

It's the first Monday back after the new year. Which means that today, both school and Parliament are in session again.

But the truth is, only one of these institutions will be forced to deal with just how many desks remain empty.

In 2023, serious youth violence rose across the country. That means hundreds more promising lives cut short over an argument or a fleeting emotion. Hundreds more classrooms dimmed by grief.

Every day, the feeling of helplessness in us parents grows bigger and bigger. If you have kids of a certain age, then you know – that feeling is relentless. Every walk to school. Every hug goodbye. You can't help but wonder if that's it; that's the last one.

It's high time the urgency felt by us as parents, and in our communities, be actioned by our politicians.

That's why the 'Don't Stop Your Future' Campaign we're launching today aims to raise serious youth violence to the top of the political agenda, where it belongs.

This morning, when our political leaders come to work, they'll pass by a series of neatly folded outfits in Parliament Square representing those lost in 2023. While the victims come from all walks of life, they share one terrible thing in common. They all got dressed that day not knowing it would be their last.

Beside me in Parliament Square will be Yemi Hughes, a mother and teacher whose world fell apart when her son, Andre Aderemi, fell victim to knife crime at just 19. She'll be holding the clothes Andre wore that terrible day, the day he never came back. Together, we'll be calling upon Parliament to prevent other mothers from suffering this unbearable grief.

It's easy to feel like the growing rate of violence is unstoppable. But the fact is that if Parliament gives this issue the focus it deserves – this terrible trajectory absolutely can be reversed.

Back in August, Government promised to ban zombie knives and machetes. But four months later, the legislation needed has only just started its slow journey through Parliament. We're asking for the ban to be implemented immediately.

We're also calling for a new Coalition to End Knife Crime. We need a group that can operate across party lines to bring together everyone with a role to play in tackling this issue – from Government to grassroots orgs, sporting bodies to young people themselves.

And for this coalition to be truly transformative, it needs to invite tech companies to the table. Weapons are being advertised and sold to kids online every day. They should be stepping up to help – and stopping those who profit from putting weapons in the hands of young people.

Lastly, it's been proven that cuts to youth services manifest in a rise in youth violence. The last decade of cuts has stripped our communities of the tools they need to provide our kids with opportunities, support and hope. Without those three things, their future – and ours – will be stopped.

It may seem like we're asking for a lot, but things can move at speed if there's political will to do so. American XL Bully were banned quickly because they were considered an immediate threat. Yet serious youth violence killed far more people than dogs in 2023.

This campaign is more than just a call for change. It's also a salute to many incredible organisations and heroes working to tackle the root causes of crime. Through the ongoing work of the Don't Stop Your Future organisation, I'll be working alongside anti-knife crime charities and amplifying the voices of marginalised communities.

To the political leaders reading this, this can be the moment we turn the tide. The year the numbers reversed course. It's not too late to end this nightmare for our kids – and make fuel for their dreams instead.

The community is waiting to act with you. We all are.

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