

Bercow hits out at probe into bullying



EX-SPEAKER: Faces ban

JOHN Bercow branded a parliamentary inquiry into his conduct a “kangaroo court” as he revealed it will conclude he bullied three House of Commons staff when he was Speaker.

Bercow, 58, claimed most of the evidence against him was “hearsay”, and many witnesses were not even present when the incidents were supposed to have occurred.

Bercow, who stood down in 2019, told the Sunday Times: “To call it a kangaroo court is unfair to kangaroos.”

The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Kathryn Stone, held an 18-month inquiry into bullying allegations against Bercow.

He said: “I resent my reputation being put through the wringer on the basis of a protracted and amateurish process. It is grievously unjust.”

A final verdict, from an appeals panel, is expected by the end of the month and could see him banned from Parliament for life.

Thousands in ‘Kill Bill’ protests

THOUSANDS of people took to the streets across the country yesterday in “Kill the Bill” protests.

Demonstrators calling on the House of Lords to reject the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill marched through cities including London, Bristol, Coventry, Newcastle, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and Plymouth.

The protests came ahead of a crucial vote on the Bill by peers tomorrow.

Opponents describe it as a draconian crackdown on the right to assembly, freedom of expression and other civil liberties.

The Bill would put protesters at risk of lengthy prison sentences and hefty fines for actions that cause “serious annoyance” – such as making noise – and expand stop and search powers.



POSTER BOY: Novak Djokovic is the face of brands such as Lacoste, Hublot and others

Could Covid row cost Djokovic millions in sponsorship deals?

By **Eugene Henderson**

TENNIS ace Novak Djokovic’s reputation is “balancing on a knife edge” and could potentially cost him his big money sponsors, an expert has warned.

The unvaccinated Serbian superstar’s participation in next week’s Australian Open was thrown into doubt after his visa was torn up for a second time on Friday over inconsistencies between his sworn evidence on immigration documents and social media posts.

He flew into Melbourne on January 5, claiming a vaccine exemption because of a positive PCR test result on December 16, but his visa was disallowed.

His legal team overturned that decision, but it then emerged he had incorrectly claimed not to have travelled in the 14 days before his

arrival in Melbourne, despite visiting Spain. He also admitted breaching Serbia’s isolation rules after testing positive by taking part in an interview with a French newspaper and attending an event with children.

Edward Coke, who has more than 25 years’ experience in crisis and reputation management, believes the sportsman’s “least worst option” is to own up to his mistakes and make a graceful exit from Australia.

Djokovic’s net worth is put at £160million and he is believed to earn far more from endorsements than he does from prize money.

Last year he joined forces with luxury watchmaker Hublot. He also promotes French clothing company Lacoste and he has a racquet sponsorship agreement with Head. There is a shoe deal with Asics, ties with carmaker Peugeot and more.

“Between the beginning of the week and now there have been growing inconsistencies in his story,” said Mr Coke, of Repute Associates.

“I think the story has now progressed from him being portrayed as a victim to one where there are serious questions about his judgment and the competency of his management and what happened when he tested positive.”

Mr Coke added: “If Djokovic does not bite the bullet and apologise it’s pretty clear his sponsorship deals will be affected.

“It’s very much on a knife edge. If he wins the right to stay on some technicality, that for many people will be like a red rag to a bull.”



Urgent plea for more GPs as patients suffer

ONLY recruiting more GPs will solve the crisis of patients being unable to get face-to-face appointments, as well as avoiding mistakes and misdiagnoses, MPs and campaigners have urged.

Among the most pressing problems patients face include not being able to get through on the phone to book an appointment, weeks of waiting, symptoms not spotted early and the start of treatments being delayed.

Campaigners also complain patients are now being “fobbed off” with less-qualified staff when they meet a practitioner face to face. With primary care suffering from a shortage of doctors, NHS staff are overworked and feel as though they are “holding up a broken system”, MPs said.

On top of the “pent-up demand from people who felt reluctant to seek help during the pandemic”, the pressure is mounting as people now live longer and have more care needs, a debate held on Wednesday heard.

It was held in response to a 19,000-strong petition calling for a legal right for patients to get a timely face-to-face appoint-

By **Tony Whitfield**

ment with a GP. Dennis Reed of Silver Voices said of the debate: “There was recognition that remote consultations can lead to misdiagnoses, with devastating life-changing effects. And the Government now appears to be muddying the waters

by counting face-to-face appointments with other practice staff as equivalent to GP consultations.”

Theresa Villiers MP called on the Government to use the record £33billion NHS investment to increase the number of family doctors.

She said: “GP services are a crucial gateway to treatment... If this gateway gets blocked up, the consequence will be that lives are lost.”

But she noted that more GP appointments are being made now than pre-pandemic, and that 65 per cent of them are currently face to face.

Maria Caulfield, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, said there were 4,000 doctors in GP training places this year, an increase from 2,671 back in 2014.

A Department of Health and Social Care spokesperson said: “We have invested £520million to improve access and expand GP capacity during the pandemic.

“On top of this, we have provided an extra £5.4billion to the NHS to respond to Covid-19 over the next six months.”



CONCERNS: Theresa Villiers and Dennis Reed