

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Prime Minister, HC 453

Wednesday 6 July 2022

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Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Chris Bryant; Stephen Crabb; Mr Tobias Ellwood; Sir Robert Goodwill; Robert Halfon; Dame Meg Hillier; Dame Diana Johnson; Darren Jones; Angus Brendan MacNeil; Huw Merriman; Sir Robert Neill; Caroline Nokes; Sir Stephen Timms; Tom Tugendhat; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1 - 219

Witness

I: Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister.

Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon. Boris Johnson MP.

Chair: Welcome, Prime Minister, to this session of the Liaison Committee. There are one or two things that I need to say at the beginning about what we can and cannot talk about. As colleagues know, I am on the Privileges Committee; colleagues will be aware that the House has referred to that Committee the question of whether or not the Prime Minister's answer about the events in No.10 and the Cabinet Office during lockdown amounted to misleading the House.

Just as we would not refer to something that was sub judice, it would be wrong to go into detail about a matter that the House has referred elsewhere for examination. I very much want colleagues, the Prime Minister and the public to understand that we have to operate under that constraint. I remind colleagues that the Speaker and his Deputies have pulled people up about this in the Chamber. We should not be undermining the process that the House itself has set in place.

There is, of course, no difficulty in raising any other matter. Prime Minister, I have no wish to constrain anything that you wish to say in this Committee, but I will have to pull you up if you stray into the Privileges Committee remit.

Prime Minister, it is our intention to start with the great issues facing the nation and to move to the question of integrity in politics and related matters towards the end of the session, unless you want to dispose of those matters immediately first.

The Prime Minister: Sir Bernard, it is your Committee; I will be guided entirely by you.

Chair: Very good. I am afraid that I will pull you up if your answers are pressing on time, so that we can deal with that latter topic fully and properly at the end. If your answers are too long, I am afraid that we will just detain you until we have concluded our business—so there is every incentive for you to be as crisp as possible. That goes for the questions as well, colleagues.

We will start on the topic of Ukraine with the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Q1 **Tom Tugendhat:** Prime Minister, good afternoon. The alliance that has been brought together to dissuade Russia from further actions, and indeed to push Russia out of Donetsk and Luhansk, has clearly got a window of opportunity before the winter starts to bite and the coalition starts to fracture as energy prices in Europe rise and homes across our country start to suffer. Are you able to concentrate on building that alliance at the moment?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: Yes, and thanks, Tom. If you look at what the UK has done over the last couple of weeks, I think that the efforts of UK diplomacy, strategists, security and our armed forces have been very considerable. The G7 outcomes were at the upper end of expectations; NATO, again, probably exceeded expectations, both in the level of unity and in virtually every country around the table in NATO being determined to help President Zelensky in that window of opportunity you described.

Q2 **Tom Tugendhat:** And you are seeing, of course, food prices rise around the world as the ports of Odesa are closed and Mariupol and so on are occupied. What are you doing to make sure the food is getting out from the Black sea—that such wheat as is available is able to get out? How are you supporting the United Nations, and what are you doing to prepare those states, including in the middle east and, of course, Africa, that are facing enormous food poverty, with the possibility of migration and the pressures that that will cause?

The Prime Minister: First of all, on the grain that is being held hostage in Odesa, we are working with the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, who is leading the negotiations. The Turks are clearly crucial: they hold the waters. What the UK is offering is both demining capabilities, including remote demining capabilities—which we are good at—and the insurance of the vessels that might be used to ferry the grain out through the Bosphorus.

We are looking at other routes in addition to convoys through the Bosphorus. We are also doing what we can to help smaller packets of grain go through land routes, or indeed up the River Danube and out that way, and we are spending some money on upgrading the railways to that end. We are starting to see some growing quantities of grain coming out, not via the Black sea but overland and on the rivers.

Q3 **Tom Tugendhat:** As you know, we are seeing enormous pressure on the weaponry that goes into Ukraine. We are seeing a lot of promises but, sadly, fewer deliveries than promised from many countries. What are you doing to increase production and co-operation between armaments companies around Europe, and in the United States and Canada, to increase the supply?

The Prime Minister: The UK led the way in inaugurating the Ramstein conferences, which have brought countries together to supply weaponry to Ukraine, though the Americans and I are very much in the lead on that and are certainly providing the bulk of what is going in. We will be doing more in August at the Copenhagen conference, as I am sure you know—another military donor conference.

The supplies continue to go in. The Ukrainians are steadily getting the kind of kit that they need if they are going to expel the Russians from where they are, but it is also very important that they are trained to use the multiple launch rocket systems effectively, so that very expensive weaponry is put to good use.

Q4 **Tom Tugendhat:** Your Foreign Secretary has explained that victory in



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Ukraine means taking back every single square inch of Ukrainian soil, including Crimea. What is your view of victory?

The Prime Minister: We cannot be more Ukrainian than the Ukrainians. That is for them to decide. President Zelensky has set out his ambitions; it will ultimately be for him to decide what are the terms that he wants, but he has been very clear that he would like to return at least to the status quo ante 24 February.

Q5 **Tom Tugendhat:** What is your view of what victory for us should look like?

The Prime Minister: I think that victory for the Ukrainians would be a result that the Ukrainian people feel is the right one, and at the moment I think I am right in saying that 90% or more of Ukrainians believe passionately that there should be no deal that involves land for peace. They want the Russians expelled from every part of the territory that Putin has invaded.

Q6 **Tom Tugendhat:** Are you confident of holding the NATO agreement—or, rather, the European and American agreement—together in making sure that that coalition sustains the Ukrainians, even when the winter prices start to bite?

The Prime Minister: I think what was notable at Madrid was how anxieties about the friability of the coalition were proved to be unfounded. That is because the logic of the situation simply demands international unity. There is no other solution; there is no deal on offer. Even if the Ukrainians wanted to do a deal of land for peace, Putin isn't offering any such deal. He remains utterly maximalist in his objectives. That is why we have to continue to support Zelensky in the way that we are. That's accepted around the table.

Q7 **Tom Tugendhat:** Part of your commitment to sustaining Ukrainian operations, and indeed wider British military operations, was your increase to 2.5%. Given that the various international organisations, and indeed our own statistical agencies, do not foresee any growth in the UK economy in the coming years, who are you going to take the money off in order to increase the defence budget?

The Prime Minister: Well, I'm not certain I agree with your premise about the growth of the UK economy in the coming years. I am sure we will come to this in later sections, but both the IMF and the OECD see us going back to being at or near the top of the growth league.

Tom Tugendhat: It's still a percentage, rather than an absolute.

The Prime Minister: Sure. The 2.5 is just a prediction. It is based on the—I think—reasonable assumption that we are going to have to continue with the investments we are making in the future combat aircraft system and the AUKUS agreements with the Australians and the Americans. Those are very big projects. They will be expensive, but they are the right things for the country.



Q8 Tom Tugendhat: The last question from me will be on Sweden and Finland. Clearly, their membership of NATO is an extremely important event—not just for them, but for all of us. What are the implications for the guarding of the High North and particularly the integrity of the United Kingdom and Scotland as part of that in the Alliance? What commitments is the UK willing to make to increase co-operation with Sweden and Finland—not just in military supplies, but in training?

Chair: As briefly as you can, please.

The Prime Minister: We already do a lot of co-operating with the joint expeditionary force—the JEF—as you know, which is up there in the High North. The addition of Finland and Sweden is a great moment for the Alliance. I think it will strengthen the Alliance. It tells you all you need to know about Putin and his aggression that countries as peaceable as Sweden and Finland have decided to join NATO.

Chair: Tobias Ellwood.

Q9 Mr Ellwood: Prime Minister, it is good to see you again. We are establishing that the world is getting more dangerous; the next decade is going to be very bumpy indeed. I want to focus on UK defence capabilities. Despite the injection of £24 billion, the integrated review has seen a tilt towards cyber and space, which is welcome, but it has come at the expense of cuts to all three conventional services.

At your last appearance before the Committee, prior to the Russian invasion, you boldly stated that tanks are not the answer to the defence of Ukraine and that “the old concepts of...tank battles on the European landmass...are over”. Prime Minister, do you now recognise the value of tanks as part of our land warfare mix? Do plans to reduce our tank numbers now need to be reviewed?

The Prime Minister: Thank you very much, Tobias. It is certainly important for the UK to have tanks. However, what were even more valuable, for the Ukrainian purposes, were anti-tank weapons. If you look at what really changed the course of the first few weeks of the war, it was the Javelins and the NLAWs in particular that were used to destroy the tanks and make Russia’s tank warfare extremely difficult. You will have seen exactly what happened.

Q10 Mr Ellwood: That is understood, and I don’t disagree with that. What I am trying to stress is that the defence budget will actually go down by £1 billion in 2023-24, according to Library figures. You mentioned NLAWs. Our stockpiles are being depleted. We are short of deep fire capabilities, rocket artillery, air defence and hypersonics. That is where the character of conflict is moving.

We need to invest more, including in those tanks, which we are cutting by one third, and, indeed, in our Warrior fighting vehicles. We have no capability to do dismounted infantry because we are actually cutting the entire Warrior fleet. Could I beg the Prime Minister to reconsider the Army numbers? If there is one thing he could take away from here, it would be to look with his new Chancellor at securing the £40 million required to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

reverse the cuts in our Army manpower.

The Prime Minister: Thanks. I just want to stress that we value immensely the armed forces in the sense that we value the numbers of troops. If you include the reserves, there are, in fact, more than 100,000; there are 73,000 in the regular Army, plus 30,000 reserves. I heard all the points that people like General Sanders have made, but the important thing is to have the best possible equipment for those troops. That is what we are doing.

Q11 **Mr Ellwood:** Let's look at that equipment. In the Army, as I just said, we are losing a third of our tanks, we are losing our Warrior fighting vehicles and we are decimating our tracked land warfare capability. In the RAF, we are down from 36 squadrons during the Gulf war, to just six today. We are losing all of our Hercules heavy lift. We only have 48 of the 138 F-35s. We are losing two of the E-7 ISTAR aircraft that are so critical to work with the F-35s. In the Navy, in 1990 during the cold war, we had 13 destroyers and 35 frigates; now we are down to just 18.

We are hollowing out all our armed services at the very time that, as you mentioned, the head of the Army is saying we face a 1937 moment. This is the time to be investing in our armed forces, not depleting our capability.

The Prime Minister: I agree with that; that is why we are spending £24 billion over the next four years. That is the biggest increase since the end of the cold war. I think that money is being wisely spent. You talk about—

Q12 **Mr Ellwood:** It has been spent already. It has gone.

The Prime Minister: Well, it's over the next four years.

Q13 **Mr Ellwood:** It has gone into investing in the replacement of the Vanguard submarines. The money didn't even hit the sides. That was where it was needed—to make sure that programme allowed us to continue our nuclear deterrent.

The Prime Minister: I understand, but we are also committed, as I said earlier on, to a number of massive projects. You mentioned heavy-lift aircraft; actually, if you look at what the UK has, I think we are still by far the biggest possessor of heavy-lift aircraft in Europe.

On ships, we have a very active shipbuilding programme. Tobias, I take your point about tanks humbly and sincerely, and I will take it away and look at the armoured personnel carriers and armoured vehicles. They have been useful to the Ukrainians, particularly the armoured vehicles. But the Committee should be in no doubt that we are investing massively in defence.

Q14 **Mr Ellwood:** I hear what you say, but you are a classicist and your responses to date make me feel like Homer's Cassandra. I say to you, "We must prepare for the storm clouds that are coming over the horizon", and you don't seem to believe me. I say, "We can't afford these troop cuts in our Army numbers", but you don't believe me. I say, "We need to reverse



HOUSE OF COMMONS

these cuts in our land warfare systems, our ships and our planes”, and you still don’t believe me.

There is change afoot. We are at a turning point in our history, and we need to prepare for what is coming over the horizon. Britain must play its part. There is a gap in leadership in Europe, and I want Britain to assume that role. We can only do so if we prepare today and advance our defence posture.

The Prime Minister: I really think you should have been at NATO to listen to what the—

Mr Ellwood: I wasn’t invited, sir.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Take him next time.

The Prime Minister: One day. You should have been at NATO to listen to what the other countries say about the UK contribution and the indispensability of the UK armed forces, our contribution to NATO’s new force model and the role that we play. We are the second biggest spender in NATO, but a massive contributor to all the joint operations. I think Jens Stoltenberg, the Secretary General, would testify to that. When you say that I don’t believe you, that is not true. I do understand the need for more spending on defence. It has to be balanced against other priorities, but it is going on.

Mr Ellwood: Then reverse those troop numbers.

Q15 **Chair:** Can I press one matter related to this? We have given away our training stocks of NLAW, MLRS and other munitions to the Ukrainians. What are we doing to galvanise the supply chain back to a wartime capability that would provide a resilience of stocks? At the moment, we simply cannot replace those stocks.

The Prime Minister: Thank you; but actually if you look at what is happening in Belfast, they are making a lot of NLAWS.

Q16 **Chair:** They are not replacing them as fast as we are giving them away—that is a fact.

The Prime Minister: That is true. They take a while to make, but we are replacing them.

Chair: But this goes to the heart of the Integrated Review, which was very good at analysis and requirement, but there were only two pages on the implementation. What are we going to do to make sure that we implement the defence Integrated Review, so that we actually have the capability ready when we need it? At the moment, we don’t.

The Prime Minister: We are supplying a huge amount of capability. I accept the view that we need to modernise and do more, and more NLAWs are certainly rolling off the production line at Thales—I think it is Thales—in Belfast.

Q17 **Mr Ellwood:** Is it time to review aspects of the Integrated Review?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: I think the Integrated Review has stood the test of time well—

Chair: We are going to move on.

The Prime Minister: I am happy to take it up later.

Q18 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Four years ago now, I was comparing your predecessor to Gloria Gaynor—“She will survive”—at the very moment when a young Lochinvar type was making his resignation statement in the House of Commons. Can you remember who that was?

The Prime Minister: Mr MacNeil, I—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It was yourself, Prime Minister. I was just checking. You were a bit of a trendsetter.

Going by the rumours I am hearing from Conservative MPs, you are beyond Gloria Gaynor and are now more Paul Young, wanting to tear the playhouse down. They are warning that if the Prime Minister is facing assured destruction, he might make it mutual by calling a general election and a cull of Tory MPs—something that would be very welcome on many sides. On a point of clarification regarding a disagreement that some of us have had in the light of powers being taken away from the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act, do you need the permission of the Queen, or do you just need to inform the Queen to hold an election?

The Prime Minister: I really do not think that anybody in this country wants politicians to be engaged in electioneering now or in the near future—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Can you answer the question? Do you need permission?

The Prime Minister—and I think we need to get on with serving our voters and dealing with the issues they care about.

Q19 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** So your nervy Back Benchers are okay.

Interestingly, we have had some difficulty in the International Trade Committee with CRAG and the triggering of the process to bring this about in Parliament or look for an extension of CRAG.

I put it to you that Brexit has done damage of 5% of GDP and these trade agreements you are signing up to are a minor part of that—0.08% of GDP, equivalent to going out and losing £500 and coming back with £8, or £2 in the case of New Zealand, and thinking you have done well. Are the Brexit process and the trade agreement process good for the economy, given what your own figures are saying?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think that they are.

Q20 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** So if you lose £500 and come back with £8, you would tell us all you’re having a good day?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: It was the ability to set our own medicines policy that enabled us to vaccinate—

Q21 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Every country has done that, and what about the death rates?

The Prime Minister:—faster than every other country—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am asking you a specific economic question.

The Prime Minister: Most fair-minded people—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: What about the 5%?

Chair: Order. Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: To your point about the economic benefits, Mr MacNeil, in addition to the freeports, free trade deals, the ability to vary regulation and all the rest of it, I would point out that by being able to vaccinate faster than virtually every other European country, which was of considerable economic benefit—*[Interruption.]*

Chair: Order. Mr MacNeil.

Q22 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Prime Minister, If you cannot see the difference between losing £500 and taking away £8, and note that you are out of pocket, we will have to leave it there and let the public make up their own mind.

Something that is concerning many of my constituents is EGNOS—the European geostationary navigation overlay system. It is a 3D system for aircraft in the air. The UK is the only G20 country without such a facility. It is affecting the training of pilots. Will you get the UK back into EGNOS quickly, or have an equivalent 3D navigation system in place soon? It is required.

The Prime Minister: That is a very interesting suggestion, which I will happily look at. We do have a pioneering low Earth orbit system of satellites called OneWeb, as I am sure you know—

Q23 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** It is of no use to aircraft at the moment.

The Prime Minister:—I don't know if that is of any use.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: No, no.

Chair: Perhaps you will write to us on that.

Q24 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Prime Minister, you are a fan of imperial measurements. Do you think—

The Prime Minister: I think that if people want to have them—

Q25 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** How easy is this system? How many ounces are in a pound?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid I was brought up and educated with—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Angus Brendan MacNeil: So you don't know how many ounces are in a pound—the basics of the imperial system.

The Prime Minister: I think there are 16 ounces in a pound.

Chair: Mr MacNeil, we can't hear what either of you are saying, because you keep interrupting each other.

The Prime Minister: Yes, 16 ounces in a pound—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I won't tax you with pounds then, unless—

The Prime Minister: But I have to make a confession: I was educated all over the place. I can do metric as well.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: So the UK Prime Minister is more adept in the metric system. Excellent.

The Prime Minister: I think of my weight in stone—how about that?

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Okay, thank you very much. Just to put your mind at rest, I have heard mention of Sweden, Finland and Scotland, but I have no questions to ask about Scottish independence, because that is not a matter for you; it is a matter for the people of Scotland. It will be decided in Scotland. I think that is about all we need to discuss at the moment, Prime Minister. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Mr MacNeil. I call Sir Robert Goodwill, Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

Q26 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Thank you, Chair. I would like to bring us back to the topic of food security, both globally and nationally. Globally, it is a matter of whether people eat or starve; nationally, it is having a major impact on the cost of living crisis. I wonder whether we are underestimating the ease with which we can bring supplies of wheat and sunflower oil out of Ukraine, given the change of gauge in the railway lines running into Poland, and the way that loading equipment in Odesa could be damaged by missiles. Isn't there a realistic possibility of getting those supplies out only if there is a ceasefire? As long as the conflict is ongoing, is it really possible that we could get those supplies out?

The Prime Minister: Sir Robert, what is happening is that the monthly consignments of grain out of Odesa are starting to go up. It should be about 5 million tonnes a month, and the most recent figures I saw, for June, showed about 2.75 million tonnes, so it is not nothing. You can get it out not just by sea, as I was saying earlier; there are also land routes. The risk—I think this is what the Ukrainians are worried about—is that if they negotiate a deal with Putin to get him to open up the Black sea, he will demand the lifting of sanctions in an unacceptable way.

Q27 **Sir Robert Goodwill:** Coming closer to home, a couple of weeks ago the Government published their food strategy, which I think was widely welcomed. One aspect of that was having more food from our own resources. We are self-sufficient in liquid milk, but only about 75% of the



food that we could produce here climatically is produced here. Given the global situation, do you think that we should revisit things like rewilding, putting solar farms on arable land and planting trees, and instead concentrate on improving food production here at home?

The Prime Minister: Look, I share that enthusiasm, and the food strategy that we launched a few weeks ago certainly puts our own domestic production at the heart of what we are trying to do. We have 74% self-sufficiency, but there is a massive opportunity. It affects our balance of trade. Personally, I would like to see many more solar panels on roofs than in what could otherwise be productive fields. I think that we sometimes need to think about the fiscal incentives we offer.

Q28 Sir Robert Goodwill: One of the key inputs into agriculture in our country is nitrogen fertiliser. We now have only one plant operating, at Billingham. The plant at Ince in Cheshire has been closed, and I think the owners are looking for buyers. Are the Government aware of what they can do to try to get that plant operational again? Is there any assistance that might be available to possible buyers, because we will once again be reliant on imports of a product that internationally is in very short supply?

The Prime Minister: Thank you for the question, because this is a massive issue for farmers. We are not sufficiently self-reliant in fertiliser. We had the fertiliser roundtable recently, where we tried to see what we can do to help, trying to get alternatives, but clearly that does not always work and is not as effective. We need to make much more fertiliser domestically. I have to say that one of the reasons why the global south is suffering so much at the moment is also the shortage of fertiliser. There are far too few African fertiliser plants. We should be doing what we can to help build fertiliser resilience around the world. They are really feeling that right now.

Q29 Sir Robert Goodwill: Do you know whether there have been any conversations with prospective buyers of the plant in Cheshire?

The Prime Minister: I can't tell you about prospective buyers of that plant, but we are certainly concerned that there is a single plant left, as you say, and that puts a lot of pressure on that plant.

Sir Robert Goodwill: Thank you very much.

Chair: Mr Ellwood, you wanted to catch my eye briefly for a one-liner.

Q30 Mr Ellwood: Thank you, Chair. On the Ukraine grain, we recognise the importance of getting grain out of Ukraine. It is ground zero when it comes to feeding not just Europe but also Africa. I think there is an opportunity for British leadership to take this to the UN General Assembly—it is something that I raised with you before, Sir—to see whether we can get those two-thirds votes to turn the port into a humanitarian safe haven. That would then facilitate the starting point of getting that grain out in those ships. It's the ships that we need to get out; that is the scale of exports that are required if we are to affect the cost of living crisis here—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: That was a long one-liner. Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you. I don't disagree at all. The question is, "Could you get the Russians to do it?" and sadly, as you know, Tobias, even in the UN General Assembly, although we got a great vote for the initial condemnation of the invasion, Russia and China are very influential.

Chair: Dame Diana Johnson for Home Affairs.

Q31 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Thank you. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. A few weeks ago, I met a group of Ukrainian MPs who had travelled to the UK via the Republic of Ireland. Like every other country, the Republic of Ireland, for Europe, doesn't require a visa. They then travelled up through the common travel area. They didn't have anything checked. They were raising with me whether it was a sensible decision to allow such a bureaucratic visa system for Ukrainians fleeing Ukraine—if it was a sensible use of resources. As we know, it has compromised the capacity of the Home Office. What do you say to that?

The Prime Minister: I hear you loud and clear, Diana. I think that the argument that has been put me is—well, two things. First of all, we have got to be careful that we are able to screen people properly and—

Dame Diana Johnson: Yes, but these people are coming up through the common travel area; there's no screening.

The Prime Minister: I accept that, and I accept the limitations of screening, but on the other hand, you've got to look at what we have done so far: 135,000 visas have been issued, and I think that the record is getting better and better. The UK is hosting a lot of Ukrainians, and I think we should be very proud of that.

Q32 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay. Perhaps I will come on to the problems with the Home Office and, as I have just alluded to, the capacity issues of the Home Office when they designed a whole new visa system. Why is it that British people are waiting so long to get their passports when we all knew there was going to be a surge in passport applications after covid, with people wanting to travel, have family holidays, get married abroad, and all of those things? Why is it that we've ended up with people waiting so long and having to spend so much time and money to get a passport?

The Prime Minister: It is very frustrating, and I share everybody's frustration. I think the answer is that the demand has been very big because people are very keen to go on holiday—

Q33 **Dame Diana Johnson:** But this isn't rocket science; you knew this.

The Prime Minister—and we've rushed people into the Passport Office—

Q34 **Dame Diana Johnson:** But why are we having to do that? We knew this was happening.

The Prime Minister—and the numbers are starting to improve. I think, from memory, 91% get their passport within four to six weeks.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q35 Dame Diana Johnson: Well, the standard that the Home Office is supposed to operate on is three weeks. It is now 10 weeks. When will it go back down to three weeks?

The Prime Minister: Well, I don't know when it goes back down to three weeks, but I think that what I have in my head is that 91% get their passport within four to six weeks. I would urge everybody who is thinking of going away four to six weeks from now and hasn't got a passport to get a passport.

Q36 Dame Diana Johnson: Okay, so the bread-and-butter issues just aren't being looked at by the Home Office and dealt with in a very good way. Why is it that your Government now have a backlog of 89,000 asylum claims that they have not decided? Why has that happened?

The Prime Minister: Well, the UK has historically had very large numbers of asylum claims—

Dame Diana Johnson: They're stable.

The Prime Minister—and I seem to remember that there were many, many thousands of asylum claims left un—

Dame Diana Johnson: It is incorrect, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister—undecided when the last Labour Government left office.

Q37 Dame Diana Johnson: No, Prime Minister. The asylum claims in this country have remained fairly steady in the last few years, so your Home Office has built up a backlog of nearly 90,000 claims they've not decided. Can I just ask you, then, why is your Government so bad at actually sending back failed asylum seekers? In 2010, we sent back 10,663; last year, we sent back 806 failed asylum seekers. Why?

The Prime Minister: Diana, I don't think that it's the fault of the officials; I think they do their level best. I don't think it's that they're so bad; I think it's that our brilliant legal profession is so good at finding reasons why they should not be returned.

Q38 Dame Diana Johnson: That's your answer? It is not to do with the fact that you have not been able to enter into agreements with other countries and you have not got a replacement for the Dublin agreement?

The Prime Minister: My—

Dame Diana Johnson: No? Okay.

The Prime Minister: If you look at what happened with the Dublin agreement, that broke down across the board. Returns agreements have been extremely hard to strike.

Q39 Dame Diana Johnson: Well, let's put it this way. You said about 20 people came across in small boats across the channel last year—20—and there were 28,000 who came. On the civil service cuts that you talk about—the 20%, 30% or 40% cuts—will that help the Home Office get to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

grips with some of these problems, or will it make the situation worse?

The Prime Minister: I think that certainly what you need when you talk about the asylum seekers crossing the channel illegally and in very frail vessels—

Dame Diana Johnson: No, your cuts.

The Prime Minister: The way to fix that is not just by having more civil servants, but to have a proper deterrent for the people traffickers—

Q40 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I don't think we are talking about having more, Prime Minister. We are talking about cuts.

The Prime Minister—and to reduce the numbers of people who are being made to risk their lives.

Q41 **Dame Diana Johnson:** My final question. Could you confirm—I would appreciate a yes or a no—that you met former KGB officer Alexander Lebedev without officials when you were Foreign Secretary on 28 April 2018?

The Prime Minister: I would have to check.

Q42 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Are you having a lapse of memory again?

The Prime Minister: No. You are asking me a very specific question about a very specific date. I would have to get back to you. I certainly have met the gentleman in question—

Q43 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Without officials?

The Prime Minister: He was the proprietor of the *London Evening Standard* when I was Mayor of London. I am certainly not going to deny having met Alexander Lebedev. I certainly have. As far as I remember, he used to own the *London Evening Standard*.

Q44 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, but with officials when you were Foreign Secretary. Did you meet him with officials or without?

The Prime Minister: Look, I have certainly met him without officials. As I say, he is a proprietor of a newspaper.

Q45 **Chair:** Perhaps you could write to us with a specific answer to that very specific question.

The Prime Minister: Very happy to.

Q46 **Dame Meg Hillier:** Can I just follow that up, Prime Minister? You said you met him without officials. Presumably that was when you were Mayor of London. When you were Foreign Secretary, did you meet Alexander Lebedev without officials?

The Prime Minister: I think I probably did, but—

Q47 **Dame Meg Hillier:** Probably did?

The Prime Minister: As I say, I would need to check.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q48 **Dame Meg Hillier:** You are used to regularly meeting him? “Probably” because you meet him often or “probably” because you can’t remember?

The Prime Minister: I have met him on a very few occasions—

Q49 **Dame Meg Hillier:** As Foreign Secretary?

The Prime Minister: On the occasion you mention, if that was when I was Foreign Secretary, then yes.

Q50 **Dame Meg Hillier:** Without officials?

The Prime Minister: Yes. That makes sense, yes.

Q51 **Dame Meg Hillier:** Did you report to your officials that you had met him?

The Prime Minister: I think I did mention it, yes.

Q52 **Chair:** And where did you meet him?

The Prime Minister: I met him in Italy, as it happens, but I really, you know—

Chair: Perhaps you will write to us.

Dame Meg Hillier: Was it a personal engagement?

Chair: We will move on. I call Caroline Nokes from the Women and Equalities Committee.

Q53 **Caroline Nokes:** You have referred to the Homes for Ukraine and Ukrainian family schemes. Can you give us any indication of what proportion of the visas issued have been to women?

The Prime Minister: I can’t, Caroline. I am sorry; I will have to write to you.

Q54 **Caroline Nokes:** We are not collecting official statistics on that, but the indicative ones suggest that 82% are women, many of whom have children with them. What safeguarding concerns do you have about Ukrainian women being here in the UK?

The Prime Minister: People initially complained that the scheme was slow, but we wanted to make sure that people, when they arrived, were in a safe environment. As far as I know, work is done to ensure that they are with families or with people who will look after them properly.

Q55 **Caroline Nokes:** Do you feel comfortable that the accommodation is checked in many instances after people have arrived?

The Prime Minister: To the best of my knowledge, everybody that I have met or who has been involved in the scheme says it is working very well.

Q56 **Caroline Nokes:** So you do feel comfortable that the accommodation is checked after people have arrived?

The Prime Minister: I can’t tell you, Caroline, exactly what checks are done on the accommodation after people have arrived, but I know that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

safeguarding is done to make sure that they have a good experience while they are here.

Q57 **Caroline Nokes:** Do we know how many are no longer with their original sponsors?

The Prime Minister: I can't give you that. I don't know.

Q58 **Caroline Nokes:** There are certainly indications that there could be as many as 660 Ukrainian households already who are owed a duty under the homelessness prevention policy. Do you have any concerns about where they are going to end up?

The Prime Minister: I don't know that it is right that there are that many Ukrainians who are homeless in the UK. I think that where there are arrivals who have had a problem with their sponsor or household, councils have a duty to provide a roof for them, and that is supported by a grant of £10,500 per person. We are not currently aware of any Ukrainian sleeping rough, for instance.

Q59 **Caroline Nokes:** The statistics show that there are 660 Ukrainian households owed a prevention or relief duty for homelessness. You said earlier today to, I think, Clive Betts that people would be able to switch between the Ukrainian family scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme. When do you think that will be possible?

The Prime Minister: We are trying to speed things up. I can't tell you when we will be able to allow people to move fluidly from one scheme to the next, but clearly there is a logic to that.

Q60 **Caroline Nokes:** If people should be able to switch between the family scheme and the Homes for Ukraine scheme, should they also be able to switch sponsor within the Homes for Ukraine scheme and have the £350 a month funding follow them?

The Prime Minister: Interesting idea; I will have a look at it. I am not going to extemporise a solution.

Q61 **Caroline Nokes:** If a lone woman has fled a sponsor's home because of safeguarding concerns, do you think the funding should follow her?

The Prime Minister: I can see the logic of that, yes. I will certainly have a look at what is happening. I am sure that particular issue is something that Home Office staff have thought about.

Q62 **Caroline Nokes:** Perhaps Minister Harrington and Minister Gove, if they are still with us, could look at that. Can I ask you specifically: when it comes to safeguarding concerns, should safeguarding always be straightforward?

The Prime Minister: Well, of course.

Q63 **Caroline Nokes:** Thank you for that.

Finally, we know that people traffickers are operating on the borders of Ukraine, targeting particularly women and young girls. Do you have any



HOUSE OF COMMONS

concerns that Ukrainian women are going to turn up on the beaches of Dover trafficked here in small boats? If that happens, what should we do to help them?

The Prime Minister: To the best of my knowledge, that is not happening at the moment. We have several safe and legal routes for Ukrainians right now.

Q64 **Caroline Nokes:** Earlier this week, a group of female Ukrainian MPs were at the OSCE meeting specifically expressing concerns about people trafficking. What are you doing with other European Governments to make sure that that does not happen?

The Prime Minister: The Home Office does a huge amount to tackle people trafficking upstream, working with other European Governments. The National Crime Agency is heavily involved in that.

Q65 **Caroline Nokes:** Are they specifically looking at the threat to Ukrainian women?

The Prime Minister: I know that when the exodus began, one of the things we were particularly doing was making sure that we had staff in Poland who were looking after the interests of people who were leaving and might want to come to this country.

Q66 **Caroline Nokes:** Are those staff trained to deal with people trafficking?

The Prime Minister: I believe so, but I would have to get back to you on that.

Chair: Thank you. Stephen Crabb.

Q67 **Stephen Crabb:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. We will move on to cost of living issues now. With the appointment of a new Chancellor last night, is the Government's position still that they are committed to a full social security uprating next April based on September's CPI figures? That is a full uprating of benefits and pensions next April.

The Prime Minister: I am aware of no change in our policy.

Q68 **Stephen Crabb:** Has the new Chancellor indicated any desire or intention to look at or reopen any of the decisions we have made in response to the cost of living crisis or, indeed, are there any areas you would want him to reopen?

The Prime Minister: I think what the new Chancellor is going to want to do is continue with the package of support that we have set out. Don't forget that there is £1,200 for the 8 million most vulnerable households, going into people's bank accounts this month; £400 to help out everybody with the costs of energy; and cuts to council tax. I know that the new Chancellor is certainly committed to all that.

Q69 **Stephen Crabb:** So as far as you are concerned, Prime Minister, the basic template for our response to the cost of living crisis and, indeed, for our wider tax-and-spend strategy, remains locked for now under the new



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chancellor.

The Prime Minister: There you are pushing a bit too hard. I think that that is not quite the conclusion that I want you to draw. I certainly think that the new Chancellor will want to think about what we can do to do even more to help people, whether on the fiscal front or whatever.

Q70 **Stephen Crabb:** The Minister for Brexit Opportunities recently appeared to be quite dismissive of OBR forecasts, and I think even appeared to question the usefulness of the OBR altogether. Do you, Prime Minister, have confidence in OBR forecasts?

The Prime Minister: I think that the OBR forecasts are very useful. I don't think that they should necessarily—my experience is that they don't always turn out to be correct, but that does not mean that they are without value.

Q71 **Chair:** When have they turned out to be correct?

The Prime Minister: Sir Bernard asks, I think, a rhetorical question.

Q72 **Stephen Crabb:** In March, Prime Minister, the OBR predicted that the UK will see the fastest drop in living standards since the 1950s. Is that an OBR forecast that you accept?

The Prime Minister: We have got to be realistic that there is going to be a lot of economic pain; we have got to be frank with people about that. That is certainly the case. What we are doing is trying to help the lowest-income households as much as possible. Actually, they may get fully compensated—or virtually fully—but there will certainly be a lot of pressure for a while. That pressure will then abate. We will get inflation under control. That is the big problem right now, but I am very confident that it will have abated by next year.

Q73 **Stephen Crabb:** Is the latest economic advice that you are receiving, Prime Minister, that the OBR forecast about the drop in living standards is indeed correct, or are you receiving any evidence to point to a softer landing, or to things getting even worse next winter?

The Prime Minister: No, I want to repeat things. An inflation spike like this takes a long time to work through; we just have to be realistic about that. There will be pressure on people's incomes and on people's budgets. We really cannot ignore that. We will try to help people with massive, or very substantial, contributions to support them—I have mentioned some of the sums that make up the £37 billion of support—but we also have to fix the underlying causes of inflation.

Q74 **Stephen Crabb:** Prime Minister, you said a few moments ago—you are absolutely correct—that it will be very painful. If the OBR forecast about living standards is anything like correct, it will be absolutely brutal for many families out there in the country in the months ahead.

The Prime Minister: I didn't say that, Stephen—

Q75 **Stephen Crabb:** That is my language; your language was "very painful".



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Forgive me for asking this, Prime Minister, but do you accept that at a time of such economic crisis for the country, and for many families up and down the country, what the country needs is a Government with the very best team and the very best focus—absolutely squarely focused on tackling these issues? When you see people like John Glen leaving Government, or people like Kemi Badenoch or Neil O’Brien, one of the intellectual architects of levelling up, do you not feel that the very ability—the capacity—of this Government to address these enormous overhanging issues is deteriorating as we speak?

The Prime Minister: When I came into Parliament, I think there were about 140 Conservative MPs—I cannot remember exactly what the number was—and there are now 365 or so, 360 or thereabouts. There is a wealth of talent, Stephen—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: You’ve had more resignations than—

Chair: Order.

The Prime Minister: We should be confident in our ability. And as for your point about the Government focusing, the Government are certainly focusing on the issues that matter. Today, we are cutting taxes for everybody—by £330 for 30 million people, just this day. I have talked about the £1,200. And we have just brought half a million people off welfare into work.

Q76 **Stephen Crabb:** Very quickly, Prime Minister, you are being very kind about us on the Back Benches, but actually I think you will find it extremely hard to appoint people of the same calibre as the kind of Ministers I have mentioned to you. I think you will find it extremely difficult.

Chair: You don’t need to reply to that point, Prime Minister; I think the point has been made. You are catching my eye, Mr MacNeil. You were a little bit under time.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Thank you. Prime Minister, just following on from that, you have had more resignations than any Prime Minister since 1932. Michael Gove has told you to go. The charade’s up—the game’s up. Really. Will you be Prime Minister tomorrow?

The Prime Minister: Of course, Mr MacNeil. But—

Q77 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** Next week?

The Prime Minister: Rather than giving any running commentary on my own career—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: It is—

Chair: Mr MacNeil.

The Prime Minister: I am going to talk about what the Government are doing.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Okay.

The Prime Minister: That is what I was telling Stephen.

Q78 **Angus Brendan MacNeil:** You didn't answer the question.

The Prime Minister: And we're doing a lot. More and more.

Chair: Huw Merriman—transport.

Q79 **Huw Merriman:** In the six minutes I have, Prime Minister, I want to talk to you about transport policy delivery—if you're focused. I want to talk about rail, air and also road. Starting with rail, do you have all of the policy, and legal interventions and levers, that you need to end this rail strike?

The Prime Minister: Thanks very much, Huw. I call on the union barons and the railway companies to sort this out. I think that they should be able to do it. And I think that, yes, we probably do need a few more tools.

Q80 **Huw Merriman:** Specifically, what would they be?

The Prime Minister: I think that you could have minimum service levels; you could have ballot thresholds. And as you know, we are bringing in—I think we have already brought in—the provision for agency workers where that is necessary.

Now, that is not going to fix problems like train drivers; you are not going to get agency workers to drive a train. But the argument that I would make is that you need to modernise.

Q81 **Huw Merriman:** Let me again just focus on the levers, because I think that in the Conservative manifesto there was a line that said, "Only the Conservatives could get Brexit done", a few more things, "and stop passengers being held hostage by the unions." And that was with the introduction of that policy of minimum service levels. Yet that hasn't been introduced.

The Prime Minister: It has not, but—

Q82 **Huw Merriman:** And people are being held hostage, which might be your view. Why did you not bring, with an 80-seat majority, that legislation through before the strikes started?

The Prime Minister: That is a very good question. And—

Q83 **Huw Merriman:** And the answer is?

The Prime Minister: And the answer is: we should have done it. The trouble was that we had a lot of covid stuff to deal with and I'm afraid it got pushed to the right, and I regret—

Q84 **Huw Merriman:** I thought you might say that, although there have been other things we have been able to do, notwithstanding covid. Okay, let me move on to airports. There has been massive disruption to the airports—people having their holidays cancelled at the last minute. Why wasn't



HOUSE OF COMMONS

more done to stop airlines from putting more flights in place than they had the bandwidth of staff to deal with?

The Prime Minister: Well, the airlines should not be abusing passengers in the way that they have been, and I think there should be greater protections. But I think the—

Q85 **Huw Merriman:** But again, this is all, “There should be”. My question is: why hasn’t there been?

The Prime Minister: Because basically, we were trying to get any airlines flying at all. I mean, Diana has asked a very good question about passports, where we’re putting huge numbers of people to try and speed up the delivery of passports. We had a situation in which no airlines were moving at all. And we had to put £8 billion—as you will remember, Huw—into supporting the airline industry.

Q86 **Huw Merriman:** Indeed. But Gatwick, for example, has controlled the number of flights that will be able to fly out during July and August, because they can see the airlines are trying to fly at 2018 levels. They could see the number of staff coming on, so they have taken action. Other airports haven’t necessarily. The regulator—the Civil Aviation Authority—doesn’t have the power, up front, to implement these types of policies. Shouldn’t it have that power?

The Prime Minister: I am willing to be persuaded that it should.

Q87 **Huw Merriman:** Because when we put a report on that basis, the recommendation was rejected by Government on the basis that there wouldn’t be a proposal to give the regulator up-front powers to take action, including to help with compensation. Perhaps we can push him a bit more on that, if you are behind it—

The Prime Minister: Huw, I am going to have to look into what more powers we might need to take to get the airlines to behave responsibly towards their passengers. But I think the experience of the public is pretty wretched at the moment for all sorts of reasons, and they need to do much, much better.

Q88 **Huw Merriman:** Turning to another area of policy that perhaps needs to change, at the moment 4% of the Exchequer’s revenues come from motoring taxes. Those will plummet to zero when we all drive electric vehicles. Are you serious about getting a new form of road pricing policy in place to fill that hole? If not, how will it be filled?

The Prime Minister: Road pricing is something that we will eventually have to consider. I’m not attracted to it. I seem to remember that I successfully campaigned to remove the western extension of the congestion charge in London.

Q89 **Huw Merriman:** I am not talking about road charging in that way; I am talking about—as we do at the moment—charging people per mile they drive, because that is what fuel duty does. You will have to replace that.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: I see what you mean—for electric vehicles as well, so that you charge a mileage.

Q90 **Huw Merriman:** Yes, something along those lines.

The Prime Minister: It is certainly the case that we will need a substitute for fuel duty.

Huw Merriman: This comes back to my point about policy delivery, because—

Chair: I am astonished. This is imminent. We are introducing electric cars.

Q91 **Huw Merriman:** May I finish, Sir Bernard? For three months, Prime Minister, No. 10 has had a recommendation for a working body just to look at this, because something has to fill the 4%. The Treasury signed off on it, and for three months it has been sat in No. 10. One week, I am told somebody has signed it off; the next week, someone else has looked at it and stopped it, and it is stuck. My question is: the inertia inside No. 10—perhaps because of the events that we will go on to talk about—

The Prime Minister: Nonsense.

Q92 **Huw Merriman:** You say it's nonsense, but it is a nonsense that we have been waiting three months just for someone to sign off on something that fills 4% of the Exchequer—that is the nonsense. Do you not agree that something should be done? If you can't do it, do you think that perhaps someone else could come in and run it properly?

The Prime Minister: This No. 10 was actually the first Government in Europe to set a timetable for moving away from internal combustion engine cars by 2030.

Q93 **Huw Merriman:** I know. That is why you should follow through on the consequences of it.

The Prime Minister: We have been moving at blistering speed. We are looking at all fiscal proposals to replace fuel duty, and I am happy to come back.

Q94 **Huw Merriman:** You're not. You are actually currently sitting on all proposals.

The Prime Minister: I cannot believe that the Treasury is showing the slightest hesitation or reluctance to find a new way of taxing motorists.

Q95 **Huw Merriman:** That is my point. The Treasury signed off on it. No. 10 then insisted on looking at it and has sat on it for three months. I think Andrew Griffith is currently the one who has now said, "No, I don't like this." We are therefore stuck, having thought we had cleared all the hurdles.

The Prime Minister: I will take it up with Andrew.

Q96 **Chair:** I was shadow Transport Secretary in 2000, and road charging was seen as the future then. Successive Governments have dodged it, but why



HOUSE OF COMMONS

is your Government dodging it when you are already abandoning the revenue stream from hydrocarbons?

The Prime Minister: Sir Bernard, why do you think we necessarily are? We have got to find a way of filling the gap left by fuel duty.

Q97 **Chair:** You have actually got a target for eliminating fossil-fuel cars, but you have not got any plan in place to replace the revenue.

The Prime Minister: I think it highly unlikely that the Treasury will let any opportunity go to substitute revenue from motoring. What we want to do is, for the purposes of the environment, to encourage the take-up of low-carbon vehicles, and that is why the fiscal strategy is framed as it currently is. That is what we are doing for the time being.

Chair: My apologies to Darren Jones, of the BEIS Committee. I should have brought you in earlier.

Q98 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, how is your week going?

The Prime Minister: Terrific, like many others.

Q99 **Darren Jones:** Did Michael Gove come and tell you to resign today?

The Prime Minister: I think I said earlier that I am here to talk about what the Government is doing. I am not going to give a running commentary on political events.

Q100 **Darren Jones:** Okay. Let's talk about what the Government is doing. You have just said today that the Government is giving the biggest tax cut in a decade, but it is a tax cut to your own tax rise, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: No, what it does is it gives 30 million people—by lifting the threshold, it gives them, on average, a tax cut of £330.

Q101 **Darren Jones:** Against the tax rise that you previously announced. In fact, freezing tax allowances for average income tax payers means that they are going to pay £46.8 billion more over the next four years. Tax is going up, not down, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: It is certainly true that what we have had to do is make sure we deal with the fiscal impacts of covid. The Committee will remember that we had a colossal fall in output. We had the biggest pandemic for 100 years, and we had to look after people and businesses to the tune of £408 billion. That money doesn't grow on trees. In order to protect our schools and hospitals, we of course have had to—

Darren Jones: Increase the tax levels.

The Prime Minister: We have had the health and care levy. What we are doing now is helping people with, on average, a £330 tax cut.

Q102 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, I asked about the tax cut that was announced today, but I will move on. Let's look at the economy before the pandemic. You mentioned the pandemic—an event that was very difficult for the Government. Before the pandemic—between 2010, when the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Conservative party came into office, and the pandemic—national debt increased by £640 billion. It is now at 100% of national wealth, and you keep announcing tax cuts and spending plans at the same time. Are you just going to keep putting more and more debt on to the nation's credit card?

The Prime Minister: Sorry, you were just complaining about taxes going up.

Darren Jones: I am asking about what you are doing in government, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: You need to get your story straight.

Darren Jones: My facts are from the Treasury, Prime Minister. Debt is up.

The Prime Minister: We have to be sensible and we have to be responsible. We are making sure we manage the public finances in a prudent way, and I think that there will be scope for further tax cuts in due time.

Q103 **Darren Jones:** Maybe imminently. Prime Minister, can I move on to economic growth? You said yesterday that you welcomed your new Chancellor, Nadhim Zahawi, because he would grow the economy, presumably in a way that Rishi Sunak couldn't.

The Prime Minister: I don't think I said that. Anyway, go on.

Q104 **Darren Jones:** We are more likely to end up in a recession this winter, aren't we?

The Prime Minister: As I was saying to Stephen, the economy and people are going to be under a lot of pressure, but I think we will get through it.

Q105 **Darren Jones:** Do you think there will be a recession in the winter?

The Prime Minister: I think there will be a lot of pressure caused by the price spike. We are going to do everything we can to shield people and deal with the underlying causes of inflation, whether that is through the energy markets, the labour markets or whatever. There is a lot that we can do, and I think we will emerge stronger on the other side.

Q106 **Darren Jones:** You and your supporters have often said that you have got all the big calls right as Prime Minister, but actually on tax, debt, growth and pay, things have been getting worse, not better. I understand that 14 million people voted for you in 2019; you have let them down, haven't you?

The Prime Minister: No, I think that what they can see is a Government that gets on relentlessly with a programme of uniting and levelling up. We have the biggest investment in infrastructure for a century—£650 billion going in on all the things that Huw was talking about: roads, rail, transport of all kinds and housing. It is a colossally ambitious programme that we



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are still doing. At the same time, because, as you put it, Darren, we got the big calls right—

Darren Jones: I didn't agree with that, by the way.

The Prime Minister: Well, I'm going to agree with it even if you don't. We got the big calls right on covid. We came out of lockdown faster, and we got it right with the vaccine. That has put us in a position to look after people, and that is what we are doing.

Q107 **Darren Jones:** Thank you. I'm going to move on to my next question. I would like to read something out to you: "When a regime has been in power too long, when it has fatally exhausted the patience of the people, and when oblivion finally beckons—I am afraid that across the world you can rely on the leaders of that regime to act solely in the interests of self-preservation, and not in the interests of the electorate." Who authored that quote?

The Prime Minister: You are trying me. Was it Cicero? Was it Aristotle? Let me think—was it Plato? Was it Montesquieu?

Q108 **Darren Jones:** Maybe Nero. Just to break it to you, it was you, Prime Minister. Perhaps it was foresight. I will finish, because I am about to run out of time. I made a joke there, but in all sincerity—I know this must be difficult for you personally—this isn't funny. This is not a game. People are struggling across the country. It is not brave for you to carry on doing this. I think, in my view, you are hurting the country, Prime Minister. On a very human level, surely you must know that it is in the country's interests for you to leave now.

The Prime Minister: I think the country is going through tough times. You are making a point about duty, right? I look at the issues this country faces, I look at the pressures that people are under and the need for Government to focus on their priorities—which is what we are doing—and I look at the biggest war in Europe for 80 years, and I cannot for the life of me see how it is responsible just to walk away from that, as I said earlier on in PMQs, particularly not when you have a mandate of the kind we won two or three years ago.

Q109 **Chair:** But shouldn't you, as Prime Minister, actually spell out that the pressure the economy is under is very serious, not just because of the invasion, but because we have decided to make the necessary sacrifices in order to resist Putin? We are in an economic war with Russia now—with Putin. He is coining it on the energy sales; our economies are suffering as a direct consequence of the sanctions. Shouldn't we be spelling out that it is going to be tough, but these sacrifices are necessary in order to secure our continent?

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Sir Bernard. That is exactly the point that I have been making. I think I made it on Monday in the statement on the summits. It is the point that resonates with colleagues around the table in NATO, the G7 and other places. The cost of not standing up to Putin is that you legitimise or encourage further acts of aggression in other



HOUSE OF COMMONS

parts of the former Soviet Union, destabilising the whole continent—if not the world—and causing further economic distress and uncertainty going on for years and years. That is why I made the point about the decades of peace and stability that followed the second world war, where we finally learnt to stand up to dictators and not to accept that borders could be changed by force. That decision led to decades of the rule of international law, the expansion of global trade, peace and stability. We need to inaugurate that era again.

Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister.

Q110 Robert Halfon: I am starting off with fuel as it segues in. I will move from Ukraine to a fish and chip shop in Harlow, Prime Minister, if I may. They are down 150 customers a month, their takings are down £5,000 a month, their energy bills have gone up from £1,800 to £3,000 a month, and now the owner has got to pay over £2 a litre to fill up his vehicles. Can you understand what is fuelling the haulier protests? While I do not agree with direct action, I do have sympathy with what they are asking for. Is it not the case that the 5p fuel duty cut, while welcome, is swallowed up, that actually this is unsustainable, and that you need to slash either fuel duty or VAT? You also need to look to introduce a “PumpWatch” monitor, because since 14 June the wholesale price of diesel fell by 7.2p per litre, but filling-up costs increased by 8.1p. For petrol, the wholesale price dropped by 14.9p, but the pump price rocketed by 17.4p. Every way you look at it, motorists are being fleeced by the Government and fleeced by the oil companies. What are you going to do? If you do not do something, there is going to be a Canada-style haulier protest around the Palace of Westminster. There is no doubt that this is going to spread.

The Prime Minister: Robert, thank you. You have been campaigning on this for years and years. I listen to you very attentively. As you say, we have cut fuel duty by 5p a litre. That is only about £100 a year—I appreciate that’s not much for people, and it is being swallowed up by what is happening on the forecourts. Grant, I believe, is doing a “PumpWatch” scheme to ensure the cuts that we are putting in do get passed on. Clearly, the pressure is there. I hear you loud and clear.

Angus Brendan MacNeil *rose—*

The Prime Minister: Before Angus leaves, one of the benefits of Brexit is that you can cut VAT on fuel, which I should have pointed out.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: 5% off GDP.

Q111 Robert Halfon: Do you recognise that you need to slash it? You need to literally cut it by a significant amount, because this is unsustainable. It is hurting our frontline services and our bus services—it is hitting transportation. It is hurting our businesses, as well.

The Prime Minister: I hear you loud and clear. We have a new Chancellor; we will see where we get to on that. But I hear you loud and clear.



Q112 **Robert Halfon:** Turning to education, I was distressed about the closure of schools. I thought it was a huge mistake that they were closed for most pupils.

The Prime Minister: During covid?

Robert Halfon: During covid. I thought it was a huge mistake. That was acknowledged by the previous Education Secretary—now the Chancellor. We now know that there are 124,000 so-called ghost children who have not yet returned to school. Persistent absences have gone up from 1.6 million to 1.7 million. What are the Government doing to get these kids back into school? Will you look at rolling out a programme of 2,000 school attendance mentors—not necessarily new employees, but existing employees of schools, local authorities and charities—to work with the families to get these children back into school? You could use existing money from the supporting families fund—the £80 million from that fund—in order to do so.

The Prime Minister: First of all, I agree with your overall premise that it was awful that schools had to close. We didn't want to do it. We tried to keep it for as short a period as possible. We are trying to get kids back into school as much as we can. We are spending about £5 billion on school catch-up, but one of the things I think is important and which I believe in very strongly is trying to give kids the opportunity of tuition—one on one, one on two or one on three—which they might not otherwise have.

Q113 **Robert Halfon:** But those are the children in school. I am talking about the ones who are not in school. There are 1.7 million persistent absences. Some 124,000 children have disappeared off the schools rolls. They are the so-called ghost children.

The Prime Minister: Robert, we will do everything we can to get these children back into school.

Q114 **Chair:** What are you doing?

The Prime Minister: What we are doing is putting £5 billion into education recovery. There is a lot for tutoring, but also direct targeting for those most in need. There is a £2 billion fund, which should help schools to get those ghost children back. This is something that, I am afraid, will require a joined-up effort. It requires councils; it requires a lot of bodies to come together to get those children back into school.

Robert Halfon: The Children's Commissioner has said that she wants all the kids back by September. I just think the priority for the Education Department should be to get these children back into school. It is just wrong that so many children are missing school and have not yet returned. They face safeguarding pressures and lifetime damage to their mental health, and they are trying to join county lines gangs. I urge you to look at the supporting families fund, as I mentioned—that £80 million.

Finally, I brought in a ten-minute rule Bill—the national school infrastructure Bill—which would treat schools the same as other national infrastructure to stop schools closing again. If, God forbid, there was



HOUSE OF COMMONS

another wave of covid and the Government decided to close schools, the Children's Commissioner would have a veto and Parliament would make an individual decision on school closures every six weeks.

Chair: What's the question?

Q115 **Robert Halfon:** Do you support that concept of making schools part of the national infrastructure?

The Prime Minister: Robert, I would be very happy to look at it. I understand where you are coming from. It is clear from the data I am seeing that the damage to kids' education, particularly done by the lockdown, continues. It is disappointing to see the literacy and numeracy stats. We need to do better. There is no question in my mind but that that has been partly caused by the closures.

Chair: We are going to move on to integrity in politics. We are bound to overrun somewhat, because we have to do this subject justice. I hope, Prime Minister, you will be able to stay until we have finished.

Q116 **Sir Robert Neill:** How important is the truth to you, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: Very important, Bob.

Q117 **Sir Robert Neill:** And accuracy of language and statement?

The Prime Minister: Also very important.

Q118 **Sir Robert Neill:** And do you expect those standards from those who work for you in Downing Street, as either spokespeople or as those who brief Ministers to speak on behalf of the Government?

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q119 **Sir Robert Neill:** Can you help me on this, then? The story concerning the hon. Member for Tamworth broke late evening on 29 June or early morning of the 30th. In the course of subsequent days, a number of statements were made by spokesmen on your behalf, in which it was said, in terms, that you had not been aware of any specific allegations. That is correct, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and that was not right. Just so the Committee understands what I was doing, on the Friday, when the allegations were put to me in detail—and the fact that a complaint had been made—I was mainly engaged in talking to a witness and removing the Whip from the Member in question. That is what I did—

Sir Robert Neill: Perhaps we can get to that, Prime Minister—

The Prime Minister: I then left the building. What we should have done was go over all the interactions between Government, me and the Member for Tamworth, and get a full timeline. I am afraid we didn't.

Q120 **Sir Robert Neill:** That is in retrospect?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: I should have done that. But as a result, some things were said that were not right. As soon as I was aware of the discrepancy, we took steps to clear it up.

Q121 **Sir Robert Neill:** Okay. Well, what we do know is that on 5 July, Lord McDonald of Salford, who was the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign Office, said in his letter to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards that the line that was put out was “not accurate”, which you now accept, and that, “Mr Johnson was briefed in person about the initiation and outcome of the investigation. There was a ‘formal complaint’.” I am sure you have seen Lord McDonald’s letter.

The Prime Minister: Yes.

Q122 **Sir Robert Neill:** Do you accept the content in Lord McDonald’s letter?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is entirely correct. If I can just explain—

Q123 **Sir Robert Neill:** Do you accept what Lord McDonald says is accurate?

The Prime Minister: I wouldn’t want to say that I accept absolutely everything he says—I do not have it before me—but what I can certainly tell you is that there was a complaint—

Sir Robert Neill: Yes, and you were told about it.

The Prime Minister: Against the Member for Tamworth in 2019.

Sir Robert Neill: Yes, in late 2019, if that helps.

The Prime Minister: And that complaint was upheld, and the matter was resolved within the Foreign Office. It was not deemed to approach anything like the level of criminality, or the ministerial code, but I was briefed on it on two occasions by the propriety and ethics people—first that it was happening, and then that it had been concluded. On both occasions, I had an extremely short all-account. On Friday, there was no record of that in No. 10—there was no written record of that.

Q124 **Sir Robert Neill:** It didn’t stick in your mind, then? Forgive me, but it is not common for a serving Minister of the Crown to be subject to an allegation of sexual impropriety, is it?

The Prime Minister: I do not want to go into the details of the allegations, because I think there are human resources issues there. I am not certain that that is a fair characterisation of what happened.

Q125 **Sir Robert Neill:** Okay, but in all events, it was a serious matter. This was someone who had worked closely on your leadership team only a few months before, so you would be aware that it was sensitive.

The Prime Minister: That’s fair, yes. It was also, to be fair, almost two and a half years ago, and without any—

Q126 **Sir Robert Neill:** But it’s not the sort of thing you forget, is it, Prime Minister?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: As I say, when it was drawn to my attention a couple of days later that there was a discrepancy between what we were saying abroad, as it were—or what No. 10 was saying—and the fact that this briefing had taken place, I took steps to clear it up as soon as I could.

Q127 **Sir Robert Neill:** The suggestion that you couldn't recall, which was said on your behalf—is that a serious explanation? You couldn't recall this unusual incident with someone who is a close political ally?

The Prime Minister: No. What we failed to do on the first day was to go over all the possible interactions between me and the Member in question, all the possible decisions that I might have taken. As it happened, the issue—the report about the complaint—was not raised to me as a point for any kind of decision. It was simply something that was mentioned to me in the margin of other meetings, as I recall, as a point of information about what had happened, because it was the Foreign Office that dealt with it.

Q128 **Chair:** But Prime Minister, when you were considering appointing him into the Government most recently, how true is it that actually you wanted him to be Chief Whip?

The Prime Minister: Not to my recollection, Sir Bernard. I don't think so. I think the suggestion was that he was going to be Deputy Chief Whip, and that is what happened.

Q129 **Chair:** What happened to all the messages pouring into Downing Street about the risk of appointing this person? There were plenty of them.

The Prime Minister: Well, I don't know how many there were, but there were certainly—

Q130 **Chair:** There is a cultural problem here. Why couldn't the system hear that there was concern about this appointment?

The Prime Minister: I don't think that is entirely fair.

Q131 **Chair:** Then why did you refer it to the ethics and propriety director in the Cabinet Office? Why was that necessary if there wasn't a concern?

The Prime Minister: Every ministerial appointment automatically goes to the propriety and ethics team. They look at every one.

Q132 **Mr Wragg:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I appreciate that today is a day of events, and though this meeting has not quite resembled a Moscow show trial—certainly, they were livelier—it must be none the less quite difficult. I pay tribute to you for turning up today.

The Prime Minister: I wouldn't dream of being anywhere else. I am delighted to be here.

Q133 **Mr Wragg:** Having said that, at what point does it become impossible for the Queen's Government to be continued?

The Prime Minister: I really think, William, that you are underestimating the talent, energy and sheer ambition of Members of Parliament. They



HOUSE OF COMMONS

want to get things done for their constituents. The Government of the country is being carried on with ever-increasing energy.

Q134 Mr Wragg: Well, they seem to want to get one thing done at the moment—I agree with you on that. The issue that we have is that, at least on my initial calculation at the start of the meeting, you have had 27 Ministers resign, and there have been more in the meantime. Do you think there are swelling ranks of those young thrusters on the Back Benches who can replace them?

The Prime Minister: I think it highly likely, yes.

Q135 Mr Wragg: Ambition—could that not be considered delusion at times?

The Prime Minister: That is a sort of moral judgment about human nature, and I wouldn't venture to comment on it. Maybe we are all deluded in our ambitions, but I think most people who come to this place, in spite of what everybody says about MPs, are actuated by the highest motives. Most people want to serve their constituents and get stuff done. That is the reality.

Q136 Mr Wragg: Entirely so. So in terms of that assessment of individuals, which qualities in the former Deputy Chief Whip appealed to you most?

The Prime Minister: Let me just—big picture—

Q137 Mr Wragg: No, not big picture. Be specific.

The Prime Minister: Let me be clear: with the benefit of hindsight, I can see that that appointment, as I said in the House and on TV, was a mistake.

Q138 Mr Wragg: I want to know about the qualities of Ministers. Are Government appointments based upon ability?

The Prime Minister: It was put to me that, like everyone we appoint, the Member had excellent administrative skills.

Q139 Mr Wragg: Administrative skills? Was he behind what is colloquially known as Operation Save Big Dog?

The Prime Minister: To the best of my memory, in addition to serving as Deputy Chief Whip under the previous Prime Minister, he did a stint at the Foreign Office and then a stint at the Department for Communities and Local Government, when he had a role in housing. The accounts I had were positive.

Q140 Mr Wragg: Casting our minds back to January and February, it was a tricky time, and certainly some people in the shadow whipping operation used their charm in order to persuade, but I think it is fair to say that others used aspects of what we might describe as being offensive to work that wonder for you. Why was Mr Pincher the first to be invited into Downing Street on the day of the reshuffle, when the most senior job available was that of Chief Whip? Ordinarily, it would be awarded to the person who was called in first.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: We are going back to Bernard's point. I think that's a red herring. There was no—

Q141 **Mr Wragg:** Did any colleagues come to you on that day and express concerns about that appointment, or potential appointment?

The Prime Minister: Not to me, but what happened was that concerns were expressed actually after I had made the appointment.

Q142 **Mr Wragg:** Why was he in there for four hours before the appointment was made?

The Prime Minister: For that reason. I made the appointment and then went and got on with making other appointments, but there was a problem that needed to be resolved.

Q143 **Mr Wragg:** What was that problem?

The Prime Minister: I think that I probably ought to, given that this Member is—

Chair: They are investigating him, Prime Minister; they are not investigating you, so you can answer the questions.

The Prime Minister: Yes, but I do not want to offer any more commentary that might or might not—

Chair: Well, I'm sorry but we are asking you questions.

The Prime Minister: That might or might not be correct about it.

Chair: Come on—he is asking you a straightforward question, Prime Minister.

Q144 **Mr Wragg:** It is quite a direct question. It is about your judgment and how you approach appointing Ministers.

The Prime Minister: Yes, so let me be clear. I made the appointment and I then got on with making other appointments. There was then a delay while the matter was cleared up—in announcing the appointment. I was told that it had been cleared up and we go on with it.

Q145 **Mr Wragg:** What needed to be cleared up?

The Prime Minister: It was a matter concerning another colleague, but I really don't want to—it would not be right for me to go into it.

Q146 **Mr Wragg:** No, it wouldn't be right, because what happened to that colleague wasn't right at all, was it?

The Prime Minister: Well, I wasn't informed of that at the time, but, having been subsequently informed about it, I can see that is another reason not to have had that Minister—if it was true—in post. But on the other hand—

Q147 **Mr Wragg:** If it was true, do you believe that colleague who came to you, or made overtures in No. 10, or do you believe Mr Pincher?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: Look, I think that these things have to be examined and I'm not going to make a comment about that. I think what happened was that my team interviewed both people and resolved the matter, and that's why we proceeded as we did.

Q148 **Mr Wragg:** Are you familiar with the Lascelles principles?

The Prime Minister: I knew you were going to ask this and I can't— This is about "Tommy" Lascelles.

Mr Wragg: Indeed; you watched "The Crown".

The Prime Minister: Yes. Go on, remind me.

Q149 **Mr Wragg:** If you were to go to Her Majesty and request—it is a request; you would not go to advise—a Dissolution of Parliament, could you give me two conditions under which Her Majesty would be justified in declining your request?

The Prime Minister: You are asking about something that is not going to happen, unless everybody is so crazy as to try to have a new—we are going to get on—

Chair: Order.

The Prime Minister: I don't think the people of this country want to have an election, and I certainly don't.

Q150 **Chair:** Order. Prime Minister, you said it is not going to happen "unless". Unless what?

The Prime Minister: Well, I think that history teaches us that the best way to have a period of stability and government and not to have early elections is to allow people with mandates to get on and deliver—

Q151 **Chair:** Unless what?

The Prime Minister: That's what I'm saying. So the history teaches—

Chair: No, you said "unless"; unless what?

The Prime Minister: Unless people ignore that very good principle that history teaches us that the best way to avoid pointless political disturbance is to allow the Government that has a mandate to get on and deliver its mandate—

Chair: But unless what?

The Prime Minister: That is what we are going to do.

Chair: Unless what, Prime Minister?

Mr Wragg: I think what you are alluding to—

Chair: Sorry, Mr Wragg; just a minute. The Prime Minister—

The Prime Minister: Unless people forget that, Sir Bernard.

Q152 **Chair:** What does that mean?

The Prime Minister: That means that, on the whole, I think it's a good thing if Governments which have a substantial mandate from the electorate and are doing an enormous amount of stuff, when that country is facing a lot of pressure, particularly economic pressure, and when there are serious international issues at stake, I think that, on the whole, it is sensible not to get bogged down in discussion about electoral politics but to allow the Government of the country to continue.

Q153 **Chair:** Can I just remind you that when Prime Minister Major seemed to be threatening a general election because he was having trouble with the Maastricht Bill, it didn't do his reputation any good at all, and there would never have been a general election?

The Prime Minister: Can I thank you for that excellent historical lesson? That is exactly the point I am trying to make.

Chair: Well, I don't know why you said "unless". Mr Wragg.

Q154 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. One of the conditions of the Lascelles principles is that the sovereign could rely on finding another Prime Minister who could govern for a reasonable period with a working majority in the House of Commons. Do you accept that principle?

The Prime Minister: I want to agree passionately and strongly with what Sir Bernard has said. If you go back to the '90s, you do not solve problems by threatening to call elections. You have got to get on with what you are elected to do, and that is what the Government is doing.

Q155 **Mr Wragg:** So I am taking it that you accept the Lascelles principles.

The Prime Minister: Insofar as they are designed to prevent pointless wildcat elections, they sound sensible to me.

Mr Wragg: Thank you.

Chair: Mr Bryant.

Q156 **Chris Bryant:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. Welcome, Prime Minister. Have you been told of any other allegations—similar to the conduct of Mr Pincher—about any other Ministers in your time as Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I'm going to have to tell you that it is all too possible that people have said things to me about any number of people, including, possibly, people around this horseshoe.

Chris Bryant: Have you ever had—

The Prime Minister: It would be a great labour for me now to sit down and try to reconstruct every single piece of gossip or innuendo.

Q157 **Chris Bryant:** No, that's not what I am asking. I am not asking about gossip and innuendo. You now accept that you were told on two occasions about the allegations against Mr Pincher that were upheld.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: Yeah, by the head of the Foreign Office.

Q158 **Chris Bryant:** I am asking whether you have been formally told about any other such events relating to any other Government Minister?

The Prime Minister: Look, I would have to get back to you. I would not want to—

Q159 **Chris Bryant:** It seems extraordinary that you wouldn't know whether there are outstanding allegations of sexual impropriety against your Government Ministers—such that they might potentially constitute criminal offences, apart from anything else.

The Prime Minister: Look, nothing that springs to mind. But what I will say, Chris, is that if you have some information that you think we need to have—

Q160 **Chris Bryant:** No, I don't. I am asking you this because it seems incredible to me that you would not remember that you had been told this about somebody who is one of your closest allies in Parliament.

The Prime Minister: I think I tried to explain exactly the circumstances in which it happened.

Q161 **Chris Bryant:** Well, you haven't. But let me ask you a different question, because you have not answered this elsewhere. Did you say, "All the sex pests are supporting me," or words to that effect?

The Prime Minister: Look, people attribute all sorts of things to me. I don't remember saying those words, but people ascribe all sorts of things to me.

Q162 **Chris Bryant:** That sounds like a yes to me. Did you say, "He's a bit handsy"?

The Prime Minister: That is not a word I use, actually.

Q163 **Chris Bryant:** So that is a definite no.

The Prime Minister: I would not have used that word.

Chris Bryant: It's a definite no, is it?

The Prime Minister: People maybe hear me say all sorts of things. "Handsy", as it happens, is not a word I use.

Q164 **Chris Bryant:** All right. Did you say, "Pincher by name, Pincher by nature"?

The Prime Minister: I'm not going to get into some trivialising discussion on what I may or may not have said. This is a serious matter. I believe the Member has had a complaint made against him.

Chair: We are not discussing that.

The Prime Minister: And that is where I propose to leave it. The Member has had a complaint made against him.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q165 **Chris Bryant:** The point is that the allegation is that you have trivialised this issue. You have not even remembered it, perhaps because he is a useful ally to you. The point is that then you appointed somebody who you believed to be a sex pest to a position of power and authority over other people in Parliament.

The Prime Minister: No, that's not right. Under any view, the issue at the Foreign Office—although it was upheld, it was resolved in a way that was satisfactory.

Q166 **Chris Bryant:** It was upheld.

The Prime Minister: It was resolved in a way that was satisfactory to all parties. I cannot be confident that it was a sexual—

Chris Bryant: Lord McDonald makes it clear that it was very similar to the allegations about what happened in the—

The Prime Minister: The trouble is—

Chris Bryant: Let me ask you a different question—

The Prime Minister: If I may say so, on the occasions when it was mentioned to me, I was given a very brief, sketchy account. I really think that you need to know exactly what happened—

Chris Bryant: It just seems incredible that you would not think that that was a matter worth investigating. Can I ask you—

The Prime Minister: Sorry, but it was investigated, by the Foreign Office—

Q167 **Chris Bryant:** And it was upheld. Was Neil Parish right to resign from Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I think the problem he had was that he was—

Chris Bryant: Was he right to resign?

The Prime Minister: It was his decision.

Chris Bryant: Was he right to resign?

The Prime Minister: I think that he was doing something that is not normal or tolerated in most workplaces.

Q168 **Chris Bryant:** So should Chris Pincher resign from Parliament?

The Prime Minister: You ask about my relationship with him. I took the Whip away from him.

Chris Bryant: Should he resign from Parliament?

The Prime Minister: That is a matter for him.

Q169 **Chris Bryant:** So you think he should stay.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: That's a matter for him. He no longer sits as a Conservative MP.

Q170 **Chris Bryant:** All right. Was it right for Sarah Dines to ask the man who was groped in the Carlton Club whether he was gay, and to say that it was problematic that he was?

The Prime Minister: You are asking me about what other Members are alleged to have said. I can't—

Q171 **Chris Bryant:** No, no, including the people in this room, there are five other MPs who witnessed it. It's not in any doubt, and I don't think she has denied it. Was it right? Is it not victim shaming?

The Prime Minister: Let me put it this way: I think that what happened was extremely serious. As soon as I knew that a complaint had been made and I talked to a witness, I removed the Whip—

Q172 **Chris Bryant:** Did you talk to Sarah Dines about it?

The Prime Minister: I haven't talked to her about that, but I removed the Whip immediately from—

Q173 **Chris Bryant:** Do you not understand why this is problematic? It means that being gay, for some reason or other, makes you asking for it.

The Prime Minister: Chris, I see why you are putting it like that. I very much doubt that Sarah meant to put it that way.

Q174 **Chris Bryant:** You said yesterday about Chris Pincher: "If I had my time again"—a bit Captain Hindsight if you don't mind me saying—

The Prime Minister: You know who he is.

Q175 **Chris Bryant:** Yeah, it's you. "If I had my time again, I would think back on it and recognise that he wasn't going to learn any lessons and he wasn't going to change". But that's true about you, isn't it? You're not going to learn any lessons and you are not going to change. You're not capable of changing. You'll be doing this again, time and again, if you stay in post, won't you?

The Prime Minister: Coming to this Committee? I will. Yes, I hope very much to be invited.

Chair: Come on, you know what he is asking, Prime Minister. He is not asking that question.

The Prime Minister: Well, I don't know quite what—

Q176 **Chris Bryant:** You know exactly what I'm asking. This is all about you, in the end. The reason these things happen is because of you. He took liberties because he knows that you take liberties and get away with it, and allow other people to get away with taking liberties.

The Prime Minister: Sorry, I'm not quite sure what you're driving at there.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q177 **Chris Bryant:** I think you know perfectly well what I'm driving at. You said on one of the other broadcasts, "If you're saying you want me to undergo some sort of psychological transformation, I think that our listeners would know that is not going to happen." Isn't that the problem—we need a psychological transformation if you're to stay in office?

The Prime Minister: With the greatest possible respect, what I think we all need to do is focus on the things that our electorate sent us here to settle for them. They are: how to fix the post-covid economic shocks, and that is what we are doing; how to make sure that we improve the life chances of every kid growing up in this country. What Robert said about kids being excluded from school was incredibly important and I am going to go away and look at that. These are the issues that matter to the people of this country—not to exclude the fascination that people will have with these other subjects, but that is what I am focused on.

Chris Bryant: No, they also focus on honesty, decency and propriety and standards in public life, and they hate it when people who get caught out just want to turn over the table and abolish all the rules. Let me ask you one very specific final question, which is about the ministerial code. It enshrines the existence of the Independent Adviser on Minister's Interests. You haven't got one at the moment. I hope you are going to appoint one very soon, and you can tell us who that is going to be, but you authorised an investigation into Mark Spencer's alleged Islamophobia, which I gather Lord Geidt had very nearly completed. When will that be completed, and when will it be published?

The Prime Minister: That's a very good question. I think that Lord Geidt did give me a brief update on it. I had the impression that it was nearing conclusion. I will have to get back to you.

Q178 **Chris Bryant:** And is there going to be a replacement?

The Prime Minister: Yes, there will be.

Q179 **Chris Bryant:** When?

The Prime Minister: As soon as we can find one. The difficulty—

Q180 **Chris Bryant:** You haven't got enough Ministers to appoint yet, let alone—you have lost 32 now.

The Prime Minister: I am sure there will be no shortage of candidates. If I can just explain a bit about the replacement for Lord Geidt, I do think there is an issue, and I think we need to think about it collectively, which is what happens when we appoint these people. They can become very exposed and very vulnerable to abuse, to political pressure, to campaigns—I am just giving you my view. They are much more public than they used to be. Christopher, I think, did an outstanding job, but he was facing a lot of public pressure.

Q181 **Chris Bryant:** He resigned because he thought you had lied to him.

The Prime Minister: That's not what he said. He said that he resigned over the question of whether steel tariffs should be imposed in—



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q182 **Chris Bryant:** He didn't resign over steel tariffs. You know perfectly well that's not the truth.

The Prime Minister: I am sure you have seen his letter.

Chris Bryant: I have, yes.

The Prime Minister: That's what he says. The issue there was whether retaining steel tariffs in the UK would be in breach of WTO—

Q183 **Chris Bryant:** No, I'm sorry, Prime Minister. He resigned, as he says in his letter, because he knew that he wanted to initiate an investigation into your breaching of the ministerial code—

The Prime Minister: No, that's not what he said.

Chris Bryant: But he could not do so without resigning, and that put him in an impossible position. That is expressly what his letter says.

The Prime Minister: Sorry, then you must have seen another letter, because that is not what—

Q184 **Chris Bryant:** No, I read it and you didn't.

The Prime Minister: I'm going to have to disagree with you gently there.

Q185 **Dame Meg Hillier:** After that outbreak of mythomania, let's perhaps get down to some facts. Prime Minister, you know that my job in Parliament is to do the maths. You have a pen there; could you tell us what 148 plus 32 adds up to?

The Prime Minister: I'm going to leave that. I think what you are inviting me to do is speculate on—

Q186 **Dame Meg Hillier:** No, I'm asking you a simple question, Prime Minister. Earlier, I asked you how many MPs you have. Perhaps someone has now slipped you a note to remind you how many Conservative MPs you have in Parliament. Do you know how many Conservative MPs you have in Parliament, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I think, Meg, this is a question designed to invite me to comment on political events when I have told you—

Q187 **Dame Meg Hillier:** Prime Minister, if you do not want to answer it, let me answer it. You have 358 MPs. You did think it was 365; you have lost a few. As Mr Bryant has highlighted, you now have 32 Ministers and PPSs who have resigned. It was 28 at the beginning of this meeting, and an additional PPS will resign tomorrow if you do not resign, so that makes it 182 if you include her. Half of 358, Prime Minister—just to make the maths simple for you—is 179. It's not looking very good, is it?

The Prime Minister: You know, Meg, you are wanting me to comment on current political—

Q188 **Dame Meg Hillier:** You have lost the confidence of more than half of your party, not including other Members in this room who may not be in the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

148. I have been generous and not double counted.

The Prime Minister: Sure. I am here to talk about the government of the country and the policies that we are pursuing.

Q189 **Dame Meg Hillier:** But, Prime Minister, without the support of your party, you cannot govern this country responsibly or well. Whatever our political disagreements, I have respect for the office of Prime Minister, but I am afraid that I have completely lost respect for you and your capability to run this country.

The Prime Minister: I think if you look at the actions that we are taking today and the Bills that we are getting through, we are doing some fantastic things for the people of this country, and we will continue to do that.

Chair: Darren Jones.

The Prime Minister: I appreciate that they may not be supported by the Labour party, Meg, but that is not my problem; that is your problem.

Dame Meg Hillier: No, Prime Minister, it is about competence, not policy.

Chair: Darren Jones.

Q190 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, it's being reported that there is a delegation of your Cabinet colleagues waiting in Downing Street, including the Chief Whip, the Transport Secretary and your new Chancellor, waiting to tell you when you finish here today that it's time for you to go. How will you respond to that?

The Prime Minister: Darren, you're asking me to comment on—

Q191 **Darren Jones:** That conversation will happen in a few minutes, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: So you say. But if you want to ask about what we're doing to help people with the cost of living, if you want to ask about what we're doing to build more clean, green energy supply, which this Committee has taken an interest in—

Q192 **Darren Jones:** That is going to be your answer to the Cabinet colleagues in Downing Street, is it?

The Prime Minister—then I am very happy to talk to you about it. But I am not going to give a running commentary on political events. We are going to get on with the government of the country.

Q193 **Chair:** On the Prime Minister's adviser on ministerial interests, you have had two resignations, not just one. Why did Sir Alex Allan resign?

The Prime Minister: Sir Alex, as it has been pretty well documented—I thank him, too—was asked to investigate allegations of bullying against the Home Secretary. The team produced quite a long report, which was based on a lot of extensive work—mainly anonymised interviews—and I read it very thoroughly. The trouble I found with it was that nothing that



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the Home Secretary had actually said seemed to me to breach the threshold necessary to trigger her resignation. Although you might argue that she should have spoken in a different way from time to time, it did not seem to me that the allegations wholly stacked up. I thought that it did not trigger a resignation.

Chair: That was not the reason that he resigned—

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am coming to the reason.

Q194 **Chair:** He resigned because you would not even accept his report.

The Prime Minister: Let me say what happened. Sir Alex took a view that—I read the report; I read the whole thing. He didn't actually write it; he simply read it and drew some conclusions. I read all the interrogations that had taken place, and although she might have spoken differently from time to time, it didn't seem to me that she deserved to be fired on the basis of what I had read—I read the whole thing—and I made that point.

The difficulty was that Sir Alex thought that the ministerial code had been breached, even if in a minor way, and that any breach of the ministerial code necessarily meant a resignation. That view has subsequently been modified by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, which said that there can be gradations of sanctions for breaches of the ministerial code.

Q195 **Chair:** So what you should have done was accept Sir Alex Allan's report. He would not have resigned; it would still have been in your gift not to demand the Home Secretary's resignation; and the system would have been changed retrospectively, as it has been. But you wouldn't even accept his report.

The Prime Minister: No, Sir Bernard. As I remember it, the problem was that I would have had to accept the Home Secretary's resignation. That was the problem. And that did not seem to me to be a necessary outcome.

Q196 **Chair:** Supposing you continue in office, what lessons do you learn from the appointment of Chris Pincher?

The Prime Minister: The most important lesson is, first, be less optimistic about people's ability to learn and change—

Q197 **Chair:** And perhaps take a bit more interest in it. It is extraordinary how many things—perhaps you should just take a bit more interest in it.

The Prime Minister—and secondly, when something like this happens, make sure that we do a full timetable of exactly what happened and when it happened, so that when people go out to brief, they have all the facts at their fingertips.

Q198 **Chair:** But it's not a comms failure, Prime Minister; it is a propriety and ethics failure. Isn't the real lesson that if we promote people with the wrong behaviour and attitudes in this place, it will give permission for people to behave in that way, which is why we've got a culture problem in this place? What will you change?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Prime Minister: What you are saying is very important. I have given this a lot of thought, and I think there is a problem with alcohol. I have always resisted this conclusion in the past, but it feels to me that some people simply can't take their drink, and we need to think about how we work that in Parliament. This particular event took place—

Chair: It didn't take place in Parliament.

Chris Bryant: It's utterly immaterial.

The Prime Minister: There is also an issue about standards of behaviour. I additionally accept that I should have been more stringent in my approach, and as I said earlier, I regret that.

Q199 **Chair:** But don't we also need to learn—I take it that Chris Pincher is a friend of yours, and that would be perfectly respectable—that we have let him down because we didn't give him the help he needed?

The Prime Minister: I think that is a very fair point.

Q200 **Chair:** What system is there in this place to support people in that position? What do you have in place as a leader of a political party to help people who have behavioural or drink problems?

The Prime Minister: I think we all have a duty, as colleagues, to look after each other and try to help people. That is actually one of the functions of the Whips Office.

Q201 **Chair:** Unfortunately, Whips have other duties that rather conflict with their duty of care. There needs to be something else to support people who need help so that they don't feel that they are giving ammunition to the people who control their careers, so that doesn't work, does it?

The Prime Minister: Well, I—

Q202 **Chair:** We've now got another Whip appointed to do the duty of care work. That's not going to work, is it?

The Prime Minister: Bernard, what are you proposing?

Q203 **Chair:** Well, I'm not going to make policy on the hoof here, but what you have got in place as leader of your party is not working. Would you accept that?

The Prime Minister: I think there are issues about standards of behaviour, and I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that there is an issue with alcohol.

Q204 **Chair:** You are the last person in the room to accept that there is a problem. Why do you think integrity in public life has become such an issue under your premiership?

The Prime Minister: I think, actually, the reality is that people are very, very keen to try to get me off the subjects I want to talk about and try to focus on me—

Q205 **Chair:** So it's all about you?

The Prime Minister: No, I don't want to talk about it. I have been trying very hard throughout this session to talk about the things that I care about.

Q206 **Chair:** How much consideration are you giving to the prospect of your resignation?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to tell you that I am getting on with the job that I was elected to do, and that is what I am going to do.

Q207 **Chair:** So all these problems are basically somebody else's fault?

The Prime Minister: No. Look, I think that it was one of the people who has left—

Q208 **Chair:** Who is responsible? Who should be held accountable?

The Prime Minister: I am responsible, but I am also responsible, Bernard, for delivering the huge manifesto commitments that we made in 2019, many of which are now coming through. Huw asked what we are doing to make sure we are taxing electric vehicles properly. There is a colossal body of work that we are engaged on right now. We are uniting and levelling up across the country. We have the biggest programme of infrastructure investment that we have had for 100 years, and I am going to get on with delivering on the programme that we set out and on the priorities of the people of this country.

Chair: These are all very important.

The Prime Minister: I know that there will be plenty of people who, for whatever motive, want to try to throw me off course by turning it into a story about something entirely different. I think it would be a fine thing if we focused on the arguments between us, which are about policy and the agenda, and what we love doing, which is working hard for our constituents and trying to make their lives better. We have had some interesting exchanges about how to control inflation and motor vehicles. Those are the things that people are interested in, and that is what I am focused on.

Chair: Caroline Nokes.

Q209 **Caroline Nokes:** Bullying and sexual harassment are about a culture of power. Have you just sat there and told us that alcohol is an excuse?

The Prime Minister: Not at all, not at all.

Q210 **Caroline Nokes:** Is it throwing us off the story by trying to talk about alcohol, instead of talking about the culture that has underpinned those behaviours?

The Prime Minister: Not at all, not at all. I observe that some people seem to get very drunk. That in no way minimises the underlying the pattern of behaviour.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Caroline Nokes: Well, that's what you've just done.

The Prime Minister: I vehemently disagree with that.

Chair: Prime Minister, I hope that you will reflect on the fact that, in the end, we are all dispensable—

The Prime Minister: Bernard, that is certainly true. All flesh is grass.

Q211 **Chair:** However, the programmes and the policies of your Government, the welfare of the British people and the security of the nation are indispensable. If you are becoming an obstruction to the achievement of those aims, I hope you will consider your position.

The Prime Minister: Of course I will. But I wanted you to know that my job is to get on and deliver on those aims. That is what I was elected to do.

Q212 **Chris Bryant:** But will you resign if it is clear that you do not have the confidence of the majority of Conservative MPs?

The Prime Minister: I love this Committee, but you are asking me, again, to offer commentary on political events, when I am here today to talk about policy.

Q213 **Chair:** Prime Minister, I wish you to be clear about one thing: if you have lost the confidence of your MPs, you will not seek a Dissolution; you will stand aside and allow a leadership election to take place, so that the Queen may send for an alternative leader. That is the proper procedure, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: What I'm going to do is get on with the job.

Chair: No, I need you to answer this question, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Where you are quite right and where I passionately agree with Will and with you is that I see absolutely no need whatever for an election.

Q214 **Chair:** Prime Minister, I am going to ask you once more. If you have lost the confidence of your MPs and you are required to step down as leader of the Conservative party, you will not seek to dissolve Parliament. Please confirm that that is the case.

The Prime Minister: Well, the last thing this country needs—

Chair: Because this House—

The Prime Minister: But I am not going to step down. The last thing this country needs, frankly, is an election. What it needs—

Chair: Because this House—

The Prime Minister: On the contrary, the risk is that people continue to focus on this type of thing. I think that is a mistake. What we need to do is get on with stable Government.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q215 **Chair:** And how would it help the crisis in Ukraine and the cost of living crisis if we were plunged into a general election that nobody wants?

The Prime Minister: This is your fantasy. I think it would be—

Chair: Then rule it out. Rule it out.

The Prime Minister: Of course I rule it out.

Q216 **Chair:** You've ruled it out?

The Prime Minister: The earliest date that I can see for a general election is two years from now. I think 2024 is the most likely date for the next election. We have a huge amount to deliver. We are going to get on and do it.

Q217 **Chris Bryant:** And you'll resign if a vote of confidence in the Conservative party is carried?

Chair: I think we are done.

Chris Bryant: Otherwise, it's dangerous.

The Prime Minister: You're asking me to comment on politics. I think it is important that we get on and deliver on our agenda. That is what I was elected to do.

Q218 **Chair:** I think it is the understanding of this Committee that you envisage a general election in '23 or '24—not before—

The Prime Minister: You said 2023.

Chair—and that, if you have lost the confidence of your own MPs and you cease to be leader of the Conservative party, you will not plunge this country into an unwanted general election.

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear with you. I see no reason—

Q219 **Chair:** Is that a yes or a no?

The Prime Minister—whatever for a general election now. On the contrary, what we need is stable Government, to love each other as Conservatives and to get on with our priorities. That is what we need to do, Sir Bernard, okay?

Chair: I love all my colleagues in the House of Commons.

The Prime Minister: Good. Fantastic.

Chair: Order.