

Keir Starmer – 2023 Speech on Reducing Crime

The speech made by Sir Keir Starmer, the Leader of the Opposition, in Port Vale on 23 March 2023.

It's good to be here in Burslem, the "mother town" of the Potteries. Where the spades first hit the ground in the construction of the great Trent and Mersey Canal. A fact which of course gives its name to Port Vale.

5 Though for me, if I'm honest, this is better known as the ground where Arsenal came really close to losing the double in 1998. No really – you can look it up. Two draws in the cup and a very close penalty shoot-out somewhere over there. I went out to look at the pitch to see where those penalties were taken from.

10 But we're here today on more serious business. The launch of Labour's second national mission – to make our streets safe, and stop criminals getting away without punishment.

Now, if you think that sounds basic, something which should be guaranteed in a country like ours, then let me tell you: you're right.

Nothing is more important – more fundamental – to a democracy like ours. The rule of law is the foundation for everything.

15 Margaret Thatcher called it the "first duty of government" – and she was right. An expression of individual liberty – our rights and responsibilities, but also of justice, of fairness, of equality – one rule for all.

20 That's the principle I've been proud to serve all my adult life. As a human rights lawyer, fighting for families with young children, trying to escape mould-infested accommodation, or for freedom of speech. [...]

Everyone protected, everyone respected. No-one denied the law. No-one above the law. Not the murderers of Stephen Lawrence – who, for a time, thought they were, not Al-Qaeda terrorists. Not MPs, Labour or Conservative, gaming the expenses system to line their pockets. I prosecuted them all and I'm proud of that. One rule for all.

25 That's why I found the pandemic parties in Downing Street under Boris Johnson so reprehensible. The circus of the last few days – a reminder of his total disrespect for a national sacrifice. That's why I said I'd resign, if I'd broken those same rules.

30 I just couldn't have looked the British people in the eye and asked for their trust. Those values are too important to me. The core of my politics today. So if the Tories want to attack me for being a human rights lawyer, attack the values I've stood up for my whole life, I say fine.

That only shows how far they've fallen, and how little they understand working people.

Because whatever the crime: anti-social behaviour, hate crime, serious violence, it's always working people who pay the heaviest price.

Working class communities who have to live under its shadow.

35 That's why tackling crime – law and order – will always be so important for my Labour Party.

Fighting crime is a Labour cause.

I grew up working class in a small town, I know how important it is to feel safe in your community.

40 If you don't have a big house and garden, the streets are where your kids play, your community is your family, your neighbours – your eyes and ears. You have to feel a sense of trust, of confidence, of security. It's what gives you roots. A precondition of hope. The firm ground your aspirations can be built on.

But as somebody who has worked in criminal justice for most of my life, I also know that far too often, the inequalities that still scar our society: class, race, gender; do find an expression in the very system that is supposed to protect us all, without discrimination.

45 I've talked about this before, but the case that crystallised so much for me, was the murder of a nurse called Jane Clough. Stabbed to death in the car park of the Blackpool hospital where she worked.

50 Killed – by the man awaiting trial on multiple charges of raping her, on the one morning she went to work unaccompanied. I will never forget the day her parents, John and Penny, came to my office and talked me through the awful treatment they'd received from our criminal justice system.

It's a moment that has shaped everything I've done since, everything I think about justice. [...]

In fact, it's why I decided to come into politics. Because the more and more case files I read, the more and more I could see those ugly inequalities at work.

55 You saw it in grooming scandals like Rochdale¹ as well, how good prosecutors and decent police offices – people who hated crime – would end up looking for the “perfect victim”.

¹ Rochdale grooming scandals: criticism of the Manchester police force for failing to investigate a child sex abuse ring.

Casting aspersions based on a way of thinking that was out of date, out of touch with the experience of the victims and communities that they needed to serve.

- 60 “Why didn’t you come to the police straight away?”
“Why did you go back with them?”
“Why didn’t you put up a fight?”

Questions and assumptions that are deeply flawed and have left vulnerable people, working class women and girls especially, ignored. Voiceless. Denied justice.

That’s why the mission today matters to me. [...]

- 65 Do you know – today, 300 women in Britain will be raped. But of those 300 rapes, just three cases will see someone charged. Honestly, I had to get my team to check those figures. I couldn’t believe them. But this is Britain right now.

Yet from the Government – silence. No urgency, no reform, no big agenda – nothing. I could say it’s the usual Tory sticking plaster politics – and it is. But this is complacency on another level.

- 70 It’s like they can’t see the Britain they’ve created, and maybe that’s it. Their kids don’t go to the same schools. Nobody fly-tips on their streets. The threat of violence doesn’t stalk their communities.

- 75 They don’t see the problems, and so they’re complacent about the need for solutions. Asking outdated questions, making flawed assumptions, about victims, policing, crime, everything. Out of touch with the realities of modern Britain. They should try and walk in your shoes for a day or two. [...]

This is the Britain they’ve created – and they should look it in the eye. Working people don’t feel safe. I won’t take any lectures from them on this, I won’t have our commitment to justice called into question, and I won’t stop until working people feel protected.

- 80 This is our mission, Labour will make Britain’s streets safe.

And we will do so, as with all our missions, by bringing people together with purpose and intent, by embracing the challenge that comes with clear accountability, and setting out four clear, measurable goals.

- 85 One, as I announced on Tuesday, we will restore confidence in every police force to its highest ever level.

Two – we will halve incidents of knife crime.

Three – we will reverse the collapse in the proportion of crime solved.

And four – by solving more crime, by reducing the number of victims who drop out of the system, we will halve the levels of violence against women and girls.

90 None of this will be easy – clearly. As I say about all our missions – they should invite a sharp intake of breath. After this week, nobody can doubt the scale of our ambition, nor its urgency. Or for that matter, how comprehensively the Tories have thrown in the towel. But equally – it’s obvious that these targets require partnerships, not just across government, but between politics and people.

95 It’s not just about the police and criminal justice systems. It’s about education, media, health, community services, online regulation, tackling the evils our young boys are exposed to – that follow them in their pockets, everywhere they go.

100 So yes, change has to come from all of us – it’s going to be a long, hard road. But there are some steps we need to take together now. Urgent priorities that my Labour Government would respond to immediately.

So let me take each of our targets one by one, starting, as I did on Tuesday, with confidence in the police.

105 Because the horror of what we’ve seen reported² about the Metropolitan Police this week cannot be understated. I know there are good officers in the Met, as of course there are across the whole country. But the actions of that force, collectively and individually have tarnished the reputation of policing everywhere.

Our policing by consent model – a precious model – is now hanging by a thread. [...]

Confidence is everything. It’s what effective, visible, open-minded policing can provide to the communities it serves, and, as we’ve seen this week, it’s what bad policing destroys.

110 So let me make it very clear: the next Labour Government will modernise British policing. [...]

Policing must start to serve women and minorities – no more excuses.

And look – modernising the police is also the first step we must take on halving violence against women and girls. You can’t defeat misogyny without robust policing, but you can’t have robust policing without defeating misogyny.

² In 2023, a report found the Metropolitan Police to be racist, sexist and homophobic.

115 That's what modern policing looks like, what serving your community looks like.

So we'll put specialist domestic abuse workers in the control rooms of every police force responding to 999 calls, supporting victims of abuse.

120 We'll get a specialist rape unit in every police force. And we'll also set up dedicated rape courts – the current prosecution rates are a disgrace. We all know how hard it is for women to come forward, that the criminal justice system only ever sees the tip of the iceberg on sexual violence.

And that the experience of going to court – the way victims are treated – just doesn't work. I've been pushing for action on this for nearly 10 years. [...]

We need reform to get more police on the beat – fighting the virus that is anti-social behaviour.

125 Fly-tipping, off-road biking in rural area, drugs – now some people call this low-level – I don't want to hear those words.

There's a family in my constituency – every night cannabis smoke creeps in from the street outside into their children's bedroom – aged four and six. That's not low level – it's ruining their lives.

So we won't pull any punches on this. Everyone protected, everyone respected – that's what justice means.

130 And the Tories are soft on it. Soft on anti-social behaviour, soft on the crime that most affects working class communities. Only Labour will protect them.

We'll get 13,000 extra police on our streets, bring in new Respect orders – anti-social behaviour orders with teeth, and we'll get clever with fixed penalty notices. [...]

135 But the reality of today's society, as any parent knows is that our children need protecting in their homes as well as on their streets. You can't fight behaviour that is learned online, spread online, glorified online, armed only with the tools of the past.

Take knife crime. We know so much of this is about prevention, about pulling young boys back before they get in too deep. It's about good youth work, neighbourhood policing, mental health support – in every school. We'll do all that.

140 It's about smart legislation as well. About making the criminal exploitation of children illegal, and using that to target the county line gangs who exploit kids to do their dirty work. But it's also about standing up to the big tech companies. Seriously – how can we ignore the fact a child can go onto the internet and buy a machete as easily as a football?

145 It's exactly the same thing with the social media algorithms that bombard young minds with misogyny. Both are social evils, both an example of where greed comes above good. So my

message to the big tech companies is this – the free ride is over. If you make money from the sale of weapons, or the radicalisation of people online, then we will find ways to make you accountable.

You wouldn't get away with it on the streets and you won't get away with it online.

150 But look – the fight against online hate, shows the scale of the challenge we face.

As I've said before, about all our missions, change must come from all of us. Success depends on unlocking the pride and purpose that is in every community.

This is a new way of governing. But it can be done. [...]

155 So why can't we imagine a society where violence against women is stamped out everywhere?
Why can't the future citizens of our country look back at this generation as the one which turned the page on misogyny, which protected our children and made our streets safe?

I promise you this. If we pull together – we can do this. And I will give it everything.

Because this mission – crime and justice – is my life's work.

I've made it central to my Labour Party. Because it's central to the lives of working people.

160 For the confidence they need in their community, to push on and hope for a better future. The foundation for a better Britain.

Where working people succeed, aspiration is rewarded, children are protected and crime is punished.

A Britain where families once again feel safe on their streets.

165 The basis for a country that gets its hope, its future and its confidence – back.

Thank you.