# Commons Speaker criticises government for sidelining MPs on major prison policy



Commons Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle has once again taken the government to task over its handling of significant policy announcements, highlighting a growing pattern of ministers opting to communicate such information through the media rather than directly to Parliament. Most recently, Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced early releases for prisoners to alleviate overcrowding in the UK’s prisons from Downing Street, a move which has contravened established protocols that dictate such announcements should be made in the House of Commons first.

Hoyle's remarks came during a session in the Commons, where he expressed his frustration that members of Parliament (MPs) were not given an opportunity to scrutinise a decision of considerable importance. He noted, “I’m surprised the Government did not think that members would want an opportunity to question ministers on a very important issue.” This incident follows a series of similarly contentious announcements, including a recent immigration white paper, which had also been disclosed to the media before being presented to MPs. Hoyle underscored his commitment to uphold the rights of backbenchers and has communicated his intent to request that the Commons' constitution committee review what he termed "repeated breaches" of the Ministerial Code.

The recent announcements from the Ministry of Justice have sparked significant debate concerning the adequacy of the current justice system and its ability to handle the burgeoning prison population, which has doubled in size over the past thirty years. In response to chronic overcrowding, the government has grappled with significant policy challenges, including contemplating alternatives such as house arrest. A review led by former justice secretary David Gauke is exploring “tough alternatives to custody” to prevent emergency releases, a strategy that has already permitted the release of 1,100 inmates. Critics of the government, including advocates for prison reform, have raised apprehensions about the early release of certain offenders, particularly those convicted of domestic abuse, highlighting the risks involved in such measures.

Furthermore, Mahmood's recent initiatives include the establishment of a "women's justice board," aimed at addressing the specific challenges faced by female inmates—many of whom have non-violent backgrounds and have experienced domestic abuse. This initiative follows an acknowledgment from Mahmood that the previous Conservative administration failed to adequately deal with the issues contributing to the current crisis in the prison system. The proposed board is intended to focus on community support and early interventions, an approach welcomed by advocacy groups seeking to reduce recidivism and better support vulnerable offenders.

Hoyle's critiques resonate amid a broader discontent among MPs about the manner in which key policy shifts have been communicated. This week alone, the Speaker was also vocal in condemning Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for discussing major shifts in the UK's Net Zero targets while MPs were not in session, illustrating a consistent concern regarding transparency and accountability in governance. In addition, past incidents where significant announcements—ranging from proposed reforms of the Human Rights Act to healthcare plans—were made to the media before Parliament further underscore the persistent tension between government communication strategies and parliamentary procedure.

As the government attempts to navigate the complexities of an overburdened prison system and address pressing societal issues, the importance of maintaining a robust dialogue with Parliament cannot be overstated. Hoyle's commitment to safeguarding this dialogue reflects a critical aspect of democratic governance, underscoring the necessity for ministers to engage directly with the very bodies responsible for scrutinising their policies.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2055667/lindsay-hoyle-fury-government)
2. Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2055667/lindsay-hoyle-fury-government), [[4]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1814863/Lindsay-Hoyle-Rishi-Sunak-Net-Zero)
3. Paragraph 3: [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/7cbc084f-5038-4c11-85e7-fe3ff7eb59c0), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/fbfa9976-5da8-4e19-935b-b06d3028766c)
4. Paragraph 4: [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/fbfa9976-5da8-4e19-935b-b06d3028766c)
5. Paragraph 5: [[4]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1814863/Lindsay-Hoyle-Rishi-Sunak-Net-Zero), [[5]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1629522/lindsay-hoyle-news-dominic-raab-row-echr-statement), [[6]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1787104/Lindsay-Hoyle-Rishi-Sunak-war-of-words-announcement-MPs)
6. Paragraph 6: [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2055667/lindsay-hoyle-fury-government), [[7]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx9ww120zy8o)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/2055667/lindsay-hoyle-fury-government> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/7cbc084f-5038-4c11-85e7-fe3ff7eb59c0> - In October 2024, the Ministry of Justice in England and Wales considered house arrest as an alternative to jail to alleviate prison overcrowding. A review led by former justice secretary David Gauke aimed to explore 'tough alternatives to custody' to prevent future emergency prisoner releases. This initiative followed the early release of 1,100 inmates due to severe overcrowding, a continuation of a policy that freed 1,700 prisoners in September. The review also considered expanding tagging technology for home detention and introducing good behavior credits to incentivize rehabilitation. England and Wales' prison population had doubled in 30 years, leading to deteriorating conditions and increased violence and drug use. Plans for additional prison spaces and reducing the number of incarcerated women were underway. The review was welcomed by prison reform advocates but raised concerns from women's charities regarding the early release of domestic abuse perpetrators. Prime Minister Keir Starmer acknowledged public discontent but stressed the necessity of the current measures to avoid justice system paralysis.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/fbfa9976-5da8-4e19-935b-b06d3028766c> - In October 2024, Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood announced the creation of a 'women's justice board' to reduce the female prison population in England and Wales. This initiative aimed to address specific issues affecting female inmates, such as high self-harm rates and the traumatic backgrounds of many offenders. Mahmood criticized the previous Conservative administration for the current crisis in the prison system and highlighted the record overcrowding in jails, which led to emergency early releases. The proposed board would focus on early interventions, community support, and specialized assistance for young women in custody. Most female inmates had committed non-violent crimes and many had been victims of domestic abuse. Mahmood also pledged progress on providing rape victims with independent legal advocates. The announcement was welcomed by advocacy groups, underscoring the need for a dedicated framework to support female offenders and reduce reoffending rates.
4. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1814863/Lindsay-Hoyle-Rishi-Sunak-Net-Zero> - In September 2024, Speaker Lindsay Hoyle criticized Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for announcing a major policy shift on Net Zero targets outside of the House of Commons. With MPs on conference recess, Sunak made the announcement without recalling Parliament. Hoyle expressed strong disapproval, stating that such significant policy changes should be announced when the House is sitting, emphasizing that ministers are answerable to MPs and that the House of Commons is where laws are made and national debates occur.
5. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1629522/lindsay-hoyle-news-dominic-raab-row-echr-statement> - In July 2024, Speaker Lindsay Hoyle expressed disappointment over Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab's announcement of a new British Bill of Rights to replace the Human Rights Act, which was first reported by the media before being presented to the House of Commons. Hoyle criticized the government's approach, emphasizing that major policy announcements should be made in Parliament first, as ministers are answerable to MPs and not to the media.
6. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/politics/1787104/Lindsay-Hoyle-Rishi-Sunak-war-of-words-announcement-MPs> - In June 2024, Speaker Lindsay Hoyle criticized Prime Minister Rishi Sunak for unveiling a major NHS workforce plan to the media before presenting it to the House of Commons. Hoyle emphasized that such significant announcements should be made to MPs first, as ministers are answerable to Parliament, not the media, and that the House of Commons is where laws are made and national debates occur.
7. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cx9ww120zy8o> - In May 2024, Labour accused the government of a 'cover-up' over its scheme allowing some inmates to be freed early to ease overcrowding in jails. Shadow Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood highlighted cases where violent criminals were released without proper risk assessments. The government insisted that no one convicted of serious offenses would be eligible for early release, but concerns remained about the adequacy of the assessments and the transparency of the process.