



**Bedford & District
Group Newsletter
December 2023**

Editor's notes

I'm starting this a little late in the quarter because my time is no longer my own. My husband has been diagnosed with motor neurone disease (MND) so I have become a "carer". I think I was one before, but that's probably another story. Currently, his mobility is not affected but he is losing his ability to speak and he has difficulty with swallowing. It is a disease that manifests in different forms. It is also quite rare, many people only recognising the illness when you mention the names Stephen Hawking, English theoretical scientist and cosmologist 1942 - 2018 and rugby league player Rob Burrow, born in 1982 who represented England in 2008. Pete was a football player, his most famous clubs being Ringstead Rangers and the Meltis. So, Pete is in good company!

Chair John Abington

2023 has been a year which seems to have passed me by very rapidly, and I can see Christmas looking over the horizon. The CSPA is settling down again, after the staff changes in Head Office in the summer, and I wish the new team every success in their endeavours. The CSPA National Annual General Meeting at Kenilworth in October was well attended and there was lively debate to some of the Motions. Romy Neeves took notes at the AGM, and produced a comprehensive report of the proceedings, which has been circulated

to all our members on email. If you do not have email and would like a copy, please let me or Romy know, and we will send one. Our contact details are at the end of this Newsletter. As I write this report there has been another major reshuffle of the present government. We are still waiting to see whether the State Pension will rise by 8.5%, which was the figure for average earnings in September 2023, or whether it will be reduced, to take out the effect of one-off bonuses paid in 2023, which are claimed to have inflated its value. Our CS pensions will rise by the Consumer Prices Index, which in September 2023 was 6.7%. Also beginning to appear on my horizon is a general election, though I did get the deadline date wrong at the September Meeting. It is almost certain to be held before the end of 2024, so we need to be prepared to campaign at the local level so seek the opinions of prospective main party candidates within our constituencies. However, more of that in later Newsletters. As this newsletter will go out in December, may I usually at this time of the year wish all our members the Seasons Greetings, and hope for a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year for 2024

Transport

According to a news item in my daily paper, The I, the Government has scrapped controversial plans to close railway ticket offices in England after

warnings that thousands of people could be denied access to rail travel.

The proposed closure of almost all 1007 train station outlets prompted uproar from unions, charities, passenger groups, and one of the issues the CSPA in conjunction with the NPC (National Pensioners Convention) have campaigned against. Transport Focus, which said it received 750,000 responses to the ticket office consultation, said there were "key issues that are critical to maintaining accessibility for all to the national network.

Society

I like words! So it is with surprise that I read the abbreviation for artificial intelligence (AI) has been named the Collective Word of the Year 2023. The dictionary said AI, which it said means the "modelling of human mental functions by computer programmes" has become the dominant conversation of 2023. Oh! has it?

The words that really tickled me, and will become clear if you read on, is "nepo baby". This has become a popular phrase to describe the children of celebrities who have succeeded in industries like those of their parents.

For example, the son of Sir Keir Starmer's chief of staff, former Partygate investigator Sue Gray (who was our keynote speaker last year) has applied to stand for Labour in Beckenham and Penge in London at the next election.

Another word on the list is "debanking" – depriving people of banking facilities, as in the case of Nigel Farage and his Coutts account.

In his first state opening of Parliament as monarch, Charles paid tribute to the late Queen's "legacy of service and devotion" and said ministers will focus on "difficult but necessary long-term decisions", as he read out the Government's legislative priorities in the first King's Speech in seven decades. Here are some of the policies promised in the Speech, with predictions on how likely it is to pass into law before the next general election.

Offshore Petroleum Licencing Bill – the Government intends to introduce legislation to strengthen the United

Kingdom's energy security and reduce reliance on international markets **4/5**

Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership Bill) A bill to promote trade and investment, continue to negotiate trade agreements with dynamic economies, delivering jobs with economies in the fastest growing region of the world. **5/5**

Automated Vehicles Bill

To introduce new legal frameworks to support the safe commercial development of emerging industries, such as self-driving vehicles. **2/5**

Digital Markets, Competitions and Consumers Bill

Aims to boost competition in digital markets, and clamp down on fake reviews and subscription traps **4/5**

Data Protection and Digital Information Bill

Measures include setting up digital verification services and reforming the way births and deaths are registered in England and Wales **4/5**

Media Bill - This Bill proposes to support the creative industries and protect public interest journalism. **4/5**

Arbitration Bill

Intended to modernise the law on arbitration, a form of dispute resolution between two parties. **5/5**

Draft Rail Reform Bill

Measures include combining the management of the rail networks into a public body, Great British Railways and simplify ticketing. **2/5**

Tobacco and vapes Bill

Plans to tighten up rules and ban smoking for future generations. **3/5**

Leasehold and Freehold Bill - To make it easier for leaseholders in England and Wales to extend their lease, increase the standard extension term from 90 to 990 years and scrap ground rent. **3/5**

Renters (Reform) Bill

To ban Section 21 'no fault' evictions in England and Wales and ease evictions of anti-social tenants. **3/5**

Football Governance Bill

To create a football regulator **4/5**

Pedicabs (London) Bill

Aims to deal with the "scourge of unlicensed pedicabs in London". **5/5**

Holocaust Memorial Bill

To enable a memorial to be erected next to the Houses of Parliament **2/5**

Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports Bill) A ban on exporting live animals for slaughter and fattening. **4/5**

Sentencing Bill – To toughen sentences for serious offenders in England and Wales. **5/5**

Criminal Justice Bill – To help combat complex crimes, including grooming, and give police more powers. **5/5**

Investigatory Powers (Amendment) Bill – To give the security and intelligence services new powers. **3/5**

Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill – Will require venues to consider the threat from terrorism. **4/5**

Victims and Prisoners Bill – It will bring a Victims Code into law and join up support Services. **5/5**

Technology

I have already mentioned AI, Stephen Hawking and Rob Burrow, so I was pleasantly surprised by how on message I happened to be when I read in The Sunday Times on 12th November that Rob is thought to be the first non-verbal person to present a podcast, made possible by several small British businesses harnessing artificial intelligence to help people like him with motor neurone disease (MND).

He plays his voice through a tablet computer which he controls using his eye movements.

The technology used by Burrow is a long way from the monotone computer-generated voice used by Professor Stephen Hawking.

To create Burrow's new voice, the Edinburgh-based voice technology business listened to hours of his post-

match interviews from his time as a rugby player at the Leeds Rhinos. This was then paired with a tablet computer that converts the words he types, letter by letter, using his eyes, into speech. An infrared camera recognises when his gaze lingers for approximately one

second on an individual letter on a keyboard on the screen.

Europe

British wine-lovers can raise a glass of the finest Beaujolais or Bordeaux after France regained its title as the world's top wine producer, even as global production fell to its lowest level since 1961.

France had fallen behind Italy as the largest wine producer in recent years but is set to reclaim its leadership after extreme weather and fungal disease hit Italian vineyards.

English wine producers have latterly earned accolades as producing white wine on a par with some French wines owing to conditions in the UK becoming more suitable because of global warming.

To some degree I would agree but it is always the price that holds me back.

The Lifeboat Fund

Many years ago, I went on a training course to The Merry Hill Centre near Dudley. It was at that time occupied by the Department for Social Security. In the carpark was a lifeboat! Since Dudley was about as dead centre in the country as it could possibly be, I was puzzled but didn't think any more about it even though there is always a stall outside the Annual General Meeting promoting the RNLI and selling souvenirs of the RNLI.

However, at this year's Annual General Meeting we had a presentation given by The Lifeboat fund and it all became clear. The lifeboat Fund is an official charity of the Civil Service. It exists for one reason: to help the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) save lives at sea.

The Lifeboat Fund is the RNLI's longest-standing contributor and its biggest single donor. It was founded in 1866 by a group of civil servants and is the only

Civil Service charity run in-house to this day.

The RNLI is now asking serving and retired civil servants to support its work by giving to The Lifeboat Fund.

Ever since the original group of civil servants asked their workmates for donations to buy a lifeboat, the Lifeboat Fund has continued to provide financial support for RNLI priorities, including

- Purchasing and maintaining lifeboats
- Funding crew and lifeguard training and equipment
- Refurbishing lifeboat stations and helping with lifesaving projects.
- Continued running of this vital emergency service around our coastline.

The charity has funded 54 lifeboats since those early days, and the lifeboats' courageous crews have saved over 4,500 lives.

For its 150th Anniversary Appeal, the Lifeboat Fund raised over £1.2 million to fund a Shannon class all-weather lifeboat.

Fundraising help is available via Trustee, Michael Lawler, who would love to hear from you.

So, my curiosity about the lifeboat in the carpark was satisfied!

Back to the future!

Usually attributed to British Prime Minister Harold Wilson in the mid-1960s "a week is a long time in politics". According to Nadine Dorries, former Culture Secretary, and former resident of the jungle whilst still representing her constituency, and who was very disappointed to not get a retirement title to move in the House of Lords when Boris Johnson stepped down as party leader, apparently Nigel Farage, former UKP leader, and who is now a GB News presenter, is going to Australia to be in the jungle to take part in "I'm a celebrity...get me out of here". Whatever next, you might expostulate.

But who would have thought it. In a cabinet re-shuffle this week, David Cameron, former prime minister, famous for taking the country out of Europe, has become a life peer and Foreign Secretary and will be "in the room for big decisions".

Tax

Finally, according to Sir Steve Webb, a former pensions minister, thousands of female pensioners who have shared part of their income tax allowance with a spouse may face unexpected tax bills. The marriage allowance lets couple share some of their personal tax allowance (the £12,570 that someone is allowed to earn before they start paying income tax) with one another, as long as one person in the couple is a basic rate taxpayer who earns between £12,571 and £50,270, and the other does not pay income tax.

Sir Steve, who is now a partner in a pension's consultancy, says increases to the state pension, coupled with the freezing of tax allowances over the past few years, means more of those who hand over their allowances will now be liable to pay tax.

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