



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence: Evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 1602

Tuesday 4 July 2023

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 4 July 2023.

Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Harriett Baldwin; Mr Clive Betts; Steve Brine; Sir Chris Bryant; Greg Clark; Philip Dunne; Dame Diana Johnson; Alicia Kearns; Catherine McKinnell; Sir Robert Neill; Mr Robin Walker; Sir Bill Wiggan; Pete Wishart; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-114

Witness

[I](#): Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Prime Minister.



Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Prime Minister.

Chair: Welcome to this summer session of the Liaison Committee, and welcome to the Prime Minister, who is giving evidence today. I have noted, Prime Minister, that we have been informed that you have an engagement immediately after this session, so we are aiming to end on the dot of 3.30 pm. You are usually very generous with a bit of extra time, but we will let you off today. Thank you very much for what you usually do for us.

We have slightly altered the order, because Sir Bob Neill has to speak in the estimates day debate, so we will take him first. He will be referring to the fact that the Liaison Committee itself has launched an inquiry to explore Select Committees' scrutiny of strategic thinking across Government, with which I can assure you the civil service and Ministers are already well engaged. We look forward to that being a positive inquiry. Sir Bob Neill.

Q1 **Sir Robert Neill:** Thank you very much, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, I was tempted to say I am opening the bowling, but maybe that is not the appropriate start for today. I want to refer to the inquiry that the Liaison Committee has set up, because we attempt, after all, to co-ordinate the activity of all the Select Committees. The purpose of the inquiry is to look at the way Government seeks to co-ordinate policy, decisions and action across Government Departments. Do you recognise that there is a problem with UK Government activities being very siloed?

The Prime Minister: I think that, historically, that has been a concern of Government. I saw that as Chancellor, actually—probably most acutely when I was doing spending reviews, where Departments would focus on the things that were most important to them. Some of the areas that required Departments to work together to put in bids were probably less developed than you might like, with the early years being an obvious example of that. I can certainly see why the perception is there and, as I said, I saw elements of that as Chancellor.

Q2 **Sir Robert Neill:** Can I draw the position of the Ministry of Justice to your attention as an example of this? It is a Department whose funding is not protected in financial terms, but which is frequently under pressure because of failures in other parts of the system. For example, people end up in the justice system because they have had chaotic lifestyles. Families have broken up. They have been failed by social services, they have been failed at school and they have been failed by drug-testing programmes. What are the means whereby the Government can take into account the pressures that are placed on the downstream Department, which is the recipient of failures elsewhere? Is there a mechanism to recognise that and to join up policy across those areas?

The Prime Minister: Yes. When I was Chancellor, we established something called the shared outcomes fund, which funded Departments to do exactly this: to work together, particularly where they could tackle



some of the problems that need upstream or downstream—depending on your perspective—intervention. Early years is one I have mentioned, and the supporting families programme—what used to be called the troubled families programme—is a good example of that. Work was done to evaluate the benefit of that programme on outcomes in education or the criminal justice system, so that Government overall could understand the value of that programme. It should not just be something that MHCLG or DLUHC should be concerned with, because all these Departments were benefiting in one way or another from that programme. That is the type of thinking that I tried to introduce as Chancellor, and I think that programme is a good example of where there was clear evidence that it was having an impact, beneficially, on criminal justice outcomes.

Q3 Sir Robert Neill: Two quick examples, if I may. The Home Office has started recruiting 20,000 extra police officers—that is Government policy. What steps are being taken to properly fund the Ministry of Justice for the extra court time that will be taken up, hopefully, by police officers capturing more offenders and potential prison time? At the moment, the MOJ is not covered to pick up the cost of those extra police officers doing their job.

The Prime Minister: My recollection, because I was Chancellor at the time when the funding for that was put in place, is that the downstream impacts of the 20,000 police officers were calculated and funded as part of the original settlement for those Departments to deliver on the 20,000 police officers commitment. I was Chancellor at the time, and I distinctly remember those conversations and that modelling happening, with particular focus on the downstream cost. You are absolutely right; you cannot just focus on the cost of police officers, as that has a knock-on impact elsewhere. My recollection is that that was funded as part of the settlement at the time for the 20,000 police officers uplift programme.

Q4 Sir Robert Neill: To try to join up matters, at least within the criminal justice world, something called the Criminal Justice Board was established in 2015. It has not actually met since 2021, but it still appears to be in existence on the Government website. We have an excellent Lord Chancellor. Could you perhaps assist him to get that Criminal Justice Board up and operating again, because there is a real concern over the lack of join-up across that sector?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to make sure that the join-up is happening. For example, on tackling illegal migration, that is something where I regularly convene different Departments, particularly the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice, as well as the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and others, because that requires cross-Government co-ordination to deliver on the priorities. I will happily look at making sure that we are co-ordinated and joined up. I am not sure what exactly the right structure is, sitting here, but I am very much sympathetic to the thrust of the question.

Q5 Sir Robert Neill: There are potential cost savings, if you can get it right.



The Prime Minister: Again, which is to the benefit of the individuals and the taxpayer, where we can realise those.

- Q6 **Sir Robert Neill:** My final point, which I will raise quickly is this. You have recognised in the past, Prime Minister, the importance of the reputation of the English legal system for the United Kingdom's standing in the world. In October, England and Wales will have the first woman Lord Chief Justice. Will you make a point of making an early opportunity to meet Dame Sue Carr, when she takes up her appointment, so that you can learn from her first-hand the real pressures that there are on the courts? Delays of two years or so for a small business to have a money claim heard in the country courts, which could make all the difference to its survival, are really not acceptable or fair, would you not agree?

The Prime Minister: I have met the previous Lord Chief Justice a couple of times since I have been Prime Minister. I fully expect to continue those meetings and engagements with the new Lord Chief Justice. We are focused hard on reducing the court backlog. Obviously, more funding has gone into it, as the Committee will be aware, but we have also removed the limit on sitting days in the Crown court. We have continued to use the 16 Nightingale courtrooms, and we raised the statutory retirement age for judicial office holders. All those initiatives help to expand judicial capacity to help us get through the backlogs. It remains a commitment and focus for us. I look forward to discussing that with the new Lord Chief Justice in due course.

Sir Robert Neill: Thank you, Chair.

Chair: We are now moving on to the all-important subject of the Russian aggression in Ukraine, and other associated security issues, with Alicia Kearns, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

- Q7 **Alicia Kearns:** Prime Minister, I fear we are on the cusp of a Gaza crisis of 2023. Yesterday, we took up presidency of the UN Security Council. How do you hope that, over this month, we will use that to shed light on what is taking place? Also, what outcomes will we achieve during our presidency?

The Prime Minister: What were you referring to specifically?

- Q8 **Alicia Kearns:** The Gaza crisis—essentially Israel-Palestine—but also, as President of the UN Security Council over the next month, what have you tasked Foreign Office civil servants to achieve?

The Prime Minister: There are a couple of different things. With regard to the current situation in Israel and around, of course we support Israel's right to self-defence, and have condemned the recent terrorist attacks. We would say that the protection of civilians must be prioritised in any military operation, and urge the IDF to demonstrate restraint in its operation, and for all parties to avoid further escalation in both the west bank and Gaza, both now and in the days ahead. We also call on Israel to adhere to the principles of necessity and proportionality when defending its legitimate security interests.



More broadly, with regard to the UN Security Council and our actions there, I would imagine that we will continue to focus on highlighting what is happening in Ukraine and Russia's illegal invasion. One thing that we have helped play a leading role in is ensuring broad support at the UN condemning Russian action. More than 140 different countries have signed the resolutions that we have helped to support at the UN. That will continue, I would imagine, to be a focus in the coming weeks and months. Recent events in Russia highlight from others the illegality of Russia's invasion. Hopefully other countries are recognising that, and we will continue to use the UN as a platform to highlight that.

Q9 **Alicia Kearns:** Before we move on to Ukraine, in your discussions with Netanyahu how clear were we that we should not see an expansion of illegal settlements, and will we see Israel-Palestine brought forward specifically by the British Government over the next month?

The Prime Minister: The settlements are illegal under international law, and we have said that they present an obstacle to peace and threaten the physical viability of the two-state solution. We have consistently engaged with Israel. I met President Netanyahu a little while ago, and we have repeatedly made it clear to Israel that we oppose any settlement expansion. We have asked the Israeli Government to halt and reverse their policy.

Q10 **Alicia Kearns:** Moving to Ukraine, there are reports that ahead of the Vilnius summit a coalition of the willing will bring forward some sort of security support package—a security agreement for Ukraine. Can you set out for me what your vision would be for such a security agreement for Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: Not wanting to pre-empt the conversations that are obviously happening in private, what I have said is that I think that it would be beneficial for Ukraine, and for the conflict, for there to be a multilateral declaration of support for Ukraine into the long term. There are various different shapes and forms that can take. Those conversations are happening. The purpose of that declaration, assuming that it can be something that gathers broad support, is to demonstrate that support for Ukraine will be in place for the long term. I think that that will send a strong signal to Putin that his efforts are in vain, and ultimately he should recognise that we—the coalition of the willing who are defending principles of territorial integrity and the UN charter—are not going to go away, and will continue to give Ukraine the support that it needs and the means to defend itself against current and future aggression. Those conversations are ongoing.

Q11 **Alicia Kearns:** What is your level of confidence that at Vilnius we will see a path to NATO membership for Ukraine set out and agreed?

The Prime Minister: Again, those conversations are ongoing. As you will know, NATO is a consensus organisation, so we are having those conversations with our partners. What is very clear—I have said this previously in the past—is that Ukraine's rightful place is in NATO, but the alliance works by consensus, so we will have to work together with our



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allies. There are things that we are already doing that will help Ukraine on that journey, notably increasing the interoperability of capabilities, the training of Ukrainian troops to NATO standards, and the provision of NATO standard equipment—all examples of the type of support that will help Ukraine not just now but on that longer-term journey as well.

- Q12 **Alicia Kearns:** Thank you. Moving on to the Balkans, there has been an international failure of deterrence when it comes to the western Balkans. That is best exemplified by the EU and US response and recent punishments of Kosovo in the face of Serb antagonism and Dodik's secessionist rhetoric in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As Prime Minister, will you now commit that we will rejoin EUFOR, which I would add that both Turkey and Chile are members of? Will you also consider lobbying for an expansion of KFOR's mandate in Kosovo, so that it can deal with the illegal arms being brought across from Serbia into Kosovo, which is harbouring illegal Belgrade-funded and armed militias?

The Prime Minister: The first thing to say is that we in the Government fully support Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity and sovereignty and will continue to take measures against those who threaten that. We are particularly concerned—I am particularly concerned—about the situation in the north of Kosovo, which you will be familiar with, and very much condemn the unprovoked attacks by protesters on KFOR personnel. The Foreign Secretary has already told the Prime Ministers of both Kosovo and Serbia that leaders in Belgrade and Pristina have a responsibility to reduce tension and prevent further violence. Our view is that we must find a way back to the EU-facilitated dialogue.

With regard to EUFOR, we do see EUFOR as vital for peace and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Our non-participation in it does not reflect the importance of the operation to the peace and stability of the region, and we are going to continue to explore opportunities to widen co-operation with the mission.

Alicia Kearns: Thank you. I would urge the Government to look very closely at that. Finally, and very briefly, just taking you back to Israel-Palestine—

Chair: No, we don't have time, I'm afraid.

- Q13 **Alicia Kearns:** A yes or no answer. Would you now put in place a special envoy for the middle east peace process to make sure that we have adequate attention on what is going on there?

The Prime Minister: Look, it is something that I know the FCDO is talking to the hon. Lady about, and is happy to continue talking to her about. We continue to say that that is something that we will be open to at a time when we think it will be beneficial to the peace process. It is not that we are against it in principle; it is just figuring out when it can be deployed.

Alicia Kearns: I will take that as a yes, but subject to announcement, hopefully. Thank you very much. Thank you, Chair.



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- Q14 **Chair:** Prime Minister, I am not using my time in this session, for the benefit of others, but I have two very brief supplementary questions. We are confronting Russian aggression in Ukraine very vociferously and very clearly. How confident are you that the international community is not appeasing proxy Russian aggression in the Balkans?

The Prime Minister: I don't believe that we are. As you have heard from my answers to Alicia, we are continuing to take quite a robust stance against proxies, not just in that region, but previously in Africa as well with Wagner, because where we see threats to territorial integrity and sovereignty, it is important that we do our best to stand up for them, and that is what we are doing.

- Q15 **Chair:** The war in Ukraine will last as long as the friends of democracy around the world allow it to last. The more support we can give, the quicker it will end successfully for the Ukrainians. Are we doing enough, and what more could we be doing?

The Prime Minister: As everybody knows, I think, we are providing £2.3 billion in military support for Ukraine this year, matching what we have given last year, which I believe puts us second only to the Americans. As well as just the quantum of support, it is the type of support, where we have been consistently out in front in the type of capability that we are providing to the Ukrainians and training them on.

We saw that with the main battle tanks, which I was the first leader to announce we would provide, and to actually provide; and, most recently, with Storm Shadow long-range weapons, which are having a beneficial impact on the current state of the conflict. We will continue to do that—look for opportunities to provide the Ukrainians with the support they need.

The priority remains, as it always has been, heavy armour, artillery, long-range weapons and training—most recently, combat air—where we will play our part as part of an international coalition to provide combat capabilities, particularly the training of pilots. We are starting that this summer, in fact, which is something that I know the Ukrainians have warmly welcomed. And we continue to talk to other countries about increasing their support for Ukraine, both in quantum and in capability. I think that is important at this stage because the priority is to ensure that the counter-offensive can be as successful as we would all like it to be.

Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister. Greg Clark on science and technology and AI.

- Q16 **Greg Clark:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Prime Minister, a few days ago, you told London Tech Week that the possibilities of AI “are extraordinary.” What do you see as the biggest positive impact of artificial intelligence?

The Prime Minister: Just in the last few weeks, in the news reporting, you have seen some of the promise of AI—paralysed people being able to walk, the cracking of the structure of almost every known protein, and



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starting to be able to model reactions in nuclear fusion. That gives you a sense of the variety that is there. When you combine that with the computational power of quantum, I think you can really start to imagine a future in which curing incurable diseases like cancer and dementia or developing new ways to grow crops all might be possible.

I have kind of put it in a couple of different categories. Straightforwardly on the economy side, there was an interesting report from PwC recently that estimated a 10% GDP benefit over the coming decade. You are starting to see that in the way companies are using AI—leading companies like Palantir are opening their European AI HQ here—and the quality of our research and so on. So that is on the economic side of it. I have spoken in the past about AI holding out the promise of being a general-purpose technology, and the economic research is very clear that that leads to a kind of J-curve effect in productivity that we are on the cusp of hopefully realising.

Then, in public services, I would say health and education are the two areas where I am excited, particularly in healthcare. I think people are reasonably familiar with the opportunity to speed up diagnosis of a range of different conditions, but also to improve the productivity and accuracy of, for example, people looking for skin cancers—there is an interesting DERM AI technology that is being deployed—or robotic surgery.

In education, there is an opportunity to reduce workload for teachers, whether that is lesson planning or marking, but then also to provide personalised tuition for children. The Khan Academy is starting to roll out an AI chatbot that has enormous potential, because we know that that more personalised approach to learning has huge benefits for children, particularly disadvantaged children. Tutoring in the physical sense is hard to scale, but the technology allows us to provide that, and I think that would be transformational.

Q17 **Greg Clark:** So there are lots of upsides. In that speech at London Tech Week, you said that we must do AI “safely”. What do you see as the biggest danger of AI?

The Prime Minister: I would categorise the risks into a few different buckets. The first is the socioeconomic risk from the large-scale societal shifts that the technology will bring. That is often what technology does. That does not mean that you should stand in the way of it, but it just means we should make sure that we are cognisant of it and provide people with the skills they need to flourish in a world that is being changed by technology.

I think the second is the risk of misuse, whether it is open-source models or otherwise. They can be used as tools to generate misinformation, to identify and exploit cyber-vulnerabilities, or to create harmful content, deepfakes or child sexual abuse. That is the second category.

I think the third category would be tool use, whereby foundation models can be used to activate capabilities in the real world, and then the last



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category is what people would describe as capability overhangs, and that kind of trends into the area of more existential risk, because there is just a lack of understanding at this point about what the potential of these models might be.

Now, obviously, separate from all of that there are national security risks—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I am limited in what I can say—but thinking about it in terms of those four categories is probably the right way to go about it.

- Q18 **Greg Clark:** You have convened an international safety summit for the autumn. Are you intending that to be a summit of like-minded countries, like the US and Japan perhaps, or is it for all countries—a bit like the International Atomic Energy Agency, which includes countries such as China and Russia? What do you have in mind?

The Prime Minister: I think, in the first instance, mainly what we are trying to do is acknowledge that there is a global dimension to this challenge and that AI does not respect national borders. Countries are at varying stages in their thinking about how we can put guard rails in place to make sure that we can realise the benefits of AI in a way that is safe and secure. It seems a sensible and reasonable step to try to bring some of those countries together to talk about these problems in a collective forum, because ultimately there will need to be some co-ordination. So it is quite early thinking. As I said, it is more just about bringing people together—

Greg Clark: So all countries together.

The Prime Minister: It is just bringing together people who are thinking about these things in a similar way to exchange ideas and share information. As I said, AI does not respect national borders, and I think we will all benefit from hearing and talking to each other in a conversation with the businesses themselves. That is really what this is about. We are a long way from anyone establishing an IAEA equivalent for AI. Those things are long into the distance, but in the first instance, just talking this through with like-minded countries seems a sensible step.

- Q19 **Greg Clark:** Finally, Prime Minister, you have this summit and you published a White Paper in March. The last Session of this Parliament begins in November. Do you expect there to be an AI Bill in the King's Speech?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to comment now on fourth Session legislation. All those conversations are happening and the final decisions are being made. I think what we need to do—and I think we can probably do lots of this without legislation—is sit down and figure out what safety features and guard rails we would like to put in place. I think we have a sense of what some of those might be, whether it is watermarking, pre-release information sharing, the reporting and licensing of large training runs, pre-training or pre-deployment disclosure, or transparency on the datasets that are used. That is the kind of category of things that we need to spend time on, which is why the foundation model taskforce has been



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set up and funded specifically in its early phase to focus on safety research. I think that's an area where the UK can lead, because we already have good capability in it, so if we can develop that capability further—it is a growing field—it will mean we will know what to do. Actually, so far the conversations with the three leading foundation model companies have been incredibly co-operative.

Q20 **Greg Clark:** But they are calling for legislation.

The Prime Minister: Well, I think what they want is for Governments to put in place the guard rails, and they are very open about that. As I say, thus far they have been incredibly instructive, open and transparent with Government and they want to try and find a solution together. As I said, it is too early to pre-empt what all that might look like, but you can imagine a world where at least the initial stages of that don't require legislation, necessarily, but just require us to get in there and do safety evaluation on the models and have access to them. As I said, we have had announcements already from some of the foundation model companies that they will provide that access to the Government to be able to do that on a priority basis, which I am grateful for and I think will help us to get this right.

Greg Clark: Thank you, Prime Minister.

Chair: I am sorry but we are dragging behind. People are going to have to be quicker and I will have to be stricter. Dame Diana Johnson for Home Affairs.

Q21 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I know you are appealing against the Court of Appeal's ruling on the Rwanda scheme. You have said that the policy is an important part of your plan to tackle illegal migration and stop small boats. Do you have a plan for what you will do if the appeal fails?

The Prime Minister: As I said, our belief remains that the plan that we have is legal: it's compliant with all our obligations and we'll be appealing it vigorously. If you look at the ruling, what you will see is that the Lord Chief Justice, in his opinion, agreed with the High Court and with the Government that the safeguards and reassurances that we have received from Rwanda are sufficient. There is a very specific point of contention about the onward relocation, potentially, of people who we send to Rwanda. As I say, we believe that the safeguards we have are sufficient, so we will continue to confidently and vigorously pursue our case.

Q22 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So you are betting everything on the Rwanda policy being upheld in the Supreme Court?

The Prime Minister: Well, no, that's not a fair characterisation of what we are doing—

Q23 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Well, it is a gamble, isn't it? You're not sure.

The Prime Minister: Last year, and indeed this year, I set out a range of things that we are doing to tackle this problem. So for example—



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Q24 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, can I come on to that, because I have some specific questions on what you're going to say?

The Prime Minister: Well, you asked the question, and clearly a very substantive additional piece is the new deal that we have with Albania.

Q25 **Dame Diana Johnson:** With the greatest respect, Prime Minister, I have very little time and I do want to get through some important issues with you, so if I could just leave that—I've got your response—

The Prime Minister: But you made a statement that we are betting the house on one thing; I think it's reasonable for me to say, "Let me give you an example of something else that is significant that is making a difference to the problem"—

Chair: And you have done so, Prime Minister.

Q26 **Dame Diana Johnson:** With the greatest respect, Prime Minister, I have quite a few questions that I want to ask. You are clear that you think Rwanda is going to succeed in the Supreme Court. On the small boats issue, I think it is six months today since you made your five promises to the British people, including stopping the small boats. Now, win or lose in the Supreme Court, right now your plans around Rwanda are on hold, so does that mean that your attempt to stop the small boats is on hold at the moment?

The Prime Minister: No, and a good example of why it is not on hold is our deal with Albania. Albania accounted for a third of the illegal migrants that crossed last year, which is surprising given that Albania is clearly a safe country, it's an ally and a European nation, and it's a signatory to many of the same treaties that we are on these issues, which is why our new deal with Albania and the revision in how we treat illegal migrants from Albania means that—

Q27 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I know you are very keen to talk about Albania, but I am very keen to actually address the fact that, in June, so in the last month—

The Prime Minister: You asked for an example of being committed to continuing to stop the boats outside of the Rwanda policy; this is a very good example of something. As I said, we've returned almost 2,000 illegal migrants—

Q28 **Dame Diana Johnson:** But none from those who came across last year. None of the returns actually relate to people who travelled in small boats last year, do they?

The Prime Minister: Because we work through the backlog of people we've got. But because of the new deal we are now able to return people to Albania, and you can start to see the early benefit of that deterrence, because in the most recent data that we had, the number of illegal migrants from Albania had reduced considerably since we put that new deal in place. It shows that you can make a difference on this policy.

Q29 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay, let's move on from Albania. The largest



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number of people who crossed the channel in small boats last year—the largest number in any of the records that have been kept over the last five years—was 3,824, and the majority, or a large chunk, come from Afghanistan. What I am just trying to get to is, with the rate of progress that you're making at the moment, when do you think you'll be able to fulfil your pledge to stop the small boats?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, the Court will have to determine its own ruling and that is outside the Government's hands. It is the Court that determines the timing of its rulings. But in the meantime we can get on with a range of other things, as I said. We have talked about the deal in Albania; one of the other things we are doing—

Dame Diana Johnson: You have talked about the deal in Albania quite a lot.

The Prime Minister: Well, let me move on to one of the other things we are doing, which is tackling illegal working to show people that if they do come here illegally, they won't be able to disappear into the black economy. One of the things we have done is increase the number of illegal working raids by about 50%. We have doubled the number of arrests. Again, all of that will contribute, I believe, to a deterrent effect.

Q30 **Dame Diana Johnson:** With the greatest respect, Prime Minister, I want to ask you this: since the Illegal Migration Bill was introduced earlier this year, 8,128 people have crossed the channel in small boats. If we assume that your Rwanda policy is upheld in the Supreme Court, Rwanda has said that it can take a capacity of 500 people, which leaves 7,628 who have come across since the Bill was introduced, so what do you intend will happen to those people?

The Prime Minister: As I said, I am not going to talk about a private commercial contract that we have but, as we have said multiple times, our Rwanda scheme is uncapped. I think that is important.

Q31 **Dame Diana Johnson:** That's not what the Rwandans say, is it?

The Prime Minister: Well, the Rwanda scheme is uncapped, which is why I believe it can act as a very helpful deterrent when it is up and running.

Q32 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Can I move on to your other promise, which is about dealing with the backlog? When you came last time, you said you were going to double the workforce, triple productivity and re-engineer the system to deal with the legacy backlog, yet the National Audit Office has found that the Home Office is not yet making enough decisions to actually achieve your target of clearing that part of the backlog by December '23. I wonder what is going wrong, because you were very chippy last time about how you were going to deliver this.

The Prime Minister: When I made the announcement, the legacy initial asylum backlog was around 92,000. When I gave the update earlier this year, that had reduced by almost a fifth—by about 17,000—down to around 74,000. So that is the progress that has already been made in reducing the legacy initial asylum backlog. As I said, those were the



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numbers when I last gave the update, but they were down by around a fifth.

Dame Diana Johnson: So will you deliver by December?

Chair: Order. I am afraid your time is up; sorry. We will move on to the cost of living crisis, with Harriett Baldwin from the Treasury Committee.

Q33 **Harriett Baldwin:** Thank you very much, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, we are halfway through the year, and you want to halve inflation this year. How is that going? What probability would you assign to you achieving that by the end of the year?

The Prime Minister: Leave that to the forecasters, but we remain committed to bringing inflation down. Halfway is a step on it going back down to the inflation target, which is obviously even lower than that. Inflation is clearly proving more persistent than people anticipated, but that does not mean that the plans and policy options that have been deployed are the wrong ones—indeed, they are the right ones. Whether that is monetary policy, responsible fiscal policy or supply-side reform, that is the right toolkit that you need to deploy to bring inflation down. We just need to continue to stick to the course. That is not easy and it involves difficult decisions, but those are the right long-term decisions for the country, because if we don't do that, inflation will just get worse and last for longer, and that doesn't help anybody.

Q34 **Harriett Baldwin:** You mentioned forecasts; the Chair of Court of the Bank of England has written to the Treasury Committee to say that they are going to do a root-and-branch review of their inflation forecasting models because they have been wrong. What percentage would you put on achieving your goal of halving inflation?

The Prime Minister: Harriett, I don't have one for you. I am working 100% to deliver it and we will keep doing that. All I can do is keep throwing everything at it. As I said, the broad mix of policy levers we have are monetary policy, which is independent of Government; fiscal policy, which is in our control; and supply-side reform. Those are the two levers that we have and we will make sure we use them fully. I think everyone can see that this is incredibly important, and it is important that we tackle it because it is ultimately what is making people poorer. It is eating into the money in their pockets. That is why defeating inflation is such a central premise and plank of our economic strategy.

Q35 **Harriett Baldwin:** Do you accept that there is a higher probability today that you will miss that target than there was at the beginning of the year?

The Prime Minister: As I said, I think there is a range of forecasts, but I don't spend my time on that, which I cannot control. What I can control is what we are doing, and what I can tell you is that we remain committed to bringing inflation down and using all the tools at our disposal to keep working to bring inflation down. That is what I should focus on, and that is what the Government is going to continue to do.



Q36 **Harriett Baldwin:** Given that the Bank of England have accepted that they need to look again at their inflation models, do you have confidence in the approach that they are taking to bring inflation down?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course I support the Bank of England. Their modelling is a matter for them and it is right that they are having that dialogue and evaluating everything they do, but of course I support the Bank of England. The track record of the independent central bank over the past 20 to 25 years of keeping inflation to target has been very strong. I do not think anyone thinks we should return to a world where the Government are setting interest rates, so I think it is right that they are set independently. Again, no decisions are easy when it comes to bringing inflation down, but we have to do the things that are right for the long-term benefit of the country.

Q37 **Harriett Baldwin:** You are confident that the tools they are using are the right ones? Obviously, they keep raising the Bank rate, and that is affecting mortgage payers in particular—actually, a small cohort of mortgage payers who are on either a variable rate or whose fixed rates are coming to an end. It is a really small subset of the population who are having to do the heavy lifting in terms of reducing demand through this monetary policy tool. Is there nothing that could be done that might widen the fiscal pain, as it were, that would make it less of a problem that the Bank of England can only solve through raising rates much more sharply than they had anticipated?

The Prime Minister: Again, it would not be right for me to comment on monetary policy, but there are lots of different transmission mechanisms for how monetary policy feeds into the real economy. Obviously, mortgage rates are one, but there are other ways as well. You are right about the transmission mechanism perhaps being slower when it comes to mortgages than it has been in the past, because of the preponderance of people who have at least short-term fixed-rate mortgages now, but that is something that the Bank take into account in their modelling. The mortgage aspect is just one of the many transmission mechanisms of the monetary policy.

What else can we do? That is why I talked earlier about fiscal policy and supply-side reform. Fiscal policy is making sure that our borrowing is responsible and our approach to public sector pay is responsible. If we get those things wrong, that makes the inflation situation worse. With supply-side reform, it is about making sure that we are increasing the supply of areas of the economy where we are short and that is fundamentally leading to some of the inflationary pressures. Whether that is in energy, labour markets or elsewhere, I think we should target our policy there. Of course, I acknowledge the difficulty that rising interest rates pose for mortgage holders.

Q38 **Harriett Baldwin:** May I use my last half-minute to ask about savers and the transmission mechanism of them being paid more by the banks? Do you endorse the Treasury Committee's campaign on that?



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The Prime Minister: I endorse what the Chancellor said, which is that the issue needs to be resolved. I know he has met recently with the FCA and they have agreed to deliver better deals for savers by driving competition and increasing reporting, which I think they are doing in the next few weeks, in particular to make sure that savers are benefiting from higher interest rates. I fully support the FCA's review and, indeed, the new consumer duty gives them a stronger power to take action if necessary.

Alongside that, the charter for mortgage holders provides support and relief for mortgage holders who are facing difficulty with repayments, allowing them either to stretch the term of their mortgages or to switch to interest-only payments. Either or both of those can save people hundreds of pounds a month, potentially, on their mortgage bill when it reprices, and they can do that without any impact on their credit rating. There is also the support for mortgage interest scheme for more vulnerable borrowers, which has been increased in generosity and accessibility. Those are the different things that are there to help people.

Chair: Thank you. Clive Betts for the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee.

Q39 **Mr Betts:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I am sure we can all agree that there is a real problem in this country of both rising housing costs and a shortage of housing, which affects the whole country but some families in particular. It is therefore important that the Government achieve their target of building 300,000 new homes a year. I presume that is still the Government's target. At the end of the year, you consulted on, through planning policy, abolishing local housing targets that councils have to meet. When you get back to the office and get out your spreadsheets, and you look at the 300,000 target at the bottom which the nation has to hit, how can that be done if the Government are going to give up their influence over the individual targets in each local area that are supposed to add up to that 300,000?

The Prime Minister: What I would say is that we had a commitment to deliver a million homes over the Parliament, which we are continuing to make progress towards. In the last year that we have numbers for, ending 2022, something like 230,000 additional homes were delivered, which in itself was the third-highest yearly rate, I think, in the last three decades. Indeed, if you look at the last few years, all of them have been some of the highest rates that we have seen for decades. I think that shows that the Government's policies are delivering and we are making progress to our overall ambition of 1 million homes over the Parliament.

With regard to the planning reforms, I think it is important that the planning system also has the confidence of local communities. Planning targets remain there, but they are a starting point as opposed to something that is being imposed on communities without reference to the particular circumstances.

Q40 **Mr Betts:** But how will the Government achieve the 300,000, Prime Minister, if you are losing control of the individual figures that add up to



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it? Lichfields, the planning consultancy, has said that this planning policy that is undergoing consultation will reduce house building to 150,000 homes a year—half the Government’s target. Already this year, housing starts have fallen by 12%, from a figure that was well below the 300,000 homes to begin with. That is not success, is it?

The Prime Minister: I think that success is, as I said, that we have delivered some of the highest years of new housing additions in three decades over the last few years. I think that shows that the approach is working. What we are doing as well is ensuring that we support local communities in bringing housing onstream, particularly on brownfield land, where we are investing taxpayer funds to help to remediate land and unlock thousands of homes.

Q41 **Mr Betts:** Are you effectively giving local communities a veto, then, over achieving the 300,000?

The Prime Minister: No, no. As I said, we are reforming how the planning system works, so that we strengthen the neighbourhood plans. Neighbourhood plans particularly have shown that they can deliver the housing that people need in their local areas, but they do so in a way that has the consent of the community, which is important. It means that the character of local areas, and the particular circumstances in each local area, whether it is green belt or something else, are taken into account in assessing what is a reasonable amount of housing to build there.

Q42 **Mr Betts:** I am still not sure how that will get us to 70,000 more homes when you are taking away the ability to influence targets, but can I go on to another point, Prime Minister? Many people, because they cannot afford a home and there is no social housing to rent, end up in the private rented sector. Sometimes it is through choice; often it is because that is the only place for them to go. Since 2020, the local housing allowance, which helps the poorest families pay for their rent in the private rented sector, has been frozen, yet at the same time rents in the private rented sector have risen by 25%. Now only one in 20 homes is covered by the local housing allowance. How is it fair for Government policy to impact so severely the poorest families, who can no longer pay for the rent of most homes in the private rented sector with the allowances that are available to them?

The Prime Minister: Look, I cannot remember precisely, but I think that we increased the local housing allowance a couple of years ago by a very significant amount.

Q43 **Mr Betts:** Frozen since 2020, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Yes, but it was frozen at a level that was significantly higher than it was before. It was about a £600 uplift, from memory, for about 1.5 million households.

Q44 **Mr Betts:** That does not help families with a 25% rent increase that they cannot pay, Prime Minister.



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The Prime Minister: The discretionary housing payments of a few hundred million pounds are there to support people as well, on top of housing benefit. The affordable homes programme has delivered thousands of new affordable homes for rent, and will continue to do so.

Q45 **Mr Betts:** But affordable homes are 80% of market rent, Prime Minister. They are not affordable to most people on the lowest incomes, are they?

The Prime Minister: Look, it is a question of how you are targeting that support, but as I said, the affordable homes programme is, I think, over £11 billion over its period. It is significantly higher than the one that it replaced. It is supporting thousands of new affordable homes for rent, together with housing benefit and discretionary housing payments. All that support is there.

Q46 **Mr Betts:** But even public sector workers—nurses, policemen and others—cannot afford affordable rents in London; 80% of market rents are just not within the remit of many public service workers struggling on their current levels of pay.

The Prime Minister: Yes, which is why, on the other side, we have taken huge steps to help people with their energy bills, which is saving them around £1,500 over the past few months, raising the national living wage by record levels to put more money in their pockets, and raising the threshold at which people start paying national insurance. All those things also put more money in people's pockets.

Q47 **Mr Betts:** I think a lot of people will think, Prime Minister, that you are not really on their side.

Chair: Order.

The Prime Minister: I think if you look at case studies of families in different circumstances, what you will see is that the support that we have put in place is disproportionately benefiting the most vulnerable families. Now, that is happening in lots of different ways. Whether it is support with energy bills; the cost of living payments, worth £900, that are going to several million of the most vulnerable households in our society this year; the national living wage increase; or tax changes, all those add up to quite meaningful support for families. It is deliberately targeted on the most vulnerable families.

Chair: Moving on, we have Catherine McKinnell for the Petitions Committee.

Q48 **Catherine McKinnell:** Thank you. But it is not working, is it, Prime Minister? Do you take responsibility for the fact that the UK has the highest inflation in the G7 and the lowest growth projections?

The Prime Minister: We have had this debate in the past. If you look at the growth projections, actually we were the fastest growing country in the G7 in 2021 and—

Catherine McKinnell: I asked a very specific question, which is: do you



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take responsibility for it?

The Prime Minister: Of course I take responsibility for the Government, but to correct what you are saying, because I think it is important, as the head of the IMF—

Catherine McKinnell: No, sorry; do you dispute those facts? We have the highest inflation rate in the G7 and the lowest—

Chair: Please allow the Prime Minister to answer.

Catherine McKinnell: I am just asking whether he disputes the facts, because there is no point in giving a two-minute answer—

The Prime Minister: I am putting them in context, because it is important. As the head of the IMF themselves said, because those are the numbers that you are quoting, at a press conference here in the UK, which I am sure the hon. Lady was listening to, seeing as she is quoting the figures, it is not right to focus on one specific year when it comes to growth forecasts. If you look at any period in either the two years before, when we were the fastest-growing country in the G7, or the projections for the years thereafter, we are not the lowest growing. She asked about inflation, which I think is important. It is worth bearing in mind that if you look at—

Q49 **Catherine McKinnell:** Sorry, Prime Minister, but I have quite a few questions that I need to ask you, and I think it is important to focus on the reality. People contact us in Parliament about the realities they face. One in seven is cutting back on, or going without, food because of a lack of money. That is one in four in my region of the north-east. What level of food insecurity do the Government assess is acceptable in this country?

The Prime Minister: Of course we don't want anybody to live in food insecurity—

Q50 **Catherine McKinnell:** But that is the reality, so what are the Government doing about it?

Chair: Please allow the Prime Minister to answer.

The Prime Minister: Let me explain the various things that we are doing to help people with the cost of living. The first and most significant intervention is to support people with their energy bills, because that is the No. 1 cost increase that they are facing. That support is worth £1,500. It is about half of a typical family's energy bill, and it is benefiting all families up and down the country.

The second thing is that the most vulnerable families—the ones that the hon. Lady is talking about; the several million of our most vulnerable families—will receive direct cost of living support through the welfare system. There are those payments of £900 to someone who is in receipt of universal credit, and additional payments for pensioners or those who are



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disabled. We are also making sure that those on low incomes are benefiting; the national living wage has gone up by record levels this year.

Q51 Catherine McKinnell: So why are people going hungry, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: All the money that people are receiving can be used for whatever they deem to be most important to them, including food, but the cost of living payments that are going to people can be spent on food, so I think that does help people.

Very specifically on food, what we have done is extend the holiday activities and food programme. That is funded with hundreds of millions of pounds a year. That provides not just food, but also activities to disadvantaged children outside of term time. We have Healthy Start vouchers for pregnant or new mums, which also helps, and of course the free school meals programme is there. I think if you put all that together, while I accept that of course things are challenging, there are a range of different measures in place to help people with the cost of living, deliberately and specifically targeted on the most vulnerable in our society.

Q52 Catherine McKinnell: In terms of mortgages, millions are terrified about what will happen to their mortgage when it comes up for review. They have been ever since the disastrous mini-Budget last year of Truss and Kwarteng. Do you know the number of people who are due to remortgage by the end of 2024?

The Prime Minister: I do not have those numbers to hand, but what I can do, and what would probably be helpful, is to explain to all the people you are talking about, who you said are anxious about that, what support is in place to help them. A typical mortgage outstanding in the country is about £140,000, or about 17 or so years left. If that mortgage was to reprice now, it would go up from around £770 or £800 to about £1,000. That is a significant increase; of course it is.

What can someone do in that situation? Well, if they extend the term of their mortgage—which they can now do, thanks to our mortgage charter—by, say, 10 years, that will reduce the monthly payments basically back down to where they are currently. They could switch to an interest-only period for a while. That will, again, reduce the payments by hundreds of pounds. Those are just a couple of things that they can do. For those who are most vulnerable, as I said, the support for mortgage interest scheme is there through the welfare system, which provides support for people much more quickly than it used to. Those are the practical examples of how someone in the circumstances that you are describing can access support that will ease some of the burdens for them—not make them disappear, for sure, but considerably ease them.

Q53 Catherine McKinnell: What about the 15% who are not taking part in the Government scheme? There are about 1 million mortgage borrowers affected. What are the Government doing about that? Is it really enough to say to the banks, “Be nice”?



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The Prime Minister: No; I said the vast majority of the mortgage market is covered, and the Chancellor is continuing to have those conversations with the 15% that are not, but the vast majority are covered. As I outlined, for someone on a typical mortgage, that support or those easements can potentially help offset hundreds of pounds from their monthly mortgage costs when they come to reprice. That is as well as the support that is there through the welfare system. Again, they can do that without any impact on their credit rating. Because of the consumer duty that the Chancellor has introduced for the FCA, anyone facing fear of repossession will have a full 12 months before that can happen, and the banks have a duty to act fairly and responsibly. As I said, of course I know it is a worrying time, but there are very specific, practical steps in place to help people.

Chair: Thank you. We move on to William Wragg from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, on constitutional matters.

Q54 **Mr Wragg:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. I hear alarming reports of a blob wandering down Whitehall, thwarting the ambitions of Ministers. Do you recognise that characterisation?

The Prime Minister: No.

Q55 **Mr Wragg:** Where do you think it comes from?

The Prime Minister: It does not come from me. In the jobs that I have had—when starting out at MHCLG, where I spent much time with Clive; at the Treasury in particular, over the last few years; and now in No. 10—I have always been supported by incredibly hard-working and diligent civil servants, who responded to what I needed and worked all hours, day and night, to deliver what I wanted.

Q56 **Mr Wragg:** Some current and former Ministers, however short-lived their role might have been, have a view. One knight of the realm has described “blobonomics”. Do you think this talk is really an excuse for weak Ministers, and perhaps unworkable policies?

The Prime Minister: I think ultimately the elected Government of the day is responsible for the policies it puts forward. I would expect, and indeed have found in my experience, the civil service to be responsive to implementing them. Of course, that requires strong leadership and direction from Ministers, and grip on what is happening. Of course, things may sometimes feel harder to work through than you would like, but as I said, in my personal experience, I have not found that to be an issue.

Q57 **Mr Wragg:** Given your experience, which I accept entirely, do you sometimes take those struggling Ministers to one side, put a friendly arm around their shoulder, and perhaps try to inculcate that work ethic in them?

The Prime Minister: I think everyone is working very hard to deliver for the country—elected and appointed Ministers, and also the civil service, which works for them. Of course, the last few years have not been easy



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for anybody, given all the various challenges—the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the demands that has put on the entire system—but I think everyone remains committed to delivering, and I would expect them all to work very hard to do so.

Q58 **Mr Wragg:** So reports of relations between the Government and the civil service being at an all-time low are somewhat exaggerated.

The Prime Minister: Certainly from my perspective, and it would not be conducive to delivering for the country, if indeed they were that. My view has always been that I have been very fortunate to be served by absolutely brilliant civil servants, who have given me everything I have always asked of them and more, at all hours of the day. I have been very fortunate, and am grateful to them for that support. I continue to find that in my current job, and I have no reason to expect that to change. My general view is that their job is to support Government to do that, and we should do that with a constructive attitude. That is what I would like to see and expect to happen.

Q59 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you. To come on to House of Lords appointments, if I may, could you briefly explain what you understand to be the conventions around resignation honours and, in particular, the nomination of new peers?

The Prime Minister: My understanding is that previous Prime Ministers are entitled to resignation honours. Those would go through the normal vetting process. I followed what I understand and believe to be the long-standing convention of forwarding those names to the palace for clearance after they have been through the vetting process, and without any active involvement, engagement or interference in that process.

Q60 **Mr Wragg:** So you conducted your constitutional role entirely proprietously?

The Prime Minister: Yes. As I said, I had no active involvement or engagement in that process. I received a list and forwarded it on unaltered.

Q61 **Mr Wragg:** The list that came, having been vetted by the House of Lords Appointments Commission?

The Prime Minister: Absolutely.

Q62 **Mr Wragg:** I think there is only one example in the past of that not being the case. Is that right? Not with yourself as Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I am not familiar with that example, but—

Mr Wragg: I think the example is Lord Cruddas, and the next day he gave the party a donation, but those things were entirely unrelated, I am quite sure.

The Prime Minister: As I said, whatever list I have received that has been through the vetting process, I have forwarded on without interference or active involvement in it.



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Q63 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you for clarifying that. Are there any circumstances under which a resignation honours list is not appropriate?

The Prime Minister: It is a long-standing convention that has been adhered to by, I think, parties on both sides of the House. I have fulfilled what I believe to be my constitutional role and followed convention in forwarding a list that I received that had been vetted for approval, without interfering in and opining on it. That has generally been the case for political honours more broadly: they are forwarded without the person in charge necessarily agreeing with political honours more generally, and that is how the system has worked.

Q64 **Mr Wragg:** May I ask if you are still reviewing former Prime Minister Liz Truss's list?

The Prime Minister: As I say, that process is ongoing, and it has not reached me yet.

Q65 **Mr Wragg:** That is helpful.

This is entirely hypothetical, as you will understand, given my keenness for a Conservative victory at the next general election, so please do not take it the wrong way, but would you think it appropriate yourself to issue a resignation honours list?

The Prime Minister: It is not something I am focused on or have given any thought to.

Mr Wragg: I think that is a fairly good answer. Thank you, Sir Bernard.

Chair: Pete Wishart, Scottish Affairs.

Q66 **Pete Wishart:** Prime Minister, it is almost 25 years since the Scotland Act established the Scottish Parliament, and I think it would be fair to say that relationships between the two Governments have never been so poor, characterised as they are by mistrust, suspicion and antagonism. What are you personally doing to try to improve the situation?

The Prime Minister: I think it is important to try and have a constructive relationship with all the devolved Governments in the United Kingdom. Clearly, we are not going to agree on everything, but that does not mean—

Pete Wishart: What are you doing?

The Prime Minister: As I say, I do think this is important, which is why, when I first had this job, I spoke, I think, on the first day, not just to the then First Minister of Scotland, but to the First Minister of Wales. I was also the first Prime Minister, I think, in over a decade to attend the British-Irish Council, which brought together leaders from across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland; that was warmly received. I have met with First Ministers in my role, and have met with the new First Minister, and I continue to try and find ways to work collaboratively together—freeports being a good example of that. We are clearly not going to agree on everything, but it is good to have the dialogue.



Q67 **Pete Wishart:** That is a very lengthy and important list, but is it not the case that the UK routinely ignores Scottish Parliament legislative consent motions, and can now legislate in devolved areas, with the nuclear option of a section 35 being used for the first time? Scottish Government Ministers are even being reprimanded for saying that Brexit is bad for Scotland when meeting foreign delegations. Do you think this muscular Unionism is actually working for you?

The Prime Minister: As I said, I think there are examples of the Scottish Government and the UK Government working together, particularly to deliver things like freeports. You mentioned section 35, and I think we have had that debate in the past. It was clear that there were concerns about the operation of that law on UK-wide competencies and areas of competence. It was reasonable, in that sense, for the Scottish Secretary of State, after taking significant legal advice, to issue the section 35. Yes, as you say, it is the first time it has been used—

Pete Wishart: On top of everything else.

The Prime Minister—but it was always envisaged that it might be used, including, I think, by the SNP at the time. So I do not think people can debate the principle of it being used, because it was something that was supported at the time. Obviously, it is subject to a legal proceeding now, so there is a limit to how much we can say.

Q68 **Pete Wishart:** But it is not just the Scottish Government. With respect, the Welsh Labour Government recently criticised the UK Government's "unilateral and destructive approach" to devolution and is actually seeking to have the UK judicially reviewed. The Northern Irish Executive is not sitting. In Scotland and Wales, it feels like their democracy is under real threat. Is devolution broken?

The Prime Minister: Again, on Wales, I spoke to the First Minister on, I think, the first day I got this job. I spent time; I met with him. Again, delivering freeports is a good example of Wales and the UK Government working together. With regard to Northern Ireland, because you brought it up, I do not think anyone could say that I have not been heavily actively involved in trying to restore the Executive in Northern Ireland. I visited Northern Ireland five or six times in my first few months in this job to demonstrate my commitment to Northern Ireland and the people of Northern Ireland. The Windsor framework represents a very significant intervention, and removed one of the big barriers to the Executive being restored in Northern Ireland.

Q69 **Pete Wishart:** Given that the UK Government has given itself the provisions of the single market Act, against strong opposition from Scotland and Wales, is not the main problem that the UK Government represents English interests while at the same time being the arbiter and referee for the whole of the United Kingdom? You have now given yourselves the powers of the European Union. Surely, the four nations idea across the UK just is not working any more.



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The Prime Minister: No, actually, the Scottish Government, as far as I recall from when I last looked at this, is probably the most powerful devolved Assembly anywhere in the world—if not the, certainly one of. The Government also delivered all the recommendations after 2016. I think the UK Government is right to look after UK-wide interests. As I say, sometimes those will conflict, and we have seen that with section 35 on the gender recognition Act. There is a court process to resolve that, so we should let that run.

Q70 **Pete Wishart:** Do you see yourself as saving Scotland from itself on legislation like gender reform and DRS?

The Prime Minister: No, I think—

Q71 **Pete Wishart:** Do you see it as your job now to be the corrective feature when it comes to devolution issues that you do not like?

The Prime Minister: No. On DRS, actually the drinks industry raised concerns about the Scottish Government's return scheme differing from the rest of the plans for the UK. Now, it is because they had an interaction with UK interests that the UK Government was asked for the UKIM exclusion. There was an exclusion given on narrow terms, and the decision to not proceed was a decision that was made by the Scottish Government.

Q72 **Pete Wishart:** But if it is seen to be in the English national interest, therefore, it will be judged to be in the UK interest. Is that how it works? I do not understand how we get to where we are with these efforts. Surely all four nations should be equal on how these issues are approached?

The Prime Minister: Well, as I said, the operation of the scheme had an impact on UK-wide interests. That is why UKIM exclusion was sought. It was granted on a narrow basis, which would allow the scheme to proceed in a particular way. Ultimately, it was a decision of the Scottish Government, ultimately, not to proceed with it.

Q73 **Pete Wishart:** Because you made it impossible for us, didn't you?

The Prime Minister: That is not right, actually. I think the chief executive of Circular Scotland was categorical that the scheme remained viable on that basis. Many successful schemes run without glass. It was the Scottish Government that decided not to proceed. That is a decision that they can explain.

Chair: Sir Chris Bryant, for the Standards Committee.

Q74 **Sir Chris Bryant:** The ministerial code says: "When Parliament is in session, the most important announcements of Government policy should be made in the first instance, in Parliament." So why did you announce the NHS workforce plan not in Parliament but outside Parliament?

The Prime Minister: I always try to announce what I can in Parliament. On my track record, the Speaker has always said in the past that I, particularly, have done that. Where that is not possible, the statement is made immediately thereafter.



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Q75 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You managed it last Friday.

The Prime Minister: It is particularly worth considering that this is not just the Government's plan; it is also the NHS's plan.

Q76 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You could have announced it in Parliament on Monday, couldn't you? You chose not to.

The Prime Minister: As I said, this involved not just the Government; it involved also the NHS. It was the NHS's long-term workforce plan. The Government was pleased and proud to support it.

Sir Chris Bryant: Oh, come off it, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: It is a plan that will do something special for the NHS in this 75th year.

Q77 **Sir Chris Bryant:** The Speaker said yesterday: "The Prime Minister is a Member of Parliament. He is answerable to the Members of Parliament from all political parties. I have to say that his behaviour was not acceptable. He may be the Prime Minister, but the Members of Parliament should hear first." Have you apologised to the House yet?

The Prime Minister: As I said, I continue to be in Parliament to answer Members' questions on a range of issues, making statements on a range of topics, and will continue to do so.

Q78 **Sir Chris Bryant:** But you are not coming to Prime Minister's questions tomorrow, are you, or next week?

The Prime Minister: Yes, because I am attending the 75th anniversary celebration for the NHS—

Q79 **Sir Chris Bryant:** And you decided when that should be, so you could have had it tomorrow evening or tomorrow morning?

The Prime Minister: No, again, that is not right. I did not decide when that was. Quite frankly, even if it was on a different day, also because His Majesty is in Scotland on Wednesday, it might have been reasonable for me to be there as well. With regard to the week after, I am also at the NATO summit—

Q80 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Remind us when a Prime Minister last missed two Prime Minister's questions in a row.

The Prime Minister: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that I should not attend the NATO summit on behalf of the United Kingdom, as previous Prime Ministers have done?

Sir Chris Bryant: Remind us when a Prime Minister last missed two Prime Minister's questions in a row.

The Prime Minister: As I said, I do not know, but is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that I do not attend the NATO summit, which I am not in control of the dates of?



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Q81 **Sir Chris Bryant:** No, I am suggesting that you should be attending Prime Minister's questions and—

The Prime Minister: Not attending the NATO summit.

Sir Chris Bryant: And that you should have made the statement to the House of Commons because your own ministerial code says that that is what you should do.

The Prime Minister: Your view is that I should not be attending the NHS celebration or the King's coronation celebration in Scotland or, indeed, the NATO summit. That is a perfectly reasonable point of view, but it is worth pointing out that the Leader of the Opposition also will be speaking at the NHS service on Wednesday.

Q82 **Sir Chris Bryant:** We are talking about your turning up in Parliament. We are talking about your respect for Parliament. You did not turn up for the Owen Paterson votes, at all. That is right, isn't it?

The Prime Minister: I cannot recall.

Q83 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You did not turn up for the Boris Johnson votes, at all, did you?

The Prime Minister: No, I was at a charity dinner for Jewish Care.

Q84 **Sir Chris Bryant:** I think that is cutting it fine, I would argue, since other Members of Parliament who were at the same dinner with you, and left after you, did manage to get back for the vote.

The Prime Minister: With the greatest respect, I think their role and my role at the dinner were probably slightly different.

Q85 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You chose not to be there, didn't you? That is twice. On two rule-breaking moments, you chose not to be in Parliament, but yesterday you opined on the rules of cricket. Take us through that.

The Prime Minister: I chose to fulfil my obligation to an incredible charity, for whom that is one of their significant fundraising moments of the year. My presence there was something that they had asked for, and me being there and being able to thank their volunteers and donors was something that they appreciated—

Q86 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Others were there. Wes Streeting was there as well, and he managed to get back.

The Prime Minister: Again, with the greatest respect, I think his role and my role at that dinner were probably slightly different. I am very happy to talk about the rules of cricket, as you mentioned, but—

Q87 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Yes, but not about rule breaking in Parliament.

The Prime Minister: I have also addressed that too.

Q88 **Sir Chris Bryant:** If I might ask you about the Privileges Committee, the Committee has accused seven MPs of trying to undermine and impugn its



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work. The Leader of the House has condemned this. Do you think that they should apologise to the House?

The Prime Minister: I have not actually gone through the report yet.

Q89 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You have not read the report.

The Prime Minister: No, I have not been through the report yet in detail. I have seen it being reported, and I have been very clear in the past that—

Q90 **Sir Chris Bryant:** But you asked Zac Goldsmith to apologise.

The Prime Minister: Yes, because he is a Minister.

Q91 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So you have read it sufficiently to note that Zac Goldsmith should apologise.

The Prime Minister: Yes. I have read the findings of the report. I have not read the report from cover to cover, no, but I have read the—

Q92 **Sir Chris Bryant:** It is about three pages long.

The Prime Minister: I have seen the findings.

Q93 **Sir Chris Bryant:** You know that Zac Goldsmith ought to apologise, but you do not have an opinion about whether the other seven should apologise.

The Prime Minister: Ah, because there is a difference between Zac Goldsmith's role as a Minister, and I think that that was not consistent with him being a Minister, yes.

Q94 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Ah, so you have read the report.

The Prime Minister: I have not read every page of the report. Sorry, which report are you talking about?

Q95 **Sir Chris Bryant:** There are two reports. The report that we are considering next week—the one in which it says that the Committee thinks that the seven Members of Parliament, all of your political party, were seeking to impugn and undermine the Committee report.

Let me ask you something else. You have to authorise all foreign travel by trade envoys and other parliamentarians and parliamentary private secretaries. In the last year, that has cost £264,192. Why will you not publish the details of who that is being spent on?

The Prime Minister: I am not familiar with the details of past practice on that, but I will happily look into it.

Q96 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Okay, different question: do you think that UK businesses should still be trading in Russia, at all?

The Prime Minister: I think UK businesses should be following all the sanctions legislation that we have put in place.

Q97 **Sir Chris Bryant:** Do you think they should be trading in Russia at all, a



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year after the second invasion?

The Prime Minister: There may be particular circumstances in which some businesses are in the process of either divesting or where it is considered that it would actually be detrimental to our interests to hand over assets very cheaply to the Russians. But, as I said, the job of business is to comply with the laws that we set and—

Q98 **Sir Chris Bryant:** So Mantrac, which owns Unatrac FZE, sold new diggers to Russia in April of this year, and you took £5 million from its owner. Is that right?

Chair: Last question.

The Prime Minister: As I said, I am not familiar with the specific company.

Chair: Philip Dunne, Environmental Audit Committee.

Q99 **Philip Dunne:** Last time we met at this Committee, Prime Minister, you were very keen to pay tribute to the leadership role of the UK on climate and nature issues. You particularly singled out Lord Goldsmith for his role in delivering the biodiversity deal in Montreal. Are you still as proud of UK leadership on climate and nature in view of Lord Goldsmith's remarks in his resignation letter last week?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I am grateful to him for the work that he did, which helped contribute to that role. As I said, we should be very proud of our leadership role on tackling climate change but also putting nature at the heart of how we do so.

Q100 **Philip Dunne:** So the ambition for net zero remains, but delivery has slowed over the past year under your prime ministership. The evidence for that is the Climate Change Committee report last week, in which Lord Deben said in his foreword, "Our confidence in the achievement of the UK's 2030 target and the Fifth and Sixth Carbon Budgets has markedly declined from last year," through apparent lack of delivery by officials, who have taken a signal that this has not been among your priorities, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I disagree with what Zac Goldsmith said. I think our record is second to none—

Philip Dunne: That was Lord Deben.

The Prime Minister: Yes—I was speaking more broadly about our record. The facts are that we have decarbonised faster than any other G7 country. Those are the facts. The facts are that when we had the presidency of COP, we ensured a very successful COP that had a clear trajectory to 1.5° and made sure that we increased the number of countries that had binding targets on net zero. Land degradation, forests, coal financing—there is a range of things that we have led on.

With regard to the carbon budgets, the facts are that we have overachieved on every single one of our carbon budgets to date, we are on



track to have met the third—that is what the latest statistics show—and I think the Climate Change Committee said that their confidence in the UK meeting the fourth carbon budget has actually slightly increased in the last year. With regard to 2033 and then 2037, which is when some of these future carbon budgets are, of course we have already set out that some of those policies will evolve over time—it is hard to predict right now with certainty the exact shape of the UK economy in 2037—but we have done a better job of this than anybody else and we have the most ambitious targets compared with anybody else, so I feel nothing but proud and confident in our record.

Q101 **Philip Dunne:** Do you expect the British Government to respond to the US's and the EU's significant interventions this year before the COP28 meeting in November?

The Prime Minister: Sorry, Philip, what was the question?

Philip Dunne: We have had the Inflation Reduction Act in the United States and significant measures in the EU—

The Prime Minister: Ah, right, fine. Look, it is right that other places are catching up with us. That is the reality of it. We have decarbonised faster than any of those other blocs, so other countries are having to catch up. That is a good thing, which we welcome. That will help combat climate change, and I am glad that they are doing so.

We do this in a completely different way, historically. We have done it through contracts for difference and other things, which have brought tens of billions of pounds of investment into the sector. If you look at that over time and you compare as a percentage of GDP what we have done and what the US has done, we have consistently out-invested and will continue to do so. It is just that people do it in different ways, and I think we need to compare on an apples-to-apples basis.

Our contracts for difference structure is now being copied all around the world, and that is a different way to bring investment into the green transition. We have also protected our R&D budget, which is growing. That is ultimately how we can also contribute, because if we can develop the technologies that will help us deal with these things and then commercialise them, that will do enormous good for the world. That is something that plays to our strengths as a country.

Q102 **Philip Dunne:** Looking forward to COP28, do you plan to prioritise UK leadership? If so, how are you going to demonstrate that?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I attended COP as Chancellor and we had a very successful finance day—I think it was widely perceived to be the most successful finance day that COP had ever had. The centrality of that made sure that we would be the first net zero financial centre, and all the things around TCFD and so on that we have pioneered. That is what I did as Chancellor.



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I attended last year, when we talked about nature in particular. That carried on at Montreal, and we will continue to do that this year. I think part of the focus this year will be on attracting private capital to help with the transition. Given our strength in financial services, that is an area where we can obviously play a leading role.

Chair: We will move on to Robin Walker, who chairs the Education Committee.

Q103 **Mr Walker:** Prime Minister, you have referred to education as the closest thing to a silver bullet that we have. You also said at PMQs recently that children missing school is a tragedy. How concerned are you that the latest figures show that 24.2% of pupils were persistently absent in the autumn term, almost double the rate of the previous year?

The Prime Minister: First, I welcome the fact that the number of pupils who are consistently absent from school fell by, I think, over 300,000 in the spring term 2022 when compared to the year before, but you are right that persistent absence is a real challenge. The tools for responding to it and resolving it don't just lie with the Department for Education. One of the things we are doing is rolling out attendance hubs across around 600 different primary and secondary schools to spread best practice. That will reach, I think, about 250,000 children. The work they do includes activities like automatic text messages and using data to analyse proactively who might be at risk—those types of things. There are some other things that I could speak to, but it is a real challenge and it is right that we focus on it.

Q104 **Mr Walker:** In terms of addressing that challenge, one solution that the Government previously drafted legislation for was a statutory register for children not in school. That has been supported by the Children's Commissioner, the Select Committee, and the Opposition Front Bench in PMQs recently, I think. It is something on which we have legislation before the House, from my colleague on the Committee, Flick Drummond. Is that something that you feel the Government could embrace and deliver?

The Prime Minister: We remain committed to introducing a statutory local authority register for children, as well as a duty for local authorities to provide support to home-educating families. We will look to legislate at a suitable opportunity, again, without pre-empting fourth session legislation.

Q105 **Mr Walker:** Since we last met, the Chancellor has made very welcome announcements on childcare and stepping up the activity of the Government in that respect by providing support to parents of under three-year-olds. That will mean a shift from the Government subsidising about 50% of the childcare market to around 80%. Do you recognise that puts an additional burden of responsibility on Ministers and the Government to ensure that it is adequately funded so that settings can keep going?



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The Prime Minister: The first thing to say is that a member of my family has a financial interest in a childcare company. As well as the expansion that the Chancellor announced in the provision extending the age entitlement, significant funding was put in to deal with the existing entitlement and the inflationary pressures. That is around £200 million this year, paid from this September, and then that rises to just shy of £300 million for the future year, with further uplifts to come. What does that mean? It means a 30% increase in the two-year-old rate, which will take it to around £8 an hour, but also an inflationary increase to the other rates as well.

Q106 **Mr Walker:** Some of those rates have been welcomed in theory by some of the practitioners we spoke to, but there is a question mark over whether they will actually receive them, given some of the machinery of local government through which the rates have to pass. Will you be encouraging Ministers to ensure that practitioners do receive the rate—at or close to the national rate that has been advertised?

The Prime Minister: Yes. The rates were chosen in response to surveys with thousands of nurseries to understand the different cost structure for provision. They are adjusted in local areas to account for local differences. I will go back and make sure that the money is flowing as it is intended to, but it has certainly been announced and put aside.

Q107 **Mr Walker:** Last in this area, one of the great benefits of early education is early identification of need. In terms of SEND, picking up issues early on and being able to address them early on allows children to engage with their education in mainstream schools who might otherwise end up in much more expensive and more limiting specialist placements. However, the Education Committee has heard that only 18% of local authorities feel they have enough provision for disabled children in the early years. Is there anything specific that you think should be done to address that as part of the wider efforts of the Government on SEND?

The Prime Minister: I would say that the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan that we published in March of this year sets out the Government's mission for SEND and alternative provision, making sure that we can collectively fulfil children's potential, as well as ensuring parents' trust in the system and financial sustainability. Alongside that, we are increasing the high-needs funding by about £10 billion for this financial year, which is a 10% increase over last year's funding. That should help.

Q108 **Mr Walker:** Moving further up the school system, there has been a lot of concern about transparency on schools' teaching of RSHE materials. How do you strike the right balance between reassuring parents and making sure that they can have access to these materials, and making sure that children do have access to the curriculum that the Conservative Government introduced?

The Prime Minister: My personal view is that it is vital that what children are taught in RSHE is age appropriate and factual. I was concerned by reports that that was not the case, as was the Education Secretary. That is why we have brought forward a review of the RSHE statutory guidance.



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We have assembled an expert independent panel drawing on different backgrounds—health, education, equalities, child development, safeguarding—to help inform our work. Their work should conclude in September and their recommendations will help us to form a public consultation for later in the autumn. That is our approach.

With regard to materials for parents, I think we have been very clear that parents should be able to see all resources, and I don't think—

Q109 **Mr Walker:** Ministers have repeatedly stated from the Dispatch Box that parents should be able to see them; I think courts have ruled otherwise. If there is a legal issue here, would legislation be a possibility to address it?

The Prime Minister: As I said, we are working through that as we speak, but our general view is that copyright law does not prevent a parent from viewing external resources. We have written to schools to clarify our expectations. As I said, the review and the guidance will work through that particular issue, but our current position is that copyright law should not prohibit that from happening.

Chair: Finally, Steve Brine for the Health and Social Care Committee.

Q110 **Steve Brine:** Prime Minister, well done. Well done on getting the NHS long-term workforce plan out. It is a serious piece of work and it is a big moment, and well done for taking the long view because clearly a 15-year plan outlives even the next Parliament when you are Prime Minister. Can I ask you about medical school training places? It says in the plan that the first new medical school places will be available from September '25. Presumably that is about the public expenditure cycle, but we have heard from colleagues from medical schools who are in a position now to make offers for September '24 to domestic students who want to be doctors in England, if there were funded places available now. The UCAS deadline for September next year is 15 October this year. Is there a reason why we are kicking in in September '25?

The Prime Minister: It is not just the medical training places. My understanding of it is that we need to ensure that the pipeline can also deal with the other training that people will need, not just in the medical schools. The system needs to be able to deliver that at the same time. Also, one of the things we talked about is that we are looking at medical school training itself and looking at whether there are ways to improve the efficiency and streamline that process. We want to make sure we do that work because if there is a way to fund medical school training places that are done in a more efficient or effective way, we would like to do that. That work needs to happen as well. I think that will take some time because that will obviously involve the medical regulators looking at potential different ways of training students and making sure that they are okay with it. If we can do the training in a slightly shorter period of time while maintaining the quality, that would be beneficial and we would want to put incremental funding into that ideally, so we need time for that process to play out.



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Q111 **Steve Brine:** There are a lot of announcements in the plan—I think you could have filled your No. 10 grid for many weeks hence with the number of things that are in here, one of which was talking with respect to training dentists about a tie-in period to encourage dentists to spend a minimum proportion of their time delivering NHS care in the years following graduation. Could you tell us how long that could potentially be, in your mind, and was that discussed in political circles for doctors more widely?

The Prime Minister: I addressed this at the press conference. People have raised concerns both on the medical side and the dentistry side. The work was done on the medical side, and I think I said that I do not have the numbers to hand, but around 95% of people who have done medical training were still at an NHS practice after a certain period of time. The issue was far less widespread than most people assumed it to be, which was why it did not seem like it was necessary right now.

The issue on dentistry was more pervasive. As I said, I do not have it to hand, but I think around only two thirds of those who had trained at some point later were providing NHS services. That is obviously a far more significant issue, and that is after the receipt of hundreds of thousands of pounds of taxpayer support during training, so it did seem reasonable to explore options for a tie there. As I said, there are no conclusions, but that seems to be something that is worth exploring for dentistry. At this stage, the issue in medicine seems to be less pervasive than imagined.

Q112 **Steve Brine:** Just sticking briefly with teeth, because you will know there is huge concern among our constituents about access to NHS dentistry, there is talk of an NHS dentistry plan from the Department. I assume that you wanted to get the workforce plan out first. Could you give any update to constituents as to when they might see that?

The Prime Minister: I do not have an update, but I can tell you that we are still getting on, and that more money has been put into dentistry. There has been some reform, and changes to the existing dentistry contract, and high-performing practices are able to provide about 10% more activity, which should also help. The number of dentists is higher now than it was before—in the last set of numbers that I have seen.

Q113 **Steve Brine:** But not necessarily doing NHS work, of course. That is the challenge.

The Prime Minister: As I said, that is why the workforce plan not only trains more dentists, but is also exploring the tie. The reforms to the contract should hopefully increase NHS dentistry activity.

Q114 **Steve Brine:** Finally, page 13 of the plan says: “Rising demographic pressures and a changing burden of disease are increasing demand for NHS services.” Well, yes, and some. Demand continues to outstrip supply with an ageing population. Where are you on the prevention agenda, Prime Minister? Because it has to be better than cure. When you see that we have kicked the “buy one, get one free” regulations down the line, and the advertising restrictions on food with high fat, salt and sugar have



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been pushed down the line, where are you personally on the prevention of ill health?

The Prime Minister: Of course prevention is always better than a cure. It is worth being cognisant of the particular challenges with inflation and the cost of living that we face at the moment, and I think that is reasonable to course correct for that. More generally, calorie labelling on menus is a good example of that. Then, if you look at the most recent provision of anti-obesity medicines, that should help, because we know that there is a link between other conditions, such as heart disease and diabetes.

On smoking, the “swap to stop” programme is trying something quite proactive and, I think, quite innovative—the chief medical officer would be able to talk about it better than I can. There is such persuasive evidence from that programme and the schemes that we have done on a smaller scale that if you can help existing adult smokers to switch away from smoking to using vapes—this is not about disposable vapes for children, which is obviously concerning and I have spoken about that in the past—there are clearly public health benefits of acting before the bigger problems come down the line. Those are some of the examples of the things we are doing in the prevention space.

Steve Brine: Thank you, and thank you for getting the plan out.

Chair: Thank you. We have done extremely well, and we are going to finish even a little early, partly because I have foregone my own questions to a large extent. May I just ask Sir Chris Bryant to speak? He has volunteered to correct the record very neatly.

Sir Chris Bryant: Many apologies. I said that Wes Streeting had voted on 19 June, and I was wrong, so I just wanted to put the record straight. My apologies to the Committee.

Chair: Thank you very much indeed.

Prime Minister, thank you for your attendance today. Maybe we can have an extra 10 minutes or so next time. We are most grateful to you for attending.

The Prime Minister: Thank you very much.