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SAFETY ISSUES SIDE-LINED IN QUEEN'S SPEECH

Today's short-sighted Queen's Speech gives businesses continued license to get away with institutional negligence, putting countless lives at risk, according to lawyers.

Hopes for a new corporate killing Bill have been dashed, and an urgent need to introduce wide-ranging safety reforms are not on the agenda, causing fears that company directors will shirk their responsibilities if people are killed because of a firm's negligence.

While proposals for a new Rail Accident Investigation Branch will go some way to improving safety in train travel, it does not go nearly far enough in ensuring proper public safety, said David Marshall, vice-president of the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers (APIL).

Although we welcome much of the detail, there are still gaps and shortcomings in the system. The proposals for implementation of recommendations are weak, there is no formal link up with the marine and air accident investigation branches, and no-one to deal with disasters which fall outside rail, air and marine transport such as the Kings Cross Fire, the Hillsborough stadium disaster, and Piper Alpha incident, he said.

We now plan to speak to the Government about the need for a new Director of National Safety who would oversee the transport accident branches, and ensure all other major disasters involving loss of life are dealt with promptly and efficiently.

APIL also expressed bitter disappointment that the long-awaited reforms to corporate manslaughter laws were not included in the Queen's Speech.

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We have been campaigning for years for the introduction of this new offence, said Marshall. Our members are constantly seeing appalling incidents in which people are killed through a company's negligence and their loved ones are left demanding justice which never comes.

It's outrageous that businesses have escaped prosecution just because of what is, effectively, a loop-hole in the law. We believe that if an individual director is found to be partly responsible for the incident, he himself should be subject to a range of punishments from fines to imprisonment.

Action must be taken against individual directors, wherever possible, because only then will boardroom members start to take safety issues more seriously.

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