HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence: Evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 1211

Wednesday 30 March 2022

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Mr Clive Betts (Chair); Sarah Champion; Philip Dunne; Dame Diana Johnson; Julian Knight; Catherine McKinnell; Neil Parish; Mel Stride; Stephen Timms; Tom Tugendhat; Sir Bill Wiggin; Pete Wishart.

Questions 1-90

Witness

I: Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP.

Chair: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to this afternoon's session of the Liaison Committee. Three times a year, we have a session for the Prime Minister to answer our questions. Welcome, Prime Minister—I can just about see you down there.

The Prime Minister: Good to be with you, Mr Betts, and good to see you in the Chair.

Chair: I should explain that Sir Bernard Jenkin, who would normally chair our Committee, is unfortunately indisposed with covid. The Committee members have asked me to take the Chair this afternoon. I am sure we all want to pass on our best wishes to Bernard for a speedy recovery.

Prime Minister, we want to concentrate particularly this afternoon on the war in Ukraine and the consequent refugee crisis, and also on the cost of living issues at home, particularly around food and energy. Before we go on to those two important matters, we have one or two questions we would like to raise following yesterday's announcement from the Metropolitan police that they had issued 20 fixed penalty notices around events that had happened either in Downing Street or the Cabinet Office. To begin on those issues, I will ask Pete Wishart to come in, please.

Q1 **Pete Wishart:** Prime Minister, it is very nice to see you once again—I always enjoy our little exchanges at the Liaison Committee. To start things off, could you tell us whether you are one of the 20 people who received one of those fixed penalty notices, and if you are not, are you expected to secure one in the next few days and weeks?

The Prime Minister: Well, Pete, I am sure you would know if I were. Let me just say, generally on this whole issue, that I have, I think, been several times to the House to talk about this and to explain, to apologise and to set out the things that we were doing to change the way things are run in No. 10, and we have done that. But what I also said repeatedly—and Mr Betts, I hope you will forgive me if I return to this theme—is that I won't give a running commentary on an investigation that is under way. People will be naturally curious about all sorts of things, and I totally understand that, but I just think it would be wrong of me to deviate from that.

Q2 **Pete Wishart:** Absolutely, Prime Minister. We are not expecting you to give a running commentary—quite obviously—but if you are served with one of them, you are pretty much toast, aren't you? No Prime Minister could possibly survive a finding of criminality on the very rules that that Prime Minister set. You would be finished if you got one.

The Prime Minister: With deepest respect to you, Pete, I don't in any way wish to minimise the importance of the issue and your point, but I

just want to return to what I have said, and that is that that would come under the category of "running commentary" in my view.

Q3 **Pete Wishart:** Well, getting away from the running commentary, you can at least accept that there has been criminality committed. Apparently, your spokesperson has just contradicted the assertions made by the Justice Secretary—your deputy—this morning that there has been criminality committed. You do accept that criminality has been committed? Twenty fixed penalty notices have been issued, for goodness' sake. There cannot be any contradiction or doubt that criminality has been committed.

The Prime Minister: I have been, I hope, very frank with the House about where I think we've gone wrong and the things that I regret, that I apologise for, but there is an ongoing investigation and—

Q4 **Pete Wishart:** It is quite a simple question, isn't it? Has criminality been committed or not?

The Prime Minister: I understand the point you are making, Pete, but I am going to camp pretty firmly on my position—

Pete Wishart: And not change anything about this at all, or answer any questions.

The Prime Minister: No. I understand that. Look, I understand why you have to ask it, and it is quite right that you do. But I have been very clear: I won't give a running commentary on an ongoing investigation.

Q5 **Pete Wishart:** Okay, but could we maybe go over some of the things that you have said to us, which we do understand is a matter of record? You could maybe help clarify some of it, because some it I find very difficult to understand. First you said there was no rule-breaking. Then you claimed you were not aware of any of these parties. Then you said it was a work meeting. Then you said you were outraged by them. Then you said you were aware of these events but they weren't against the rules. Finally, you admitted that you were at these events but you were so ignorant of the rules that you didn't realise you were breaking them. You do understand why the public have such difficulty with all this?

The Prime Minister: Of course, Pete, and I understand why you are asking the questions, but I just want to repeat that there will come a point when I will be able to talk about the investigation and the conclusions of the investigation, and that is when the investigation has concluded. I have no doubt at all that I will be back before this Committee, back before the House of Commons, to talk about it, but at the moment it is still going on.

Q6 **Pete Wishart:** And if it has been found that you did break the ministerial code, which, looking at all the things you have said and all the things that have transpired subsequently, it is crystal clear that you did, that will mean a resignation issue for you.

The Prime Minister: With great respect, Pete, I think you are just going

to have to hold your horses and wait until the conclusion of the investigation, when there will be a lot more clarity and I will be back before this Committee and, I have no doubt, back before the body of the House of Commons, and I will be only too happy to elucidate you further.

Q7 **Pete Wishart:** Do you realise how frustrated and disappointed the public will be when they hear these responses from you today? They expect some sort of answers. I mean, just talk about your leadership in No. 10. I was in rock 'n' roll for 15 years. I could never even start to compete and keep up with the activities in No. 10 under lockdown, and the partying culture that you created. Who was responsible for all of this?

The Prime Minister: You see, that is—I hear you, Pete, but if I may say so, your question is a very good illustration of why it is important that we should wait until the conclusion of the investigation.

Q8 **Pete Wishart:** I think you famously sang—talking on the rock 'n' roll theme—"I Will Survive". Are you still going to survive? It is not looking good, is it?

The Prime Minister: I would respectfully say—

Pete Wishart: We could maybe have a duet after this.

The Prime Minister: I am always, always only too happy to have a drink with my friends from the SNP, but look, this is not something I can say much more about right now.

Q9 **Pete Wishart:** You thought you had got away with it, didn't you? You thought this was just going to be put aside and nobody would be interested. You have been a bit shocked in course of the past 24 hours. The optics last night of parading your MPs in front of the covid-bereaved to go and party the day that you received fixed penalty notices were surely dreadful.

The Prime Minister: Pete, there will be a time for me to talk to you at length. That is your view. You are entitled to your characterisation of events. I have no wish to engage with you in a dispute about how you choose to see things. That is not the way I see things. But where I think you and I are certainly in agreement is that it would be right for me to come back before this Committee when the investigation is concluded, and to set out what I think, and to be properly interrogated about the findings of the investigators. But that has not happened yet. The thing isn't over, and any such discussion is, in my view, premature.

Chair: Right. Can we move on now?

Pete Wishart: I have tried my best.

The Prime Minister: I have done my best too, but there is literally not a lot more I can say.

Q10 **Catherine McKinnell:** I have listened very carefully to this exchange in relation to the Downing Street lockdown parties. Lack of trust in Government is raised regularly in parliamentary petitions. So, Prime Minister, how would you respond to 130,000-plus petitioners who are

calling for lying in the Commons to be made a criminal offence?

The Prime Minister: I think that it is very important that you should be clear with the House of Commons, and I have tried to be as clear as I can about my understanding of events. I have been back, repeatedly, before the Commons to explain—to apologise for—the things that I think we have got wrong, and I have no doubt that I will be back again, but there is not a lot more I can say at the present time.

Q11 **Catherine McKinnell:** On the words that you used, "I have tried to be as clear as I can", I think that is the big concern that people have—that you are not able to be clear or straight on these issues if you cannot even answer the question as to whether any laws were broken in Whitehall during lockdown, when 20 fixed penalty notices were issued yesterday. Can you at least give a clear answer on that?

The Prime Minister: Well, you say 20 fixed penalty notices were issued yesterday; I am not certain of that, but you may know something that I don't. That is one of the reasons why I think it would be really quite sensible of us all just to wait until the investigation is concluded.

Q12 **Catherine McKinnell:** Okay. I have just one further point that I want to put. Can you appreciate, Prime Minister, that throwing a party for Tory MPs on the anniversary of the covid memorial—on the day that some fixed penalty notices were issued for lockdown breaking in Whitehall—might give the impression to the public that you don't care about how they feel about this?

The Prime Minister: I think that this Government has done everything we can to protect the public throughout the pandemic and—

Q13 **Catherine McKinnell:** I asked specifically, do you care about the public's perception of the lockdown breaking?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I care deeply, but we have worked incredibly hard across the whole of Government to look after the population during the pandemic. Some things went well; some things went less well. It was an incredibly difficult time, but I think, overall, the record of the UK Government in dealing with covid has been pretty remarkable, and I am proud of it.

Q14 **Chair:** Prime Minister, just briefly before we move on to Ukraine, you say that you'll be able to answer questions when the investigation is finished. Is that when the Met police say, "We have now investigated and finished our investigations"?

The Prime Minister: Yes, because it is only at that stage, Mr Betts, that we will be able to conclude the Sue Gray process, and that is when we will be able to wrap the whole thing up. That, I genuinely think, is the sensible moment for us to have a discussion.

Chair: So the Met police finishing is the time. Okay, that is fine. Moving on to Ukraine, I will go to Tom Tugendhat, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee.

Q15 **Tom Tugendhat:** Thank you. Prime Minister, it is good to see you. Has President Macron been speaking to Putin for too long?

The Prime Minister: Tom, I think it is very, very important that the unity of the west, and the unity of NATO, should be remembered and prioritised. That is what we are doing. I think the question of negotiation with Vladimir Putin—of the value of those negotiations—is an open one. My own view is that Putin is plainly not to be trusted.

I think the most important thing—and here, I think Emmanuel and I would be in total agreement—is that whatever happens should be what the Ukrainians want. It is for them to decide what their future should be. That is what is at stake here. It is not for any of us—whatever we may think—to try to create a future for them; it is for them to decide their future.

Q16 **Tom Tugendhat:** So do you agree with President Biden that the end state should be not only Russians out of Ukraine, but Putin gone from the Kremlin?

The Prime Minister: I understand why Joe Biden said that, and I understand the frustrations that people feel about Putin. To desire a change of Government, in itself, is not an ignoble thing. There are probably plenty of people around this horseshoe—Pete, perhaps—who would like a change in this Government; that is the objective of a lot of democratic politics. But it is literally absolutely clear, it is not the objective of the UK Government. It is very, very important that everybody gets this. We are simply setting out to help to protect the people of Ukraine, and to protect them against absolutely barbaric and unreasonable violence. That is what we are doing. There were 141 votes, Tom, in the UN General Assembly against what Russia had done. That was a fantastic thing. As you know, there was a more recent vote which almost kept the number. You have to keep this simple.

Q17 **Tom Tugendhat:** Given the effort is to protect the Ukrainian people, something that we would all welcome, what did you think of the Franco-Turkish-Greek attempt at humanitarian aid?

The Prime Minister: You mean for Mariupol?

Tom Tugendhat: Yes.

The Prime Minister: I am obviously in favour of humanitarian aid but, Tom, you and I remember the ruthless cynicism with which Putin manipulates so-called humanitarian aid corridors in order to throw his opposition off balance. You remember what he did in Aleppo—the constant dangling of peace processes and humanitarian corridors, when really what he wants to go and do is administer extreme violence. Again, it is a good thing to be humanitarian. It is good to help people and to help refugees, but I have my doubts about the genuine willingness of Putin to co-operate.

Q18 **Tom Tugendhat:** Do you think, however, that there is more that we could do for civil defence? There are various avenues that we could assist with. The Ukrainian Government itself has asked, for example, for armoured Land Rover assistance in, if you like, White Helmet-type units

within Ukraine. Is that something that you are already looking at?

The Prime Minister: We are certainly looking at going up a gear now in our support for the Ukrainians as they defend themselves.

Q19 **Tom Tugendhat:** This is in civilian assistance rather than in military assistance, if you like?

The Prime Minister: Right. In Mariupol, the issue is, as you know, the Ukrainian defenders are now pretty much encircled, and there is a humanitarian catastrophe. The question is, can we help the Ukrainians relieve Mariupol, if that were possible? Would armour, would APCs, be useful for them? You mentioned armoured Land Rovers.

Q20 **Tom Tugendhat:** What about ambulances?

The Prime Minister: We are certainly looking at that, but I am afraid that it depends very much on the environment that Putin's forces are willing to allow.

Q21 **Tom Tugendhat:** Prime Minister, I understand that. I am actually looking more at the civilian assistance that could go—

The Prime Minister: The White Helmets?

Q22 **Tom Tugendhat:** A White Helmets-type arrangement—so armoured ambulances to help, for example, around Kyiv, around the Dnieper river, areas where the Ukrainians are suffering not just from casualties from the artillery but where the aid units that go in to assist the injured are being targeted by Russian units. In those areas, armoured ambulances could help and possibly some extra logistical supplies in terms of body armour and so on for medical units. Is that something you are looking at?

The Prime Minister: That is a very interesting suggestion, Tom. It is not something that Volodymyr Zelensky has requested so far from me personally, but that does not mean that the Ukrainians have not reached out and asked for it through other channels. He has asked for a lot of different things so far, but not that. I am certainly keen to—

Q23 **Tom Tugendhat:** Let me just repeat, then, a request from some of the Ukrainian MPs: they have asked for it. I will pass that in through your system to make sure that it has gone in.

The question really is also, when are we going to lift sanctions, because presumably if there is stick, there also must be carrot? At what stage do you think that sanctions could be lifted on Russia? Does it have to be Ukraine whole and entire, including Crimea? Does it have to be the liberation as well of the occupied areas of Georgia? What is the line that you are thinking about?

The Prime Minister: I certainly don't think that you could expect the G7 to lift sanctions simply because there has been a ceasefire in Ukraine. Again, that goes straight into Putin's playbook. In my view, we should continue to intensify sanctions with a rolling programme, until every single one of his troops is out of Ukraine.

Q24 **Tom Tugendhat:** Including Crimea?

The Prime Minister: As I said—every single one of his troops is out of Ukraine.

Q25 **Tom Tugendhat:** Would you include Georgia, which has now been occupied, as you know, since 2008—South Ossetia and Abkhazia?

The Prime Minister: I think we need to have a total rethink about all the support that we offer countries such as Georgia and Ukraine. What we are evolving towards, I think, is a new way of looking at Ukraine and other countries in the CIS and the former Soviet Union. I think that, because of the sheer quantity of NATO-compatible matériel and the weapons that we are now supplying, we are changing the dynamic and changing the security architecture of the situation bit by bit, and there will come a point when we should recognise that this has happened.

I hope that we will be in a position, with willing partners, to offer to Ukraine not an article 5 security guarantee but a different kind of commitment, based on the idea of deterrence by denial, so that Ukraine is so fortified and protected with weaponry—so that the quills of the porcupine become so stiffened that it is ever after indigestible to Putin.

That is the path that we are now on, and I think it is a very productive way of thinking now about a problem that we have been unable to solve, which is the homelessness of Ukraine and other countries in Europe's security architecture.

Q26 **Tom Tugendhat:** May I just build on that, because your point is very welcome? The point you are making is focused very much on Putin. You would also recognise, I am sure, that Putin is not Russia; he has just stolen it. The reality is that there is a criminal conspiracy that calls itself a Government sitting in the Kremlin today, centred on a single individual, but there are opposition voices. We know, for example, of Alexei Navalny, Vladimir Kara-Murza, Mikhail Khodorkovsky and, indeed, Garry Kasparov. There are prominent Russians who have voiced a possible different future for the Russian people, and one that I suspect would be rather more popular with the Russian people than the current system of vassalage under which they live.

Would the UK Government consider offering support and assistance to those people, and making sure that independent democratic voices have a way in? Would that include things such as ensuring that virtual private networks on the internet are freely available to Russian citizens, who currently find it very difficult to buy them, because of course the economic sanctions are effectively assisting Vladimir Putin's censorship?

The Prime Minister: We see all sorts of possible futures for Russia. But to get back to the point I wanted to make in answer to your first question, we have to keep this one simple. I have never seen a clearer case of right and wrong. This is about the flagrant violation of international law through the invasion of a totally innocent country. It is about helping the Ukrainians to protect themselves. That is something that unites the whole House of Commons, I hope, and certainly a large number of countries

around the world. If we stick to that, we will not go wrong, because I think that the logical consequences, politically and militarily, speak for themselves—I am sure you will have thought it all through.

When it comes to supporting wider civic society in Russia, supporting free media and a free internet, we do a lot of that already. We have just put another £4.1 million into supporting BBC Ukrainian and Russian services to help people get at the truth. We are doing a lot more to promote a proper understanding of what is going on.

Q27 **Tom Tugendhat:** Prime Minister, Tobias Ellwood, as you know, is in Warsaw at the moment. He has asked me to ask you, on his behalf, about the integrated review, which rightly spells out looming European security threats but not the timeline. He highlights the cuts to the RAF's F-35, Typhoon and Hercules fleets, to the Army's tank and armoured fighting vehicle numbers, and the 10,000 reduction in troop sizes—now at the lowest number since before the Napoleonic wars.

In this new era of insecurity, are you going to reconsider those numbers and are you going to request the National Security Council to produce an updated assessment of the long-term strategic threat picture, with recommendations for how gaps in our capabilities can be filled?

The Prime Minister: If you look at the integrated review, you will see that it was pretty much spot on in the priorities it set out for the country. In particular, it said that the Euro-Atlantic area was the No. 1 issue of concern. When it comes to the choice between high tech and heavy armour—Tobias and I had this conversation here—I think that the advantages of high tech in helping the Ukrainians are pretty manifest now. Given the effectiveness of the NLAWs, Starstreak, Javelin, Switchblade, UAVs, the TB2 drones that the Turks have been supplying, and a lot of the systems that we are now using—these are the game changers—I think it was right for us to go for this massive increase in expenditure, as we did, with the defence review. It was a 10% increase. It was also right for us to focus on real value for the UK and make sure that we could maximise our ability to project force overseas. That is what the integrated review gives.

Chair: We will move on now to the humanitarian issues involved. Sarah Champion.

Q28 **Sarah Champion:** Thank you. Hello again, Prime Minister. I am very grateful that the UK has committed £400 million to humanitarian support for Ukraine. I wrote to you on 9 March asking for details of whether that money has got to the people it is intended for, but I have not had a reply. May I ask about some specifics? How much of the UK's pledged financial contributions have reached organisations supporting communities in Ukraine? How much has reached international agencies? How much has reached local organisations, local NGOs, mayors and councils?

The Prime Minister: Sarah, I am going to have to—

Sarah Champion: Write to me?

The Prime Minister: I am so sorry. The number is high, so we will give at least £400 million, and—

Q29 **Sarah Champion:** You have pledged £400 million; I have not seen any evidence that it has landed.

The Prime Minister: Correct. I would be very happy to share where it is going. As you know, we have lots of visa application centres in the region and we are doing lots to help with the reception of refugees, but on how much has gone to each mayoral team in Rzeszów and Warsaw and exactly how it has all been divvied up, I really will have to get back to you.

Q30 **Sarah Champion:** I would be really grateful if you could, Prime Minister. Earlier, you mentioned humanitarian corridors and how they are being flagrantly exploited. They are necessary both to get people out and to get aid in. Have you considered doing something like what happened in north-east Syria with the UN Security Council resolutions, to try to keep those passages open for the safety of everyone?

The Prime Minister: Yes. That is, in essence, what we are looking at. The difficulty is that the Russians are very adept at manipulating the humanitarian corridors and negotiations to regroup, deal with other objectives and come back and do it again. I remember sitting around many negotiating tables talking about Aleppo and what we were doing to help people out, and what assurances Putin could give. In the end, it turned out to be more or less completely valueless. They pulverised Aleppo and they did not stop.

Q31 **Sarah Champion:** Are there other options that you are considering to try to keep those corridors open?

The Prime Minister: I mentioned one to Tom. We are thinking about whether there is anything we can do to actually relieve Mariupol, which would be a great thing to try to do, but that is going to be very tough. Do not forget that Mariupol is an extraordinary place. It has fallen before to Russia and then been retaken by Ukraine. What is happening is absolutely tragic. If we could think of an easy solution, we would do it. But we are, as everybody knows, heavily constrained.

Q32 **Sarah Champion:** Prime Minister, I have also written to you about the mine clearance that needs to happen, and the British charities that are really central to achieving that. Again, could I get a response to that because of the horror that is going on at the moment? It might only be small things that we can do, but if we do all of them, hopefully we can make it a little better.

The Prime Minister: You are so right, Sarah. I don't know whether the Committee has seen this, but as the Ukrainians push back Russian forces in some places, what we are hearing are absolutely horrifying tales of what the Russians have done while they are occupying—

Q33 **Sarah Champion:** Can I come on to that? You will have been as equally horrified as I have about the countless examples of sexual violence being used as a weapon of war, and this seems a very systematic technique—if

I can use that term—that the Russians employ. We've got to end the apparent culture of impunity around this and show that there will be consequences. The UK has been a leading light on PSVI around the world, and I am very proud of that. What practical steps is the UK taking to prevent sexual violence and to document those crimes? Have we got PSVI people there on the ground? What support is being offered to NGOs for the victims and survivors?

The Prime Minister: We have a PSVI—preventing sexual violence in conflict—team working to support survivors and hold perpetrators to account for what is happening in Ukraine.

Q34 **Sarah Champion:** On the ground?

The Prime Minister: I believe that they are in the surrounding area rather than in-country, because so many of the victims are now outside Ukraine. Sarah, I agree with you. It is something that the Foreign Office pioneered under William Hague and Baroness Helić, who really got that on the international agenda and quite rightly. The tales are appalling, but we have a team in the region and we're funding them very actively.

Q35 **Sarah Champion:** That is very reassuring.

This is my final question. I am sure, again, that you're aware of the unaccompanied children who are fleeing Ukraine.

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Sarah Champion: We have heard a lot of concerns about a large number of children from orphanages fleeing into Moldova, which, to be honest, is ill equipped for the safeguarding of its own children, let alone the influx from Ukraine. UNICEF reports that more than 500 unaccompanied children crossed from Ukraine into Moldova in the few weeks between 24 February and 17 March. What plans do you have in place to strengthen and increase the safeguarding systems in the countries surrounding Ukraine? Do you have any plans that would enable children to come to the UK for safeguarding, as we saw with the Dubs amendment, for example?

The Prime Minister: You're right in what you say about children. It is one of the horrifying aspects of the conflict that so many women and children have been coming out. What we want to do, wherever possible, is to ensure that children are united with their families—that's clearly in the best interests of the child—before bringing them as UASCs to this country. We are seeing what we can do with NGOs to make sure that they get all the safeguarding and help that they need. It's a very difficult problem, but before we go to a Dubs-style solution, I think we need to think about whether the needs of those kids are probably going to be best met if we can keep them in the area and get them back to their families.

Sarah Champion: I agree. Thank you.

Chair: We move now to Julian Knight.

Q36 **Julian Knight:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Our recent Committee

session on Russian disinformation showed that there are growing doubts among the Russian population concerning Putin and his lie machine. Prime Minister, should we not seize this opportunity? We pledged £4 million, as you mentioned to Mr Tugendhat earlier, to the World Service, but should we not look to fund a sustained information strategy in order to bring the truth to the Russian people about the crimes being committed in their names?

The Prime Minister: You are so right. One of the depressing things is the ruthlessness with which Putin tries to conceal the reality of what is happening from the Russian population. Genuinely, you can ring and talk to Russian friends and they will seriously dispute what is going on in Ukraine. I am afraid that people are very vulnerable to the lies that Putin is telling, and we have to be extremely energetic in exposing them.

We have a Government information cell that has been going for some time to counter disinformation. You can imagine, Julian, the sorts of things that it tries to do. Our whole approach has been to try to be as frank with people as we possibly can about what we know and to demystify things. It was the UK and the US that were out there in the beginning saying, "There is a massive problem. There are 100 battalion tactical groups on the borders with Ukraine. We know this," and we put it into the public domain. Similarly, when we got information about false flag operations, we immediately put it out into the public domain to try to fight the disinformation with as much exposure of the reality as we can. I think that is starting to have an effect. I think you are seeing signs now in Russia of people waking up to what's going on.

Q37 **Julian Knight:** That is very much about their disinformation directed at us, and since 2013 the Russians have been very open in talking about the fact that part of their strategy is effectively to undermine the west. Should we not now turn the tables on them and have all our news media organisations working together in order to get the truth into Russia by whatever means we possibly can, co-ordinated on a governmental level?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I think that is why, as I said to Sarah, we are increasing funding for the BBC. We are doing whatever we can to counteract the Putin narrative, and we are doing an awful lot to communicate to ordinary Russians what is really going on. As I said, there are some signs that it is getting through—you know, this new movement with green ribbons and so on. I think there is a growing awareness of the reality of what's happening in Ukraine, but it is very, very far from universal in Russia.

Q38 **Julian Knight:** Russia Today and Sputnik have been blocked but there is nothing stopping the Kremlin starting up a new media organisation via a social media platform almost in a heartbeat. To stop this happening, Prime Minister, do you think we need the clearest possible definition of what constitutes a recognised news publisher in the upcoming Online Safety Bill?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and I know you have been following this like a lynx or a bloodhound or something. A news publisher needs to have a

registered UK address, a standards code and editorial control, and the Online Safety Bill will force all such companies to tackle the content that is illegal in the scope of the legislation.

Q39 **Julian Knight:** Not all such companies, though, because the reality is that banning Russia Today and Sputnik is of little importance because the real disinformation that is coming from Russia is emanating from platforms such as Telegram. As it stands, it looks highly likely that Telegram will not be considered as a high risk, high-reach social media platform. For Telegram, among others, to face the strictest regulation under the Online Safety Bill, shouldn't the Government outline in the coming weeks precisely which specific companies will be in scope to be considered high risk?

The Prime Minister: As news publishers or as high risk?

Q40 **Julian Knight:** As high risk. Do you think Telegram should be included as one of those high-risk companies?

The Prime Minister: I am going to have to say that my general feeling about it is that anybody putting stuff online—putting content online in a systematic way—should be defined as a news publisher and should be subject to the controls that we have set out in the Bill.

Q41 **Julian Knight:** My final question, Prime Minister, is partly a request, if you like. Despite no collective ministerial agreement and having written to my Committee ruling out such a move just 24 hours before, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport still seems intent on introducing a new Committee, which will effectively mirror the work of my Committee, looking at online safety. This, Prime Minister, would drive a coach and horses through the Select Committee system. Prime Minister, will you commit to investigating this matter, write to me on it, and protect the Select Committee system, which I know you value so much?

The Prime Minister: I do, Julian, and I value your work, but I am conscious that Committees are really a matter for the House. I will certainly investigate the matter and write back to you.

Julian Knight: Thank you.

Chair: We move on now to the issue of visas, which is a very challenging one. I call Dame Diana Johnson.

Q42 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Thank you, Clive. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I want to ask you about the two main routes for obtaining visas to come to the United Kingdom. I wonder whether, on reflection, you thought that not going for an emergency humanitarian visa for those people fleeing war was the right decision. The route that the Government have taken of a family visa scheme, which is about controlling migration and not about dealing with the humanitarian crisis, has, as you know, been beset with over-bureaucratic provisions, caused confusion and changed many times.

The Prime Minister: Of course I thought about having a system where we just opened the doors and—

Dame Diana Johnson: No, that is not what I said, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Oh, forgive me.

Dame Diana Johnson: I said an emergency humanitarian visa, so you would still carry out the checks. You would be able to take the biometrics at the border or before someone got on a plane. That is what we're talking about. I recognise that you are concerned about security.

The Prime Minister: Thanks. Let me clarify. I think we're probably not that far apart, because what I wanted was a system that was as light touch as possible and that would enable people to come here, but that would enable us also to do checks. We are outside the Schengen system; we have the advantage of being able to clarify people's status, their bona fides and so on. That is not a bad thing if you want to have a programme that really works and commands confidence.

So far, what it has meant is that we've had 25,000 visas approved—that's not a bad number so far. They're being handled at a rate of 1,000 a day. It is quite sizeable, and the numbers will mount quickly—there is no cap on these numbers, don't forget.

Q43 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I ask you about Homes for Ukraine? That scheme still requires a visa—a 30-page visa application, as far as I am aware from speaking to the Minister this morning—but only one in 100 of the applications that have been submitted has actually resulted in a visa being issued. You were asked at Prime Minister's Question Time today how many of the—I think—2,700 who have been given visas have actually arrived in the country.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I know, and I'm afraid that I still don't have the number. I know that 2,700 have been given visas, but don't forget that these numbers are climbing, and the generosity of the British people is quite remarkable. I think that almost 200,000 people have said they will take Ukrainians. There is no cap on the family reunion scheme; that is already at the thick end of 25,000—that is a pretty big town.

Q44 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I totally agree with you, Prime Minister, about the generosity of the British people, but can I just put to you the case of a pregnant woman who is in Poland at the moment? She is heavily pregnant. She has been matched under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. She has been told that she actually has to wait to give birth in Poland, in temporary accommodation, in order to obtain a birth certificate for the child to then be able to get a visa. Is that really how you think the scheme should be operating, if we are so concerned about bringing people over to this country as quickly as possible?

The Prime Minister: I can't see any reason why she couldn't come and have the baby here. If you write to me with the details, I would be very happy to look into it.

Q45 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I will. Can I ask about safeguarding? This week, Michael Gove received a letter from 16 refugee and anti-slavery groups, which were concerned that the Homes for Ukraine scheme risked operating as Tinder for sex traffickers. What do you say about that?

The Prime Minister: I think that that is one of the reasons why it's important to have—with as light a touch as possible—DBS checks, and checks both ways, to make sure that we have a programme that is really working. I think that's important for the whole country, because everybody will want to be as generous as possible, but they'll also want to feel that the scheme is really sound, that we are getting the people who really need our help, and that we are helping them in the best possible way.

Q46 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Do you think that the National Crime Agency should be policing Facebook groups where people are putting their personal details? I think there was one case of a man who said he was looking for a Ukrainian wife. There are children who are posting on those Facebook groups to try and be matched with someone in the UK. Do you think that they National Crime Agency has a role to play in that?

The Prime Minister: Certainly. One of the things that I have become concerned about in the last couple of weeks is what is happening to refugees—overwhelmingly women and children—in the region. Who is predating upon them? What is happening to them? Yes, we have to be very vigilant about that. That is why I think the Homes for Ukraine scheme has got to be something where we are very generous and open our arms, but we must also make sure that that scheme is not itself being abused—not by the Ukrainians, but by people who may have bad motives.

Q47 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I wonder if you have had an opportunity to raise with any of the social media organisations, Facebook in particular, any of the concerns around this scheme and how it is operating, with people being able to advertise and match through those mediums?

The Prime Minister: No, I haven't personally, but it is a very good point, and I am sure that Michael Gove and his team are on it. We are going to have a lot of Ukrainians, and that is going to be a great thing. It is going to be a great thing—they are fantastic people. We are going to be very generous, but what we want is a scheme that really does command confidence among the British public, and also confidence among the Ukrainians.

Chair: Moving on to a general issue about immigration, I call Bill Wiggin.

Q48 **Sir Bill Wiggin:** Thank you, Clive. Prime Minister, 2,700 visas have been issued out of 28,300 applications in the last 15 days. I happen to agree with everything you have said about how my constituents, your constituents and the British people want Ukrainians to come to the UK and be properly looked after. Why do you think it is moving so slowly?

The Prime Minister: We are processing about 1,000 a day.

Sir Bill Wiggin: That is what we want to get to, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: Already, you've got—what is the population of Hereford, Bill?

Sir Bill Wiggin: 140,000.

The Prime Minister: All right, okay. What, the town of Hereford?

Q49 **Sir Bill Wiggin:** The problem is that in 15 days, we have only done 10% of the people who have applied. We are nowhere near 1,000 a day. My problem is that what you want is what I want and what the people want, but it does not appear to be what we are delivering. That is my concern. Why aren't you getting what you want, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: We are getting, already, sizeable numbers and I think that that is a good thing. Don't forget: most Ukrainians want to be in the region. In an ideal world, they would like to go back to their homes. A lot of them, increasingly, now want to come to other European countries. They want to come to the UK, and that is quite right. We are opening our doors and opening our homes. The numbers are going up quite steeply now and I think they will continue to rise for a while to come. I think that is going to be a great thing. This country has a very proud record of welcoming evacuees.

I do not want pointlessly to berate officialdom and blame people for being slow—that is too easy. We ask a lot of our officials and public servants. They have to balance some quite difficult objectives. We have just been hearing some really good questions about modern slavery, sexual trafficking, children, and about gangsters who might be trading in evacuees. You've got to be careful. Do not forget that the point I made on the first day in the House is that there will also be people coming from that war zone who may not be entirely who they say they are. We have had some cases, sadly, of that already.

Q50 **Sir Bill Wiggin:** Okay. Let me take you to the complete other end of the spectrum. We have, on at least three occasions, promised the Qataris visa-free access. These are very wealthy people who are unlikely to stay, yet despite saying we would do it three times, we still have not delivered. I am really worried, Prime Minister; everything you have said to us today I actually want to happen, but it is not happening. The only people who are turning up turn up in rubber boats. Why can we not get the right people through our immigration system, instead of the wrong ones?

The Prime Minister: If I understand you correctly, Bill, you are asking why the Qataris and other Gulf countries cannot have visa-free access.

Q51 **Sir Bill Wiggin:** Well, we want Ukrainians and we want Qataris, but we do not want people in rubber boats.

The Prime Minister: No, sure. The Nationality and Borders Bill, coupled with a few other things, will help us do a great deal to stop the cruel trade in people across the channel. We will do our best to deal with that, but that is a separate issue from the visas for Qataris and others. I am keen to have a much more fluid system for Qatar. We are keeping our system under constant review. I recently had the good fortune to tell the Emir of

Qatar that we were likely to see progress very soon, but I do not want to go beyond that. This is one of the things that, frankly, could go a bit faster.

Q52 **Sir Bill Wiggin:** You were very generous in your protection of the civil service a few moments ago. Will you have a very close look at the people who are not moving at the speed at which you would like? You wanted a light-touch system; you want that security. You want all the right things. The country wants those same things, too. What can you do to make sure that your wish becomes your command, or vice versa? We want more of that.

The Prime Minister: What you can do is make sure that you increase the number of visa application centres in country, and put everything online so that people can get their application cleared digitally and then come here. That is what we are doing. You have to pay to send more officials out to Poland, Romania, Slovakia and everywhere that is currently receiving refugees, and make sure that they are able to process as many as possible. You have to increase our ability to help people at Lille and Calais and everywhere. That is what we are doing.

Q53 **Sir Bill Wiggin:** Excellent; so we can look forward to the right people arriving in the coming days.

The Prime Minister: I can assure the Committee that—thankfully, praise be—we are going to see a lot of wonderful Ukrainians coming. To cheer you up even more, Bill, I also think we are going to see some pretty fluid to-ing and fro-ing by our friends in the Gulf.

Q54 **Chair:** Let us move on, Prime Minister, to the two schemes: the sponsorship scheme and the family scheme for Ukrainian refugees. The Home Affairs Committee was told two weeks ago that local authorities would get £10,500 for each refugee who came through the sponsorship scheme, and they would get the same funding for refugees under the family scheme.

This morning, the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee was told that that was not true, and there would not be any funding to local authorities for refugees who came under the family scheme, even though refugees coming under that scheme will still need almost entirely the same wraparound support as refugees under the sponsorship scheme. Can we have a look at that? Clearly, local councils are under financial pressure, and it does not seem fair to say to them, "Over to you, it's all yours and there's no help."

The Prime Minister: Thanks, Clive. You are right about the distinction. The Homes for Ukraine scheme attracts support of £10,500 per person per year for the council—£8,755 per child for education, plus the £350 per month to the recipient home. On the broader initial category—the family reunion scheme—what we are starting with is access to benefits, access to the NHS and mental health care, access to education, and free travel. That is a considerable package of support.

The way of paying for all that is clearly through the massive support that we continue to give to our NHS, our education budget and so on. They are going to be an extra cost, but on the other hand, don't forget that there are 1.25 million job vacancies in this country. One of the problems our economy has—I am sure we will come on to it—is the need for more pairs of hands to do crucial jobs, and one of the things that the Ukrainians will be able to do immediately is contribute to the economy by working.

Q55 **Chair:** But Prime Minister, lots of the organising of that help for Ukrainians—finding school places for the kids, travel to school and paying for that, giving benefits advice—is down to local authorities, who are going to get not one penny of extra help for people under the family scheme. Can you at least go away and look at that? Or can you explain to me what local authorities are going to be required to do under the sponsorship scheme that they are not going to have to do for families under the family scheme?

The Prime Minister: Clive, we are making a distinction because we think there will be particular types of people who will want to take advantage of the Homes for Ukraine scheme, and people who will want to come under the family scheme. I am not going to pretend that this can be done without an extra call on the public purse, but what I am also saying—

Q56 **Chair:** Will you look at the funding for councils, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Of course.

Chair: Because they are still going to have to put resources in to help people under the family scheme.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and we have massively increased support for councils over the last year, and will continue to do so.

We should also recognise that, at the moment, the dispersal of refugees around this country is not particularly equitable. I am looking at Pete now—he has just popped into my head. There are quite a few councils in Scotland that do not take very many—*[Interruption.]* I'm afraid so. What would be good to see is a greater spread and greater fairness in the distribution.

Q57 **Chair:** I don't think you have really answered the question about funding. We are going to keep going at this, because councils are still going to have to provide services for people under the family scheme.

Can I come on to the fact that the two schemes are so different? The Local Government Association told the Committee this morning that one of the reasons for the sponsorship scheme is that there simply isn't the necessary number of vacant affordable housing around the country for refugees to be moved into. Councils across the country have already received 144 homelessness applications from Ukrainian refugees. Some of them have come under the family scheme, because family members are not obliged to provide housing for people. Councils would like to house those families with some of the 200,000 people who want to volunteer to provide accommodation in their homes, but councils are not

being given access to that information and data.

The Prime Minister: Really?

Chair: So people are being housed in temporary accommodation, rather than in the homes of families who want to receive them. Can we at least unblock that logjam?

The Prime Minister: I see no reason at all why councils shouldn't have access to that particular data.

Chair: Right. I think that is a very positive move, Prime Minister, and thank you for that.

Moving on to the other major subject, the cost of living issues, I turn to Neil Parish.

Q58 **Neil Parish:** Thank you, Mr Betts. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. We face a perfect storm of factors with rising food prices.

The awful situation in Ukraine, which is known as the breadbasket of the world, has a knock-on effect on global food security. Ukraine produces 12% of global wheat exports and a Russian blockade of its Black sea ports is taking that wheat out of the market. That is driving prices up everywhere. It is also leaving countries across north Africa and the middle east short of wheat because much of their supply comes from Ukraine. As you know, Prime Minister, I am always very keen to see us produce more of our great British food.

The Prime Minister: You are.

Neil Parish: That helps us to protect ourselves from volatile markets abroad, and by being less reliant on imports there is more food abroad for those countries facing shortage. I want to see us produce more in this country. Growing food is in the DNA of our farmers and producers. They want to produce more, and we need to help them to do that. Our consumers and retailers want to buy British food and they want stable prices. We are 64% self-sufficient in all foods, but that percentage has been declining for decades. For example, we were 55% self-sufficient in vegetables and 71% self-sufficient in potatoes, but for both self-sufficiency has fallen by 16% in the last—

The Prime Minister: Sixty per cent.?

Q59 **Neil Parish:** Sixteen per cent. in the last 20 years. We can boost production—the potential is there, the farmers want to do it and consumers want to buy it. Farmers want to produce more food, so my question is, Prime Minister: what can we do to help so that we have a strong supply of high-quality food at stable prices?

The Prime Minister: Thank you very much, Neil. I know what a passionate advocate you are of UK food and farming, and you are quite right. I share your ambition that we should grow more of the food that we eat, and we can. We are trebling our investment in the farming investment fund, which will help farmers with their equipment and

technology, but we need to encourage young people to go into farming and to see it as a great future.

And it is a great future. When I talk to farmers, one of the sadnesses I find is that they cannot persuade their kids to do it. My grandfather was a farmer—very unsuccessfully, I may say—and it is a wonderful thing to do. You need to support UK agriculture, give better business advice to farmers about their options, and help them with equipment and training.

Also, we must have a more positive attitude about consuming our own food, but also about our own exports. Neil, you and I have discussed before the importance of having in every embassy around the world someone whose job it is specifically to champion UK food and farming. That is what we are doing. By the way, the sector is growing the whole time. The exports of UK food and drink are colossal now—absolutely colossal.

Q60 **Neil Parish:** But Prime Minister, what we want is to get help with costs, right. One of the things is fertiliser; as you know, the invasion by Russia has combined with rising gas prices to send the cost of fertilisers through the roof. Fertiliser now costs four times more than it did a year ago at £1,000 a tonne.

All that has a knock-on effect on the cost of food and farmers cannot absorb those costs alone. All farming needs fertiliser—livestock, dairy, cereals, vegetables and even salad production by hydroponics here in London—but we only produce 40% of our own. We have two fertiliser plants; one is still open, but one is closed. If we can contain fertiliser costs caused by events abroad, we can boost home production, deliver more stable prices to our consumers and help with world food supplies. My question, Prime Minister—I normally would not ask for this—is whether as a short-term solution we can do everything possible to reopen that second fertiliser plant, keep them both going—

The Prime Minister: Which one? Where?

Neil Parish: It is up in the north of England; both of them are there. One is mothballed at the moment. Can we not get that fertiliser out there, because if we want to produce good food, we need to do it now?

The Prime Minister: Old muckspreader. Okay, Neil, I want to spread the good stuff over the fields of this country as passionately as anybody. You have to do that. By the way, the cost of inputs into fertiliser and feed is clearly one of the biggest problems that we have, but that is hydrocarbons and peat. One of the reasons why we would be crazy to abandon our hydrocarbons industry is that it is so vital. I think 36% of our diesel comes from Russia. If we are going to end our dependence on Russian diesel for British tractors and farm vehicles, we have got to think practically about where else it is coming from.

On the fertiliser, I make the same point: we have long-term need for sustainable hydrocarbons for basic inputs into the cost—

Q61 **Neil Parish:** So you will help to get those plants open?

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Neil; I am now alerted to the need to get the second fertiliser plant going. I do not wish to commit to this Committee, Clive, that I will wave a magic wand and open this fertiliser plant because I will doubtless be told that there are overwhelming circumstances that make that impossible. But I will jolly well find out what I can do. I will have a look, okay?

Neil Parish: I look forward to your taking immediate action, Prime Minister. Thank you.

Q62 **Philip Dunne:** This follows on very neatly from what you have just been saying, Prime Minister. My interest is in the cost of living challenge arising from increasing energy prices.

For the last year or so, since economies started to emerge from the pandemic, all our constituents have been seeing astonishing increases in their energy costs—exacerbated, clearly, by the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. To what extent will the energy security strategy, which you are planning, address the cost of living pressures?

The Prime Minister: I think you have to provide as much short-term relief as you can to people, within the fiscal constraints that we have—the £9.1 billion that we are giving to help people with the cost of energy and abating the council tax—as well as the extra cash we are giving to councils, by the way, Clive, under the household support fund.

We are doing all those things to help people with the cost of living. But we have got to recognise that in the UK we have just failed for a generation to put in enough long-term supply. It has been one of those colossal mistakes. Renewables are fantastic. Offshore wind—I stress "offshore"—has massive potential, but so does nuclear.

This is the country that split the atom; the first ever civilian nuclear power station was at Calder Hall in Cumbria, I seem to remember from my Ladybird book on atomic power. Why aren't we doing it? Why have the French got 56 nuclear reactors and we have barely six? Whose fault was that? The Labour party obviously, but I leave that to one side.

Mel Stride: And the Lib Dems.

The Prime Minister: And the Lib Dems—thank you, Mel.

But we have got to fix it now. I am not going to pretend that we are going to get a nuclear reactor on stream in real time for our constituents in the next couple of years—no. We have got to do lots of other things, including transitional hydrocarbons and basically helping with the cost of living wherever we can. But long term, and medium term, we have got to be looking at big ticket nuclear solutions—Sizewell and other projects—and also at small modular reactors.

Bill mentions the Qataris. The Qataris are just one of the countries that want to work with us on SMRs. There is a huge list now of potential partners for Rolls-Royce to do that.

Q63 **Philip Dunne:** Your Government is the first in 30 years to make a decision on nuclear. I applaud that; I think it is exactly the right thing to be doing. But as you say, it is going to take a decade to bring a major system onstream. How long do you think it will take before a small modular reactor is contributing to the grid?

The Prime Minister: I saw a bit of paper last night saying before the end of the decade. But they will have to go quicker than that.

Q64 **Philip Dunne:** So eight years or so.

The Prime Minister: I'm not going to predict, but if we don't start now we won't be fixing the problem. But I am optimistic. We have shown that we can do things really fast; the booster roll-out was unbelievably fast—we have done some things fast recently. I think we should have a look at an acceleration.

Q65 **Philip Dunne:** So there may be scope for your future planning Bill to look at the planning requirements for major infrastructure projects, such as small modular reactors on existing nuclear sites, where they are likely to be welcomed rather than fought.

Can I take you back to the transition, which you were just touching on? As we move towards net zero Britain, we will require fossil fuels to continue to support the economy for another three decades. Currently, three quarters of our energy demand in this country is met by fossil fuels—

The Prime Minister: Of our energy demand, not our electricity demand.

Q66 **Philip Dunne:** No, but we heat homes, we use it for transport and so on. Our oil and gas reserves are currently depleting rapidly. What is the prospect for the energy security strategy that you are going to unveil providing some further exploration opportunities for the UK continental shelf?

The Prime Minister: We will look at all those options. The hydrocarbon riches of the world, I'm sorry to say, are still vast. That is a bad thing because we want to move away from hydrocarbons as fast as we can, but it is also, in the short term, a useful thing. There is no doubt that the United States disposes of colossal wealth in oil and gas, and so does the Gulf—so does Iran, by the way. If we could get an agreement on the JCPOA—not to chuck another difficult subject in—then another source of supply might open up.

Q67 **Philip Dunne:** Does this suggest that you're moving away from the climate change ambitions that you were trumpeting at COP26 in Glasgow only six months ago?

The Prime Minister: No, not at all. And by the way, I think one of the most productive lines of research, and one that we must not close down, is the hydrogen route. Hydrogen could be a fantastic solution, particularly for heavy goods vehicles, for farm machinery, for diggers, for ships—hydrogen really could be the answer. How do you get hydrogen? You get hydrogen out of hydrocarbons. If hydrogen is going to be part of the mix,

and I think it is, then hydrocarbons are going to be part of the solution for the long term. That doesn't mean we're—if you combine use of hydrogen with carbon capture and storage, then you have a serious long-term prospect for the UK.

Philip Dunne: Hydrogen is derived from processing water—

The Prime Minister: Well, it can be, yes.

Q68 **Philip Dunne:** —and the oil and gas element of it is to provide the energy to drive that process. Are you suggesting therefore that you are looking at a purely grey hydrogen rather than a green hydrogen production technique?

The Prime Minister: I think that you should look at both types—both green and blue hydrogen. People are anxious at the moment about putting in ground source or air source heat pumps to heat their homes, and everybody is worried about having to replace their boilers at vast expense. I think for some people that will be the right solution—I think the price of those things will come down very fast as more are made—but you've also got to look at the possibility of going back to where we were, actually, in the '60s and '70s, when town gas contained a lot of hydrogen and you could put a lot more hydrogen into the pipes.

Chair: I think we will leave it there.

Philip Dunne: Just one more question, if I may, Clive.

Chair: We are getting very close to time.

Philip Dunne: Okay, final question—

The Prime Minister: But the ambition to keep going on the path towards net zero—no, that has not been adulterated or lost at all.

Q69 **Philip Dunne:** So you would welcome our Committee doing an investigation into the potential for oil and gas exploration while maintaining the ambition of net zero?

The Prime Minister: I think that would be a very useful thing, yes.

Q70 **Chair:** Prime Minister, just coming back to the issue of help with people's energy bills, the Government have chosen the council tax rebate—the £150—as a major way of doing that. That seems like a scheme dreamed up in the Treasury, passed on to DLUHC to try and sort out, and then passed on to councils to sort out the further problems when they come to implement it.

I want to raise one particular element with you because it is a real concern. For some of the poorest tenants in private accommodation who pay their council tax in with their rent, the £150 gets handed over to their landlord, and some landlords are going to get multiples of £150. I assume that that was not the intention of the scheme.

The Prime Minister: No.

Q71 **Chair:** Is there anything you can do about it?

The Prime Minister: Do you mean people who have paid local housing allowance?

Chair: They pay their council tax in with their rent to their landlord. The landlord therefore effectively pays their council tax to the council—

The Prime Minister: So they get the rebate.

Q72 **Chair:** It's the landlord who gets £150, not the person.

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look into that, Clive. I don't have an immediate answer, but that's a wrinkle I hadn't foreseen.

Chair: It's been confirmed by the permanent secretary in the Department.

The Prime Minister: I will have a look at it.

Q73 **Chair:** Secondly, if it's too late to sort it out with the current rebate, if the Government go for an extension of the scheme in any form—I am not saying you have to commit to that at this stage—during the course of the year, would you try to ensure that the regulations are written in such a way that the help actually goes to the tenants who have the heating costs, not the landlord who picks up the money?

The Prime Minister: I think you will have everybody with you on that one, Clive. I will do my best to ensure—what we want to do is cut the cost for the people who are paying it, and to help people get through an unreasonable spike in energy prices caused by all the things that the Committee has mentioned.

Chair: Yes, I think we're on the same page.

Q74 **Stephen Timms:** Can I start by welcoming two recent Government decisions? One is to make permanent the extension of free school meals to children in families with no recourse to public funds. The other is to widen the Online Safety Bill to tackle scam adverts. Both of those are subjects we have talked about at these meetings before, and I welcome those decisions.

I want to ask you about a letter that was sent to you by the chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir David Norgrove, on 24 February. You mentioned earlier that we don't have enough people in jobs at the moment—there are lots of vacancies. His letter to you says: "You said at Prime Minister's Questions yesterday that there are now more people in employment than before the pandemic began.

According to the latest ONS figures, it is wrong to claim that there are now more people in work than before the pandemic began: the increase in the number of people who are on payrolls is more than offset by the reduction in the number of people who are self-employed." Do you accept that correction?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. That is why I took particular care today, mindful as I am of Sir David's chastisement, and on all occasions I

stressed that it was payroll employment that I was talking about. There were 400,000 more, and there are now 600,000 more people on the payroll than there were before the pandemic began, and that is not half bad when you consider what we were predicting. Everybody was talking about 12% unemployment, I seem to recall.

Q75 **Stephen Timms:** His point in the letter is that the increase in the number of people on payrolls is "more than offset by the reduction in the number of people who are self-employed." Do you accept that that's correct?

The Prime Minister: My overall picture, I think, is right. The employment record of the Government has been absolutely outstanding when you consider that people were seriously predicting that after covid we were going to have not only huge backlogs in healthcare but also unemployment running at 12%. That has been very far from the case.

Q76 **Stephen Timms:** I completely agree—it is understandable—why it is that employment now is lower than it was before the pandemic. I just wanted to confirm that you recognise that total employment is now less than it was before the pandemic began.

The Prime Minister: Well, unemployment is actually—

Stephen Timms: No, employment is what I am asking about. The figures from the latest statistics are that the number of people in employment more recently is 32.493 million. In the quarter immediately before the pandemic, it was 33.073 million. Employment now is less than it was before the pandemic began.

The Prime Minister: You are making a very important point. It depends how you look at this. Unemployment is the thing that we were worried about when we were growing up. That was the terrifying thing that happened to people—they were slung out of their jobs and it was awful, in the '80s and the '90s. We remember that. That is low. That is back down now to pre-pandemic levels. That is 3.9%. What we have got at the moment—

Stephen Timms: But employment is still less than it was before the pandemic.

The Prime Minister: Although payroll employment is higher, what you are pointing to is a very interesting thing, which is the self-employed. For reasons that everybody is trying to get a handle on, it looks as though large numbers of people, possibly in their 50s, are deciding that, what with one thing or another, they want to do something else.

Stephen Timms: And some of them have gone on to the payrolls, which is why the payrolls are higher.

The Prime Minister: Some of them, perhaps, have gone on to the payrolls. Some of them are doing other things. What we want to do is to find ways of helping those people back into work, because they have fantastic skills to contribute.

Q77 **Stephen Timms:** On the employment point, you have said in the Commons nine times, I think, that the number of people in work is higher now than it was before the start of the pandemic. I think you have recognised this afternoon that those statements were incorrect.

The Prime Minister: I think I have repeatedly—and I think I took steps to correct the record earlier.

Stephen Timms: Have you? Ah, I hadn't seen that.

The Prime Minister: I think I did, yes. I think I did. I certainly have been very punctilious to talk about payroll employment, Mr Timms.

But there is a very interesting thing. Something has happened, which is that people at a certain stage of their life are not deciding to go back into the labour force. We have vacancies now at 1.25 million—record jobs vacancies. Frankly, those people have some of the skills we need. We are probably short in this economy. One of the pressures that we have on supply chains and inflation is we are probably short about 500,000 pairs of hands to do crucial things. Many of those pairs of hands belong to those people in their 50s who have decided to do something else. One of our challenges is to get those people back into work.

Q78 **Stephen Timms:** I completely agree with that. Moving on, Citizens Advice has calculated that a single unemployed person was spending just over 15% of their benefit on energy bills in 2020; it is going to be 25% in April, and it could be up to 47% when the cap goes up again in October. Why was there no help in the spring statement for people dependent on out-of-work benefits?

The Prime Minister: Look, I know how tough it is for people to meet the costs of energy. You are raising, again, a very reasonable point. You have to decide where you are going to put your fiscal firepower, given we do not want to put up taxes and we do not want to borrow any more. What are you going to prioritise? Who are you going to make sure that you target in order to have the maximum economic benefit for the whole country?

What we think very strongly is that you are better off helping people into work. I know that there are many difficult cases, but that is why we are doing the council tax support, doubling the household support payments. That is why we are doing the targeted support for people's energy bills. We are doing all sorts of things to help people, but what we want to do, if we can, is to help people by getting them into work. We just talked a moment ago about—

Q79 **Stephen Timms:** But those who can't work are seeing this massive squeeze at the moment. In the pandemic, you increased universal credit by £20 a week. I think most people recognised that was absolutely the right thing to do—our Committee certainly thought so—and a very effective way of helping people who needed help. Why have you not done something with universal credit to help people now, given this huge squeeze that they are going to be suffering over the next few months?

The Prime Minister: We have. We have helped people with a change to the taper rate of universal credit.

Q80 **Stephen Timms:** No, it is people who are out of work I am asking about—people who, for example, cannot work because of ill health.

The Prime Minister: The majority—I think 67% or so, or 65%—of people who are on universal credit are either in work or can work—

Stephen Timms: Yes, but my question is about people who cannot work—who aren't working.

The Prime Minister: —so they have benefited from that. I take your point totally, but the way we are trying to help them is by the direct support that we are giving for people facing particular hardship, whether with—

Q81 **Stephen Timms:** Why not use universal credit? That is my question.

The Prime Minister: Because we want to try to support people as far as we possibly can—because we want to support them through other means, and we want to support people into work wherever possible.

Q82 **Stephen Timms:** Have you lost confidence in universal credit?

The Prime Minister: Not at all.

Chair: I think we are going to have to move on.

The Prime Minister: No, Stephen—I am sorry—you are asking a really, really important question, because it is fundamental to what we are trying to do. We think that the way out of poverty is to help people into work, and all the evidence is that that works. There are 1.3 million fewer people in absolute poverty than there were. We are seeing a decline in the number of kids in workless households. We can argue, rightly, about the payroll, unemployment or whatever, but the overall effect on the economy of having large numbers of people, the overwhelming majority of people, in jobs that are paid better—that is the way forward. That is why we have the Way to Work scheme. As you rightly say, there are 1.8 million people currently getting benefits and 1.25 million job vacancies—go figure. We have an economy that is massively short of hands. We need to get those people off benefits and into work, and that is by far the best thing for them. You are asking the right question, but that is what our instinct is.

Chair: Prime Minister, we have two more colleagues to get in before we come to a conclusion. The first is Catherine McKinnell.

Q83 **Catherine McKinnell:** Thank you, Clive. Prime Minister, I just want to pick you up on a couple of things you said. Seventy-five per cent. of children living in poverty across the UK are in working households. Not only is the figure that you use for a reduction in absolute child poverty measured against the 2010 baseline—it is the number by which the number living in poverty has reduced since 2010—but it is projected to rise by half a million next year, based on the Government's plans. So,

Prime Minister, you will not be able to say that child poverty has reduced, and by the Government's own measure of absolute poverty, which we believe is inadequate to measure child poverty in this country, it will be increasing.

I want to ask you about the levelling-up plans. Do you believe it is possible to level up the country without reducing the number of children living in poverty?

The Prime Minister: No, and we are going to keep doing everything we can. As far as I can remember, the numbers currently are—and you are right, there is an issue that we have to fix. I am not going to pretend that it is going to be easy, but we are going to go at it as hard as we can. But at the moment, the numbers are that there are 200,000 fewer children in absolute poverty, and I think half a million fewer in workless households. I think those are right.

Catherine McKinnell: The numbers aren't going in the right direction, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: And you are right that, at the moment, the cost of living is running too high. That is why we have to do everything we can to abate that, to help people through this tough time—and we will, using the fiscal firepower that we have, which we have built up because of the way that we have been able to run things. As I said to Sarah Champion earlier in the House, the best way forward is to get our economic activity going and get more people into higher-paid jobs. That is what we want—and to have that across the whole country.

Catherine McKinnell: Which is why I am asking you about levelling up.

The Prime Minister: And you are right.

Q84 **Catherine McKinnell:** Yes. Can you tell me, Prime Minister, how many times child poverty is mentioned or referenced in the Government's levelling-up White Paper?

The Prime Minister: I'm afraid that although—I suppose you are going to tell me that it is not mentioned.

Catherine McKinnell: I know the answer to this.

The Prime Minister: I suppose you are going to tell me it is not mentioned at all, but—

Catherine McKinnell: It is none—yes. So, if we accept—

The Prime Minister: If that is so, Catherine, it is a purely formal accident. The whole objective of levelling up is to make sure that kids growing up everywhere have opportunity. They don't, and that is what levelling up is about.

Catherine McKinnell: Okay. I just have one more question, about a petition—

Q85 **Chair:** I'm sorry, we need to move on. We are coming to the end of our time. I was going to ask the Prime Minister if he had actually read the levelling-up White Paper—

The Prime Minister: I have. Have you, Clive?

Chair: I have read some of it; I will be honest about it. On to the Chair of the Treasury Committee, Mel Stride.

Q86 **Mel Stride:** Thank you. Good afternoon, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Good afternoon, Mel.

Mel Stride: I want to come back to the discussion you have just had with Stephen Timms about universal credit. If you look at the spring statement and the actions that the Chancellor took prior to that on tax and the UC taper, there is a lot in that that is good, because it is quite progressive—both raising taxes in the way he has done it, and the way he has brought them down. However, the hole—the gap—is the area of those who are reliant on universal credit who are not in work.

One of the reasons that is a particular problem at the moment is that inflation is increasing very rapidly. As you will know, the upgrade to those benefits is pegged to the rate of inflation back in September last year, which was 3.1%. Of course, inflation is now projected to go up to 8%, 9% or 10%, so those people are going to really suffer. According to the OBR, it will take about 18 months for that effect to pass through so that the benefit recipients catch up with those inflationary changes. It would be fiscally neutral to re-examine and reindex those benefits in a couple of months' time, say, and put them up in the light of the way that inflation is moving. Given that it would not cost any more money to do that—

The Prime Minister: How's that, Mel?

Mel Stride: Simply because through time, as inflation rises, the level of these benefits goes up and finally catches up with where they would have been over the longer period as inflation goes up and then comes down again.

The problem is that over the next 12 months, some of those that Stephen referred to will have a net reduction in their income of about 10%. As he rightly says, they are very dependent on fuel, food and all of those costs, so it is really tough. Could you ask the Treasury to look at the possibility, as I believe they did in the 1970s when we had energy cost push problems, of an interim uprating of those benefits, which would be at no cost to the Exchequer across the forecast period?

The Prime Minister: Right. I think I am going to have to go and look at how you do it in a fiscally neutral way, but what we want to do, Mel, is to look after people in the aftershocks of the pandemic as much as we have during the pandemic. The aftershocks are proving to be really quite challenging because of the inflationary spike in energy. That is basically what is driving it, as it has done before.

I will look at that, but I think the direct action that we want to take is to help people in particular hardship, doubling the household support fund to a billion through councils in the way that we have, helping people with council tax through the council tax rebate—notwithstanding the excellent point that Clive makes about the risk of that going to the landlord; we will have to make sure we close that down. There are a lot of things that we are doing together that are designed to tide people over—to help them through a tough time—but we are also taking the steps now to build in long-term security. But I am very happy to ask the Treasury to look at your suggestion.

Mel Stride: That will be really helpful, Prime Minister. Thank you very much.

The Prime Minister: Not at all.

Q87 **Mel Stride:** Can I also touch on a comment you made just a moment ago? You said, "We have to take a decision as to how to use our fiscal firepower," which is always true. The Chancellor decided in the spring statement to plant a tax reduction flag in 2024, which he is going to defend at all costs, to reduce income tax by a penny. The fiscal firepower that we have is very fragile. As the OBR has pointed out, it can be wiped out at a moment if interest rates go above the central forecast, inflation goes even further up than is anticipated or growth is flatter than is anticipated.

If we end up in a situation where we have run out of fiscal firepower, we have made a commitment to that tax cut, and the Chancellor and you are rightly saying, "We're not going to go out and borrow lots more money," we will have to look at spending. I just wonder what your assessment is of the likelihood that you are going to have to start to look at cutting back on some public expenditure, and whether you have had Departments start to prepare for that possibility, because it is a possibility that we will end up in that scenario.

The Prime Minister: I think that the first thing is to recognise the massively ambitious agenda that the Government have. We had to make a big call when covid broke. We could see we were going to have to spend so much to look after people—the thick end of half a trillion; £408 billion to get people through the crisis, all told. We knew that that was going to put massive pressure on public spending. Where were we going to go? Were we going to go back to austerity? Were we going to retrench? Were we going to cut? Were we going to cut our programmes? Were we going to cut investment in the long term? Were we going to cut fantastic projects that would transform this country over the long term—the integrated rail plan, rolling out gigabit, massive investment in the NHS, massive investment in education? Were we going to cut all that because of the fiscal problem?

Mel Stride: I am thinking more to the future—

The Prime Minister: I am getting to your point. So we took a decision to keep going. As you rightly say, Mel, that means that the balance is now

very fine and the cost of borrowing—we are borrowing a large amount. The cost of servicing our interest is £83 billion a year. As you say, that number can easily go up with interest rates, so we have to be very careful in the way we handle spending—

Q88 **Mel Stride:** If it came to it, would you look at cutting spending, or would you look to borrow more to protect the tax cut?

The Prime Minister: And that is why we want to keep going with the long-term plan that we have—making sure that we steer a steady course and help people through the short term, but make the long-term investments. What are the big costs that we need to contain? We need to contain the costs of energy, the cost of housing. These are things that we can start to address by making some big decisions now.

Q89 **Mel Stride:** You spoke in response to a question from Neil Parish about the importance of exports. I think you were particularly looking at food at that moment. The OBR's latest forecast—to be precise, it is page 64, chart I, which you are probably very familiar with—shows the trade intensity, as a percentage of GDP, that our economy commands now. In other words, it shows how much exporting and importing we are doing now compared to the past. It also shows what happened to all the countries in the EU and our major trading partners.

As Brexit and the pandemic struck almost simultaneously, we all went down. We all exported and imported much less. The others, as we have come out of the pandemic, have gone back up to, broadly speaking, where they were before. We have stayed very low. Are you concerned that, perhaps because of Brexit and the time it is taking now to strike all these trade deals with other countries around the world, we are becoming more of a closed economy? That, of course, would have implications for productivity and the living standards that we are seeking this afternoon to try to protect.

The Prime Minister: I am very keen that we should not become a closed economy at all. We all want to grow more of our own food and so on, but I am not a believer in autarky. We have got to be an open, global, trading nation. I do want to see much more of an export drive. I think it was Liam Fox, our colleague, who made the point a couple of years ago that a lot of UK companies could sell a lot more overseas than they do. You may have noticed in the newspapers, Mel, that there is a big Government campaign now to encourage them.

Q90 **Mel Stride:** How long do you think it might be before we get back to where we were pre-pandemic?

The Prime Minister: I can't prophesy that. As I told Neil, we are on it and we want to champion it. There is no natural impediment to our exports. It is just will and energy and ambition. That is what we should be doing.

Mel Stride: Prime Minister, thank you.

Chair: Prime Minister, thank you very much for answering a variety of

questions this afternoon from the Committee.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Clive.

Chair: We look forward to one or two replies on points that you said you would go away and look at.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will get back to the Committee.

Chair: Thank you for coming to be with us this afternoon.