

## News

**Messages emerge in Tory MS 'expenses' row**

MESSAGES from a Conservative Senedd Member appear to show her telling staff to add extra journeys she didn't make to her expense claims.

The messages were allegedly sent by Welsh Conservative MS Laura Anne Jones.

The South East Wales regional MS is being investigated by the National Assembly's Standards Commissioner Douglas Bain and South Wales Police confirmed it had received a referral from the commissioner which remains under investigation.

A lawyer for Ms Jones said: "Ms Jones is satisfied that any allegations in relation to impropriety surrounding expenses are entirely misconceived."

First reported by the BBC, our sister website WalesOnline has also seen the messages.

One message asked a staff member: "When doing petrol thing - always make more than I did - add in stuff please ok".

The staff member asks for clarification saying: "What do you want me to add in?... Like visits to constituency office?"

The response said to be from Ms Jones replied: "Yes, stuff like that."

In another message, a member of staff asks if the MS wants her to claim for days when she was off sick. To this, Ms Jones appears to say: "If you could always do more than it says that'd be fab".

The Welsh Conservatives in the Senedd said: "We will not be commenting while this matter is being considered by the relevant authorities."

A lawyer on behalf of Ms Jones said: "Ms Jones did not receive any formal bullying complaint in relation to any of her staff members."

"Ms Jones is satisfied that any allegations in relation to impropriety surrounding expenses are entirely misconceived."

"Ms Jones' belief is that these complaints being lodged with the Standards Commissioner are without foundation."

"As these matters are the subject of ongoing inquiries, it would be inappropriate for Ms Jones to make any further comment."

"Ms Jones has no issue with WalesOnline/the BBC or its sources putting these allegations to the police and/or the Standards Commissioner, which will provide her the opportunity to respond in a formal manner as part of the inquiry should the authorities require it."

"That will allow Ms Jones the proper opportunity (on oath) to respond. Ms Jones should not have to do that with a media outlet in advance. As stated, any publication which contains any statement or innuendo bearing a defamatory meaning will result in the commencement of libel proceedings."

**Farage branded 'parasitic' over his Valleys launch**

NIGEL Farage has been branded "parasitic" by a leading academic for choosing to launch his party's manifesto in Merthyr Tydfil on Monday.

Mr Farage chose to launch the document at the Gurnos Community Sports Club, in the heart of one of Wales' most deprived wards.

The move was criticised by Professor Brad Evans, of Bath University, who was born in the Rhondda and grew up in Penrhys.

He said: "Choosing to launch in the valleys of South Wales shows how the likes of Farage are truly parasitic and prey to local concerns."

"Yes, these post-industrial communities have been abandoned. But immigration is not their main problem, it's decades of neglect authored by the elitist classes to which Farage belongs."

Prof Evans, author of recent book *How Black Was My Valley: Poverty and Abandonment in A Post-Industrial Heartland*, added: "We should also not forget that the valleys of South Wales have a rich history of fighting the forces of intolerance and bigotry. His divisive rhetoric simply fuels the anger which is understandably felt by communities who feel lost."

At Monday's launch of his party's set of election "promises", Mr Farage said he wanted Reform UK to establish a "bridgehead" in Parliament with a view to a full assault in five years' time.

The Reform leader suggested he could be in No 10 following the next general election, but the July 4 contest was too early for his party.

"The real ambition is the 2029 general election," he said, "but this is our first big push."

The Reform document is titled "Our Contract With You" because Mr Farage said the word manifesto had become associated with "lies" told by the main Westminster parties.

The plan includes:

- A commitment to leave the European Convention on Human Rights and a policy of sending migrants who arrive in small boats back to France;
- A "freeze" on non-essential immi-

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gration "to protect our culture and identity";

- Increasing the income tax personal allowance to £20,000, raising the threshold for paying the higher rate to £70,000 and scrapping inheritance tax on estates under £2m;
- Cutting the main corporation tax rate from 25% to 15% in three years;
- Slashing fuel duty by 20p per litre, scrapping VAT on energy bills, and cut stamp duty to 0% on sales below £750,000;
- Eliminating NHS waiting lists in two years with an extra £17bn a year for health.

Reform's plans imply spending an extra £141bn a year on tax cuts and various policy pledges, paid for by £156bn of savings in public spending and an assumption of increased tax revenue from 1%-1.5% extra economic growth.

But the Institute for Fiscal Studies think-tank said Reform's plans were based on "extremely optimistic assumptions" about growth and the sums "do not add up".

Mr Farage launched his party's plan in a deprived area of South Wales, in an attempt to show what a Labour government would be like.

But while Reform is targeting Labour votes, its main objective is replacing the Tories as the main party on the right of British politics.

Mr Farage said: "We are not pretending that we are going to win this General Election, we are a very, very new political party."

But he added: "This election is for our party, and for me, the first important step on the road to 2029."

"Our ambition is to establish a bridgehead in Parliament, and to become a real opposition to a Labour government."

He said the Tories would not be able to provide opposition because "they spend most of their days arguing



Nigel Farage prepares to launch Reform's manifesto in Merthyr Tydfil yesterday  
GEOFF CADDICK/GETTY



The launch was held at the Gurnos Community Sports Club, Merthyr Tydfil

among themselves, and they're split down the middle when it comes to policy".

The Institute for Fiscal Studies' deputy director Carl Emmerson said: "Reform UK proposes tax cuts that it estimates would cost nearly £90bn per year, and spending increases of £50bn per year."

"It claims that it would pay for these through £150bn per year of reductions in other spending, covering public services, debt interest and working-age benefits."

"This would represent a big cut to the size of the state. Regardless of the pros and cons of shrinking the state, or of any of their specific measures, the package as a whole is problematic."

"Spending reductions would save less than stated, and the tax cuts would cost more than stated, by a margin of tens of billions of pounds per year."

"Meanwhile the spending increases would cost more than stated if they are to achieve their objectives."

He added: "Even with the extremely optimistic assumptions about how much economic growth would increase, the sums in this manifesto do not add up."

There was not a large turnout of supporters at Monday's event. But, before the speeches, we spoke briefly with a group of about 10 outside the club, who had travelled from places including Abergavenny, Cardiff and Aberdeen.

The group, mostly middle-aged or older, and mostly female, said they would not speak on camera due to fear

of a "woke" backlash.

They also said they did not trust the media enough to be interviewed, despite us pointing out we had been invited to attend by Reform.

"We can't speak publicly because we'd be vilified as racists," said one woman. "Organisations, councils, they're all woke."

Another woman said she would not speak because she feared she would be "cancelled" and lose her job for speaking her mind.

Elsewhere, Welsh politicians hit out at the launch.

Welsh Labour's campaign chair Jessica Morden responded that Mr Farage's "divisive" politics is "not welcome" in Wales and branded Reform a "band of chancers seeking to sow division", adding: "It's no wonder that all of Farage's party were turfed out of the Welsh Parliament at the last election."

Meanwhile a Welsh Conservatives spokesman said: "Labour have repeatedly shown their true colours on immigration, and a vote for Reform will allow Labour into Downing Street. The only way to see a tough approach on immigration is to vote for the Welsh Conservatives."

A Plaid Cymru spokesperson said: "For Nigel Farage, Wales is nothing but a prop to boost his own ego."

"He has sold lies to people in post-industrial areas in the past and will do so again. Reform will blame all of Wales' ills on immigration, but what areas like Merthyr Tydfil need is investment and jobs, not Nigel Farage's divisive agenda."