

This has all the signs of a cover up – Ashworth

Jonathan Ashworth MP, Labour's Shadow Health Secretary, responding to revelations that NHS Shared Business Services failed to deliver more than 500,000 letters from hospitals to GPs in the five years to 2016, said:

"This is an absolute scandal. For a company partly owned by the Department of Health and a private company to fail to deliver half a million NHS letters, many of which contain information critical to patient care is astonishing. Patient safety will have been put seriously at risk as a result of this staggering incompetence.

"Jeremy Hunt now needs to tell the whole truth of why patient safety has been put at risk in this way. This has all the signs of a cover up by the Health Secretary and he immediately needs to make clear what he knew and when.

"The news is heart breaking for the families involved and it will be scarcely believable for these hospitals and GPs who are doing their best to deliver services despite the neglect of the Government. We urgently need to know how this was allowed to happen, how many patients were involved and how many have been harmed, and whether patients remain at risk.

"This happened on the Secretary of State's watch and now raises serious questions about Mr Hunt's handling of this shambles.

"It appears this matter was discovered at least by January 2016, and six months later in July 2016 Jeremy Hunt chose to issue a 138 word statement to Parliament. This statement was perfunctory, complacent and evasive, failing to reveal any of the catastrophic detail of how 500,000 pieces of correspondence, including test and screening results and pathways following hospital treatment, had failed to be delivered and were in fact languishing unopened in a warehouse.

"Instead Mr Hunt glibly told Parliament that "some correspondence in the mail redirection service has not reached the intended recipients." For a Secretary of State who supposedly has transparency as his watchword this looks like he has tried to hide the scandal from patients and the public. It's totally unacceptable.

"Quite simply the public will be naturally angry that the Secretary of State who oversees NHS Shared Business Services has failed in his first duty to protect patients."

Debbie Abrahams MP responds to comments by George Freeman, Head of No.10 Policy Unit, regarding sick and disabled people

Debbie Abrahams MP, Shadow Work and Pensions Secretary responded to comments by George Freeman, Head of No.10 Policy Unit, saying:

"Mr Freeman must immediately apologise for the comments he made regarding sick and disabled people.

"Freeman dismissed the needs of people with mental health conditions saying support should go to "really disabled people" rather than those who are "taking pills at home, who suffer from anxiety.

"Not only does this fly in the face of the commitment to 'parity of esteem' for people with mental health conditions, but it directly contradicts Theresa May's comments on mental health and two recent tribunal judgements."

Labour announce five point plan for business rates ahead of emergency roundtable with business organisations

Labour have responded to fears about the impact of looming business rate hikes for some businesses by calling on the Government to set up an emergency transitional relief fund and take a series of measures to ease the business rate burden for business. They are also holding an urgent meeting with leading business organisations to discuss a radical shakeup of business rates in the longer term.

Business rates revaluation due to come into effect on 1 April have caused uproar as it has emerged that The average small shop will be hit by an extra £3,663 in rates over the next 5 years, while many large online retailers will see their rates cut. The Big 4 superstores – Tesco, Asda, Sainsburys and Morrisons – will see a 5.9% reduction in Rateable Value, while online retailer, ASOS, will see their rates bill fall from £1.17million to £1.14million, despite reporting UK retail sales growth of 18%.

The changes have led to calls from businesses to reform the business rates system so that it better reflects changing shopping patterns.

Labour's five point plan to help business survive the revaluation and develop a system of business taxation suitable for the 21st Century:

1. Set up an emergency transitional relief fund for businesses facing "cliff edge" increases in their rates, and revise the appeals process to ensure businesses get a swift and fair hearing
2. Bring forward CPI indexation so that businesses aren't paying more because of how inflation is measured
3. Exclude new investment in plant and machinery from future business rates valuation
4. Introduce more regular valuations in law to stop businesses facing periodic, unmanageable hikes
5. Fundamental reform of the business rates system to ease the burden on traditional high streets and town centres in the age of online shopping; support the traditional fabric of our communities, including community pubs and incentivising free cash machines; and create a fairer system of business taxation.

Shadow Business Secretary, Rebecca Long-Bailey, Shadow Chancellor, John McDonnell, and Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Theresa Pearce, will hold an emergency roundtable on Monday with leading business organisations, including the Federation of Small Business, the British Retail Consortium, and the British Chamber of Commerce.

Shadow Business Secretary, Rebecca Long-Bailey, said:

"From delaying the revaluation to their failure to put adequate transitional arrangements in place, the Government have mishandled this whole process, and should provide immediate emergency relief to stop thousands of businesses going under.

"But the reality is that business rates are a ticking time bomb. It cannot be right for smaller, town centre retailers to be facing massive hikes while the Amazons and ASOS's of this world have their business rates cut. Given our long-standing productivity problem, it is madness that we tax businesses' plant and machinery.

"That's why Labour are working closely with business to radically reform our business taxation system so it is fit for the 21st Century"

Mike Cherry, National Chairman at the Federation of Small Businesses, said:

"Business rates are an outdated tax. FSB is keen for all political parties to help those small firms hardest hit by the current revaluation, and to start to focus on fundamental longer-term reform of business rates to make sure it's fair for small firms. It is incredibly important to support small businesses and the self-employed so they don't face shock tax rises, so we are delighted to take part in the roundtable."

Andrew Silvester, Head of Campaigns & Deputy Director of Policy at the Institute of Directors said:

"It's hugely important that politicians on all sides look for constructive

ways to reform business rates. This is a 20th century system and in a 21st century economy it looks painfully out of date.”

Christopher Richards, Senior Business Environment Policy Adviser at the Engineering Employers Federation, said:

“Establishing the principle that plant and machinery has no place in the business rates system is an important first step for all political actors to take, this is the top priority action for industry. The inclusion of plant and machinery in business rates bills represents a tax on productive investment and undermines the international competitiveness of UK manufacturing. Excluding future investments from being taxed is therefore a significant step in the right direction, is consistent with the government’s industrial strategy aims and if enacted would give some confidence to manufacturers about the likely post-Brexit investment environment in the UK.”

Hammond can’t hide from disability cuts in the Budget

The Shadow Chancellor has today called on Philip Hammond not to go ahead with the £3.7bn worth of cuts to Personal Independence Payments (PIP) which will hit 160,000 disabled people.

The announcement, which was sneaked out last week, will mean 160,000 disabled people could see a loss in their income as a direct effect of the changes made by the government to how PIP is awarded.

John McDonnell MP, Labour’s Shadow Chancellor, said:

“Theresa May has used the cover of the by-elections to sneak out this announcement hurting so many vulnerable disabled people.

“This is a return to the worst politics of spin that so tarnished our politics for so long. It is an act of immense bad faith. She is degrading politics and demeaning the role of Prime Minister.

“Next week the Tories will make out that the economy and the public finances are doing better, however, they are planning to go ahead with a £3.7 billion cut to the disabled.

“This time last year when the economy and public finances were not doing as well, and the then Chancellor George Osborne tried to cut PIP, Labour stopped him. And in his u-turn he claimed that he could “absorb” the cost of reversing this cut.

“Hammond can’t hide from these PIP cuts in his Budget. He needs to explain why he can’t absorb them like his predecessor while he is still going ahead with tax giveaways to the very wealthiest in our country.”

Press release: £17 million boost for the UK's booming artificial intelligence sector

New measures to support Britain's world-leading AI sector are set to be announced as part of a bold Digital Strategy to boost growth and deliver a thriving, outward-looking digital economy that works for everyone.

Accenture has estimated AI could add in the region of £654 billion (\$814 billion) to the UK economy by 2035. So the Strategy, due to be published by Culture Secretary Karen Bradley MP on Wednesday (March 1), builds on the plan set out in the Government's Industrial Strategy to capitalise on Britain's existing strengths and back new technologies where the UK can take a lead.

Britain already has a competitive advantage in Artificial Intelligence, with some of the world's most innovative AI companies based here and a rich ecosystem of investors, employers, developers and clients. It is a fast-growing area for research and commercial investment, including by major global digital companies, and was identified as one of the technologies that could be supported through the Government's new Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund and the Challenger Business Programme.

AI is already making a huge positive difference in people's lives – every day. This ranges from the obvious uses, such as smartphone voice and touch recognition technology and virtual digital assistants like Siri, to less well-known benefits such as online customer services which make it easier to get help when things go wrong and fraud detection tools used by banks to protect against theft. It also the bedrock of video games and music and movie recommendation services.

The Digital Strategy's proposals are expected to include:

- A major AI review led by Wendy Hall and Jérôme Pesenti to identify the critical elements for the exciting technology to thrive and grow in the UK. It will consider how Government and industry could work together to back this technology, which could inform a sector deal. The UK is already a world-leader in the science underpinning this technology and the sector has the potential to grow further, from early research to commercialisation.
- Government is also expected to confirm a funding boost of £17.3m from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) to support the development of new Robotics and Artificial Intelligence (RAI) technologies in universities across the UK.

The moves are part of the strategy's ambition for Britain to build on areas of strength and develop a global lead in technologies, including cyber

security, connected and smart devices, autonomous vehicles as well as AI. These technologies will drive future economic growth and productivity across the economy.

Culture Secretary Karen Bradley said:

Britain has a proud history of digital innovation – from the earliest days of computing to Sir Tim Berners-Lee’s development of the World Wide Web.

We are already pioneers in today’s artificial intelligence revolution and the Digital Strategy will build on our strengths to make sure UK-based scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs continue to be at the forefront.

Technologies like AI have the potential to transform how we live, work, travel and learn, and I am pleased that Professor Dame Wendy Hall and Jérôme Pesenti will be leading this review. It’s great that Government and industry will be working together to drive growth in the sector, to realise all the economic and social benefits for the UK.

Backing our thriving digital economy to expand and grow by putting the best foundations in place to develop new technology is a vital part of this Government’s plan to build a modern, dynamic and global trading nation.

Business Secretary Greg Clark said:

Investment in robotics and artificial intelligence will help make our economy more competitive, build on our world-leading reputation in these cutting-edge sectors and help us create new products, develop more innovative services and establish better ways of doing business.

Innovation is at the heart of our Industrial Strategy and the launch of the Government’s Digital Strategy underlines our commitment to this vital sector. By supporting British businesses and investing in dynamic fields such as robotics and AI, we will help put the UK at the forefront of global innovation.

Dame Wendy Hall, Regius Professor of Computer Science at the University of Southampton, said:

Our scientists, researchers and entrepreneurs are at the forefront of the development of artificial intelligence and I’m looking forward to exploring how industry and government can work together to support the technology in the UK.

Media enquiries and interview requests – please contact the DCMS News and Communications team on 020 7211 2210.

Notes to editors

- Professor Dame Wendy Hall FRS FREng is Regius Professor of Computer Science at the University of Southampton. Wendy is an entrepreneur, and one of the world's leading computer scientists. She was a founding director of the Web Science Research Initiative, now the Web Science Trust, and is the Executive Director of the Web Science Institute at Southampton . She was president of the British Computer Society from 2003-04 and was the first person from outside North America to be elected President of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) from 2008-10. Since 2014, she has served as a commissioner for the Global Commission on Internet Governance and is a non-executive director of Dstl and the Digital Catapult.
- Jérôme Pesenti is the CEO of BenevolentTech, the technology division of BenevolentAI, a British technology company using artificial intelligence to accelerate scientific discovery. He is a world-leading pioneer in the commercialisation of AI. He co-founded Vivisimo, a tech firm specialising in text mining and enterprise search engines, which was acquired by IBM. At IBM he became chief scientist of big data, and created and led the development of the Watson Platform – the first comprehensive cloud platform for artificial intelligence.
- The funding boost from the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) will support pioneering research including a project by the University of Manchester to develop robots capable of operating autonomously and effectively within hazardous environments such as nuclear facilities, while researchers at Imperial College London will use funds to make major advances in the field of surgical micro-robotics.
- AI refers to computers and software that support behaviour comparable in some ways to human capabilities. It can interpret complex data to enable better decision making, and can work with large amounts of information to improve its own performance.
- Source:
<https://www.accenture.com/gb-en/insight-artificial-intelligence-future-growth>