAL CONTRACT

Our social contract is in severe need of repair, alongside investment in the confidence in the rule of law, and the power of relationships with our neighbours and our communities.

But what do we mean when we speak about a social contract? What was originally described as a tacit contract between the rulers and the ruled has to be updated for the 21st century, where consumers and workers have more mobility, more rights and more of a voice.

The breakdown of this social contract can be shown most clearly in three ways.

WORK

First, our economic social contract is broken when work does not pay. In my parents' generation, most people left school, potentially spent a few years in an apprenticeship, and then stayed in the same industry for their whole life. The work was stable, their employer was known, and their pay packet generous enough to buy a house, start a family, and even to afford little luxuries like the occasional holiday.

Now this is clearly not the case, even in households with two working parents. Employment is more precarious, people are expected to change professions multiple times through their working life, and often their boss is a remote entity with little accountability. And this work simply does not pay. A million working households and two million children with working parents experience poverty, and even those who are above average incomes are struggling with basic costs. Many young people are barely able to keep their head above water, let alone to think about saving up to have children or for retirement.

STATE

Second, our state social contract is broken when taxpayers fail to receive value for money from the state. Even ten or fifteen years ago, it would be imaginable that you could get a GP appointment with relative ease, that you could catch the train relatively affordably on a service that ran on time, and that, if you were the victim or witness of a crime, the police would have the capacity to deal with it.

But we are far from this world in 2025, with waiting lists for elective surgery through the roof, policing services struggling to be visible and respond to even the most recordable crimes, and our infrastructure, from our trains to our energy and even our water, in drastic disrepair. More and more people are turning to private healthcare and businesses are forced to hire in private security because the state is simply unable to meet their needs as they might expect it to.

DEMOCRACY

And third, our democratic social contract is broken when people feel that their voice does not count. Now, of course there was no era in which Parliament was free of sleaze, or where our electoral system was devoid of interference or manipulation. But we also cannot deny that trust in our politics is at an all time low, and that our political processes have failed to catch up with the needs of the 21st century.

In an era in which people can receive instant communication, our institutions are clunky and unresponsive. In an age where authenticity is key, politicians must be effective natural communicators as well as thoughtful legislators in the face of the paradoxical contrast of declining trust in politicians and increasing demand their services. And at a time when seemingly infinite choice is available to consumers, sometimes even the most basic public services options remain unavailable to citizens.

HOUSING

Nowhere is this broken social contract clearer than in housing. This is an issue close to my heart, having worked in housing all my life at a local, subregional, and national level. There are many crises running through our political and economic system, but the shortage of a decent home in location close to jobs and services and at affordable price has to be chief off all.

Work does not pay, when rents, mortgages, and service charges are increasingly unaffordable, and when homeownership is a dream for most.

Taxpayers fail to see any value for money when our social housing is decimated, and when government has sat by and let 150,000 children suffer in temporary accommodation.

And our voices go unheard, when the people who provide our housing, our landlords, our freeholders, and our developers are unresponsive and unaccountable to the people that live in it.

REFERENDUM

In 2016, a critical mass lost our faith in the institutions which govern us, and we as a country voted to take the greatest political and economic risk of my lifetime in leaving the European Union. It was then that I decided to run to be a Member of Parliament to work to restore confidence in democratic processes.

Five years on after Brexit those who voted for it are not seeing it deliver on what they hoped for. They do not feel free from red tape or regulation, nor that they have the power to effect change in their local area. And those who voted to Remain in the European Union feel unserved by a hard Brexit which failed to respect the close result of this referendum, with their freedom of movement curtailed, new barriers to business, migration criticised rather than recognised as a force that has enriched and strengthened our nation.

Even as instability across the world rocks our shores, when our economy looks shaky and a climate emergency continues to loom, repairing this social contract must be our ambition. Because with confidence in the strength of social contract comes a belief in the power of political change to deliver brighter futures.

Easy, right?

SOLUTIONS

Along with 400 colleagues, I was elected on a manifesto which went some ways to repairing this contract. While I understand that there are many in this room tonight who may want the Government to be going further and faster, and those who worry that it is moving too quickly, I am confident that the foundations which we are laying have the potential to restore this faith in our economic model, our public services, and with politicians.

Firstly, we are making work pay. There are 5,000 hospitality businesses in my constituency, and as soon as the Employment Rights Bill comes into law every barista, every waiter, every kitchen porter in those businesses will have the right to fixed hours if they want them. One in every fifty-two British workers is employed in the City of London, and every one of them will have additional protections against unfair dismissal from day one in their job, even in the City's most powerful institutions. And the retail workers in my constituency, working on the nation's high street on Oxford Street will be protected from exploitative fire and rehire practices, and will be able to stay in these communities for longer.

All of these workers will benefit from an increased minimum wage, and from a living wage which for the first time ever will actually reflect the cost of living.

And we are helping these people directly with the cost of living, having put an extra 1.8 billion pounds into childcare provision, not to mention rolling out free breakfast clubs, so that working families' pay checks are not swallowed up with the basic costs of just getting by. And we have put an extra billion pounds into the Household Support Fund, in recognition that times are tough, and those who are in the most need have more demands on their resources than ever.

And yes, we have raised taxes to fund some of this. But we have done so in ways which recognises just how high the tax burden already is on working people, focusing these increases on those with the broadest shoulders – employers and those with assets, rather than simply going for the same old levers of income tax, employee national insurance, or VAT.

We are fixing the public services, so that taxpayers feel that they are receiving value for money when they contribute into the system. Alongside more funding for our hospitals, our police, and our schools, the Government is also committed to fundamental reforms in key areas of public service. Step changes are being delivered in the NHS with shifts from hospital to community, treatment to prevention, and analogue to digital. And this week we have seen the impact of that with NHS waiting list beginning to turn a corner.

Policing is being fully established in communities with our new Neighbourhood Policing Guarantee. Last week I was at a meeting with residents where they were complaining about the efforts they had had to go to to ensure that they had a neighbourhood policing officer assigned to their area. Under the Government's plans, this will be guaranteed for every neighbourhood, ensuring that residents have a named individual they can turn to when they are the victim or witness of crime.

And the Government is reforming the democratic social contract, so that citizens' voices truly matter. We are passing legislation which will set an automatic presumption in favour of devolution, and giving the ability of mayors to formally request powers for the first time, and for it to be up to Whitehall to justify why these cannot be handed down.

We are committed to lowering the voting age to 16, to usher in a new era of democratic participation where our children are raised as citizens. And we are simplifying our local government structures, so that people clearly understand who to go to with each issue, while at the same time filling in the map of devolution that every place has a metro mayor like Sir Sadiq Khan and Tracy Brabin to stand up for them, and to attract investment into their place.

As I mentioned previously, housing is by far the greatest of the emergencies which we face, and it is also the area in which the Government is acting with true ambition.

Real work is being done to address the 4.3 million missing homes, with the boldest reforms to the planning system in my lifetime. And these are not just any homes, the Government also has a clear focus on reversing the decades of decline in our social housing stock, severely limiting the Right to Buy, investing in new social homes, and ensuring that any development on 'grey belt' land prioritises affordable housing.

The Government is also getting a handle on the rough sleeping emergency, after previous administrations allowed the numbers of people experiencing rough sleeping to increase more than fourfold. Over a billion pounds of new funding has been put into the system with a new focus on prevention, and the Deputy Prime Minister is chairing a cross-departmental workforce to end rough sleeping for good.

And legislation is in the works to ensure that people's voices matter in their relations with those who provide their housing. There are 27,000 private renters in my constituency. When the Renters' Rights Bill receives royal assent, they will overnight be protected from arbitrary eviction, they will be able to challenge unfair rent increases, and have new accountability for how quickly their landlord responds to complaints. My constituency also has among the highest numbers of leaseholders in the country, who the Government is also empowering through their programme of reform. In less than two weeks, reforms will come into place which will make it easier for leaseholders to take over management of their buildings, to provide accountability bad managing agents overcharging them for services and failing to deliver essential repairs.

The Government is working at pace to repair the social contract in these key areas, and what is the role of individual politicians? Why should we care who legislators are and what they are doing? Because day to day representation matters. There are hundreds of MPs in the Commons who are engaged in work unconnected with that of the Government, but which is still vital to the lives of their constituents and the country at large.

Just as repairing the social contract is important to the Government, so it is reflected in my work too and that of representatives across the country.

This work to repair our social contract is focused in my efforts to fix our economic model, by fighting against the dirty money which proliferates my constituency in particular. It may be unsurprising to hear that my constituency has far and away the most dirty money laundered through both the City of London and the Westminster property market. Indeed, over half of property bought by shell companies registered in Overseas Territories can be found in my constituency, owned indirectly by individuals who have frequently made their wealth from corruption and the abuse of power, skimming money from state procurement contracts or directly acquiring assets, and funnelling the proceeds of this ill-gotten wealth into our property market.

Many of my constituents feel powerless when the communities which they have lived in with for years slowly erode as their building becomes a vehicle for laundered wealth.

In central London we are seeing this, with community institutions like the Central YMCA closing its doors, and more pillars of the community like the Prince Charles Cinema under threat from elusive and unaccountable organisations. These institutions have always had to compete against London's residential and business community, but increasingly they are being crowded out, bidding in a rental market against shadowy owners with nigh unlimited funds.

Levels of money laundering in London corrode our communities, damage democracy around the world, and block the growth prospects of our capital's economy. And this is something which I have the opportunity to fight against on the All Party Parliamentary Group for Anti-Corruption, pushing the government to simplify its enforcement measures against kleptocrats, calling out the opaque practices of Overseas Territories, and working directly with agencies to boost their enforcement efforts.

And finally, this work to repair our social contract is focused in my efforts that my constituents have a voice when they feel ignored. Some of you here may have suffered at the hands of a poor managing agent, particularly if you are a leaseholder. You may have seen your service charge increase well beyond reasonable proportions, you may have had to wait for months on end for essential repairs to take place, and throughout this you may have had nearly no communication with the agent whose responsibility it was to look after your building. This is a story which I had heard far too many times, particularly about FirstPort, the largest managing agent in the country.

So I did something about it, gathering a group of Labour MPs together to summon managing agents like FirstPort to Parliament to take account of their actions. We secured an agreement on how they were going to improve their service, including a promise to meet individual MPs with residents in blocks which they manage. Since then, I have been doing just this, setting up surgeries with FirstPort and residents so that they can answer for their poor service and make actual improvements. Residents who had not heard from their managing agent for months are writing to me saying that they now have daily communication, and that issues which have been unresolved for years are finally being actioned.

And this group is having real impact, with 119 MPs involved in it, we're just two shy of the entire Conservative party.

I came into politics to deliver change in uncertain times, and I truly believe that every Member of Parliament has the ability to do things in their area to restore faith in politics, to connect citizens with the state, and to ensure that people feel that their voice is heard when they were previously powerless. In fact, it is essential. Increasingly the United Kingdom feels like an island in a sea of populism, and we must continue to make the case that democracy can deliver for people in a way which they will actually feel.

I started this evening speaking about the riots which rocked our communities in the summer. They showed the worst of what humanity can do to each other, but the response to them showed potential of what strong communities can do **for** each other. We saw bricklayers in Southport repairing the walls of a mosque which had been torn down by rioters, residents who donated funds and books to restock the Spellow library after it was torched, and volunteers in Sunderland who found a new site to offer community advice after their citizens advice centre was torn down. It is by fostering these strong communities that we can reverse the damage of recent decades, by allowing us to be connected by what we have in common, rather than torn apart by our differences.

Delivering change in uncertain times is more difficult than ever, but it is more vital than ever as well. And it is a mission in which we all have a part, particularly the people in this room. We cannot take our democracy, our rights, or our social contract for granted. But, if we genuinely work together, from the Government to business, civil society and academia, even MPs I believe that we can reforge it stronger than ever.