

Report on House of Commons, UK's debate on Farm Bill and subsequent protest in India

Summary

Martyn Day, Linlithgow and East Falkirk, Scottish National Party, Chairman of the meeting

- Farming protests in India may not seem to be the most obvious issue for a petitions debate, but the Petitions Committee has always accepted petitions calling on the UK Government to engage with other Governments on human rights issues. The petition focuses on the protests in Delhi and across India following the agricultural reforms agreed by the Indian Parliament. It calls on the UK Government to “Urge the Indian Government to ensure safety of protestors & press freedom”.

Mr Khalid Mahmood , Birmingham, Perry Barr, Labour Party

- He stated that this is the largest trade dispute in the world at the moment.
- He also said that huge numbers of farmers have committed suicide. Those with small shareholdings of up to five acres will suffer hugely under this law change, which is not about looking after the welfare of farmers in India, who are by and large one of the most downtrodden communities across the whole of Indian culture, because of the work that they do with their hands and the fact that the whole family has to be involved. When they have sought a peaceful change to the legislation, the Indian Government have abused them and delivered lathi charges—charges by the police with batons of wood, he said.

Theresa Villiers , Chipping Barnet, Conservative Party

- Theresa Villiers stated that many of the laws governing India's system of farm support date back to the '50s and '60s, a time when the country was sometimes on the edge of famine. She also mentioned about the reform of farm subsidy and support has been under active and intensive discussion in India for 20 years, and international bodies such as the International Monetary Fund have welcomed Prime Minister Modi's attempt to take action on this challenge, which many of his predecessors have backed away from.
- She further asserted that Prime Minister Modi's Government have repeatedly said that a core purpose of the reforms is to make farming more profitable, raise the incomes of people who work in farming and promote investment in agriculture in order to increase yields.
- She concluded by saying that India is a country where respect for the rule of law and human rights is constitutionally protected and embedded in society. The authorities' approach to the protests should

not shake our faith in that central truth. Rather than denigrating India with unjustified criticism, she argued that the house should celebrate it as the democratic success story that it is.

Jeremy Corbyn, Islington North, Labour Party

- **Corbyn** said the farmers are protesting because they are predominantly small farmers on less than five acres, many of them very poor. Over 22,000 have committed suicide in the past few years as a result of the stress they are under. **Corbyn further argued that** it is as if globalisation has been forced upon them.
- He concluded by mentioning Sabina Inderjit's (the general secretary of the Indian Journalists Union) statement on press freedom in India.

Paul Bristow, Peterborough, Conservative Party

- Bristow spoke of Diplomatic norms and stated that the actions of the Indian Government in response to the farmers' protests broke accepted norms. However challenging the situation becomes, this democratic value should not be suspended, even in the face of provocation.
- Bristow was critical about the Indian Governments measure to block the use of the internet on mobile phones and arrested journalists, and the reports of new legislation to force social media platforms to censor posts and break into encrypted messages.

Tahir Ali ,Birmingham, Hall Green, Labour Party

- **Tahir Ali** was harshly critical of BJP led overnment in India. He said the farmer's protests have brought the world's attention on India, and particularly on the abuses of the extreme far-right Government led by Prime Minister Modi and the Bharatiya Janata party.
- He stated that Political opponents of Modi in India are at risk of arbitrary arrest, and the civil liberties of all Indians are being eroded by an extremist, right-wing Government.
- He demanded that the UK Government condemn Prime Minister Modi and the actions of his BJP Government. Furthermore, both Modi and the BJP Government are linked to the rise in violent religious persecution within India, including attacks on Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.
- Therefore, He called on the UK Government to consider the imposition of sanctions diplomatic and otherwise on Prime Minister Modi and his Government.

Virendra Sharma, Ealing, Southall, Labour Party

- He mentioned that the right to peaceful protest is a cornerstone of democracy and a right that thousands of Indian farmers are using today, and which they have used for months now.
- He is hoping that the Minister will commit to helping that cause by offering British skills in negotiation and compromise to help both sides bring the issue to a close.
- The continuation of freedom of speech and freedom of assembly is important to everybody with a commitment to democracy.

Pat McFadden, Wolverhampton South East, Labour Party

- His constituency represents thousands of constituents with family roots in India. Many are Sikhs with family roots in Punjab.
- He briefly pointed out there is a great deal of anguish at the sight of protesters being ill-treated, the internet and social media accounts being cut off, and the arrest of activists. He stated that there is also a rejection of the idea that those engaged in the protests are somehow not loyal to India, or that the response to people fighting for their livelihoods should be to suggest that they are somehow externally controlled, or to place a question mark over their motivations, saying that they are against the state in a broader sense.

Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi, Slough, Labour Party

- **Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** stated about the condition of the protestors. He claimed that the water supply, sanitation, electricity and internet have been intermittently cut. Trade unionists, human rights activists and journalists, including young women, have been arrested, with reports of sexual assault and torture while in custody.
- According to him millions of protesters are from across India and different faiths, yet because a significant number of them are Sikhs, they have been singled out and branded separatists and terrorists by unscrupulous elements of the mainstream Indian media. It is part of a pattern where Muslim Indians are labelled as Pakistanis, Christians as being under foreign influence, and Sikhs as Khalistani separatists—but we see you, and so does the world.

Naz Shah, Bradford West, Labour Party

- She began her speech by mentioning the tweet of Rihanna.
- She stated that the very argument made by the farmers is that when the new laws take effect, taking away the regulated markets that allow for minimum prices for their crops and replacing them with

deregulated markets that work in the favour of the big, powerful corporations, then what will happen to the average farmer.

- According to her farmers are already struggling. More than 52% of India's farmers are living in debt, which is causing a shocking increase in the suicide rate. In 2019 alone, nearly 10,300 Indian farmers killed themselves. Such an alarming situation cannot be ignored.
- In addition, because the protests have been dominated by Sikh protesters from Punjab, the Government have tried to silence their voices by marginalising the issue to one that affects a single community. She concluded by saying that the current Indian Government's record on minority rights is not one to be proud of.

Layla Moran, Oxford West and Abingdon, Liberal Democrat

- **Layla Moran**, the Liberal Democrat foreign affairs spokesperson stated that she supports Councillor Gurch Singh, the Liberal Democrat councillor who organised this petition.
- She claimed the protest to be the largest organised protest in human history. According to her the police brutality and arrests against peaceful protesters and journalists covering the protests are of deep concern.
- She has written to the Foreign Secretary, calling on him to work together with India to ensure that democratic values are upheld and that fundamental freedoms such as the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly and association are respected.

Nadia Whittome , Nottingham East, Labour Party

She spoke in solidarity with the millions farmers according to her who are resisting Modi's regime. She stated that farmers from across India—of all faiths and none, of all genders and all castes—are protesting against laws that threaten livelihoods. In total, 250 million workers went on strike in solidarity. That is the largest strike in world history.