

Giant panda to return home as she feels the effects of age



Keeper Liu Jiang feeds Shu Lan at a zoo in the northwestern city of Lanzhou. The 23-year-old giant panda, who is 70 in human terms, is to be returned to her hometown in Sichuan Province. [Photo/Xinhua]

A 23-year-old panda living in a zoo in the northwestern city of Lanzhou is to return to its hometown in southwest China's Sichuan Province due to its age, zoo authorities said yesterday.

Shu Lan was born in Chengdu, Sichuan's capital, and moved to Lanzhou in 1996.

In 1999, she went back to Sichuan to live in Chengdu and two giant panda centers in the city of Ya'an for research and breeding.

The panda returned to Lanzhou in April last year, but her health aroused public concern after photographs of her with an injured back and foaming at the mouth went viral.

The China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda sent three experts to Lanzhou earlier this month to evaluate her health and the living conditions at Lanzhou Zoo.

They found that Shu Lan's health was normal and determined that the foaming at the mouth was caused mainly by chewing and playing with her tongue. But they also pointed out that her weight had dropped from 103 kilograms to 92kg since she had returned to the city, though that was still in the normal range.

However, they also concluded that Shu Lan was showing symptoms of aging.

Giant pandas live mainly in the mountains of northern Sichuan as well as the southern parts of Gansu and Shaanxi provinces.

According to the latest nationwide survey, there are 132 giant pandas in the wild in southern Gansu.

But Lanzhou, in the middle of the province, has a different environment and climate compared with wild panda habitats.

Heating, air conditioning and a humidifier have been installed in Shu Lan's living area in the zoo. But the panda habitat was built in 1976 and is now deemed too antiquated for her.

The bamboo she was fed was not fresh enough as it was transported from central China's Henan Province. In addition, the zoo lacks experience in taking care of old pandas.

Experts suggested sending Shu Lan to the China Conservation and Research Center for the Giant Panda in Sichuan to help maintain her health.

That suggestion has been approved by the zoo, though a specific schedule has not yet been released.

The decision was confirmed by Zhang Jianlong, head of the State Forestry Administration.

"We will try our best to improve the condition of the zoo," said Lei Qinghai, its director, adding that the city is planning to move the zoo to a new site for future development.

A national survey released in February 2015 showed that by the end of 2013, China had 1,864 wild pandas and 375 others living in captivity.

[Peter Dowd speech at the close of tonight's Budget debates](#)

Peter Dowd MP, Labour's Shadow

Chief Secretary to the Treasury, speaking at the close of the Budget debates tonight, said:

Mr Speaker, last week the Chancellor painted a rosy picture of the nation's finances.

He claimed the Conservative Party's stewardship had been nothing short of

miraculous.

A relaxed Chancellor attempted jokes throughout his speech.

The Prime Minister shoulders shook with amusement.

Many members opposite chuckled away.

Some of the more experienced Members opposite were watching cautiously, as the nose dive gained velocity.

The Chancellor got it wrong – big time.

Within hours he was attacked by many of his own backbenchers.

He was left hung out to dry by the Prime Minister.

Unsurprisingly, he has faced universal criticism over his plans to raise national insurance to 11 per cent for millions of people who are self-employed.

As Sir Michael Caine, playing the character of Charlie Crooker in the iconic Italian Job movie said to his bumbling side kick.

“You’re only supposed to blow the doors off!”

Well, the debris from the explosion is still in descending.

A manifesto pledge broken – pure and simple.

And since last Wednesday No.10 and No. 11 have been in a briefing war with each trying to blame the other for the fine mess.

Ostensibly, No.10 suggests the Chancellor sneaked the NI rise into the Budget.

Apparently, other shocked Cabinet colleagues have indicated that he failed to mention, that it would break their manifesto pledge.

It's worrying, Mr Speaker, that Cabinet Ministers don't know what manifesto commitments they made or perhaps they don't care?

Then again the Government has an insouciant attitude towards its manifesto commitments.

First, the Government committed to getting rid of the deficit by 2015 – a promise broken.

Second, they said it would be pushed back to 2019/20 – another broken promise.

Third, they vowed the debt would start to come down after 2015 – another broken promise.

The Government will have virtually doubled the debt and doubled the time they'll have taken to get it down.

And this is what they call success and fiscal credibility?

They seem to think that they can simply press the reset button when it comes to meeting their own fiscal rules and no one will notice.

The flip side of John Maynard Keynes' approach, namely when I change my mind the facts change with it.

When the Government's misses a deadline it's modus operandi is to set a new one and brazenly move on.

The immutable Tory law of economics – make it up as you go along.

What happened to the long term economic plan?

Well, it didn't last very long? Mr Speaker

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor have their finger prints all over every single financial decision that has been made during the last seven years.

It's no surprise that they have come under criticism from many in their own party including the former Member for Witney.

Or the former Chancellor, Lord Lamont, who called the NI debacle a "rookie error".

Otherwise known, in the real world, as gross incompetence.

But regrettably it's other people who will pay the price for that incompetence.

Mr Speaker, turning to Brexit, I'll mention it even if the Chancellor doesn't, it's the tenth anniversary since the production of

"Freeing Britain to Compete: Equipping the UK for Globalisation"

This publication was a wide ranging policy document authored by the right honourable Member for Wokingham and friends.

It was endorsed by the then Shadow Cabinet which included the current incumbents at numbers 10 and 11 Downing Street.

The publication was hard to track down as it has been removed from the Conservative Party website and for good reason.

But I found a copy.

Its contents were toxic and all the more so in the wake of the subsequent global financial crisis and remain so.

But in the light of Brexit, and the resurgence of the honourable member for Wokingham's influence, it will soon be getting a second run out.

Mr Speaker, it is worth appraising the House of a few of the nuggets contained in its pages.

It includes policies such as the abolition of inheritance tax.

Charging foreign lorries to use British roads.

The potential abolition of the BBC licence fee, which it refers to as a poll tax.

The watering down of money laundering regulations.

The deregulation of mortgage finance.

Because it's the:

"lending institutions rather than the client taking the risk."

Try telling that to someone whose house has been repossessed.

It goes on:

"we need to make it more difficult for ministers to regulate, and we need to give the critics of regulation more opportunity to make their case against specific new proposals."

Remember this document, dated August 2007, was rubber stamped by the current Prime Minister and Chancellor at the same time Northern Rock was about to go under.

It continues:

"the Government (the Labour Government) claims that this regulation is all necessary. They seem to believe that without it banks could steal our money."

That is not quite the case but the taxpayer, at its peak, had liabilities for the banking crisis of £1.2 trillion.

But, Mr Speaker, many people did believe the banks were stealing their money.

It refers to wanting:

"reliably low inflation, taking no risks by turning fiscal rules into flexible friends."

As for Europe, in search of jobs and prosperity, it says:

"An incoming Conservative Government should go to Brussels with proposals to deregulate the whole EU..."

No wonder they wanted to bury the evidence.

It's the autobiography of the hard line Brexiteers.

It's the Tory blue print for a post Brexit deregulated Britain.

It's a race to the bottom.

These policies are a telling narrative of the views of the fundamentalist wing of the Conservative Party.

The Prime Minister is a hostage to the far right of the Tory Party.

She is on the hook.

The stage directions are coming from Wokingham, Haltemprice and Howden, North Somerset and Chingford and Wood Green with occasional guest appearances by the Foreign Secretary.

The forlorn, melancholic Chancellor is briefed against because he may just have a less hard-line outlook as far as Brexit is concerned.

These are the dusted off policies of the hard Brexiteers who will stop at nothing until Britain becomes a low wage, low tax, low regulation economy.

They want to turn our country into the bargain basement of the western world.

They have the Prime Minister in tow.

Parliamentary scrutiny is a hindrance.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister has put Kamikaze pilots in the cockpit.

The Chancellor knows this too well and that is why reportedly he is putting aside £60 billion, equivalent to a year's worth of borrowing on the national debt to cope with the trauma.

It's not Brexit proofing the economy but rather proofing the economy from the toxic ideology of the hard Brexiteers.

Mr Speaker, ultimately, it comes down to choices and values.

The Government's choices in this Budget are informed by their values and they are not the same as the vast majority of people in this country.

The Government propose to increase Insurance Premium Tax from 10 per cent to 12 per cent, a regressive measure which will be a further

hit on household finances and act as a deterrent to families wanting to obtain proper insurance cover.

It was a surprise to see this measure in the Autumn Statement, coming as it did from a government which constantly uses the high cost of insurance premiums as an excuse for curbs on victims' right to claim compensation for their losses, with particularly damaging effects for those injured in accidents at work.

We will oppose this rise.

And while the Government drives up insurance price for millions of families, it has chosen to forego £73 billion of revenue to give corporations and the wealthy few tax handouts between now and 2021.

A choice we would not make.

Their choice is informed by the value they put on elites and corporations, many of whom readily avoid paying their fair share of tax.

They plan to loosen the rules on the Business Investment Relief, increasing the scope for non-doms to avoid tax when they bring funds into the UK.

This is straightforwardly a giveaway to non-doms, which we will oppose.

There is little evidence that this relief has had a significant impact on inward investment since it was first introduced in 2012.

And there is little genuine reason to believe that expanding the relief now will do anything but give non-doms even more advantages over millions of UK taxpayers.

These and other tax cuts for elites and corporations come off the backs of public sector employees who have foregone pay rises for years.

Or those in the private sector whose wages and salaries remain in the doldrums and will for another decade or more.

Or the self-employed who are increasingly driving our economy who will see an increase to 11 per cent in National Insurance contributions.

We would make a different choice.
We reject the kick in the teeth to self-employed people.

Not only does it hit many on low
to middle income but will it raise anywhere near the
£2 billion the Treasury
projects?

It may also deter many people from
setting up their own businesses, from innovating and excelling.

It's a moratorium on aspiration.

We would choose not to give tax
breaks to those who do not need them.

Mr Speaker, in this Budget the
Government claims it's giving lower and middle earners, the NHS, social care
agencies, the self-employed, schools, businesses, pubs, the strivers, the
entrepreneurs the thumbs up.

Mr Speaker, in practice, this
Budget is not giving a thumbs up to all those people.

On the contrary, it's two other
digits being put up to those people.

That's another choice that Labour
would not make.

A brighter future for Ruthin Castle

The work is a holding measure to prevent further collapse of the Castle walls and the fascinating Victorian follies and tunnels built onto and within them until the recently formed Ruthin Castle Conservation Trust is able to develop an ambitious project for their large scale conservation and public access. Due to the fragile state of the ruins the work is all being undertaken by specialist rope access contractors who have cleared a huge amount of heavy vegetation from the walls, revealing this spectacular monument in its full glory for the first time in decades. Work has now begun pinning, propping, shoring and strapping the crumbling walls to stabilise as much masonry as possible.

The future of the 750 year old Castle, which is arguably the most significant medieval castle in Wales not to have been conserved, is now looking brighter. The Ruthin Castle Conservation Trust – which was created last year – is also now looking at taking over the lease of the ancient monument. The Trust's

mission is to encourage, engage and inspire the community of Ruthin and beyond to join together in supporting the restoration, and sustainable conservation of Ruthin Castle and its gardens, grounds and associated buildings, using its heritage qualities to create an historic educational, tourism and leisure environment.

County Archaeologist Fiona Gale, said:

“It is wonderful to at last see work happening at Ruthin Castle, the medieval masonry is amazing but has been in a very poor condition for decades, two years ago there was a small collapse. Cadw are putting funding in to kick start this fantastic project and to address the worst areas of damage. It is great to see this happening and great for the town of Ruthin.”

Economy Secretary, Ken Skates, said:

“I’m delighted that there’s so much good will and passion towards the future of Ruthin Castle among the local community and I wish the Trust well in their future work to share the story of Ruthin Castle. Although emergency works at our ancient monuments are rare and are used as a last resort, Cadw’s work at the site will prevent further loss of the site and will hopefully attract further funding for the Trust.”

Press release: Essex wood waste site fined for illegal waste operation

JSJ Wood Recycling Ltd, operating in Nazeing, Essex, and two directors have been ordered to pay over £12,000 in fines for treating wood waste without the correct authorisations from the Environment Agency. The Environment Agency was also awarded £10,000 in costs.

The company, and former company directors Jenny Dodge of Epping and John Michael Parish of Wickford, Essex appeared before Barkingside Magistrates Court (on Friday 10 March 2017) and pleaded guilty to operating their wood recycling site unlawfully over a period of 8 months.

Under the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2010, certain low-risk waste operations can be undertaken when an operator registers an exemption with the Environment Agency. Exemptions are limited to particular types and amounts of waste and methods of treatment. If an

operator registers an exemption but then operates outside of its terms, he or she commits an offence.

The court heard how JSJ Wood Recycling Ltd registered two exemptions for the storage and treatment of wood waste, which allowed the storage of up to 600 tonnes of waste wood at any one time. The company had a blatant disregard to the requirements of the exemption and exceeded the allowance by storing up to 1,750 tonnes of waste wood. The site also accepted waste which it was not authorised to treat and processed it in ways which it was not permitted to do.

JSJ Wood Recycling Ltd received payments for illegally receiving waste wood on its site at Birchwood Industrial Estate, Hoe Lane, Nazeing. Once on the site, the wood was processed by using heavy plant to chip it. Chipping wood makes it easier to store and transport, and in some instances makes it suitable for reuse. Once chipped, some of the wood was taken off site for incineration and for export. Some of the wood was baled in black plastic wrapping prior to removal.

Environment Agency officers attended the site in May 2014 to assess compliance with the registered exemptions, but raised concerns about the way the site was being operated, most notably the dust being generated from the chipping process and the treatment of waste wood of a type not allowed by the exemptions.

Lead Officer in the case, Patrick Schneiders, said:

I visited the site on numerous occasions during 2014 but the defendants continued to ignore our advice on how to comply with their exemptions and run a site within the rules. Further visits to the site throughout 2014 revealed an increase in illegal activity with even more waste on site.

Waste crime can undermine legitimate businesses, so we work closely with businesses to help them comply with the law. In cases like this where individuals consistently operate illegally, we have no hesitation in prosecuting them as we want to make sure that waste crime doesn't pay.

[News story: Defence Secretary announces 1,500th signing of Armed](#)

Forces Covenant

Building materials supplier Travis Perkins were revealed as the 1,500th signatory during the third annual Partnering with Defence employer conference at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre in London today.

Speaking at the conference, Sir Michael said:

By signing the Covenant, Travis Perkins joins firms across Britain committed to ensuring those who serve or have served our country are better supported.

Reaching this milestone also shows growing recognition of the unique skills and experience that reservists and former service personnel offer their organisations.

Amongst their commitments, Travis Perkins has pledged to provide Armed Forces personnel and veterans with a variety of work experience placements in their centres, branches, and stores across the country and are supporting members of the Royal Engineers in gaining NVQ qualifications for their construction skills.

Travis Perkins currently employs nine reservists and other members of the Armed Forces community across the country.

Maria Walding, a Compliance Manager at Travis Perkins, who is an Army Cadet Force adult volunteer, said:

The Travis Perkins Group has fully supported and values my role as a Reservist. I am proud to say I work for a company that consistently gives military personnel the chance to use their existing skills and build a lasting career outside of the military.

Travis Perkins CEO John Carter said:

As a business, Travis Perkins has long recognised the valuable skills and attributes those with a serving background can contribute, not only to our own workforce but also to the wider economy.

We are delighted to not only be here to celebrate the Group's commitment and ongoing support of the Armed Forces in our signing of the Armed Forces Covenant, but incredibly proud and honoured to be recognised along with our community of ex forces and serving colleagues, as the 1500th organisation to do so.

Travis Perkins joins a growing number of businesses that are making tangible pledges to the Armed Forces community.

Earlier this week Defence Minister Mark Lancaster also announced that the UK's main broadband providers including Virgin Media, Sky, Talk Talk, BT, EE and Plusnet, representing 95 per cent of Britain's broadband market, had committed to waiving fees on contracts that personnel had to cancel when posted abroad or to another part of the UK, often at short notice.

Since 2013, the Covenant has helped to deliver these key improvements for the Armed Forces community:

- A new agreement with mortgage lenders allowing personnel posted abroad to rent out their homes without facing higher mortgage costs or having to change their mortgage;
 - Fairer mobile phone contracts, freezing the accounts of Armed Forces personnel and their families posted overseas and removing cancellation fees;
 - Better deals in motor insurance, allowing personnel to keep their no claims bonuses and avoid cancellation fees when posted overseas at short notice;
 - Employer networks in a wide range of sectors to support Service leavers through their transition to new careers;
 - Better access to banking, such as savings accounts to Service families posted overseas;
 - Tackling commercial disadvantage previously experienced by the Armed Forces community in relation to credit rating and access to mortgages on offer. For example, if their Service overseas forces them into a situation where they will need to rent out their home, members are now free from the need to switch to a 'buy to let' mortgage;
 - Better access to mentoring, work placements and employment opportunities for personnel leaving the Services;
 - Increased funding and sponsorship of military charities and sports events such as the Invictus Games;
 - Flexible paid or unpaid leave for mobilised Reservists;
 - Employment support for Veterans, Reservists, Service spouses and partners, as well as support for Cadets;
- Discounts and special deals for individuals and their families.

The Armed Forces Covenant is a promise by the nation, enshrined in law, ensuring that those who serve or have previously served in the Armed Forces, and their families, are treated fairly and not disadvantaged by their service.