



King's Speech 2023: A changing of the guard.



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King's Speech 2023

The sight of King Charles delivering the first King's Speech in seventy years was a moment to pause and take stock. Symbolically it was the first time the King has taken the State Opening as the reigning monarch, and it felt like a changing of the guard.

Watching him deliver the speech, written of course by the incumbent government, there was an interesting tension as he delivered a number of commitments on the environment that privately he may well disagree with, such as the plans for new oil and gas exploration.

That announcement was one of several trailed for weeks as part of a 'make-or-break' moment for the government, a chance to reset the agenda with the Conservatives a consistent 20 points behind in the polls.

The Conservative conference was one of those key autumn moments, the King's Speech the second, and both saw the PM try a new tactic, designed to show that the Conservatives are taking the difficult decisions the country needs. The King's Speech used the phrase 'long-term' eight times, an echo of the 'long-term decisions for a brighter future' slogan used at the Conservative party conference.

However, simply repeating 'long-term' doesn't make a coherent message that will sell on the doorstep. The problem with the Conservative conference is that the key policy announcements – the lifetime ban on smoking for anyone aged under 14, the scrapping of HS2, and the reform of A-levels – were all disconnected with each other and hard to package.

The same remains true of this King's Speech. There were 21 bills announced in the Speech, 16 of which made it into the text. There were highlights, such as the focus on criminal justice, where the government is determined to draw a clear dividing line with Labour in an attempt to shore up its right wing. Labour would question this, pointing at its record on prisons and courts, but criminal justice is an important driver of voting Conservative in the Red Wall seats.

Equally, there is new regulation on tech, designed to strengthen consumer rights online and tackle fake reviews. There will be a new autonomous vehicle bill to set the framework for self-driving cars.

Yet for all these worthy pieces of legislation, there was no theme or thread to them. Downing Street were quick to point out that this was the intention – government making decisions for the long-term, tackling the structural issues that matter. However, it will prove a hard sell on the doorstep for the party's MPs in the run up to the next general election.

Of course, the actual measures announced by the King are hardly brand new, and perhaps that's why they felt underwhelming and a missed opportunity. Many of these bills are policy proposals that have been long promised. Some of the plans being promoted, such as new rights for victims of crime and restrictions on marriage for whole life killers, are in fact already in legislation before Parliament. Others, as is the way with detailed legislation, have been in the works for months. Even if the government wanted it to be a reset moment, it is unlikely that it could ever have been so.

In a year's time we may look back at this King's Speech as the moment where it was not only a changing of the guard for the new monarch, but the beginning of the end for this Conservative government.

Set against last week's prediction from the Bank of England that a recession could be on the cards in the run up to the election, the Prime Minister will be vitally aware that there is no issue more important to address than the economy if he's to remain in post for the long-term.

Unsurprisingly, then, the King's first comments as part of today's speech covered the ongoing economic situation directly, reinforcing the government's pledges to halve inflation and tackle the cost-of-living crisis, alongside supporting businesses to drive economic growth.

Though we're likely to see more of the detail of the government's economic agenda as part of the upcoming **Autumn Statement** on Wednesday 22 November, today's speech nonetheless set out some of the key areas which the government sees as vital to unlocking long-term growth.

On top of the measures announced to boost Britain's energy security, the government clearly views housing reform as key to driving economic growth. To this end, the government announced a new **Leasehold and Freehold Bill** which it says will deliver greater fairness in the housing market and make the necessary changes to improve homeownership for leaseholders in England and Wales. Meanwhile, the long-awaited **Renters (Reform) Bill** returns, having had its second reading late in the most recent Parliamentary session. The government will hope that this represents a robust challenge to Labour on the issue of housing, likely to be another key issue at the next election, and one which Sir Keir Starmer's party has sought to take a firm hold of.



Elsewhere, the **Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill** enshrines in statute the UK's status as the first European member of the trading bloc, something which the government will pitch as a benefit of Brexit afforded to the UK as an independent trading nation. On the regulation front, the government also announced the return of the **Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill**, which again they will be hoping reaps dividends to the public through the scrapping of 'consumer rip-offs' and subscription traps.

Despite speculation, there was no **Pensions Bill**, **Employment Bill** or action on **de-banking** as had been touted, while the previously announced **Corporate Governance and Audit Reform Bill** has now been withdrawn. Also notable was the lack of new concrete measures to tackle the cost-of-living crisis, though the government will likely point to the upcoming Autumn Statement as the place for this. Nevertheless, this leaves them open to criticism from opposition parties about whether this is a government in tune with the public as the country enters election mode.

Announcements in summary:

Leasehold and Freehold Bill

Renters (Reform) Bill

Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill

Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill

Following the controversial Net Zero statement delivered by the Prime Minister in September, refreshing the government's approach to climate change, today's speech looks to bring some of those measures into law as part of the Prime Minister's commitment to take "the difficult but necessary long-term decisions to change this country for the better."

The main announcement came in the form of the **Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill** which represents one of the key areas where the Conservatives will look to drive a wedge with Labour. While there are some caveats, this bill will bring in an annual bidding round for oil and gas licences. Keir Starmer has repeatedly ruled out granting new licences, but this legislation could tie his hand if he wins the next election, certainly for his first year in office.

The government has argued that its shifting of position on net zero represents an understanding that it needs to be done in a proportionate way that brings the public along with policy makers, and this bill forms part of that agenda. The King stated that this bill will also help to remove reliance on importing oil and gas from overseas, improving the UK's energy security.

Announcements in summary:

Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill

Measures to reform grid connections

New inward investment in renewable energy sources

Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill

Given Labour's strong opposition to new licences it is likely that they will vote against the bill, and so we can expect the Conservatives to use this to attack Labour during next year's election.

One of the less controversial parts of the speech, made commitments to bring in new levels of **investment in renewable energy sources** and **reform grid connections**, picking up on longstanding issues around a lack of grid capacity and the 14-year waiting list to connect to the grid. While this will be welcomed across the party divide, at this stage these are nothing more than commitments in the body of the speech, with no planned legislation and no further mention in the government's briefing pack.

Looking at the environment more broadly, we saw little announced that falls under the Defra brief. This likely recognises the fact that the department is already fighting fires on multiple fronts and does not have the capacity for more primary legislation. Critics will point to a lack of action on issues like sewage spills, agriculture and food security, and packaging and recycling, but much of this is in train through consultation and secondary legislation.

The only piece of new legislation announced was the **Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill**, delivering on a long-term commitment to ban the export of livestock for fattening and slaughter. However, more notable was the omission of any other animal welfare legislation, something which generally commands popular support. Given the short amount of Parliamentary time, the government are likely wanting to avoid legislation being taken over by external interest groups, as was the case with the Kept Animals Bill in the last session. We may, however, see further smaller, single-issue bills introduced through government-backed Private Member's Bills.

Despite the slim number of announcements, the government's position on the environment has formed a central part of this King's Speech, and it will go on to form a key part of the Conservatives' election strategy. Labour has been critical of this change in approach, accusing the government of putting at risk the investment needed to deliver a prosperous green economy and the new green jobs that would come with it. However, the Conservatives believe this will allow the UK to continue on the journey to reach net zero by 2050, but in a pragmatic way that does not drive up costs for the public.

In an attempt to hold onto voters in the 'red wall' and appeal to traditional true-blue Conservatives in their usual safe heartlands, the government confirmed a range of politically charged domestic policies relating to crime, justice and immigration.

The government is attempting to draw dividing lines with Labour and views law and order as one of the battlegrounds on which they may have success in the lead-up to the general election. The government see this as an area where the Conservatives have a strong enough record to take to the electorate, with violent crime down 52% since 2010 and domestic burglary down by 57%. As a result, a range of new laws will be implemented as the government seeks to present itself as tough on crime and anti-social behaviour and make criminal justice the centrepiece of the government's legislative agenda for the year ahead.

The legislation announced includes a **Criminal Justice Bill** and an updated **Sentencing Bill**. The **Criminal Justice Bill** will give the police the power to enter premises without a warrant to recoup stolen goods, such as phones, if a GPS signal suggests the phone is in a specific property. There were also a raft of measures cracking down on sexual crimes, with legislation making it illegal to screenshot or take naked photos without consent. The legislation comes following a campaign from various social media and reality TV stars who have fallen victim to crimes of this nature.

Under the new **Sentencing Bill**, the law will be changed to keep those convicted of murders involving sexual or sadistic conduct behind bars for life through mandatory Whole Life Orders. Judges will also be given more powers to make sure those accused of committing these most extreme murders attend court when their sentences are handed out, "to hear directly from victims and feel the weight of their crimes."

**Announcements
in summary:**

Sentencing Bill

Criminal Justice Bill

Victims and Prisons Bill

Terrorism (Protection of
Premises Bill)

Investigatory Powers
(Amendment) Bill

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

Football Governance Bill

Pedicabs (London) Bill

Automated Vehicles Bill

Draft Rail Reform Bill

Regarding Transport, the most significant legislation introduced focused on new technologies and future modes of transport through the **Automated Vehicles Bill**. Self-driving vehicles and the associated technologies have been earmarked by the government as a sector which will attract investment and deliver high-skilled jobs. The bill will set the threshold for self-driving vehicles in law, hold companies accountable (with criminal sentences) and crack down on misleading marketing claims regarding the degree to which vehicles are, in fact, self-driving. The details remain to be seen, but the Transport Committee has been investigating automated vehicles, and much of the legislation is expected to fall in line with many of their recommendations. A

Pedicabs (London) Bill was also announced, which gives Transport for London the power to regulate their use and introduce a licensing and fares regime.

The long-trailed legislation to create Great British Railways never materialised. However, it has been committed to in a **Draft Rail Reform Bill**. The text states, "The Secretary of State's franchising authority functions will be transferred to Great British Railways, ensuring that operational and infrastructure decisions are made in a coordinated way." It was widely expected that GBR would not secure a legislative slot, with the Prime Minister keen to push forward with a pro-motorist message, but the fact that GBR remains alive will be welcomed by those within the rail industry, though it should be noted draft bills never come to fruition within the session ahead, so ultimately the rail sector is faced with further uncertainty.

Another piece of domestic policy announced was the **Football Governance Bill**. The bill comes following the impact of the pandemic on lower league clubs and the botched attempt from elite clubs to create a European Super League. The bill incorporates lessons from the review led by Tracey Crouch MP and sees the creation of a regulator which will operate a licensing system, where all clubs in the top five tiers of the men's English football pyramid will need a licence to operate as professional football clubs.

Finally, as mentioned in the Prime Minister's conference speech, legislation was brought forward through the **Tobacco and Vape Bill** to stamp out alluring marketing for vape products and ban the sale of cigarettes for life for many of those who are currently underage, meaning a 14-year-old will never legally be able to buy cigarettes.



Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Bill
Arbitration Bill
Automated Vehicles Bill
Criminal Justice Bill
Data Protection and Digital Information Bill
Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Bill
Draft Rail Reform Bill
Economic Activities of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill
Football Governance Bill
Holocaust Memorial Bill
Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill
Leasehold and Freehold Bill
Media Bill
Offshore Petroleum Licensing Bill
Pedicabs (London) Bill
Renters (Reform) Bill
Sentencing Bill
Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill
Tobacco and Vapes Bill
Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement
for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill
Victims and Prisoners Bill

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SEC Newgate is an insight-driven global strategic communications and advocacy group. Our advice is delivered by c.1,200 employees across five continents.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss how the measures announced in the King's Speech affect your organisation, please contact:

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