



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 947

Tuesday 20 December 2022

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Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Harriett Baldwin; Mr Clive Betts; Sir William Cash; Joanna Cherry; Philip Dunne; Dame Diana Johnson; Alicia Kearns; Catherine McKinnell; Sir Robert Neill; Sir Stephen Timms; Mr Robin Walker; Pete Wishart.

Questions 1-101

Witness

I: Rt Hon. Rishi Sunak MP, Prime Minister.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witness: Rt Hon. Rishi Sunak MP.

Chair: Welcome to this end-of-term meeting of the Liaison Committee, where we are cross-examining the Prime Minister. I wonder if I can place on record, Prime Minister, first, our thanks for your coming after a very hectic first few weeks in office, and also that your time is under pressure, which means that our time is under pressure, so if you want to leave on time, please do not give long answers. We will keep the questions short and if you keep your answers short, we will get you out on time. But if you are too well briefed and have too many statistics, we will have to detain you, so please keep to the point. We will crack straight on with our first topic, which is on international issues, starting with the war in Ukraine.

Q1 **Alicia Kearns:** Prime Minister, if I may, I will take you around the world with as many questions as I have time for. You have ordered a Goldman Sachs-style review of UK support for Ukraine. The media say that this is a sign that you will be less steadfast in your support for our Ukrainian allies. The Defence Chair and I would like you to commit today to unreserved support for Ukraine, no matter the outcome of that audit.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I wouldn't necessarily read too much into the press reports—look at my actions, I would say, first of all. The first foreign call I made was to President Zelensky. The first bilateral foreign trip I made was to Kyiv. I have spoken to President Zelensky probably a couple more times since then, and also organised for him to speak to the G7 leaders—also the JEF leaders yesterday, when I was at the JEF summit—and committed to maintaining, or increasing, our military support to Ukraine next year. So those are all the actions, to date, in the seven or eight weeks that I have been in office.

Of course, we will continue to support Ukraine. What all of us would want to see is Ukraine successfully repel Russian aggression. It is important that we maintain support but also evolve the support for the conditions that we are seeing on the ground and the battlefield, and that is what I am keen to do.

Q2 **Alicia Kearns:** Turning to Russia's backers in Iran, Obama's greatest regret from his time in power was listening to his advisers when they told him not to back the green revolution in Iran. Today, the JCPOA is failing, the women of Iran are being brutalised, and Iran is committing assassinations across Europe and perpetrating war crimes in Ukraine. How are you standing by the people of Iran, and will you now sanction the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, as you promised in the leadership competition over the summer?

The Prime Minister: I think that the protests that we are seeing in Iran send a very clear message that the Iranian people aren't satisfied with the path that the Government has taken. We stand very much with the people of Iran. I think the treatment of protesters is, quite frankly, abhorrent.



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That is why, in terms of actions, Alicia, the Foreign Secretary summoned the most senior Iranian official here to express our view to them, and then, over the course of three different days—on 9 December, 14 November and 10 October—we have sanctioned almost 40 different individuals connected with the protests, including the so-called morality police. And on 14 December, we, together with international allies, kicked Iran out of the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Q3 Alicia Kearns: And on the IRGC specifically, which you promised over the summer—

The Prime Minister: Yes, we already sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety, and, typically, we wouldn't comment on proscription.

Alicia Kearns: I believe that you have proscribed them but not sanctioned them.

The Prime Minister: No, we sanctioned the IRGC in its entirety. The separate list of terrorist organisations that are proscribed is kept under review, and we generally wouldn't comment on proscription.

Chair: Why wouldn't you comment?

The Prime Minister: Because we wouldn't comment on processes that may or may not be under way.

Q4 Alicia Kearns: It is a frustrating Foreign Office quirk. The security services have rightly identified China as our greatest national security challenge, but we have no strategic coherence on this. We have fallen short of putting forward key resilience strategies. We have failed to protect refugees on British soil from Chinese diplomat brutality. You promised to change China policy on day one if you were made Prime Minister, so how have you done that?

The Prime Minister: Just before we go on to China, and to finish on Iran, it is worth saying that, while Russia and Ukraine remains our No. 1 foreign policy challenge as we go into the new year, I am increasingly concerned about Iran's behaviour, the treatment of its citizens, what it is doing in the region, which is destabilising, and indeed the nuclear programme. I think it is something that we will need to spend an increasing amount of time on going forward.

With regard to China, again, I would say that I have been doing this for seven or eight weeks, and we can look very practically at the steps that we have taken in that time. I have always been clear that China represents a systematic challenge to our values—it has very different values to ours. But what matters is the actions that we are taking, and there is a handful.

First and foremost, we used the powers under the National Security and Investment Act to block the increased stake in Newport Wafer Fab. Secondly, when it came to the decision to green-light Sizewell, we ensured that the Chinese state nuclear company was no longer going to be a part



of that project. Thirdly, we have removed surveillance from the HMG estate, which is connected with the national intelligence law in China. And most recently, we have organised 50 other countries in the UN for a resolution in the committee regarding Xinjiang. Those are all concrete steps that we have taken in just the last seven or eight weeks, which I think demonstrates my commitment to stand up to China, where it is in our interest to do so.

Q5 Alicia Kearns: That takes us back to your policy of robust pragmatism. How much does our dependence on China keep you up at night when rowing up your ability to be robust rather than just pragmatic?

The Prime Minister: The actions that I just outlined are all robust actions. We talked about resilience. That is why we didn't think it was appropriate for the Newport Wafer Fab transaction to go ahead as planned; we blocked it. It is why we have removed the surveillance technology from the HMG estate. It is why we have removed CGN from the Sizewell project. Those are examples of robust action to protect ourselves against economic and other threats.

All I'd say is that it is also important that our approach to China is aligned with our closest allies. Having discussed it with President Biden and, indeed, the Prime Ministers of Japan and Australia, I believe that our policy is aligned. There will be many things that we have to have a dialogue with China on, whether that is global public health, climate change or the macroeconomy. It makes sense to do that.

Q6 Alicia Kearns: Finally, we seem to have a real issue tying down our policy when it comes to our relationship with Turkey. It has been an important conduit between Europe and Russia over the last few months, but since 2019, Erdoğan has carried out attack after attack on the Kurdish people. He is now claiming he is going to roll in the tanks to eradicate them. This could, first, jeopardise our success against Daesh and, secondly, see atrocities en masse. So what are HMG doing, under your leadership, to step in to deter Turkey from undertaking these heinous attacks?

The Prime Minister: I have spoken to the President, at the international summit we were both at and bilaterally. We will continue to use all our offices to encourage Turkey to do the right thing. Most recently, we worked constructively with them on ensuring that the Black sea grain deal was renewed, and that was something that they helped play a part in.

Q7 Chair: Thank you. I have a couple of quick questions of my own. It is, of course, astonishing that we allowed China to carry on doing what they were doing for so long, and I am certainly pleased with the direction the Government are taking. Coming back to Russia, the Defence Secretary made a statement this afternoon that pointed out that this is the 300th day of the war that was meant to take a few days, and the war has been militarily disastrous for Russia. Are we underestimating their will? What do you make of Russian willpower? They are putting everything into the fight. The Russian doctrine of total war and victory at any cost seems to



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be very apparent.

The Prime Minister: That is why it is important that we continue to maintain and increase our support to Ukraine, and make sure that that support is effective in deterring further Russian aggression and pushing them back from the territory that they have already seized. That is what we will continue to do.

Q8 **Chair:** Is that shared as deeply by our European allies?

The Prime Minister: That is why I was at the JEF summit yesterday. That is 10 countries that are very like-minded on values, but particularly with regard to the threat that Russia poses. Again, there is a very strong consensus about what we need to do next year—whether that is the specific types of military support needed. Those are the types of things we discussed yesterday, and those are the conversations I have had more broadly as well.

Q9 **Chair:** The Defence Committee Chair, if he were here, would ask: what has happened to the document in the Ministry of Defence about the lessons learned in the Ukraine conflict, particularly about replenishing our munitions, which the Defence Secretary said will be replenished—not “are being replenished”—and the resilience of our munitions supply chains, which have turned out to be very threadbare? What are we doing about that? It needs money.

The Prime Minister: Yes, and we are replenishing our munitions. As the Defence Secretary would probably acknowledge—as you just acknowledged, Bernard—the issue is less about money than supply chain capacity in the short term. That is the challenge. That is a gating, or limiting, factor on our ability to get some of the support we would like to see flowing to Ukraine happening quicker.

The point made right at the beginning is that we need to make sure that we get them what they need. The priorities at the moment are: air defence, armoured vehicles, artillery and munitions. The contract for £250 million we have just signed will ensure that there is a ready supply of artillery next year, but also on a monthly basis, so that Ukraine can plan with certainty, which they have not always been able to do, because of the supply chain. Our contract that we have put in place will give them that certainty and reliability next year, which will be helpful.

Chair: Thank you. I call Clive Betts of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Q10 **Mr Betts:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I want to talk about the situation with Ukrainian refugees in this country. I am sure all our thoughts this Christmas will be with our Ukrainian guests, particularly children, who will spend Christmas in a foreign country, thinking of their loved ones back in Ukraine. I also want to thank the wonderful hosts who have hosted 100,000 Ukrainian individuals in our country.

Unfortunately, 3,000 Ukrainian families have presented themselves as homeless in the last six months, and many of those families, including



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children, will spend Christmas in temporary accommodation. Is it really acceptable, Prime Minister, that we should get to that situation in a wealthy country like ours?

The Prime Minister: The first thing to say, as you did, Clive, is to express our gratitude and admiration for the thousands of British families who have opened up their hearts and homes to accommodate Ukrainian refugees. As I said previously, many of them will be setting an extra place at their Christmas table in a week's time, and that is enormously to their credit.

The way we did that was through the Homes for Ukraine scheme, as you know, with sponsor families taking people in. The announcement we made recently extends the "thank you" payments to those families for a further 12 months. It also increases them from £350 a month to £500 a month. To your other point, I think we have provided about £150 million of funding to local authorities to help them mitigate homelessness in the second year.

Q11 **Mr Betts:** It will mitigate but certainly not solve the problem of homeless refugees, because we have the Afghan refugees on top of that. You mentioned the payments to sponsors. Richard Harrington, when he was Minister, said that the payments should be doubled. Last week, the Government announced an increase from £350 to £500 a month for families, but only after one year.

On our Committee, we have met hosts of Ukrainian families who are thinking about giving up after six months, and the pressure of the cost of living is one of those issues. Prime Minister, can you not just be a bit more generous, increase the payments a bit more and bring them forward to stop homelessness increasing among refugees?

The Prime Minister: It is worth bearing in mind that it is not just payments to the families that the Government are making; it is also payments to local authorities. As you will be familiar with, there is a tariff of over £10,000, which has meant that over a billion pounds of funding has also been flowing to local authorities to help them with preparations.

The Housing Secretary has also made available half a billion pounds in funding for a local authority housing fund. That is for capital funding to areas that are facing a significant housing pressure as a result of Ukrainian arrivals. That will help alleviate some of the pressures that we are seeing.

We are also enabling a rematching scheme, where Ukrainian guests can find new sponsors after their initial six months. We are providing guidance in Ukrainian and Russian to help households access the private rental sector.

Q12 **Mr Betts:** You just mentioned the help to local authorities, Prime Minister, which was £10,500 per person per year, but you have just cut it from 1 January, to £5,900 for new arrivals. If £10,500 was the right figure this year, why is only £5,900 the right figure next year?



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The Prime Minister: It is a combination of things. First of all, there are some costs that are front-loaded. You will know that from speaking to local authorities. It is also a question of what we can afford across the board. As alluded to at the beginning, this is all going on for longer than people anticipated. We want to increase some of the payments to individual families providing shelter. Your first questions were about making sure that those families are not homeless or put in temporary accommodation. We have increased those payments, but it is reasonable over time that payments to local authorities change.

It is also worth bearing in mind that we have provided £6.5 billion in extra funding that will be made available to local government more generally as a result of the autumn statement. That is new funding going into local government, which I assume we will talk about soon, too.

Chair: Last question.

Q13 **Mr Betts:** But as an ex-local government Minister, you will know that local councils have had bigger cuts to their budgets than any other part of the public sector over the last 12 years.

There is a cut to the amount of money local authorities are going to receive for the sponsored families. Local authorities get nothing at all for refugees who come under the families scheme, although they have to provide all the services, including children's services. Why should local citizens, through their councils, have to have further cuts to their libraries, bus services and street sweeping services for what is an international and national problem? Should it not be central Government that picks up the cost, not local councils?

The Prime Minister: Central Government is picking up a considerable amount of the cost—

Mr Betts: No, the total cost.

The Prime Minister: And funding to local government, as you will be familiar with as we used to discuss this in our other Committee, has been going up for the last few years at significant levels.

Q14 **Mr Betts:** But why no money for the families scheme at all, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: There is considerable overall funding going into local government—

Mr Betts: There is no money for the families scheme at all, is there?

The Prime Minister: Overall into local government, there is £6.5 billion—

Mr Betts: There is no money for the families scheme at all.

Chair: I think you have made your point.

Q15 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Good afternoon. From the Home Affairs Select Committee report into small boats, which was published in the summer, it



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was clear that the asylum backlog had been allowed to grow since 2013 and was an Achilles heel in its weakness and undermining everything else. The top recommendation in our report was to clear the backlog. On 13 December, you said to Parliament: “we expect to abolish the backlog of initial asylum decisions by the end of next year”—a really bold claim. Can you just confirm the number that you plan to abolish by the end of next year?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it is the initial asylum backlog up to 28 June, which is when the NABA came into effect, which separated the pool of asylum seekers—from memory, it is 90-something thousand.

Q16 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So it is 92,000, not the 120,000 that we currently have in the—

The Prime Minister: So 117,000 was the total number at the time I made the statement, but that is comprised of the 92,000, which is pre-June, at which point the NABA separates and distinguishes between claims—

Q17 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So it is not actually abolishing the backlog, is it? How many—

The Prime Minister: It is abolishing. If we can go further—

Dame Diana Johnson: But it is not abolishing, I think that is the key point.

The Prime Minister: I think it would represent one of the most significant reductions in the backlog that we have seen. As I said, if we can go further, I would absolutely like to.

Q18 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Right. How many small boats do you envisage will be coming to the UK in 2023?

The Prime Minister: It would not be possible for me to put a precise number on it. I have been very clear that this problem is not an easy one to solve. It is complicated and it can't be solved overnight. But what I do know is that the steps that we are taking already, and we intend to take, will make a difference.

Q19 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay. The Home Office this year was planning for up to 60,000 people to come across in small boats, but you are saying that there is no figure for next year.

The Prime Minister: I don't have it to hand. I am sure there is a planning figure, but you are asking me what I think will actually happen. There is a reasonable worst-case scenario that they plan to, which is different to what I can precisely tell you will happen because, obviously, that will be a function of many things.

Q20 **Dame Diana Johnson:** What do you expect the backlog to be in December '23 then?



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The Prime Minister: As I said, it will be a function of arrivals, which are uncertain, but I can tell you the initial asylum backlog is what we are keen to clear over the course of next year. We will do that by tripling the productivity of our caseworkers.

Q21 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I will come on to that, yes. Do you think that anyone will be waiting for more than six months at the end of next year to have their asylum claim determined?

The Prime Minister: As well as clearing the initial asylum backlog, we are keen to look at the end-to-end process for processing claims and see how we can shrink that. I have made the point before—at the moment, the process is such that it can be used by people to extend it and stretch it out, and I want to make sure that that system isn't being abused or exploited. That is some of the legislative change that we are looking at.

Q22 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I just press you on what you have said? You said that in order to clear the backlog you are going to double the workforce, triple productivity and re-engineer the system. What I know is that the Home Office struggle when they make targets for themselves, and I am worried that there are some fairy-tale figures in this. They failed to meet their target of getting 1,000 caseworkers in 2021, and 46% of caseworkers left in 2021. The pilot the Home Office has produced to increase productivity went from 1.2 decisions per caseworker per week to up to 2.7 per caseworker per week. The IT systems are poor. The judges in the Rwanda case just yesterday talked about the poor administration in the Home Office. On what evidence have you based your target of being able to reduce the asylum backlog?

The Prime Minister: Two things: one is that we have already doubled the caseworking workforce over the past 12 months, so that is one proved point; the second is that we have undertaken an extensive exercise to map the process end to end and, on the basis of a bunch of modelling that has been done, which is relatively sophisticated, that is where the estimate of a tripling of the productivity comes from.

Q23 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay. I only know about the pilot that the Home Office has been running. There is something else that they have been doing, then.

The Prime Minister: Obviously when I stood up, I said we had looked at the entire process end to end and identified steps in the process that we think we can streamline, remove or tweak, and, on the basis of modelling that you would expect to do when you are doing systems engineering, that is what gives you the tripling.

Q24 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay, let's hope the Home Office can actually achieve that. I want to ask about Rwanda. What is the actual target for the number of people you are planning to send to Rwanda by the end of 2023?

The Prime Minister: I think we expect further legal challenge. We will continue to pursue that as necessary. It is one of the many things that we want to pursue.



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Q25 **Dame Diana Johnson:** You don't have a figure? The Rwandan Government are talking about 200.

The Prime Minister: We haven't commented on what is a commercial contract—and rightly so. What we are keen to do is have a system that we move to where, if someone comes here illegally, they do not have the right to stay and we have the right to remove them. Rwanda is a part of that, as the new legislation will be. I welcome the fact that the Court recognised that the policy is lawful.

Q26 **Dame Diana Johnson:** What is the budget you have allocated for the Rwanda policy?

The Prime Minister: I think we have said clearly that there is a £120 million payment for economic development.

Dame Diana Johnson: That has already been paid, plus the £20 million this year as well.

The Prime Minister: And an additional £20 million, yes.

Q27 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So £140 million—that's it? There's no more money to be paid to Rwanda.

The Prime Minister: There's nothing else that we have said publicly or will in a commercial contract.

Q28 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Very finally, do you think the permanent secretary was right to say that there was no evidence of value for money with the Rwanda scheme?

The Prime Minister: I believe the Rwanda scheme represents an important part of our plan to tackle illegal migration and stop small boats. It is not the only part of it, but it is an important part. That is why I welcomed the Court decision yesterday.

Q29 **Chair:** Thank you, very good. Prime Minister, you have said that the aim is that anybody who arrives here illegally will not stay here. Some lawyers are advising you that that can be done without setting aside any aspects of the ECHR or the Human Rights Act; others are saying it cannot be done. How will you judge that question? If you take the wrong advice, and they keep arriving and staying, that won't add much credibility to your objectives.

The Prime Minister: As I say, we will introduce legislation in the new year that will achieve the aim that I set out. The legislation is one part of an overall plan that I set out to Parliament recently. I am confident that we can deliver on that plan and that it will make a difference and reduce the number of boats arriving.

Chair: And on the question of the ECHR?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we will introduce legislation in the new year that will deliver on the system that I said I would.



Chair: Anybody else want to follow that one up? Philip Dunne.

Q30 **Philip Dunne:** Prime Minister, I am going to ask some questions about your Government's environmental commitments and how you're going to deliver them. Following the conclusion of COP27, which I was pleased you attended, I asked you on the Floor of the House how, as the structures for COP26 were dismantled, with the teams and the structures of Government changing, how you were going to personally ensure and deliver our nationally determined contributions. You said you would personally drive it through Government. You are not chairing the one Cabinet Committee that has some direct responsibility for this, so how are you doing that?

The Prime Minister: I think there are a couple of things, Philip. First of all, the decisions of that Cabinet Committee still come to me as part of the collective agreement process, so I am the ultimate decision maker. Secondly, the No. 10 team are intimately involved in all aspects of it, whether that is my office sitting on that Committee specifically, the delivery unit process currently going over all the targets we have or the policy unit involved with the Departments. Probably the third thing I would say is, again, judge me by my actions: I've only been doing it for seven or eight weeks, and in that time I've already worked closely with Cabinet Ministers on various aspects of net zero, whether that is on and offshore wind, nuclear or indeed energy efficiency, where I have specifically got involved as we have been developing policy and making announcements.

Q31 **Philip Dunne:** The Government lost a case in the High Court in relation to their net zero strategy. Are you involved in the review to refresh that strategy by the end of March?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will be doing that over the Christmas holidays because we intend to respond to the High Court demand and, indeed, Chris Skidmore's net zero review. We would like to do that ideally together, and I will be going over exactly that over the Christmas period.

Q32 **Philip Dunne:** Good. He is a valued member of our Committee, so we will be pleased to get him back once that work is finished. Are you receiving regular updates on nationally determined contributions and how we are getting on with those?

The Prime Minister: Yes. As I said, I will be reviewing all that with the delivery unit—again, over Christmas—as part of our reply to the High Court judgment and Chris's report.

Q33 **Philip Dunne:** The COP15 global biodiversity conference, which has just finished in Montreal, has been widely applauded. Our commitments under that include commitments to protect habitats and species. How do you intend to deliver on those targets by 2030?

The Prime Minister: If you do not mind, Philip, I will pay tribute to Thérèse Coffey, Zac Goldsmith, Will Lockhart and the rest of the team for their efforts. It is something everyone can be proud of; the UK demonstrated real leadership. We did that under our COP presidency by putting nature at the heart of how we will meet our climate objectives. I

think we followed that up in Montreal, and that was recognised by leaders around the world.

In terms of delivery on it, what we will have is an environmental improvement plan, which will be published early in 2023, which will mean that progress can be monitored and the Government can be held accountable for the actions to recover nature. We obviously have a legally binding set of targets that were recently published as part of our world-leading Environment Act. I am excited to get on and deliver that because I think it will make an enormous difference, and it is something that we are unequivocally leading the world in.

Q34 Philip Dunne: I think we are leading the world in designating areas, both on land and in the marine environment, that we are responsible for through our overseas territories and in our waters around the UK, but much less so in enforcement. There have been a lot of concerns from NGOs in particular that the enforcement of our regulatory agencies lacks teeth and resources, and therefore they lack enforcement. Can you respond to that by providing more resource for enforcement?

The Prime Minister: I am not familiar with the specific concern. I know that—certainly on water, pollution and sewage, for example—we have given Ofwat considerably more powers as part of the legislation that we passed, so they can levy fines of up to, from memory, £250 million at the outset, which is an example of us beefing up the regulators where we think there is a problem. It is not something we have shied away from when we think it is necessary, but it is something I would be happy to keep an eye on. I do not disagree with you: we need to be able to enforce the rules we have set. That is what we have done with Ofwat and, if there are other things we need in order to do that, I would happily look at that, as I am sure the Secretary of State would, if appropriate.

Philip Dunne: Thank you, Chair.

Chair: We now have Harriett Baldwin on economic issues.

Q35 Harriett Baldwin: Prime Minister, inflation is clearly the biggest economic challenge facing our country at the moment. Most of the blame for that can be squarely laid at the door of the Kremlin, but when you were Chancellor, inflationary pressures were clearly emerging even before the invasion of Ukraine. The Bank of England was running a very loose monetary policy, but you were running a very loose fiscal policy. What do you most regret about your time as Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: Actually, when it comes to fiscal policy, I think I was getting criticism for tightening fiscal policy ahead of others, because I specifically made the point about inflation and interest rate risk at a time when many people were telling me I could rely on rock bottom interest rates forever, borrowing was fine and we could spend what we liked. I did not think that was right and said that it was not right. That is why I talked about it in spring 2020 and, towards the end of 2020 and in spring 2021, introduced a set of measures to actually start putting the public finances on a much more sustainable track.



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At the time, many people said we were the first country to do that and it was not necessary, so I am actually proud of the record I have on that. No one gets these things perfectly right—I am not pretending I did—but I do think we were right to identify that as a risk and to take steps earlier than others did to start mitigating it.

In terms of other regrets that I have, the thing that was more apparent in hindsight—it is still a tricky thing to fix, and Stephen might want to talk about it a bit later—is inactivity. What was going on in the labour market definitely caught everyone by surprise. Again, it is all very well in hindsight, but at the time everyone thought that when furlough and things like that ended there would be mass unemployment, and I was getting criticism for ending furlough. That wasn't the issue; the issue was very much on the other end, where the labour market was not as large as we would have liked it to be. Had we known about that earlier, I wonder whether there are things we could have done to stop people leaving. It is always better to stop people leaving the labour market than try to attract them back once they have left. I am not sure that there are obvious answers, but that is something that we clearly need to address now.

Q36 Harriett Baldwin: But you do know about that issue now, and yet the Chancellor in the autumn statement announced next year's cost of living payment of £900. The Treasury Committee welcomes the fact that that has been increased and announced, but it will apply to only those on means-tested benefits. That means that someone who moves out of means testing and earns £1 extra will lose £900 in terms of that cost of living payment. That is a ridiculous cliff edge that plausibly you are now baking into the system. It could act as a way to very much disincentivise people from entering the labour market at higher pay. We published a report on that last week, recommending that those cliff edges be dealt with. Do you support our recommendations?

The Prime Minister: When you are dispensing that type of support at scale—a third of all households are in receipt of it—you have to do things that are also operationally deliverable and simple. I totally acknowledge the point that wherever you have eligibility criteria, they won't be perfect. I would probably say that there are three things. One is that it is not a single payment, partly to address the concern that you raised, Harriett; it is two payments split. That straightaway means that people who flow in and out of benefits, as many people do, have two bites of the apple.

Harriett Baldwin: We are recommending six, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Again, that is a question on operational delivery, and what is actually possible for the DWP to administer to get it right and not have people waiting a long time. The second thing is you can also appeal your benefit entitlement on the qualifying date. If it is found to have been successful, you will have a backdated payment. The third thing always to remember is that there is a very significant discretionary element, through the household support fund, of an extra £1 billion, which is well able and deliberately in place to pick up those hard cases.



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Those are three significant mitigations against your concern. Nothing is going to be perfect when you come to these things. It is a trade-off between what is deliverable and how we balance the different things that we have to.

Q37 **Harriett Baldwin:** Speaking of things not being perfect, baked into the Chancellor's autumn statement is the assumption that fuel duty will rise by 12p in the spring. I am sure you would want to confirm to the Committee today that that is not going to happen.

The Prime Minister: When I previously had the Chancellor's job, I always preferred it when the Prime Minister made absolutely no comments about future tax policy, so I will very much adhere to that.

Harriett Baldwin: But it's £6 billion a year during a cost of living crisis. You are not going to let the Chancellor get away with 12p a litre more on fuel.

The Prime Minister: I am going to let the Chancellor make the policy on fiscal decisions and announce them in the normal way.

Q38 **Harriett Baldwin:** As you rightly point out, as Chancellor you were someone who had to deal with the fact that these are always baked into the numbers and you have to then reverse them. Don't you think that we ought to come up with a better approach to fuel duty?

The Prime Minister: As Chancellor or as Prime Minister, I would say exactly the same thing: tax decisions are made by the Chancellor in fiscal statements, and that is the way it should be. I wouldn't comment on them outside of those.

Q39 **Harriett Baldwin:** Okay. Moving on to something that is definitely your responsibility: the refinancing of Ukraine and the assets that we have rightly sanctioned here in the UK. What is your view at this moment about how the UK can play a leading role in helping to raise the finance to rebuild Ukraine, including potentially that of the Central Bank of Russia?

The Prime Minister: A quick answer would be that we have played a leading role so far through leveraging multilateral development bank financing. I think £1.25 billion has been unlocked from the World Bank and others as a result of our guarantees and other support. That is something we will continue to look to do more of, and we are hosting a reconstruction conference next year.

Chair: Thank you very much. We will stay on the cost of living crisis with the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, Stephen Timms.

Q40 **Sir Stephen Timms:** Thank you, Chair. To nobody's surprise, food bank demand rose sharply last year. Your very welcome decision to uprate benefits fully in line with inflation next April will make sure that does not get significantly worse next year. You said in the Conservative party leadership contest that you "want to build a country where ideally nobody needs to use a food bank". Is that a realistic prospect, do you think?



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The Prime Minister: Yes, I would like to think so. As I said at the time, and I am happy to repeat, it is sad that anyone needs to use a food bank. At the same time, I am grateful to the people who provide those services, many of them in our constituencies. It is very important and I grateful to them that they do so.

Q41 **Sir Stephen Timms:** How long do you think it will take to end the need for food banks?

The Prime Minister: Well, I think it is important for us to get the economy growing again. The best way to do that is to have an economy that is growing, providing opportunity for people and enabling us to support those who can't work. That is why all the other things we are doing to strengthen our public finances and reduce inflation are paramount in getting to that point. In the short term, we have a range of different supports for people, particularly with food, whether that is free school meals, the holiday activity and food programme or others, that will help provide people with extra assistance, particularly this winter.

Q42 **Sir Stephen Timms:** Do you envisage increasing access to free school meals?

The Prime Minister: No; our free school meals policy, as you know, is universal for infants, and around 1.9 million receive free school meals beyond that.

Q43 **Sir Stephen Timms:** What about extending it to junior schools?

The Prime Minister: I think the provision we have is the right provision, but on top of that we have the holiday activity and food programme, which costs about £200 million a year and provides food and activity provision outside term time. Breakfast clubs have also been rolled out across many schools, which are helping in the mornings.

We also have something called Healthy Start vouchers, which do not get a lot of attention. We increased by quite a significant amount the value of those vouchers, which allow pregnant mothers or new mothers to get extra support for fresh fruit and milk, for example.

Q44 **Sir Stephen Timms:** Do you anticipate that food bank demand will have reduced by the time of the next election?

The Prime Minister: I very much hope so, because I hope that we can get the economy growing over the course of the remainder of this Parliament. That is something I will work very hard to deliver.

Q45 **Sir Stephen Timms:** Do you recognise that, on the way to eradicating the needs for food banks, we will need to improve the social security safety net beyond what is provided at the moment?

The Prime Minister: If you look at the stats, income inequality is lower in the last reported numbers than it was in 2010. There are over a million fewer people in poverty and several hundred thousand fewer workless households. Ultimately, the surest route out of poverty is for a child not to



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grow up in a workless household. Actually, I think there has been enormous progress on all those fronts.

On food bank usage in particular, I think we need to get a better understanding of it. That is why it is important that it is being included for the first time in the DWP family resources survey. We will start to get better data on food bank usage, which we have not had to date.

Q46 Sir Stephen Timms: Throughout all those things, food bank demand has continued to rise, except when you increased universal credit by £20 a week, and then it dipped. That is why, as I say, we will need to see an improvement in the social security safety net to achieve the eradication that you have held out.

May I mention a couple of current drivers of food bank demand? The local housing allowance is frozen at its 2020 level, so when rent goes up, people have to dip into the rest of their benefits to pay the rent; disabled people depending on equipment obviously have much higher electricity costs at the moment; and 290,000 people claiming disability benefits recently lost eligibility to the warm home discount scheme. I wonder if, with any of those three, there is any prospect of further help being provided.

The Prime Minister: I want to keep giving short answers, but the local housing allowance has increased by a third. That was worth £600-odd for about 1.5 million people.

Sir Stephen Timms: In 2020.

The Prime Minister: That was a very significant cash uplift at the time, which it is appropriate to have maintained. On the warm home discount, from memory it was properly targeted on those who most needed help. I haven't got the stats to hand, but it was about increasing the means-testing of the benefit and actually delivering it to the people who most needed the help. I recognise the extra costs for those who need devices to help them with disabilities, which is why one of the cost of living payments is £150 for those in receipt of means-tested disability payments. That will sit alongside the pensioner payment and the general cost of living payment especially to take account of the fact that you have just raised.

Q47 Sir Stephen Timms: A final point if I may, Chair. The Work and Pensions Committee today published a report on support for childcare costs in universal credit. You will recognise that supporting the costs of childcare is a big concern for MPs in your party and across the House. At the moment, maximum support for one child is capped at the level that was first set in 2005, at £760 per month. Is it not high time that that cap was updated?

The Prime Minister: As far as I recall, it is set at 85% of eligible childcare costs are reimbursable. That is quite a high threshold—85%.

Q48 Sir Stephen Timms: But subject to the £760 a month.



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The Prime Minister: That is from memory. I do not have the stats, and I will happily get back to you, Stephen. I think there are very few people at the cap. I absolutely appreciate the importance of childcare. I am not sure that the cap is necessarily the thing to focus on, because from memory I think it affects a small number of people. But I will happily have a look.

Sir Stephen Timms: Well, increasingly it is, as costs are rising. Thank you.

Chair: May I bring in Robin Walker, Chair of the Education Committee, very briefly on the matter of childcare?

Q49 **Mr Walker:** Thank you, Chair. Prime Minister, you have said that inactivity is one of the big issues that has arisen since your time as Chancellor, and is one of the big challenges that we face. Do you agree that better supporting childcare is one way of combating that, by bringing people back into the workplace and supporting people?

With that in mind, the tax-free childcare, which is supported by the Treasury, has been taken up for only about one in five of the children who are eligible for childcare, and of those who have opened accounts for tax-free childcare only about half use them. Is that a concern for you?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I started work on that when I was Chancellor, and work is ongoing on how to improve the take-up of existing childcare offers, which are not always well understood, particularly tax-free childcare and the accounts that you mention, Robin. That work is ongoing. I think we are changing the promotional material, how we explain it and how easy it is for people to access, and what they can use it on.

To make the obvious comment, of course there is always work to do. We do have one of the lowest rates of inactivity among women. Female participation in the labour force in the UK has gone up far more than in most other countries. Other people ask us how we have done that. There is of course more to do, which is why we continue to refine and improve the childcare offers.

Q50 **Mr Walker:** The early years have become a more and more important part of education and our understanding of the benefits of investment in the early years has improved over time. The IFS recently confirmed that early years spending has gone up, unlike other parts of education spending over the past 10 years. Do you think that trend is likely to continue?

The Prime Minister: Certainly if I have anything to do with it. Early years are very important, which is why as Chancellor I prioritised funding them in the last spending review that I did. In particular, I thought the work that Andrea Leadsom had done was instructive, and I have asked her to carry on doing that. That work is being rolled out across local authorities. You are right to say that all the evidence is clear that if we can intervene earlier and support children earlier, it makes a big difference. We cannot reorient the system overnight, but incrementally directing more resource there is a good and sensible thing to do.



Chair: Catherine McKinnell of the Petitions Committee.

Q51 **Catherine McKinnell:** Thank you, Chair. Prime Minister, to pick you up on a comment you made about increasing women's participation in the workforce. Are you aware that the number of women between the ages of 25 and 39 dropping out of the workforce is going up, not down? It is increasing, and all the progress that has been made in this country over many years is actually going backwards on that front. You should look at those statistics very carefully.

There are also very clear statistics that the number of mothers considering leaving their jobs is quite significant. Many are cutting down their hours due to the cost of childcare and the fact that, ultimately, many pay to work. That is obviously a significant cost to the economy. Prime Minister, you mentioned earlier that there is a tight labour market, which is a difficult issue to solve. Might I suggest that one way to solve it would be to make it affordable for women to stay in the workplace?

The Prime Minister: The point I was making, which I think stands, is that internationally we rank as a country with relatively high levels of female participation in the labour force. That is a fact. Of course, there is always work to do. It might well be that it has moved down over the past year—I do not have those numbers to hand—but internationally, that is something that we have done better than others. As I said, we will continue to look at our offers to see what more we can do to support those with childcare responsibilities to work, if that is what they want to do.

The inactivity problem that we are seeing most recently is not, as far as I am aware driven by an increase in child-carers leaving the workforce. It is much more driven by those over 50 and by an increase in student activity. The over-50s in particular are the biggest reason for the increase in economic inactivity.

Q52 **Catherine McKinnell:** Yes, because they have caring responsibilities, which is another issue that needs to be addressed.

The Prime Minister: It is not obvious that they do. It is not a problem that is completely well understood, but it is a mix of lifestyle decisions, ill health coming up and other reasons. It is not necessarily for caring responsibilities.

Q53 **Catherine McKinnell:** In terms of your international ratings, ours rates as one of the most expensive childcare systems in the world, so you should also bear that in mind.

In relation to the Healthy Start vouchers that you mentioned earlier, it was a flagship announcement and scheme often mentioned by the Government, but I have asked four times this year for the take-up of the scheme since it was digitised in April, because a lot of families expressed challenges around managing the new digitised system. I even asked at Treasury questions today. They could not give a figure. Prime Minister, do you have a figure for how many actually use the scheme?



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The Prime Minister: I don't but I will happily write to the Committee with the answer.

Q54 **Catherine McKinnell:** Good—that would be helpful. Thank you.

Prime Minister, are you aware that the Petitions Committee led a debate in Parliament yesterday on child bed poverty? There is a deputy headteacher in Leeds who has established a charity to provide beds for children because they are struggling to concentrate at school. Are you not ashamed that that is a reality for children growing up in Britain today?

The Prime Minister: What I am keen to make sure is that we do not have children growing up in poverty. All the evidence is crystal clear that the best way to do that is to ensure that children do not grow up in a workless household, and if you can achieve that, they are five times less likely to grow up in poverty, which is why I am pleased that there are several hundred thousand fewer households that are like that compared with when the Conservative Government first came into office. That is why ensuring that we can support people into good, well-paid jobs, and making sure that we continue increasing the national living wage is really important. That is the best way to ensure that children do not grow up in poverty, and that is what I want to see. We have made great progress. There are hundreds of thousands fewer children in poverty today than in 2010, but of course I want to keep driving that number down.

Q55 **Catherine McKinnell:** I just don't recognise what you are describing, Prime Minister. It seems to be a parallel reality. The number of children living in poverty is going up not down. We are headed for 34% by the Government's own preferred measure, which is going to reach the peak of the 1990s. This is going in the wrong direction, which is why children are going without beds. It is a symptom of child poverty. Given that 75% of children growing up in poverty live in a household where someone works, can you not see that yours is a very complacent response, Prime Minister? It just does not seem to be going to solve the problem. How are you going to solve child poverty?

The Prime Minister: Maybe we are looking at different numbers. The numbers that I know, which I am happy to share with the Committee, are that, as I have said previously, there are over 1 million fewer people in absolute poverty than there were in 2010. The children component of that measure of those in absolute poverty is, I think, 200,000 fewer children now than in 2010. Again, there are about 1 million fewer workless households today than in 2010. That is by far and away, I think, the biggest driver of a child growing up in poverty.

I am not remotely complacent about this. I do not want any child to grow up in poverty. It is awful to think that they are, and what we should do is continue to reduce it. We have made progress. There is always more to do. I think that the most important way to help those children is to make sure that their parents are in good, well-paid jobs.

Q56 **Chair:** Prime Minister, I am sure that you will join me in wishing Steve Brine well. As Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, he should



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be here, but unfortunately he has been taken ill with the flu. He has asked me to ask his questions for him.

We meet on the day of the second nurses strike, and tomorrow of course we have the ambulance industrial action. The Government have stressed that we have an independent pay review process, but increasingly it seems to be something that the other political parties and especially the trade unions do not believe in. How big a problem do you think that is, and what do you propose to do about it?

The Prime Minister: It is worth bearing in mind that the pay review bodies have been in existence for a long time, accepted by different political parties as a sensible part of the process. They were used by previous Labour Governments as well. Other non-Conservative politicians have said that it wouldn't be right to cut across the pay review bodies. They exist because pay is obviously difficult. They exist to come to a sensible, considered and fair view, balancing all the competing interests about what reasonable and paid settlements are. That is why the Government accepted them in full across the board, not just for the NHS. In many cases, those pay settlements were more than what the Government had initially thought was doable and, indeed, higher in many cases than what was being offered in the private sector. I think they are an important part of the process, and the Government have respected them.

Q57 **Chair:** What reform of the pay review process would you like to see?

The Prime Minister: I don't think I have said I do want to see a reform to it.

Q58 **Chair:** Is that something you would welcome the Health Committee having a look at?

The Prime Minister: It would not be for me to direct the Health Committee in their investigations. I would not dream of doing so.

Q59 **Chair:** That sounds like a no.

The Prime Minister: The pay bodies are set up to balance—the terms of reference are relatively straightforward—what is affordable for the taxpayer, because ultimately all these things have to be paid for, with the need to make sure that we can recruit and retain staff in the various sectors in which they are operating. I do not think most people would quibble with those as things for them to consider. Inflation is also important. It is not just important for us; it has been important for Governments over the last few decades. That is an important part of what they do as well.

Q60 **Chair:** The pay review body will, of course, be looking again in the new year at NHS pay and will report to you in the summer. It now looks inevitable that the process will provide a much better offer to the NHS then, because of the inflation figures. Is that on the agenda for change for next year and, with the promise of such, shouldn't the Royal College of Nursing call off their industrial action now, this winter, while we



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attempt to scale the covid backlog and get the extra resources into social care to ease discharge and, therefore, the very real stress that our ambulance crews are facing on a daily basis?

The Prime Minister: I think, with regard to inflation, the pay review bodies, when they make their decisions, are aware of what forward estimates of inflation are. Indeed, that was the case for this year's estimates for inflation, which already were in the evidence and in their considerations. Of course, you are right: there will be a body and a process for next year. Among any other things, the Health Secretary has been clear that our door is always open to talk to everybody and be constructive about how we approach these things in the future.

What I want to see is the NHS able to focus on reducing the backlogs and improving the quality and timeliness of care that people are getting. That is why we have put billions of pounds of extra funding into both the NHS and social care, as you mentioned, in the autumn statement, in spite of the other difficult decisions that needed to be made. I think that represents a clear commitment from the Government to the importance of the NHS and making sure that it is funded well, but we do need to make sure that that money can actually now go and deliver for patients.

Q61 **Chair:** In short, what would be your personal message this Christmas to NHS workers and others who are taking strike action or contemplating strike action as we run up to Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I have always been very clear in expressing my gratitude and admiration for our NHS workers and, indeed, our public sector workers across the board, for the job that they do. I have acknowledged that it is difficult; it is difficult for everybody, because inflation is where it is.

The best way to help them and to help everyone else in the country is for us to get a grip and reduce inflation as quickly as possible. We need to make sure that the decisions that we make can bring about that outcome. If we get it wrong and we are still dealing with high inflation in a year's time, that is not going to help anybody. I do not want to see that; I want to see things get back to normal. That is why having an independent pay process is an important part of us making those decisions and getting them correct, and that is why we have accepted those recommendations in full.

Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister. I am impartial about the quality of your answers, but the brevity is good. We are on time. We will move on to the last section of our questions, which we have called the state of the Union. It starts with the Chairman of the Scottish Affairs Committee, Pete Wishart.

Q62 **Pete Wishart:** Hello, Prime Minister. It is nice to see you here. I think this Committee is disappointed that we did not get the opportunity to hear from your predecessor, such was the pace of events over the past few months. It has now been four weeks since the Supreme Court made its decision that the Scottish Parliament did not have the necessary



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powers to legislate for a Scottish independence referendum. What happens now?

The Prime Minister: We respect the decision of the Supreme Court, and we will continue to focus on delivering for the people of Scotland and working constructively with the Scottish Government to do that.

Q63 **Pete Wishart:** What has happened is that six opinion polls in a row have shown majority support for Scottish independence. If there was an independence referendum tomorrow, there is a very good chance that Scottish independence would win. Again, I ask you how do we take this forward? How do we start to resolve the situation?

I do not think you should expect those of us who support Scottish independence to take our ambitions for our nation away. What is the UK Government going to do to respond to the situation? If this session is called state of the Union, it is certainly in a state when part of it seems to want the option of leaving this Union.

The Prime Minister: I will continue delivering for the people of Scotland. We have talked about all the issues that the country is grappling with, whether that is inflation, the cost of living more than anything else, ensuring that we can have health services responsive to people's needs, protecting our energy security and standing up to Russian aggression.

Those are all really important issues. On many of them, we can and will continue to work constructively with the Scottish Government to make a difference to people's lives. That is very much my focus, and that is what I will continue to do.

Pete Wishart: Do you realise how hollow and woeful that response sounds to the situation of Scotland? We want to resolve this democratically. We believe that the Scottish people should decide their future. I think that is how most nations would approach this issue. Even the Labour party has its own new constitutional plans that it is bringing forward, and I think the Liberals still believe in federalism across the UK. You are not going to sit there, are you, and tell me that you have no plans to deal with some of the constitutional difficulties and issues in Scotland just now? Surely you must have some sort of plan, other than all the other things that you are going to do anyway.

The Prime Minister: One thing that we are very keen to deliver is all the recommendations of the Smith commission, which represented a significant transfer of power and responsibility to the Scottish Government, which is probably the most powerful devolved Parliament anywhere in the world.

The Scotland Act 2016 set out all of those, and we want to work constructively with the Scottish Government to deliver on all of those. We are making good progress on them. That represents one of the biggest transfers of power that anyone has ever seen. That is the UK Government respecting the commitment they made and delivering on them.

Q64 **Pete Wishart:** We have all been asking the Government—from you all



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the way down to senior Ministers and the Secretary of State for Scotland—what do we do now? How do we bring this forward? How do we start to accommodate the legitimate requirements of the Scottish people, when it comes to deciding its constitutional future? We have not had any answers, and again we are not getting any answers at all.

The only thing we have had is from the Secretary of State for Scotland, who said that we will just know when we get there, when the conditions will be right. He gave the famous duck test—if it looks like a duck and waddles like a duck—you know the rest of that, Prime Minister. Is that what it is? Is that what we have to wait for? We have to wait until you decide that the conditions are right for the Scottish people to have the opportunity to decide their constitutional future?

The Prime Minister: My belief is that the Scottish people would like their Governments—both the Scottish and the UK Governments—to focus on the issues that are most pressing at the moment, given the scale of the challenges that we face. I have been very clear that I want to do that in a constructive manner. I want to work in partnership with the Scottish Government where we can, and I think we can make a difference to people's lives.

That is why I called the First Minister very shortly after assuming office. It is why I attended the British-Irish Council that brings together everyone from across our islands in one place to discuss these issues. I will continue to operate in that spirit and, hopefully, make a difference on the issues that matter to people at this time.

Pete Wishart: Here is something else I will offer you; see whether you agree with this. The more you prevaricate on this and say no, along with your failure to engage with the legitimate demands of the Scottish people, the only thing that will happen is that support for independence will continue to grow. At some point you will have to sit down and deal with that. Why do you not just deal with that now? Why not put forward the necessary change in the legislation so that we can do this? The other option is surely that support for independence will go up, and at some point you will have to address that. You do realise that, don't you?

The Prime Minister: What I am focused on is making a difference to the lives of people in Scotland. The challenges they face, first and foremost, are with the cost of living and the impact that is having on them. I want to do everything I can to try to alleviate some of those burdens, and provide opportunity and jobs for them. I think we can do a lot of that in partnership with the Scottish Government, when we work constructively together, which is what I am going to keep doing. I think that is the right thing to do.

Q65 **Pete Wishart:** I think the Scottish people will be listening to these proceedings, and will be very disappointed that you can't even offer one scenario where you are going to engage positively with what they seem to want.

Lastly from me, you are the only senior Government Minister who was



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given a fixed penalty notice during partygate. The other recipient is, of course, facing the Privileges Committee and some very serious sanctions. Do you think we have been unnecessarily hard on your predecessor but one, or maybe too lenient on yourself?

The Prime Minister: I have addressed that in the past and I have nothing further to add. It would not be my place to comment on the Privileges Committee, which is obviously independent from Government.

I would just disagree with something you said before about the Scottish people seeing us engaging positively. That is exactly what we are doing. We are engaging positively with the Scottish Government. That is why I called the First Minister shortly after taking office—indeed, on my first day. It is why I went to see her and other devolved leaders shortly after taking office. I was the first UK Prime Minister to attend that gathering since 2007. I think that serves as a demonstration that I do want to engage positively to make a difference to the lives of people in Scotland.

Pete Wishart: I can tell by your demeanour that you are unhappy about trying to address this—

The Prime Minister: I think that is the right thing to do and—

Pete Wishart: I think everybody can sense your discomfort in this situation.

The Prime Minister: Just recently when I was Chancellor, we made sure that we could invest directly in Scottish communities through the levelling-up fund. Those investments are making a real difference on the ground to those communities. That is an example of what we can do, and I am going to keep doing more of it.

Chair: I would just like to point out that the references to the Privileges Committee have nothing to do with fixed penalty notices; they are about a completely separate matter. As a member of the Privileges Committee, I think I am entitled to say that.

Q66 **Joanna Cherry:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. In September, the current Home Secretary told a fringe event at your party conference that ultimately the United Kingdom would need to leave the European convention on human rights. Last week, when we had the Deputy Prime Minister and Lord Chancellor in front of the Joint Committee on Human Rights, I asked about his position on the convention. He said, "The Government's position is very clear: we rule nothing out. Nothing is off the table for the future". Can you confirm whether you agree with your Home Secretary and whether the Deputy Prime Minister accurately described the position of your Government to my Committee?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear, as I said previously, that I want to deliver an immigration system that means that when someone comes here illegally, they don't have the right to stay and we will be able to return them either to their own country, where that is safe, or to a safe third country alternative where that makes sense. We will introduce the



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legislation next year. I am confident we can deliver on the system I want to put in place.

Joanna Cherry: But what I asked you is whether the Home Secretary is correct to say that, ultimately, it will be required that we leave the convention.

The Prime Minister: As I said, we will put in place the legislation next year, and I am sure we will discuss it at that time.

Joanna Cherry: Do you disagree with her?

The Prime Minister: I don't think I was in government at the time she made the comment, and I am not familiar with it, but what I can tell you about is the system that I am going to deliver as Prime Minister, which I am working on with the Home Secretary. You will see the legislation next year and, no doubt, we will have the opportunity to debate it then. I would not want to speculate on that now.

Q67 **Joanna Cherry:** Despite the high turnover of Prime Ministers, you were in government last week when the Deputy Prime Minister told me that it was not "off the table". Is that correct—leaving the convention is not off the table for your Government?

The Prime Minister: I want to fix this problem, and I am going to do everything I need to do to fix the problem of illegal migration in small boats coming here. We will introduce legislation in the new year that will help us do that. As I said, there are lots of different things we need to do—legislation is part of it, Rwanda is part of it, our approach to Albania is part of it—but I am confident we can deliver on all these things.

Q68 **Joanna Cherry:** When will the British Bill of Rights Bill have a Second Reading?

The Prime Minister: I do not have a specific date. As with all these things, it is when parliamentary time allows.

Q69 **Joanna Cherry:** Has it been deprioritised to allow you to concentrate on the new immigration legislation you have just mentioned?

The Prime Minister: I am a new Prime Minister; you would expect me to look at the entire legislative programme and make decisions on that basis. There are some things we need to do sooner rather than later. For example, with Northern Ireland we had to make decisions because of the lack of a functioning Executive. That meant that that legislation had to be introduced at that time. That was not something I was anticipating beforehand. Those are the types of things that come up, but we are keen to deliver on illegal migration, and it is something that I have said is a priority.

Q70 **Joanna Cherry:** The Bill of Rights Bill is very much Dominic Raab's baby—very much his pet project. If the bullying allegations against him, which are currently being investigated, are found to be true and he has to resign, would that be the end of the Bill of Rights?



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The Prime Minister: I do not think you would expect me to comment on either of those points. I would just point out it was also a manifesto commitment to update the Human Rights Act.

Q71 **Joanna Cherry:** But there wasn't a manifesto commitment to repeal and replace the Human Rights Act, was there?

The Prime Minister: There are lots of different ways of doing it, but I am making the broader point that a commitment to update the Human Rights Act was there from 2019.

Q72 **Joanna Cherry:** But my point is that Dominic Raab's Bill does not update the Human Rights Act; it repeals it and replaces it with something else. Are you saying that the option of simply updating it is still on the table?

The Prime Minister: I was making the broader point that that is where the genesis of the policy comes from, but there are some very practical, sensible things that would be good—I think everyone hopefully would agree—whether that is deporting more foreign national offenders who are using their article 8 right to a family life to stop being deported, or whether it is convicted terrorists in prisons who are somehow able to use their right to socialise to stop being separated from other prisoners, which we think will actually cause more radicalisation. Indeed, that was the recommendation of an independent reviewer of counter-terrorism for us. Where we are not able to deliver on those very sensible policy things because of the way the HRA is being interpreted, it seems entirely reasonable to look at how best to resolve those.

Q73 **Joanna Cherry:** Will your new immigration laws contain any provisions derogating from the European convention on human rights?

The Prime Minister: Again, I will not speculate on future legislation now, but I am going to introduce legislation next year that will deliver on the immigration system that I want to see, which is that if someone comes here illegally, we will have the right to remove them to either their own country or a safe third country alternative. They should not have the ability to stay here. Quite frankly, I think that is a common-sense position that is held by the vast majority of British people and that is the system I want to deliver.

Q74 **Joanna Cherry:** The convention and the Human Rights Act are woven into the Scotland Act, which established the Scottish Parliament. My Committee has heard expert evidence that a consent motion will be required from the Scottish Parliament before the Human Rights Act could be repealed. Indeed, our cross-party Committee of MPs and peers has recommended that you should not proceed without that consent. Now, you made great play to my colleague, Pete Wishart, a moment ago about your new agenda with the Scottish Government, and when you took over as Prime Minister, you said you wanted to reset the relationship between Westminster and Holyrood and that the Union between Scotland and England should be collaborative and constructive. In that spirit, will you respect the vote of the Scottish Parliament if it withholds consent to the repeal of the Human Rights Act?



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The Prime Minister: I want to make sure that we work through the Sewel convention processes, that there is good engagement and constructive dialogue, and that is what we will try to do.

- Q75 **Joanna Cherry:** Yes, but if the outcome of the process is the withholding of consent, will you respect that in the spirit of collaboration and constructive engagement that you have promised?

The Prime Minister: I do not think anyone would expect all Governments across the United Kingdom to agree on absolutely everything, but, where we can work collaboratively and constructively together, we will do, and even where we disagree it is right to have engagement about those things. That is the approach that I will take.

- Q76 **Joanna Cherry:** You said a moment ago that the Scottish Parliament was the most powerful devolved Parliament anywhere in the world. Wouldn't you expect such a powerful devolved Parliament to be able to protect human rights laws woven into its foundation document?

The Prime Minister: I would expect the Scottish Parliament to continue delivering for its people on the things that matter, whether that is schools or policing, and to work with the UK Government where it makes sense.

- Q77 **Chair:** Prime Minister, would you welcome proposals from anybody on how to deliver your objective of being able to either send people back to their home country or send people back to a safe country if they arrive here illegally—for example, from the Joint Committee on Human Rights, the SNP or the Labour party? Would you consider those proposals?

The Prime Minister: I am always happy to hear proposals. There is no shortage of them coming my way, I have discovered, so I don't think anyone needs an invitation from me to give me their opinion.

Chair: I call Sir William Cash from the European Scrutiny Committee. We still have much European law in our system.

- Q78 **Sir William Cash:** Yes. Prime Minister, our statute book in the United Kingdom is still really seriously affected by accumulated and current EU law, even though we have left the EU. The European Scrutiny Committee has found this deeply disturbing, and the interaction between our own statutes and European statutes includes our own current Online Safety Bill and the European Union's Digital Services Act.

There is an urgent need, in particular, to protect our children and grandchildren in relation to the monstrous and evil state of affairs now stalking the land, whereby there is child sexual abuse and exposure of children to harmful content online. I am sure it is a matter of grave concern to you as well. This is combining to destroy the lives of young people and their families, even driving some children to suicide, such as in the tragic case of Molly Russell. The inquest proved that was the case.

As we now know through lobby documents that have recently been released by the Corporate Europe Observatory under freedom of information procedures, there is massive secrecy within the institutions



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and the procedural labyrinth of the EU, including the trilogue system, with big tech firms having recently spent more than £27 million on lobbying in just one year, in both the EU and here.

We have tabled amendments, and are now drafting further ones, to our Online Safety Bill to impose personal criminal liability, including imprisonment, for those senior managers who wilfully fail to comply with their statutory safety duties, and who, by the abuse of their platforms and algorithms, fail to protect children from online harm. In this matter, we are fully supported by the NSPCC, other children's charities and many MPs from across the House coming together in the national interest.

Do you appreciate the nature and scale of the problem? Would you meet myself and others in the first week of the new year, before Report stage on 16 January, to ensure that our Online Safety Bill is amended to include the concept of safety controllers, and so that senior directors and managers will be made personally criminally responsible if their service fails to comply with children's safety duties—such failures have resulted in profound tragedy and harm to our children—whatever the European Union has decided to legislate for itself? Will you please give me some clear understanding that you will support the proposals of the NSPCC, myself and others in this matter?

The Prime Minister: First of all, I think this is a really important piece of legislation for exactly the reasons you outlined, Sir Bill. At the moment, our children are not as safe as they deserve and need to be online. Our Bill is a world-leading piece of legislation that has been designed to ensure that large tech companies take more responsibility for the safety of their users, particularly children. There are strong protections in there for our children; they have been welcomed by stakeholders across the board.

To your point on the powers that we have to hold them to account, Ofcom will be able to fine them up to 10% of their global turnover, which is obviously very significant. It can direct them to make specific improvements to their platforms, it can force third-party services to remove content, and, under the Bill, senior managers are already able to face criminal sanctions if their company does not comply with Ofcom's requirements.

I know the Culture Secretary has been engaging with all parties widely. The Bill has been widely supported, by not just all the former Secretaries of State but children's groups and others. As I have said, it is something that we are leading the world in. I am sure she will continue to engage with colleagues as the Bill makes its way through Parliament.

Q79 **Sir William Cash:** But don't you accept the premise from which I set out the question I put to you, asking if you would meet us to discuss these matters? Unfortunately, there is a serious lacuna here, and the criminal responsibility to which you refer is one stage removed; it is not direct, and it does not deal with the problem, as the NSPCC and others have clearly stated.



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The Prime Minister: Okay. I am sure the Culture Secretary will continue to engage on the specific detail. But the principle of the Bill, as far as I understand it, and what we want to achieve, is that senior managers could face criminal sanctions if the company does not comply with Ofcom's information requirements. I will happily have the Culture Secretary pick that up.

Q80 **Chair:** Prime Minister, something to look forward to in the new year—a meeting with Sir William Cash.

The Prime Minister: I will get the Culture Secretary to pick it up immediately.

Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you, Sir William. Sir Bob Neill for the Justice Committee.

Q81 **Sir Robert Neill:** Good to see you, Prime Minister. How seriously do you take the Government's obligation under the Constitutional Reform Act to uphold the independence of the judiciary and to provide adequate resource for the efficient discharge of the justice system?

The Prime Minister: Of course I am committed to the independence of the judiciary, Sir Bob. It is absolutely a cornerstone of how I see the world.

You are right about resourcing. I think we are investing about £138 million additionally into the criminal legal aid sector, for example, and we have already implemented, I think, a 15% increase to most fee schemes. I know that is something you have thought about and mentioned in the past. In sum, it will mean that our criminal legal aid lawyers will receive the biggest boost to their compensation in some decades.

Q82 **Sir Robert Neill:** Would you accept that there is a situation where, despite that investment, which I recognise, people can be waiting for two years for a serious sexual offence case to be heard, or a small business can wait 18 months for a money claim or a contract dispute to be resolved, which is not really efficient?

The Prime Minister: Yes, look, we absolutely have a challenge with the backlog in our court system. I think we were making progress. It is as a result of covid, let us be clear, and that is why in the spending review in 2021 we allocated almost £0.5 billion extra over the rest of the Parliament to try to get this backlog down. We were making progress until the barristers' strike, but we now need to redouble our efforts.

Some of the things we are doing include recruiting up to 1,000 new judges and removing the limit on sitting days. We are also providing more support for remote hearings and the continued operation of the Nightingale courts. I think that all of those initiatives will help us to move through the backlog. You are absolutely right, though: we want people to have swift and timely access to justice, so this deserves our attention and is getting it.

Q83 **Sir Robert Neill:** I believe you are to due meet the Lord Chief Justice of



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England and Wales in the new year. Will you make a point of particularly listening to the concerns of the senior judiciary that he has raised with the Justice Committee about the delays and pressures on the system as it stands?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I look forward to meeting him and having that conversation.

Q84 **Sir Robert Neill:** Do you also accept that legal certainty is important for British business and for investment in the UK?

The Prime Minister: Yes, you are right about that. It is not just for individuals; for business as well, it is important that we have timely justice and certainty.

Q85 **Sir Robert Neill:** How does the provision that would cause perhaps more than 2,000 or 3,000 pieces of retained legislation to expire automatically at the end of 2023, as currently proposed, add to business certainty?

The Prime Minister: On that point, it is right that we look at the stock of retained EU law that we have and make sure that we, as a UK Parliament, have decided what we want to keep and what we want to flex and change. I want to move on with that as quickly as possible. Now, there are some provisions in the Bill, as you know, for flexibility around doing that, but I do think it is right that we make progress on this.

Q86 **Sir Robert Neill:** But are you open to some flexibility on the time limit for achieving this?

The Prime Minister: No, but it is about making sure that we can do this properly, which is what we are going to do. The referendum was several years ago, and I think it is appropriate that we look at our statute book and say, "Hang on. Which bits of these that we grandfathered in deliberately at the time for practicality do we actually think are right for the UK?"

It may well be that bits of them are, and that would be straightforward, but there will certainly be areas—particularly in those areas of our economy where we want to see growth, whether that is in life sciences or digital and data or financial services, which we are reforming already, or professional services—where we will want to take advantage of the new flexibilities and sovereignty that we have to do things differently and to create opportunity in this country. I think that is really important in demonstrating some of the benefits of the freedoms that we have from Brexit. I believe we need to do it quickly to provide the certainty that, you are right, people should expect.

Q87 **Sir Robert Neill:** Does quickly mean arbitrarily, or is it just doing it thoroughly?

The Prime Minister: No, we should do it quickly and thoroughly. What people should be focused on is the practical changes that we are going to make that will make things better in the UK. That is what I am focused on.



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I am focused on being able to say, "Here are the things we are going to change, and these are the benefits that will flow from them."

- Q88 **Sir Robert Neill:** I have one final point, if I may. When you became Prime Minister, you referred to delivering on our 2019 manifesto commitment. That commitment has already been referred to in that we want to update human rights and administrative law. Of course, we made no mention or suggestion at all that we would ever leave the convention, and I do not think you have suggested that, Prime Minister, have you?

The Prime Minister: The reason we are having this conversation is with regard, specifically, to illegal migration. I am clear about the system that I want to deliver. There are lots of theories people will have, but the example I point people to is that of Albania. People have said, "Well, you have to leave the ECHR if you want to fix this problem." I made the point that, hang on, lots of other European countries—in fact, the vast majority of them—all reject close to 100% of Albanian cases. They are all signatories to ECAT, they are all signatories to the ECHR, so we must be able to fix the problem we have with illegal migrants from Albania.

- Q89 **Sir Robert Neill:** I take your point, and I agree with you. In terms of updating and staying within the convention, as those countries have, will you have another look at the report by Sir Peter Gross and the independent review of the Human Rights Act, which suggested updating and a number of specific changes in areas, including those which you and I have just been discussing—migration, extraterritoriality and other practical measures? What do you think of that as a potential way forward?

The Prime Minister: I am going to defer to your expertise on this. I am grateful to Sir Peter and his panel, in fact, for their report, and I know the Justice Secretary and the Government have considered the report in producing their own consultation in this area, which you will probably be more familiar with than I am. But I think, taking on board some of the spirit of the suggestions—for example, emphasis on common law—I will happily take that away as well.

Sir Robert Neill: Thank you.

Chair: Joanna, forgive me, but I've got to let some other people in first. I will let you in if there is time. Philip Dunne.

- Q90 **Philip Dunne:** I have one additional point, Prime Minister, in relation to a Department that is at risk of overload because of a backlog of work, and that is DEFRA. You announced recently that you are intending to extend the current Session of Parliament until autumn 2023. One of the pieces of legislation that is expected to be concluded during the course of 2023 is the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill, which includes a vast number of pieces of legislation stemming from the EU relating to the environment.

There is no clarity at this point as to where the process of reviewing those laws has got to, and therefore there is a lot of concern that there



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may be some wholesale changes to environmental law undertaken at short notice, with little ability for either House of Parliament to review them. Could you give us some clarity about the timetable for that Bill and the extent to which the DEFRA ministerial team could be directed to start working within the Department, and give some reassurance that the environmental provisions are not going to be disturbed wholesale?

The Prime Minister: Yes. We have already committed, Philip—I think, during the Second Reading of the REUL Bill—that the Bill would not weaken environmental protections, so that commitment has already been made. What we want to do is use the powers in the Bill to ensure that our own environmental law is functioning and able to drive the continued improved environmental outcomes that you and I, and I think everyone, want to see, and make sure that the UK regulatory framework is tailored and appropriate for our own country.

You can also just look at the proof points. We have already introduced the Fisheries Act, the Agriculture Act and the Environment Act—those are all ambitious reforms to all those areas post leaving the EU, which I think we have done successfully and are world leading in many cases—and we have already repealed over 140 bits of retained EU law in the DEFRA space, particularly the European Fisheries Control Agency, for example.

Now, in terms of the process from here, there is a public dashboard, I think, that DEFRA have put in place. They are working through it, and we expect that dashboard to be updated in the new year to reflect the full extent of the REUL regulations that we think are in scope. I look forward to continuing working with you and others to make sure that we get this right.

Q91 **Chair:** On this subject, one Minister told me that officials are being constrained from drafting replacement regulations and consulting on them, because they are not allowed to do that until the legislation is on the statute book. Can I suggest that you should authorise Departments to start drafting and consulting on the replacement regulation from now, so that as soon as the statute is approved, they can get on with the parliamentary process of scrutinising all this stuff? That is where the bottleneck is going to exist.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I will certainly take that away. There is a body of work to be done.

Chair: Thank you.

Q92 **Mr Walker:** As a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, I particularly welcome the fact that you did attend the British-Irish Council; I think that was important. There are strong rumours that the UK and the EU are working towards a Valentine's day agreement on the protocol. Are you confident that an agreement will be in place in time for the institutions of the Good Friday agreement to be back up and running for the very important anniversary next year?



The Prime Minister: I have been clear, actually, that I have not put an arbitrary or strict deadline on the conversations that we are having. I do not think that that is necessarily helpful, and I do not want to unnecessarily raise people's expectations of a breakthrough. What I am committed to doing is working constructively with our European partners to see if we can find a way through this to resolve the very clear challenges that the protocol presents to Northern Ireland's place in the Union. I want to see those problems fixed. I want to protect Northern Ireland's place in the Union. The Foreign Secretary met with Maroš Šefčovič just recently, and those talks are ongoing.

Q93 **Mr Walker:** Thank you. One issue that affects every part of the UK in the education space is international students. There have been recent suggestions that there could be some kind of crackdown or reduction in the numbers. Yet when I have visited universities, whether it is Queen's Belfast, Cardiff, Glasgow or indeed Worcester, they all value the international students and the economic and cultural benefits that they bring. When I was at the DFE we celebrated hitting the milestone—the target—of 600,000 international students as an unequivocally good thing. Do you think that that is a target that we should continue to pursue? Do you think that we should go further, or do you think that there is actually some reason to reduce the numbers?

The Prime Minister: First, I think that international students do make a significant economic and cultural contribution to the UK's higher education sector, and indeed the UK. I think they enrich the university experience for all students, actually, and it is a good thing. The point to recognise is that the target that we had set of 600,000 was for 2030. We met it several years early. That is, in some senses, a sign of success, but obviously it causes one to look at the situation. I think no one is doubting the contribution that those students make to the UK and the economy.

Q94 **Mr Walker:** Do you agree, given that all our universities are elite institutions, that the suggestions of allowing only some to welcome international students, and not others, is a non-starter?

The Prime Minister: That is not something that I have spoken about. I want to make sure that we attract the best and the brightest to the UK. That is something that we will always want to do. There is a global competition for talent. Actually, funnily enough, our visa system for highly skilled people is very competitive. Those are the reforms that we have put in place. We will always continue to attract people here; we just want to make sure that people, when they are here, are contributing one way or another. I think that that is an important foundation of a proper migration system.

Q95 **Mr Walker:** Thank you, Prime Minister. Finally, there has been briefing that you are looking at a British baccaulaureate for post 16. Given that we are talking about the Union, what conversations have there been with the devolved Administrations about that, given that education is wholly devolved in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales? How can we call it a British baccaulaureate if it is England-only?



The Prime Minister: The main focus, as the Secretary of State probably said previously at the Education Committee, is looking at maps. That is something that I have spoken about in the past. We are an outlier country in the lack of maths study after 16, compared to almost everyone else. We certainly lag behind in numeracy when it comes to young adults—or we significantly lag behind the OECD average. Given how important that is for people’s opportunities in life and their ability to have good jobs, I think it is worth us looking at that and seeing whether we have things as we would like them, if we are really focused on making sure that our children and grandchildren have a fantastic future ahead of them.

Chair: Thank you. I should have just mentioned that Mr Walker is standing in for the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, who could not be here today. He serves on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee as well as chairing the Education Committee. How he finds the time for that, I do not know. Well done! Catherine McKinnell.

Q96 **Catherine McKinnell:** Thank you, Chair. Given that you said that it will be one of the first things that you do, and you have already outlasted the last Prime Minister, where is your independent ethics adviser?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am hopeful that I can make an announcement on that soon. It is important to me to get someone who I think is right for the job. Rest assured, I am hard at it. As I said, hopefully we can have an announcement soon.

Q97 **Catherine McKinnell:** Okay. I appreciate that you cannot comment on ongoing legal proceedings, but do you regret ignoring the warnings about a lack of basic checks, which resulted in an estimated £6.7 billion of public money being wasted to fraud on covid contracts?

The Prime Minister: Again, I have addressed this extensively in the House, and in the interests of finishing on time I will keep my answer short. There is absolutely no tolerance for people who have defrauded the system. It is wrong, particularly at a time of crisis, and they will be relentlessly and rigorously pursued, as they already are being—we’ve had dozens and dozens of arrests, billions of pounds recovered, and specialist agencies set up to go after people who have perpetrated this.

But I would say that the newest estimates of fraud across some of the schemes during coronavirus not only have reduced by a third from where they were; they are now either in line with, or lower than, the fraud that you would expect from a typical Government programme. Considering the speed and scale at which they were implemented, actually, it is positive. But there is obviously work to do, and we will keep going after people.

Q98 **Catherine McKinnell:** The question was, do you regret ignoring the warnings?

The Prime Minister: I actually don’t think that’s the right characterisation at the time, if anything. In the interests of time, I won’t go into it. I could regale you with many quotes from many politicians from



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all parties about how we were not going fast enough in removing checks and bureaucracy from businesses' ability to access loans.

Q99 **Chair:** Can I just press you on one thing? When you were Chancellor, you lost a Minister in the Lords, who was very clear that he did not feel that this was being treated seriously enough in the clearing-up operation. What has changed since then?

The Prime Minister: Actually, many of the things that he mentioned are already happening, whether it's a new public sector fraud authority, more resources into the crime-fighting agencies or more arrests. A dashboard was something that he was particularly concerned about. That was already being implemented, which is important for comparability of statistics across different lenders, for example, and recovery and bounce back loans. All those types of things actually were being implemented and are being implemented.

Chair: We are now a minute over time, but please could you give us time for two one-liners? Joanna Cherry.

Q100 **Joanna Cherry:** You mentioned the British bacculaureate. I'm not saying it's a bad idea, but it would, of course, be an English bacculaureate, wouldn't it? Education is fully devolved, and Scottish students already do a wider range of subjects at their higher level than in England.

The Prime Minister: Yes. As I said, my focus is looking at maths post 16.

Joanna Cherry: Yes, but my point is that it wouldn't be a British bacculaureate; it would be an English one, because education is fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

The Prime Minister: I am not actually talking about that. I was just talking about people studying more maths after the age of 16. That doesn't mean it is in a bacculaureate; there are lots of different ways that people could study maths.

Joanna Cherry: But do you accept my point?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it was the same point that Robin made.

Joanna Cherry: No, it's not. It is a different point. My point was that if there was to be a British bacculaureate, it would not be a British bacculaureate. It would be an English one, because education is fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament. It's not a trick question, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: It is a statement of fact, and I think it is the same point that Robin made. I wasn't disagreeing with it. It is actually a shorthand that people use, because of the alliteration, for having a broader qualification. I don't think it is meant to be, in any way, a reflection on the devolution settlement. I literally think that is all it was, and I was talking about maths post 16.

Joanna Cherry: Yes, but my point is—



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Chair: I think you have made your point.

Joanna Cherry: Okay.

Q101 **Alicia Kearns:** The original integrated review failed to reference Taiwan explicitly, despite Xi Jinping's clear intention and the fact that 40% of all global trade goes through the South China sea, if you include the Malacca strait, including 80% of all semiconductor chips. If there was an illegal invasion, the effect on the worldwide economy would truly be crippling. Can you please assure us that there will be explicit reference to Taiwan within the IR refresh? Otherwise, we are not learning the lesson of Ukraine, where Putin told us time and time again that he was going to invade, and we just didn't believe it. Alongside that, there is the need to reference the current situation in the Balkans, where we see escalating conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, and the undermining of the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where we have an explicit commitment and requirements to uphold peace and security.

The Prime Minister: All noted.

Alicia Kearns: That's not a yes, though, is it?

The Prime Minister: I'm not going to write the IR right here and now, but all noted.

Alicia Kearns: You have the power, Prime Minister!

The Prime Minister: All things that you would expect, I would go over as we are refreshing it.

Chair: Prime Minister, you have not been as generous with your time as your predecessors, but we are very, very grateful that you managed to fit us in before Christmas. You have also answered the questions very fully—whether satisfactorily or not is not a matter for me. Thank you very, very much. I am sure the Committee would like to wish you and your family a very good Christmas. I certainly wish the rest of my Committee a good Christmas as well.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, and merry Christmas.