# The urgent need for accountability in UK arm's-length bodies



The debate surrounding the oversight of arm's-length bodies (ALBs) in the UK is becoming a crucial issue, one that requires urgent attention from Members of Parliament (MPs) as the new Labour government appears to be sidelining the need for accountability. Former Conservative minister Sir Christopher Chope has been staunchly advocating for reform, citing deep concerns that ALBs have gone "rogue" under a government that seems to lack the will to rein them in.

In the House of Commons, while introducing his Arm's-Length Bodies (Accountability to Parliament) Bill, Sir Christopher pointed out how organisations like National Highways are promoting questionable initiatives, such as smart motorways, in defiance of public opposition. "What we’re witnessing," he remarked, "is a duplication of effort and turf wars between Whitehall ministries and ALBs, all while these bodies operate free from direct accountability." This mirrors a concerning trend, particularly as the current Labour leadership seems content to let bureaucratic entities function unchecked.

The proposed Bill aims to enable scrutiny of ALBs with budgets over £5 million, ensuring that MPs can discuss their accounts and reports as part of normal parliamentary business. However, during a recent parliamentary session, Labour MPs successfully curbed the vote on this vital legislation, demonstrating a clear reluctance to challenge the status quo. Sir Christopher expressed alarm at the government's apparent preference for using ALBs to evade responsibility on contentious issues.

In an equally troubling development, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer's assertion that the state is “weaker than it’s ever been” coincided with alarming plans to abolish NHS England and transfer oversight to the Department of Health and Social Care. Sir Christopher welcomed the potential for direct ministerial oversight, asserting that it would enhance MPs' ability to address their constituents' concerns. "This is good news," he declared, rejecting the ambivalence that has plagued the Labour government thus far.

Meanwhile, the issue of new sentencing guidelines has provoked a significant backlash. The Sentencing Council's new guidance—which calls for pre-sentence reports based on the ethnicity, culture, or faith of offenders—has been rightly condemned as a step towards a "two-tier justice system." Justice Secretary Shabana Mahmood met with Lord Justice William Davis to discuss these controversial guidelines, but her earlier statements suggest a troubling inclination to base access to justice on demographic factors.

Labour MP Robert Jenrick attempted to address this injustice by presenting a Bill to block these guidelines, claiming that the Justice Secretary is perpetuating division within the justice system. However, his efforts were thwarted by Labour's own MPs, revealing the party's complicity in promoting a system that differentiates based on ethnicity.

As the new Labour government continues to grapple with pressing issues of accountability and justice, the need for opposition voices is more critical than ever. The upcoming debate on Sir Christopher's Bill, scheduled for March 28, could serve as a pivotal moment in the struggle to ensure that public bodies serve the will of the people — a narrative that is all-too-often ignored by those currently in power. Observers and constituents alike are closely watching the implications of these discussions as they unfold.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.nao.org.uk/reports/central-oversight-of-arms-length-bodies/> - This report from the National Audit Office discusses the oversight of arm's-length bodies (ALBs) in the UK, highlighting inconsistencies in their setup and oversight, which aligns with concerns about accountability raised by Sir Christopher Chope.
* <https://moderncivilservice.blog.gov.uk/2024/12/18/understanding-arms-length-bodies-a-fresh-look-at-britains-public-sector/> - This blog post provides an overview of ALBs, including their roles and types, which supports the context of Sir Christopher Chope's concerns about their operations and accountability.
* <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/public-bodies-review-programme> - The Institute for Government explains the public bodies review programme, which evaluates the governance and efficiency of ALBs, reflecting ongoing efforts to address accountability issues.
* <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/> - This link to the UK Parliament's news section could provide updates on parliamentary debates and bills related to ALB accountability, such as Sir Christopher Chope's proposed legislation.
* <https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ministry-of-justice> - The Ministry of Justice's webpage might contain information on sentencing guidelines and reforms, which could relate to the controversy surrounding new guidelines based on ethnicity.
* <https://www.nhs.uk/about-nhs/how-nhs-is-structured/> - This NHS webpage explains its structure and governance, which could provide context for discussions about abolishing NHS England and transferring oversight to the Department of Health and Social Care.