



# Liaison Committee

## Oral evidence: Work of the Prime Minister, HC 572

Tuesday 26 March 2024

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Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Harriett Baldwin; Mr Clive Betts; Steve Brine; Liam Byrne; Joanna Cherry; Stephen Crabb; Philip Dunne; Dame Diana Johnson; Sir Robert Neill; Sir Jeremy Quin; Cat Smith; Mr Robin Walker; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-93

### Witness

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

### Examination of witness

Witness: Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP, Prime Minister.

**Chair:** Welcome to this session of the Liaison Committee. We are taking evidence from the Prime Minister. Welcome, Prime Minister, and thank you for being with us.

We have two particular overriding, or rather underlying, themes to the discussion today. One is the pressures on public spending and the challenge of squaring the circle between all the demands on public spending, particularly the rise in threat and security issues and the pressure on the defence budget and the need to control public spending—something that no doubt preoccupies you every hour, Prime Minister. The other is in the context of our ongoing inquiry into how Parliament and Select Committees in particular can promote better strategic thinking in Government. In this session, we will start with a post-Budget section on the economy and public services; we will move on to global issues, and conclude with a few questions about scrutiny of strategic thinking in Government. With that, we will start straight away with Harriett Baldwin, Chair of the Treasury Select Committee.

Q1 **Harriett Baldwin:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Probably the best way to start in that context is to ask: how is the economic strategy going?

**The Prime Minister:** Thank you for the preamble, Sir Bernard. When I first got this job, I set out five priorities. Three of them were economic—to halve inflation, grow the economy and reduce debt—and I am pleased to say that we have made progress on all three, particularly on inflation. That



was the No.1 economic objective, to bring inflation down from the record highs that we saw at 11%, and the last set of numbers, at just under 3.5%, were very encouraging. In terms of the economy, obviously we would all like to see the economy growing faster, but it is worth saying that last year it defied the sceptics, significantly outperformed expectations and did, in fact, grow. All the signs from early this year are that it has returned to growth, as we see in the latest GDP figures. Finally, we are on track to meet our fiscal rules to ensure that debt is falling. Those are the three main priorities that I set out; there is progress on all three, and we will stick to the plan. I am happy to expand in detail as you would like.

**Q2 Harriett Baldwin:** Debt has gone up massively over the course of this Parliament. This is a Parliament where there has been a record amount of public spending, there has been a pandemic and there has been this energy price crisis. On that third economic priority, debt, the Office for Budget Responsibility says that this year it is just below 89% of our economy; it is actually rising every year for the next few years, and it is then forecast to slightly dip in the fifth year. How do you feel about that, Prime Minister, given how important it is for the strategic priorities of Government to have debt under control?

**Rishi Sunak:** It is very important that we have debt under control; financial security is important not just for the country but for the future of our public services. Everyone knows the context of the last few years: the pandemic rightly necessitated the Government to step in to support the NHS, the vaccine roll-out, furlough and public services more generally; then there was the energy crisis, which rightly required the Government to step in again and support households with energy bills. Both of those occurrences—once in a generation and once in a century—necessitated an increase in public debt. However, I am pleased that we are meeting our fiscal rules—both of them—as the OBR has verified. Every time the Chancellor has stood up since I got this job, the overall debt profile has improved in terms of the percentage of GDP. Headline debt is forecast to fall from next year and we have always said that on a medium-term trajectory we would have debt falling, which the rule sets out, and the OBR has confirmed that we are meeting it. That requires constant discipline on public spending and spending decisions, as you know.

**Q3 Harriett Baldwin:** But you confirm that debt is still rising and that it will rise for the next several years. In no scenario that I have seen from anyone is it forecast ever to return to what it was before the pandemic. Is there any hope for future taxpayers that debt could ever reach those kinds of levels again?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I would like to believe so. Our fiscal rules were always very clear from the outset about the trajectory that we would have debt falling under. Actually, headline debt starts to fall from next year, I think, rather than in several years. That was the right thing to do given that at the time that I came into office it was necessary to support the economy in the short term and then make sure there is fiscal strength in the medium term. That is what the rules confirm we are delivering. There



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is no reason for it not to continue falling over time. As long as we have strong control over public spending, that will allow us, at the same time as growing the economy, to continue reducing debt as a share of GDP over the medium term.

- Q4 **Harriett Baldwin:** To put it on the record, the OBR has the debt rising from just under 89% this year to 93.2% in 2028. Changing the subject slightly to the recent Budget, which you mentioned, when we had the Chancellor in front of the Treasury Committee, he accepted and was disappointed that on the morning of the Budget, one of the main items—the cut to national insurance—was leaked to the national papers. Do you know how that happened, and is there a leak inquiry under way?

**The Prime Minister:** On debt, when I first got into this job headline debt was forecast to be 100% of GDP by 2027-28, and it is now forecast to be about five percentage points lower than that. That goes to the point that, on every event we have had, the profile has improved.

I deplore these leaks, particularly around Budget measures. I suffered from them as Chancellor. I can't recall the specific situation around that leak inquiry, but in general leak inquiries are instituted when there has been a breach of the confidentiality that we expect, particularly around the Budget process, given the market sensitivity of those measures.

- Q5 **Harriett Baldwin:** So there has been a leak inquiry about the leak of the Budget this time?

**The Prime Minister:** I can't recall specifically on that measure, so I will happily write back to the Committee. In general, leak inquiries are instituted when there is a leak of sensitive information. Obviously, it has historically proved difficult to identify the culprits. It is in no one's interest—certainly not in the Government's—to have sensitive Budget measures leaked in advance.

- Q6 **Harriett Baldwin:** But they must be kept on a very tight, need-to-know basis.

**The Prime Minister:** They are typically kept on a very tight basis, and there is strong information security in the Treasury, which I know well myself. That tends to become tougher to maintain right at the end of a process, where obviously the net widens as all the materials start to be published, booklets printed and all the rest of it. But in general there is very strong information security, so it is disappointing to see. There is a named list, as you alluded to.

**Harriett Baldwin:** I look forward to seeing the letter.

- Q7 **Steve Brine:** Prime Minister, the NHS Long Term Workforce Plan has a productivity increase per annum of between 1.5% and 2%. The Budget committed the NHS to 1.9% a year—the top end—over the second half of this decade. You have put £3.4 billion behind that, which I know is badly needed. The Chancellor said, "there are parts of the NHS that are woefully inefficient". Which parts, and how confident are you that this will move the dial fast, as is clearly needed?



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**The Prime Minister:** The first thing to say is that it is not the Government's productivity plan; it is the NHS's own productivity plan. That is the starting point. It has been backed in full with £3.4 billion of largely capital investment, which will cumulatively unlock tens of billions of pounds of saving over the forecast period.

The most fertile areas that the NHS have identified are to do with greater use of digital technology. They estimate that about 13 million hours are lost by doctors and nurses every year due to outdated IT systems. To give you some examples, if theatre processes are digitised more effectively, that will allow the same number of consultants to do around 200,000 more operations a year. Similarly, there is technology that will allow doctors to help read MRI and CAT scans more accurately, which will mean that approximately 130,000 more patients will get their results quicker. The NHS app can be improved to allow confirmation and modification of all appointments. They estimate that that will reduce around half a million missed appointments annually, which creates essentially free capacity for the NHS. Those are some of the areas that they have identified. Probably another one is the NHS staff app as well, which will allow more efficient rostering electronically and reduce off-framework agency spend, which you will be familiar with. The NHS are planning in general to set out more details later this year.

Q8 **Steve Brine:** The workforce plan is, without question, one of the most significant interventions in healthcare planning for a generation. Do you accept that getting this productivity challenge right, with the things that you have just set out, is make or break for that workforce plan?

**The Prime Minister:** I think that the two things come together, because the workforce plan itself has a reform element, which is slightly distinct from the overall NHS productivity plan. There are three elements of the workforce plan: train, retain and reform.

Obviously, the first is to significantly increase the number of doctors, nurses, dentists and other healthcare professionals that we train. That expansion has already started. That has never been done before on this scale. Retain is to improve retention of staff. Then the third area is reform, with the use of new types of roles—for example, physician associates and nurse associates—the new use of apprenticeships, and ensuring that every medical professional can practise at what is called the top of their licence. Those types of things will unlock labour productivity—slightly distinct from the productivity plan.

Q9 **Steve Brine:** Thank you. Achieving that productivity improvement requires making sure that pharmacy, general practice and secondary care all connect up, and the IT platforms for connecting them up are critical to achieving that productivity. Should the federated data platform be extended to primary care?

**The Prime Minister:** It probably wouldn't be right for me to comment on individual suppliers—I am conscious that FDP is a relative supplier—but, in



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general, yes, we should be rolling out productivity-enhancing technology across the NHS at both secondary and primary care.

We have seen in secondary care very strong benefits from using FDP. I think that Chelsea and Westminster was one of the first trusts to use it, and the improvement in productivity from the use was published by the NHS, which is why it has, I believe, been authorised to be rolled out more broadly.

In primary care, what we are doing currently is investing in digital telephony to ensure that we can eliminate the engaged tone that people often get at 8 am on a Monday, and then over time improve the software of how to handle calls, which again will improve the patient experience. Where there are further opportunities to use technology to improve both patient care and the nature of the work for people involved in primary care, of course we should be doing that. A large amount of the £3.4 billion will go on improving technology to the benefit of staff and patients.

**Steve Brine:** Excellent. I am grateful. Thank you.

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

- Q10 **Mr Betts:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. Since you were local government Minister, Prime Minister, things have got worse for councils in terms of their finances haven't they? In the last six years, eight councils have effectively declared bankruptcy. In the previous 16 years, none did. What is the fundamental problem? Before you say, "All those councils have made mistakes," some of them have, but as John Fuller, a Conservative leader, said to the Select Committee recently, while the problems have been specific to some councils, there is now a more general problem. Potentially, in the next year or two, about half the authorities will be in financial distress. Isn't that a fundamental crisis in local government finance?

**The Prime Minister:** I think the first thing to say is that councils are the backbone of their communities; they carry out tremendous work every day, delivering important services to the people they serve. I got to experience that as local government Minister—being scrutinised by you, Clive, at the time. As we discussed then, we recognise that they face challenges, but that is why, particularly over this Parliament, significantly more funding has gone into local government, including the £600 million boost in the most recent local government finance settlement. That has meant that councils, on average, will have around 7.5% more spending power this forthcoming year than they had last year. That settlement, I think, was warmly welcomed by the Local Government Association, the County Councils Network and, indeed, the District Councils' Network.

- Q11 **Mr Betts:** But Prime Minister, that is in the context of a 30% cut in spending power in the past 14 years, isn't it? Again, as a Conservative council leader said to us, quoting the figures he is experiencing: "when you have social care going up by 19% and children with complex needs



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going up by 23%, but your income is only going up by 3% to 5%, it does not take a maths genius to work out that there is going to be a gap at some stage." That gap, according to the LGA, is now about £4 billion, even after the extra money in the Budget. The IFS says it is about £7 billion. That is a crisis, isn't it? We are seeing social care demands going up, children's care in particular going up, SEND—special educational needs—going up, and other services being decimated in many parts of the country.

**The Prime Minister:** No, I would not characterise it in that way. Of course there are challenges, particularly with inflation, which is why I said in answer to Harriet's first question that the overriding economic priority of the Government is to bring inflation down, because that will help local councils with their finances, as well as helping families up and down the country. If you look at what has happened from central Government to local government over this Parliament, since 2019, the grant in cash terms has more than doubled—that is the change. Over this Parliament, the amount of direct cash grant going from central to local government has doubled, in cash terms, from 2019 to—

Q12 **Mr Betts:** Why is the Local Government Association saying that 20% of councils face the threat of bankruptcy in the next two years? Why is it saying that?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course, every council is going to be different and face challenges, but—

**Mr Betts:** Twenty per cent is a lot, isn't it, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** Central Government has doubled the grant since 2019—since I was Chief Secretary. The grant going from central to local government has doubled over this Parliament. Core spending power has gone up meaningfully over the past four or five years as well. Of course, there will always be challenges, but where Government can step in to help to alleviate some of that pressure, it has done, particularly with social care, which is a major area of concern—

Q13 **Mr Betts:** You have got these concerns expressed right across local government, by Conservative as well as Labour councils—right across. In the spending plans looking forward to the next Parliament, the forecast is that DLUHC—the levelling-up Department that includes local government—is not a protected Department, so there is a forecast for no growth in spending whatsoever. Is it really sustainable that local councils could face no increase in support from the Government at all for four years without making increased cuts to their services, which are already at rock bottom, or putting up council tax by excessive amounts? What is going to give, Prime Minister?

**The Prime Minister:** I do not want to write the spending review here and now—

**Mr Betts:** But it is in the forecast.



**The Prime Minister:** But the next spending review has not been done. People can forecast all they want, but until the spending review is actually done, there are no plans to comment on. What I can tell you, and what the Chair opened with, is that overall public spending is forecast to grow in real terms over the next spending review period—in cash terms by something like 2.5% or 2.7% annually. That has not been divvied up into various Departments, and that is what spending reviews are for. Necessarily, Government will prioritise at that moment, but overall public spending is forecast to rise not just in cash terms but in real terms over the next Parliament. That is what the plans in the OBR's current forecast contain, for day-to-day spending.

Q14 **Mr Betts:** But in those forecasts, Prime Minister, DLUHC is not a protected Department, therefore it is forecast to have no increase at all in its spending over the next Parliament. That is the current forecast, isn't it?

**The Prime Minister:** All I can say is that the spending review has not been done. The only number that exists is an overall spending envelope for what is called RDEL, the day-to-day Government spending on public services. As I said, that is forecast to grow by just over 2.5% in cash terms—1% in real terms—over the forecast period. How that is divvied up between different Departments is the work of a spending review.

I always come here, we have these debates, and it is completely reasonable for everyone to say that in their individual area they would like more money to be spent on their particular interest, and I am sure we will hear that from many colleagues, as the Chair pointed out at the beginning, but I think it is incumbent on colleagues to explain which Department they think that increase should come at the expense of, or indeed what taxes should be raised to pay for it.

The Government is in the business of always having to prioritise, but the framework that we have set out is one where public spending continues to grow in real terms over the next Parliament. The next spending review will divvy that up among the competing priorities, and the track record over this Parliament is for a substantial increase going into local government, particularly in the area of social care, where the most pressure has been.

Q15 **Mr Walker:** Prime Minister, I want to follow up on Clive's line of questioning. You mentioned social care, and obviously there was some small amount of extra funding in the recent Budget for that area, but many local authorities have a deficit in the high needs budget, in the children's social care budget and in home-to-school transport. Is there anything you can do, in your co-ordinating role across Government, to make sure that the support to them from different Government Departments is better co-ordinated? Can we make sure that we invest in addressing those deficits rather than in programmes to run them, like Safety Valve and Delivering Better Value, which seem to be getting larger and larger over the years but without actually reducing or removing those deficits?



**The Prime Minister:** The first thing to say is that we want all children and young people of school age to receive a great education. Regardless of their backgrounds and circumstances, we want that to be the case. That is why, over the course of this Parliament, the high needs budget has seen increases of around 60% since 2019—recognising, as you rightly point out, some of the pressures we have seen and the growth in EHCPs over that period. Today’s announcement is part of an almost £2.5 billion capital programme to create more places, which I think has been warmly received.

You are right about the cross-cutting nature of it, which—I’m sure we will talk about this in the final section, on strategy—isn’t always easy for Government to get precisely right. I saw that as local government Minister, co-ordinating closely with DFE colleagues when it came to SEND or children’s social care. I think what we need to do is make sure that those Ministers are joined up and that when it comes to spending reviews—I have seen this as local government Minister, Chief Secretary, Chancellor and now Prime Minister—we make sure, at the moment of the spending review, that the relevant Departments in areas which have cross-cutting equities are properly co-ordinated, so that things don’t fall between the gaps.

The last thing I will pick up on is that we are investing—you have touched on it, and I appreciate that the Safety Valve schemes are for immediate relief and they can help, but we are investing £70 million in the Change programme, which launched in the autumn of last year. There are nine different partnerships and it covers about 30 different local areas. It is important that we test those interventions at that level before rolling them out on a system-wide basis. People might have debates about the pace but, given the importance of getting the reforms right—to alleviate the longer-term pressure—it’s right that we try all those first in those areas.

Q16 **Mr Walker:** I recognise the importance of testing. I think that, particularly in two areas—kinship care and SEND placements—there is an urgent need to support people who are providing really valuable support and keeping people out of the care system. If we are going to meet our aspirations for having the right support in the right place and at the right time, we need to make sure that we can grow the support that is there to address the demand in EHCPs.

Can I change the subject to financial education? You have championed maths skills and numeracy as Prime Minister. We have received a lot of support for our inquiry into financial education. How do you strike the right balance between taking the opportunity of maths to 18, for as many pupils as possible, including those who may not be terribly good at complex mathematics, and making sure that they are equipped with the financial education they need to thrive in the modern world?

**The Prime Minister:** I am grateful to the Committee for looking into this. Obviously it is a subject dear to my heart. I don’t think those two things are actually in opposition. Part of broadening maths education is to ensure that everyone has a good understanding of maths, because we know from





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all the evidence, all the research, that it's hugely important for future earnings potential, employment potential, the ability to participate in many aspects of everyday life, and sadly we haven't done a good enough job of it in the past. One in four children leaves formal education without basic numeracy, and we have some of the highest levels of adult innumeracy in the western world.

The reforms that we have announced will help, particularly for the most disadvantaged—first, because over time there will be more teaching time in the classroom; compared with our peers, we do not have enough. That will disproportionately benefit disadvantaged children. Secondly, we have created a £30,000 bonus for teachers who are going to teach STEM subjects—obviously including maths—over the first five years of their career, but for the first ever time that will apply to people teaching in FE colleges, not just schools. That is a change that I was keen to make to broaden the benefit of that intervention.

Lastly, in the same announcement we announced new funding—hundreds of millions of pounds—to help students to successfully resit maths and English GCSEs. Again, that disproportionately benefits disadvantaged students. I think those interventions will, as I said, disproportionately help disadvantaged students. Maths to 18 is not about everyone doing maths A-level or further maths; it is about people having a decent degree of familiarity with mathematical concepts.

**Q17 Mr Walker:** You also commended and personally welcomed the Department's move to strengthen the ban on mobile phones in classrooms. We have heard a lot of evidence during our screen time inquiry about the broader risks to children from too much exposure to screens and social media, and the mental health pressures they are facing as a result of that. Beyond the Online Safety Act, is there more we can do to protect children in this space? Do you think we ought to be doing more to support parents in knowing how to protect children?

**The Prime Minister:** As a parent of two girls at mobile phone age, or thereabouts, I think about this a lot. I have been struck by how many teachers and parents speak to me when I am around the country about the particular issue at schools, and I am glad that our new guidance has been warmly welcomed by lots of different people, because it really will help schools to navigate that and ensure that the default is for children not to be able to have access to their phones during the school day.

On the Online Safety Act, before we move beyond it I think it is important that we implement it. It is world-leading legislation. This stuff is not easy, and what we need now is a regulator to get on and implement all the things in there, because they will make a significant difference to protecting children from harmful or inappropriate content and activity online, whether that is bullying, pornography or the promotion of self-harm. We took a lot of time collectively across the House in getting that legislation right, and implementing it now ought to be the priority.



Alongside that, of course, I am thinking more broadly about this question. Schools were the most immediate area to focus on, but the Online Safety Act is important. More broadly, as I said, I think about this first and foremost as a parent. I am open—people have made suggestions. I recently had the privilege and pleasure of speaking to Molly Russell's father and Brianna Ghey's mother about some of these issues as well, and I have been reflecting on the conversation I had with them, too.

- Q18 **Stephen Crabb:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. My Committee recently met with some of the 600,000 under-35-year-olds who are currently inactive due to long-term sickness, often with a mental health need. Despite them telling us very articulately how motivated they were in wanting to work, none of them are receiving medical interventions to help them to get better. They are not subject to any employment interventions. There is no real requirement or expectation that they should ever work again. Do you agree that that is an appalling indictment of both our health and welfare systems?

**The Prime Minister:** I think it is a tragedy for those people, because I believe that work can actually provide an enormous amount of purpose and fulfilment to people's lives, and that everyone who can work, should work—not just because that is fair to everybody else, helps financial sustainability and gives people financial security, but because it can bring purpose and dignity to people's lives. So where we can support people into work, we should.

You are right to highlight that; one of the unfortunate consequences of the pandemic is the rise in economic inactivity, particularly for those who are long-term sick. Yes, that is concentrated at the older end, but also, as you rightly highlighted, Stephen, at the younger end. We are doing a bunch of things. In the last two fiscal events, billions of pounds have been announced—a combination of the Chancellor and the Work and Pensions Secretary's back to work plan, talking therapies and universal support. I could go into that in a bit more detail. But we need to make progress on it because you are right: we need to support everyone who wants to work.

- Q19 **Stephen Crabb:** Forgive me for cutting across, but in pure fiscal terms, would you agree that the trajectory of spending—particularly on younger people of working age unactive due to sickness—is unaffordable?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. The welfare system needs to be sustainable, so it is important that we look at this. I have spoken about this previously. WCA, which you will be very familiar with from your time, is something that we have not looked at in a decade. Over that period, three times as many people are being signed off as unfit to work as there were a decade ago. I think most people, intuitively, would think that the country is not three times sicker than it was a decade ago, so that is suggestive of a system that is not working as intended.

You rightly highlighted that actually a significant chunk of those people want to work. That is why we are reforming WCA. We are giving people



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support through things like talking therapies for mental health. We are also making sure that the system is fair, in the sense of how we use something called the administrative earnings threshold, with the expectations that we put on people who can work to work. That is an important part of making sure that the system is fair and ensuring long-term financial sustainability.

Q20 **Stephen Crabb:** In terms of another area of welfare spending, is it your assumption that the triple lock should be in place for the entire period of the next Parliament?

**The Prime Minister:** The Chancellor talked about this at the weekend. I do not have anything further to add to what he said.

Q21 **Stephen Crabb:** He talked about it being a manifesto commitment, but that does not necessarily imply for the whole of the next Parliament. What is your position on that?

**The Prime Minister:** I think you can safely assume that that is what he meant, without wanting to write the entire manifesto now.

Q22 **Stephen Crabb:** If that is your position, do you genuinely think that is affordable? With your hand on your heart, do you think the triple lock, indefinitely—

**The Prime Minister:** I do, because the track record of the Government is that we make priorities. Making sure that, if you have worked hard all your life, you have the dignity that you deserve in retirement is important to me and it is important to the Government. The triple lock is an expression of that.

I am actually proud that as a result of the triple lock, pensioners are much less likely to be in poverty. They will see an almost £900 increase, in just a couple of weeks, in the state pension. That comes on the top of significant support over the winter to help with energy bills—a doubling of the winter fuel payment. It speaks to the kind of country that we believe in and the society that we live in. Making sure we look after people at that stage of their lives, I think, is the right thing to do. The triple lock is what the previous Conservative Government introduced. We have protected it and will continue to do so.

Q23 **Stephen Crabb:** Thank you for that. Given the projected profile of spending on three things—state pension, working-age benefit and the NHS—over the next five years, do you think that there is something in what Paul Johnson from the IFS said about there being a “conspiracy of silence” between the two main party Front Benches about just how constrained the public finances will be over the next forecast period?

**The Prime Minister:** Look, I cannot speak for other parties; I can speak for the Conservative party and the Government. We have set out plans that continue to have public spending growing in real terms, as I outlined earlier, and then it is the work of future spending reviews to divvy that up.

I do think it is right that we focus on productivity to get more out of the investment we are putting into public services. To give you just one statistic, public sector productivity is around 5% lower today than before the pandemic—5% lower! No one is asking for anything heroic, just a return to where we were. Obviously the private sector has managed that.

Just a return to where we were is worth £20 billion a year. The Comptroller and Auditor General has also suggested that there are billions and billions of pounds of productivity to get. We have talked about the NHS previously, but more generally, the overall public sector is 5% less productive than it was in 2019. That is worth £20 billion a year. My focus is, “Yes, we are going to grow public spending, but we’ve got to focus on getting more out of the money that we put in, so that we can responsibly cut people’s taxes,” because I think that is the right thing to do.

We have talked about the type of country I believe in. I believe in working hard and having that hard work rewarded. We have cut national insurance by four points—a £900 tax cut. We want to go further. That requires strong control over public spending, including welfare, and getting productivity so that we can continue to cut people’s taxes.

**Chair:** We now move to Sir Bob Neill of the Justice Committee.

Q24 **Sir Robert Neill:** Prime Minister, would you agree with the proposition that an efficient and effective justice system is fundamental to a civilised society?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes.

Q25 **Sir Robert Neill:** And that depends, of course, upon it being properly funded, doesn’t it?

**The Prime Minister:** Of course.

Q26 **Sir Robert Neill:** We are in a situation where we have record levels of delays in our criminal courts, particularly in the Crown court, and record numbers of people in prison, to the extent that the Justice Secretary, an admirable Minister, is having to take emergency measures to manage them. The two are clearly linked, aren’t they? What is being done to unblock that?

**The Prime Minister:** I think it is worth remembering the pandemic, and the impact of the pandemic. We made a decision during the pandemic to protect jury trials, which I know is something that the Committee and you and others—in fact, everyone—were supportive of.

During the pandemic, that flow of justice slowed, inevitably. That has meant something like a 50% increase—you know the numbers better than me—in the remand population awaiting trial or sentencing. That actually accounts for the biggest increase in the prison population over that time. I think it is reasonable to have said, “Well, we should not have persevered with jury trials; that was a mistake, and I said that at the time,” if someone did. I do not believe anyone did, actually: everyone thought that



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was the right thing to do. It is unsurprising, therefore, that you have had this increase in the population.

At the same time, though, we are in the process of the largest prison-building programme since, I think, the Victorian age, which is something that I signed off on as Chancellor. We are in the process of building thousands more prison places, and that is happening at the same time. We are investing in expanding prison capacity—that was signed off, as I said, some time ago—and it is being delivered, but there is this particular issue of what covid did to the remand population in prisons, which is causing the shorter-term operational pressure that we are seeing.

**Q27 Sir Robert Neill:** The problem is, Prime Minister, that in fact the backlog has not returned to pre-covid levels. When the Lady Chief Justice gave evidence to our Select Committee earlier this year, she said that it would not be possible to achieve the Government's target of reducing the backlog to 53,000 cases per annum without radical change; it could not be done "as the system currently stands".

Is the problem not that, because the Ministry of Justice is an unprotected Department, it is picking up people coming into the system because of failures in education, in healthcare, in mental health and drug treatment, and in children's services, for example? All of those account for a large number of entrants into the system, but it is not protected. What is being done to take a joined-up approach to funding these issues, rather than letting it all fall upon a downstream, unprotected Department?

**The Prime Minister:** The first thing to say is that we are absolutely committed to reducing the outstanding caseload in the Crown court. I have met the Lady Chief Justice to discuss this on a couple of different occasions, and we are working closely with her, the judiciary and other criminal justice partners to speed up justice and improve the experience of court cases.

There are a few specific things that I would point to. One is that we funded over, I think, 100,000 sitting days this financial year, and again next financial year. We have committed, as I think you will be familiar with, to keeping the use of the 20 Nightingale courtrooms in the next financial year, which have made a difference, and we are in the process of recruiting the 1,000 extra judges. All of that is on track and is helping to ease the pressures. I completely accept that of course there are pressures and that of course the backlog, as a result of covid, is higher than it was, but we are doing what we can to bring it down.

**Q28 Sir Robert Neill:** According to the Lady Chief Justice, there are about 100 unplanned courtroom closures every week because of poor maintenance in the Crown courts, and on average about 600 cells are unusable during the course of the average year because of maintenance backlogs in the prisons. Is it not time that we looked again at the way maintenance contracts are procured for these parts of the justice system? They seem to be rigid, inflexible and very slow to actually get the work done. Is that not something that the Government need to be looking at in a joined-up fashion?



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**The Prime Minister:** I am less familiar with the exact contracting arrangements; I would be happy to get some more information from you, Bob, on that. I do recall that we had put more money into courtroom maintenance with the new Lord Chancellor—it was something that he raised with me, as did the previous Lord Chief Justice and the Lady Chief Justice. I think that was signed off some time ago, so there is extra funding going into court maintenance. Was your precise concern about how that is being spent and the contracting, which I am not as familiar with?

Q29 **Sir Robert Neill:** It is that the contract frameworks are, it has been suggested to us by experts in the field, rather out of date and very clunky, if I can use that word. Despite the best endeavours of the Justice Secretary, the money takes a long time to get spent. That then has a knock-on in the cost of the delays in the system.

**The Prime Minister:** Okay. I will happily take that away and discuss it with the Justice Secretary, because obviously if we are spending the money, we want it to be spent quickly and well.

Q30 **Sir Robert Neill:** My final point is on a separate aspect: the importance of a functioning civil justice system to businesses. Were you aware that, at the moment, a small business that may have a £95,000 money claim that is very important to its cash flow can be waiting for up to 70-plus weeks for that case to be resolved if it goes to trial? That is 17 weeks more than it was about four or five years ago. That level of delay cannot be good for the British economy, can it?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not familiar with those statistics, for that particular type. Again, I am very happy to look into it, but more generally, I do not disagree with your point that there is an economic benefit to having a smooth and swift justice system.

Q31 **Sir Robert Neill:** I put it to you that that is partly because the county courts, which handle 95% of civil work, are operating an entirely paper-based system, which causes massive delays. Would you perhaps take away the proposition that considerable savings and economic benefit will be achieved with some capital investment in improving the technology and support systems in the civil courts?

**The Prime Minister:** Okay. I will happily do that. Bob, we invested money in digital transformation in courts; I remember signing off on it. Did that not apply to the civil courts?

**Sir Robert Neill:** Not in the county court.

**The Prime Minister:** Not in the county court—okay. Because we have been doing that, and the last time I checked with Alex, it has been working quite well.

**Sir Robert Neill:** The concern that many have is that we rightly think about justice in terms of crime, because that gets the headlines, but we need to look into those other bread and butter issues as well.



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**The Prime Minister:** Fine. I will make sure I look into that as well.

**Chair:** Prime Minister, we are always very grateful when you follow up with a letter on topics that you have not been able to cover in detail. I call Dame Diana Johnson of the Home Affairs Select Committee.

Q32 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. On your pledge to stop the boats, you told me last time that “considerable progress” had been made, so I am sure you will be disappointed by the figures for the first three months of this year: there is a 10% increase compared with 2022 and 2023.

I want to ask you about the Safety of Rwanda Bill. I think we are all clear that it will get Royal Assent fairly soon, and you can then start to put people on planes and send them to Rwanda. Have you now got an airline that will be able to send people to Rwanda, or are you going to use the RAF?

**The Prime Minister:** The Home Office are making all the appropriate arrangements. There is a range of options that they are considering. You would not expect me to get into the detail of those, because they might well involve, as you would expect, commercial conversations.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** We know it is costing £11,000 per individual.

**The Prime Minister:** What I can say is that the preparations are all being made, and have been made for a while, to operationalise the Bill.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** So you are not able to say if there is an airline or not.

**The Prime Minister:** You would not expect me to get into commercial conversations, but all the preparatory work to operationalise the Bill has been in place for a while.

Q33 **Dame Diana Johnson:** Okay. Over 33,000 people have arrived in the UK irregularly since the Illegal Migration Act came into force last July. Are you expecting to send all 33,000 people to Rwanda, because obviously they cannot make a claim for asylum in this country?

**The Prime Minister:** As you know, the Bill has to get Royal Assent, and subsequent to that the Bill has to be put in force.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, I understand that.

**The Prime Minister:** There will be choices about which cohorts to initially apply the policy to. There is a range of different options for that. That is all in the planning work that is being done.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** There are 33,000 in limbo. I just want to be clear: are you expecting that that group will go to Rwanda?

**The Prime Minister:** I probably wouldn't characterise it as being in limbo. My general view is that anyone who arrives here illegally should not be able to stay. That is the Government's, and my, very clear position. We



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will do everything that we can to remove them either to their home country, if it is safe to do so, or a safe alternative like Rwanda. There is no limbo about it. Our intention is that everybody who arrives here illegally should be removed.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Well, they are in limbo at the moment, because they cannot claim asylum and you are not able to tell me how many of the 33,000 you think will go to Rwanda. My understanding—

**The Prime Minister:** The IMA needs to be commenced for it to be in force, but they still come under the rules of the NABA, which also made the point.

Q34 **Dame Diana Johnson:** No, these come under the rule of the Illegal Migration Act from the enactment in July. These are 33,000 people who are in limbo. They cannot claim asylum. They are waiting, I assume, to be sent to Rwanda.

I want to move on, because I have a couple of other questions. Could you just explain why No. 10 blocked the reappointment of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't believe that is the case. I think the Home Secretary addressed this in the House—either he or one of his Ministers addressed this in detail in the House. The appointment decision was made by the Home Office.

Q35 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So No. 10 was not involved. Okay. It seems to some people that David Neal was actually a whistleblower, wasn't he, and he took the action he did because 15 of his reports were in the Home Office and had never seen the light of day?

**The Prime Minister:** No, and I think the response to all those he welcomed, actually, when he gave evidence—maybe it was to your Committee. I think he welcomed the response to those reports having been published.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** A year late.

**The Prime Minister:** I think the remaining two are imminently to be published.

**Dame Diana Johnson:** They are, yes.

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, obviously the Home Secretary and his Ministers have addressed this in detail in the House previously.

Q36 **Dame Diana Johnson:** There are two other things that I wanted to ask you, very quickly. Do you agree that there is a moral case to support Lord Browne's amendment to the Safety of Rwanda Bill to ensure that Afghans who helped our armed forces in Afghanistan are not sent to Rwanda—yes or no?

**The Prime Minister:** We have an existing scheme—





**Dame Diana Johnson:** It is not working, though.

**The Prime Minister:** Well, it has brought thousands of people to the UK under three different streams. Obviously in the interests of time we do not need to go over them all here, but there are two different schemes, there are multiple different strands and we have brought thousands of people safely from Afghanistan to the UK to provide them with sanctuary. That contributes to our overall numbers of around half a million people who we have welcomed to the UK through safe and legal routes over the past few years.

Q37 **Dame Diana Johnson:** The highest group within the small boats at the moment are from Afghanistan, aren't they, at 20%. There is an issue about why those schemes are not working. My very final question is—

**The Prime Minister:** On that, that does not mean that the schemes are not working. It might just mean that there are many more people who would like to come to this country than we have the resources and the capacity to safely look after. I think you can see that—

Q38 **Dame Diana Johnson:** With the greatest of respect, Prime Minister, I do not think that that is the view of most people looking at those schemes and how slow they have been. But I want to ask—

**The Prime Minister:** But I don't think you can infer from that that just because people are coming, the scheme isn't working. There is a limit to how many people we can take in this country, where we can house them and appropriately fund them.

Q39 **Dame Diana Johnson:** I fully understand that, but I will push you on this quite specific—

**The Prime Minister:** We heard lots earlier from Clive about the pressures on local government. Ultimately, much of the pressure from housing people falls on local government, and that is why we do have to be cognisant of the numbers.

Q40 **Dame Diana Johnson:** My question was quite specific about the moral case for supporting those who have helped British forces in Afghanistan. Talking of moral cases, I want to ask you my very final question. You have already accepted the moral case for compensation to be paid to the infected blood victims, but I just want to ask you this: did your Whips tell MPs last December that implementing Sir Brian Langstaff's infected blood compensation recommendations would actually mean that no tax cuts would be in the Budget? Is that what your MPs were told?

**The Prime Minister:** That is not something I am aware of, but more generally I am acutely aware of the strength of feeling on this issue and the suffering of all those impacted by what is an appalling scandal. I have consistently acknowledged that justice should be delivered, and we are working very hard to put things right. That is why the acceptance of the moral case for compensation was made in October 2022 and infected individuals and bereaved partners registered with the scheme received interim payments at that time. I have provided evidence as well to the



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inquiry, and Ministers have made statements from the Dispatch Box about the things we are doing to provide psychological support services and appoint an expert group to advise the Government on how to make informed choices in responding to the inquiry's report when we receive it.

Q41 **Dame Diana Johnson:** So the answer to my question is no—you did not tell your MPs that.

**The Prime Minister:** That is not something that I am familiar with at all.

Q42 **Joanna Cherry:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. If we can continue with questions about your Rwanda policy, the Joint Committee on Human Rights concluded that the Rwanda Bill does not comply with the UK's human rights obligations and that it would place the UK in breach of international law. We observed that other nations might be influenced by the way in which the UK treats its international obligations. We pointed to the example of the interim Prime Minister of Pakistan, who has referred to the UK's Rwanda policy in defence of his country's decision to expel from Pakistan hundreds of thousands of Afghans who fled from the Taliban regime. Are you proud that he used your Rwanda policy to justify doing that?

**The Prime Minister:** I am obviously not responsible for the comments of a person in another country, so I think that is a slightly bizarre thing to say. But what I can say is, I am very confident that our Rwanda scheme is in compliance with all our international obligations, and we have worked very hard to ensure that that is the case. In fact, the principle of sending people to Rwanda as a safe country was a principle that was supported by the High Court and not challenged by the Court of Appeal or the Supreme Court and in accordance with the refugee convention. As I said, I am very clear on what we are doing and why what we are doing is right.

Q43 **Joanna Cherry:** Dame Diana mentioned that there is evidence that quite a high number of people fleeing the Taliban regime are reaching the United Kingdom's shore on small boats. Are you proud that your Members of Parliament were whipped against voting for an amendment that would have prevented Afghans who had aided or supported His Majesty's armed forces in Afghanistan from being sent to Rwanda? Is that something that makes you proud?

**The Prime Minister:** I really disagree with that characterisation. Given we've just had all these debates in Parliament about Opposition day debates and what they do to MPs and intimidation, I actually think characterising like that is deeply unhelpful. But I will answer the question—

**Joanna Cherry:** I have to say, Prime Minister, that I resent your characterisation. I am asking you a perfectly reasonable question.

**The Prime Minister:** Your framing of the question—

**Joanna Cherry:** There are people coming to our shores who have previously aided and abetted our armed forces in Afghanistan—



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**The Prime Minister:** You have asked the question. I would appreciate the opportunity to answer.

**Joanna Cherry:** You whipped your MPs against an amendment which would have prevented them from being deported to Rwanda. I am asking whether you are proud of that policy. That is all I am asking you.

**Chair:** We will now hear from the Prime Minister. You have interrupted him twice.

**The Prime Minister:** We have a very clear obligation to make sure that we support those who aided us in Afghanistan, and we are delivering on that.

We have multiple different schemes, which I have discussed in this Committee in the past—three strands of them. Those schemes are operating and bringing thousands of Afghans safely to the UK in a way which is sustainable, and where we can provide them with the appropriate support they need when they are here. That is part of a broader approach that has welcomed half a million refugees to this country from varying different countries over the past several years. So we have a proud and compassionate record of making sure that we support people who need that help, but it needs to be done in a legal way and it needs to be done in a way that is sustainable for local communities and for the individuals concerned so that we can provide them with the support that they need.

That is why we believe that our schemes, whether that is ARAP or ACRS, are the right way to do that. Other people will have their views, but we believe our way is the right way and that's because we do believe we have an obligation and we are delivering on it.

Q44 **Joanna Cherry:** The Home Office has prepared a 137-page country information note on human rights in Rwanda. It was recently updated in January. It collates sources ranging from the US State Department to Human Rights Watch, which set out the very grave shortcomings in the protection of human rights in Rwanda. Can you explain to me why you feel able to ignore reliable information collated by your own Home Office in insisting that Rwanda is a safe country?

**The Prime Minister:** Because we have a new agreement with Rwanda that gives us the assurance that we need that people's rights will be respected. We are also supporting them to improve the processing of people's claims. I would also make the point, as I reiterated earlier, that the High Court did find that it was generally safe for individuals to be relocated under the MEDP in Rwanda, and that wasn't challenged by the Court of Appeal or the Supreme Court. The treaty that we now have makes further clear that all the obligations will be met for all individuals and without discrimination.

I would also say that the constitution of Rwanda includes a broad prohibition of discrimination. It does not criminalise or discriminate against aspects that have been raised, and Rwanda itself is passing new laws on asylum processing.



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For all those reasons, we are confident that this policy is the right one and is deliverable within all our obligations and I have had commitments from the President down that they are absolutely determined to make this work.

**Joanna Cherry:** On that point, I think where you and I could agree is that the United Kingdom has some of the best human rights and equality protections in the world for people who are same-sex attracted or people who are transgender, but it is a matter of fact that there are no such laws in Rwanda. Indeed, the Foreign Office travel advice for Rwanda warns that individuals “can experience discrimination and abuse, including from local authorities. There are no specific anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBT+ individuals”. Why then do you think it would be safe to send LGBT asylum seekers to Rwanda?

**The Prime Minister:** If I can just refer you to my previous answer, the constitution of Rwanda includes a broad prohibition of discrimination, and it doesn’t criminalise or discriminate against sexual orientation in law or indeed in policy. We do have a legally binding treaty, which makes it clear that obligations will be met in terms of treating people without discrimination as well.

Finally, the Bill means that UK decision makers will always be able to consider compelling evidence relating specifically to an individual’s particular circumstances, while respecting the fact that our courts themselves have agreed with the Government’s view that Rwanda is generally safe for individuals relocated.

Q45 **Joanna Cherry:** Briefly on that, if Rwanda is as safe as you say and if you have no concerns about human rights protections in Rwanda, notwithstanding the Home Office’s concerns, in what way do you expect the scheme to be a deterrent?

**The Prime Minister:** Because people will not be able to reside and remain in the UK. And what we have seen from the situation with our Albanian deal is that once we have a functioning returns agreement that means that we can return people who come here illegally back to a different country, we see the arrivals drop, as they have done from Albania by over 90%. And if you look at how other countries—for example, Australia—have dealt with this, it has also been found to work. That is why I am confident that deterrence works.

Without question, this is a novel thing to do, but we need to look at novel and bold solutions to a situation that otherwise will just continue to get worse. I don’t think that’s right, I don’t think that’s fair and I don’t think that’s compassionate, because, as we saw just weeks ago, people are tragically dying making these crossings when they are exploited by gangs. For all sorts of reasons, the right thing to do is to break that cycle. Having an effective deterrent is critical to that. Indeed, the National Crime Agency has also agreed that having a deterrent is key.

**Chair:** We are now moving into the global issues section of our session with Cat Smith from the Petitions Committee.



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- Q46 **Cat Smith:** Some of the most popular e-petitions on the Government website at the moment are regarding the situation in Israel and Gaza. Following the UN Security Council's resolution to call for an immediate ceasefire, what steps will the UK Government take to ensure that that ceasefire is implemented, in terms of using economic and diplomatic levers?

**The Prime Minister:** We were pleased to support the resolution at the UN, because it was consistent with our position, which is for an immediate, sustained humanitarian pause that would allow for the safe release of hostages and more aid to go into Gaza, and would provide a platform for a more lasting, durable ceasefire.

We will continue to do everything we can, both asking Israel at all levels to comply with international humanitarian law to improve the provision of humanitarian aid into Gaza and continuing to call on Hamas and work with countries like Egypt and Qatar to unconditionally release the hostages.

- Q47 **Cat Smith:** Prime Minister, does "everything we can" include looking at the situation of UK arms export licences?

**The Prime Minister:** We have a very robust regime in place for export licences. There are strategic export licensing criteria. We don't grant export licences where there's a clear risk that the items may be used to commit a serious violation of IHL, and that has been the long-standing case.

- Q48 **Cat Smith:** And is that constantly under review?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. I have made that point clear from the Dispatch Box previously.

- Q49 **Cat Smith:** When we look at the situation in Gaza, more than 30,000 individuals have been killed and 74,000 wounded. When we look at children specifically, 13,000 children have been killed and 17,000 have been orphaned. Is that something that is taken into account when looking at UK arms licences?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. You wouldn't expect me to comment in detail on legal assessments, but you can expect that all the things that you've talked about will be things—regardless of the export licence criteria—that are concerning. I have repeatedly said that the humanitarian situation in Gaza is awful and it is right that we do absolutely everything we can to alleviate the suffering of people.

I am pleased that just yesterday the Royal Air Force air-dropped for the first time 10 tonnes of food supplies into Gaza, working together with the Jordanians. That has brought water, rice, cooking oil, flour, canned goods and baby formula along the coastline. We have been working on that for a while; I talked about it at the Dispatch Box earlier. We want to get aid in through every route we can: land, air and sea. We have obviously done a lot by land. This is the first significant drop that we have done by air, which has been welcomed. We are working with partners to improve aid access via the maritime corridor as well, and hopefully we'll have more to



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say on that in the coming days and weeks. But I don't disagree: the humanitarian situation is awful and I am proud that we are doing everything we can to alleviate as much of that suffering as we can.

- Q50 **Cat Smith:** Air drops are the least effective way of delivering aid to any environment and are often seen as being the last resort by aid agencies. The most effective route is obviously by land crossings. What representations are you making, Prime Minister, to the Israeli Government to open the Rafah crossing?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I agree with that; of course, we agree with that. What we need is many more trucks per day. Before 7 October, there were 400 or 500 trucks a day going in; that is what is necessary. Now there are not that many; it is a fraction—100 to 200. That is not good enough. I have made that point repeatedly to Prime Minister Netanyahu, as have our allies, and we will continue to press for more land access. That is the best way to get more aid in quickly.

But while that is not happening at the scale we would like it to, I think it is right to do extra aid via other corridors. As I said, those airdrops will still help, and the maritime corridor, when we get it up and running, will also help. But you are right that the priority is to remove all the barriers to more land aid getting into Gaza.

- Q51 **Cat Smith:** Aid is in particularly short supply in northern Gaza; there are real issues in terms of getting supplies there. We have documented cases now of babies being born but mothers being too weak to feed them; they are dying of starvation in the first few hours of life. Is this collective punishment of people?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, we would always and have consistently called on Israel to comply with all its obligations under international humanitarian law. We have already tripled the aid—or the humanitarian support—that we are putting into the region. As I said, we are doing it by every potential corridor. Also, I have raised personally with Prime Minister Netanyahu the opportunity to bring more aid in from the north through Ashdod port and then through the northern crossing at Kerem Shalom. That is something that, together with allies, we have continued to raise, because that would open up more access into the north of Gaza as well. It is something that we have also talked about with the Jordanians; again, I have discussed that with the King of Jordan himself, because if we can get aid in through the top via Kerem Shalom and Ashdod, that will be helpful too.

- Q52 **Cat Smith:** Getting aid in is only one part of the solution here; it is also about the distribution of aid, and airdrops are often seen as being increasingly a survival of the fittest in terms of who is going to access that aid. UNRWA are absolutely unmatched in their administrative ability to distribute aid. They have an incredible track record on this. It has now been two months since the UK suspended support for UNRWA. At the time, the Secretary of State said in the House of Commons Chamber that he expected the decision to be made within two months. Given that it has



been two months, do you have an update?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. The first thing to say is that we are absolutely appalled by the allegations of UNRWA staff being involved in the 7 October attack. We are committed to getting aid into Gaza. Our decision to pause funding to UNRWA hasn't had any impact on our overall contribution to the humanitarian response. It is important that people know that. The UN's Office of Internal Oversight and Catherine Colonna have now provided their interim reports to the UN Secretary-General. We want to hear from UNRWA detailed undertakings about the changes in personnel and policy. We are talking consistently to allies about how to conclude all of that, because I don't disagree that UNRWA, properly functioning, does have a vital role to play in providing aid and services in Gaza. But it is right that we now reflect on the reports on governance that have been provided, and work that through with allies. That is what we are doing. Our position is consistent with, as I said, many of our closest allies.

Q53 **Cat Smith:** Just finally, are we expecting a decision in days or months?

**The Prime Minister:** I would not like to speculate. We are all keen to get more aid in as quickly as possible, and that is what we are doing; but given the appalling allegations, it is right that those are addressed seriously.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** There is a very brief follow-up on Gaza from Stephen Crabb.

Q54 **Stephen Crabb:** How is a ceasefire resolution that contains not a word of condemnation of Hamas, nor any conditionality around hostage release, consistent with our previous position, and the language you have previously used about Hamas being "evil" and needing to see them militarily defeated?

**The Prime Minister:** I can appreciate concern on that point. I can very much appreciate that. It is close to our position; it is not a perfect replication of it—on Hamas in particular. I think, as you know, I have been unequivocal and consistent in condemning Hamas, and we will always do that.

On hostages, though, the way that I read the resolution, and the way that I think it should be read, is that it does record that the taking of hostages is obviously prohibited under international law—and it also demands the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages, and that was important. This is not an unconditional ceasefire. This is a temporary pause, which is consistent with our position, alongside the—in the words of the resolution—"immediate and unconditional release of all hostages", as well as ensuring that more humanitarian access and aid can flow in. That has been, I think you would agree, my consistent position on this. That is why I and the Foreign Secretary felt that the wording was, while not perfect, close enough to our position that we should support it. I was disappointed to see some reporting last night of Hamas already saying that they are not engaging in conversations around hostage release, which tells you what the problem is.



**Stephen Crabb:** There is no incentive for them.

**The Prime Minister:** It can't be right for hostages to be held like that. It is reasonable for Israel to want to ensure its security and the safe return of its citizens, which is why we have always said that this immediate temporary humanitarian pause needs to be accompanied by the unconditional release of the hostages so that we can then get more aid in. Unfortunately, Hamas have not complied with that, and they are the ones who are responsible. We should never lose sight of that.

**Chair:** Next is Liam Byrne, for the Business and Trade Committee.

Q55 **Liam Byrne:** Will the Government now act to require ByteDance to divest itself of TikTok UK?

**The Prime Minister:** We have obviously taken steps previously on TikTok on Government devices, which you will be familiar with. More generally, we continue to engage with TikTok and other companies to make sure that we have a good understanding of the security of UK data, and that it meets the high data protection and cyber-security standards that we expect. We routinely do not comment on specific cases, but what I can say is that we continue to monitor any threats to our national security and UK data from all sources, and we would not hesitate to take appropriate steps to mitigate them if and when they arise.

Q56 **Liam Byrne:** Would you allow TikTok on your children's phones?

**The Prime Minister:** Again, that is not really relevant for this conversation.

Q57 **Liam Byrne:** CK Hutchison, which is controlled by the Li family and owns Three, is seeking to merge with Vodafone. Will that deal now be blocked?

**The Prime Minister:** It is the responsibility of the Competition and Markets Authority to assess the impact on competition and consumers in the market. We don't have a role in the review of mergers. As you know, in January this year they launched their formal investigation into the joint venture. They will publish their assessment about whether it requires a phase 2 review after that. Separately, we obviously have the National Security and Investment Act, which I am happy to talk about. That gives the Government the powers, as needed, to block or modify investment transactions, as we have done in previous cases.

Q58 **Liam Byrne:** And will this deal be blocked?

**The Prime Minister:** Again, you would not expect me to comment on the use of those powers because they are subject to a process, but we have not hesitated to use them where we thought it made sense, particularly in the case of the Newport Wafer Fab, where we used powers under the Act to order the divestment of that transaction.

Q59 **Liam Byrne:** Shein, the Chinese-backed fast fashion company, has been exploring the float on the London stock exchange. The Chancellor met Donald Tang to encourage him. Will that float be allowed to proceed?





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**The Prime Minister:** Again, it wouldn't be right for me to comment on individual companies, so there is not much more I can say to that.

Q60 **Liam Byrne:** The EU has an anti-subsidy probe, which it launched just before Christmas, into electric vehicle imports from China. It asked us to join that investigation and we said no. Why did we say no?

**The Prime Minister:** I don't think that is quite right. We obviously have our own market monitoring rules and independent bodies that advise us, and we do our own work on that as well. This is something that I have discussed with the European Commission President. I am pleased that on the issue of electric vehicles, we were able to reach a resolution on tariffs, which would have gone up on imports and exports of electric vehicles between the EU and the UK. I think that is something that the Committee called for us to resolve.

Q61 **Liam Byrne:** But we refused to join an EU anti-subsidy investigation.

**The Prime Minister:** But we always have the ability to conduct our own investigations as needed. Again, these are commercial things; you wouldn't expect me to comment on them.

Q62 **Liam Byrne:** Our critical national infrastructure is full of Chinese cellular modules from companies like Quectel, Fibocom, Sunsea and China Mobile. We are obviously acting to take out Huawei from some of the communications infrastructure. Will we now act to take out cellular modules from the network that controls the internet of things?

**The Prime Minister:** The first thing to say is that China represents the greatest state-based threat to our economic security, and recently we have seen behaviour that we just won't stand for. Their actions in relation to our and our allies' democracies are deeply concerning, which is why recently we have taken retaliatory action, and we will continue to address their behaviour with tough action.

We have talked about Newport Wafer Fab and you talked about critical national infrastructure. It is worth bearing in mind that I took the decision to ensure that a Chinese state-owned nuclear energy company will no longer be a part of the Sizewell C project, and previously the Government took the decision to remove Huawei kit from UK 5G networks. There is a host of other things that we are also doing to protect ourselves. All I would say is that where we identify risks and threats, the track record is clear that we will take action.

Q63 **Liam Byrne:** We are about to join CPTPP. China has said that it wants to join. If China seeks to join once we are a member, will we block that application?

**The Prime Minister:** Again, that would not be an appropriate thing to say, but what is crystal clear is that everyone who joins CPTPP needs to meet very high standards. That was a condition of our joining; we worked very hard to meet those standards. I know it is something that is shared by our allies in the CPTPP. That is a bloc of people who maintain a similar



set of very high standards. Whoever is wishing to join that bloc would need to agree to the same standards.

Q64 **Liam Byrne:** That was six clear case studies, and we have not had an unambiguous answer for any single one.

The US House of Representatives, as you know, has passed legislation now to require ByteDance to divest itself of TikTok. CK Hutchison's leaders are deeply connected to the political structure in China. Congress has also flagged profound concerns about the use of forced labour in Shein's supply chain. We have taken out Huawei, but we have still got lots of Chinese kit in cellular modules. The Business Secretary does actually have the power to initiate an investigation by the Trade Remedies Authority to investigate subsidies in the Chinese EV industry. It feels that where our allies are actually acting, we are just thinking about it.

**The Prime Minister:** I think that is completely and utterly wrong, and it is just not borne out by any of the evidence.

**Liam Byrne:** I have just given you six case studies, and you have not—

**The Prime Minister:** I am happy to respond to all of those. I would say that our approach to China is undoubtedly more robust than most of our allies, in fact. The language we use is very similar, if you look across all our foreign policy strategies. You talked about Huawei. There are European countries—including Germany, when I last checked—that have not removed Huawei kit from their telecoms infrastructure. We placed export controls on sensitive technologies to China last year. Again, they have not been replicated by the EU and in some cases are broader than those in the US. The foreign investment regime that we passed is the most recent version of that law out of any of our allies, and as a result is more robust—probably than you would find in any European country, or in the US.

**Liam Byrne:** Let me put it this way—

**The Prime Minister:** Let me just finish. On trade, we are already less dependent on China for trade than Australia, Korea, Japan, the US, Germany and many other countries.

Lastly, I don't think any other country has set up a National Protective Security Agency—which we have funded, dealt with by MI5—which means that we can provide specific support to companies to manage the threats from all states when it comes to IP theft and espionage. I am entirely confident that our approach to dealing with the risk that China poses is very much in line with our allies, and in most cases goes further in protecting ourselves.

**Liam Byrne:** It clearly doesn't—but thank you, Sir Bernard.

Q65 **Chair:** In a word, Prime Minister: does the Chinese economy qualify as a market economy?



**The Prime Minister:** I mean, obviously it is not run in the same way as we would run our economy. I have always been very clear that it represents the greatest state-based threat to our economic security. It is a country with fundamentally different values from ours. It is behaving increasingly assertive abroad and authoritarian at home. That is a source of concern. The track record, particularly over the last few years, is one where we have taken significant measures to protect ourselves: Newport Wafer Fab, Huawei, Sizewell, export licence controls and all the rest—I could keep going.

**Chair:** I take that to be a no, in that case. Let us move on to Sir Jeremy Quin, for the Defence Committee. I should just say that the context is very much Ukraine in our minds, which we lay emphasis on in every session, though we are not asking specifics this time—except that last time you did say that a success for Russia in Ukraine was an existential threat to European and transatlantic security. We take that as read.

Q66 **Sir Jeremy Quin:** This flows naturally from that: clearly the invasion of Ukraine has had implications for all of us, and the armed forces get asked to do a great deal and do it incredibly well. However, my Committee's recent report highlighted serious concerns in the event of a war with a peer adversary, including on stockpiles, resupply, personnel and training. We need to be ready to deter. Are those concerns that you recognise?

**The Prime Minister:** No, I believe that we are investing in our defences. Look at the track record over the last few years. I, as Chancellor, approved the largest uplift in defence spending since the end of the cold war: £24 billion. Subsequent to that, different events have announced something like £10 billion extra over the next few years, particularly focused on stockpiles, as you rightly mentioned, and also strengthening our nuclear enterprise, as yesterday's announcement, which we made when I was in Barrow, further does. We remain the second largest defence spender, not just now but over the past decade in NATO. Everywhere I go, the other leaders I talk to have nothing but respect and admiration for our armed forces. They are keen to do more with us and learn from us. That is why we have strengthened our military and defence alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea and others.

Q67 **Sir Jeremy Quin:** I absolutely take the point that we are investing, but clearly a lot has happened since 2020, including Ukraine, to which the Chair referred. The Defence Secretary has referred to us entering a "pre-war" world. Against that backdrop, when do we expect to hit our 2.5% ambition?

**The Prime Minister:** We have said we will do that when conditions allow. It is worth saying that defence spending is already on an upward trajectory. We are already due to hit 2.3% of GDP on defence spending. It is also important to recognise that investments in supporting Ukraine are also investments in our security. The Chair made the point at the beginning that collective security in the Euro-Atlantic is indivisible. Ukraine's security is our security. Russia's forces being degraded ultimately is a benefit for us.



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I would say that the last year or so has made it clear that there is work to be done on defence industrial production. That is not a UK-only concern; that is one shared by all our allies across Europe and NATO. That is why we have specifically put more money into munitions and long-term contracts for things such as NLAWs or Starstreak missiles, or 155 mm ammunition, on which there has been lots of commentary.

What the last year has shown is that we need collectively to up our game when it comes to defence industrial production. We are making the investments, we are signing the contracts and we can look forward to a very significant increase in the coming months and years.

**Q68 Sir Jeremy Quin:** I agree with that, Prime Minister, but at the moment Russia is outgunning Ukraine five to one in expenditure of shells. There were recent reports on CNN about how substantially Russia is producing munitions in excess of what the US and Europe are doing.

About 40% of all Russian Government expenditure is going to their military and the hot war in Europe, and there are increasing challenges, as we have discussed, from China and Iran. I know you said earlier to the Committee, quite reasonably, that Government is about prioritisation. Would you accept there is a point where we cannot afford not to invest more in our national defence?

**The Prime Minister:** I agree with that. That is why we have prioritised it. Yesterday's announcement is further evidence of our commitment to our security, to ensure the resilience of our nuclear enterprise is safeguarded for years to come. Munitions is a particular issue, and you are right to highlight Russian production. That's why we announced in February that we would invest almost £250 million to reinvigorate supply chains.

A couple of weeks ago we announced another £300 million for cutting-edge drones, to fight Putin's invasion. It is why my first trip of this year was to Ukraine. Very deliberately, I was the first foreign leader to be there. We were the first major country to announce our financial support for this year, which has increased, versus the previous two years. That is a sign of my commitment and prioritisation.

We cannot do this alone. It is all very well spending what we are on defence and providing support to the Ukrainians, but we need allies to do the same. That is the only way collectively to give them the help that they need. I am pleased that we have demonstrated leadership in that. That was recognised by President Zelensky when I was there; he was grateful for us to do that. It has helped catalyse other announcements from other countries.

That has been the track record when it comes to Ukraine: first country to provide lethal aid, first country to provide main battle tanks, first country to provide long-range weapons. Ultimately, all those things were emulated by others, which has benefited our collective security. We are leading, I am proud of our role, but we need everyone else to step up, too.

**Q69 Sir Jeremy Quin:** Thank you, Prime Minister. I would have like to have



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heard a date on 2.5% or perhaps more. We will persist on that. By way of a last question: you have just mentioned yesterday's announcement on nuclear. That followed a positive announcement on AUKUS last week, but we need an awful lot.

We need more nuclear PhDs and more nuclear apprentices. There is the investment in Barrow and the work to be done on our transport infrastructure—the list goes on. How are you going to institutionalise a cross-Government effort to ensure that we can generate the national endeavour that we need to get where we need to be on nuclear?

**The Prime Minister:** All the things that you mentioned are things that were covered by the announcement yesterday: doubling the number of apprenticeships, graduates and PhDs—you are right that we need all of those—and investing £200 million in the long-term transformation of Barrow so that it is a fantastic place to live, work and raise a family. Everybody there does an enormous and important job for us. We owe them a debt of gratitude, and it is right that we are supporting them. I have been chairing specific NSC meetings focused on this since I became Prime Minister.

We have strengthened the nuclear enterprise, not just with funding but with better governance, and we have made it a proper national endeavour. You can expect that we will put the governance in place to ensure the delivery of that. There is a fantastic SRO in Maddy, who you will know, and who is doing an excellent job. I think it is now getting the attention and focus that it deserves and needs to ensure we can deliver on the task ahead.

Q70 **Sir Jeremy Quin:** So it is NSC-led and it flows from there; you have absolutely got the grip at the centre.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and it has co-ordinated all the different aspects, whether that is MHCLG for Barrow, DESNZ on the civil nuclear side or, obviously, the defence aspects as well. We have brought it all together, and I have spent quite a bit of time on it over the past year.

**Chair:** I am tempted to ask what consideration you are giving to putting 2.5% of GDP for defence in the manifesto, like the triple lock.

**The Prime Minister:** Well, I think we will try not to write too much of the manifesto in the here and now.

**Chair:** I think I have made my point. We are coming on to the scrutiny of strategic thinking in Government, but first we will have William Wragg, Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

**Mr Wragg:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. Good afternoon, Prime Minister.

**The Prime Minister:** Afternoon.

Q71 **Mr Wragg:** Don't worry: we're nearly there. The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has had a degree of topicality in the last week or so, given the recommendation on the women's state pension



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age. May I ask you briefly whether you have a timescale for the Government's response to that report?

**The Prime Minister:** No, I do not. As you know, it is a detailed report that concerns issues that date back some years as well. Obviously, as we have said, we will go through it thoroughly, as we have started to, and respond in due course.

Q72 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you. On the same theme, the current ombudsman retires from his role at the end of this month. Last night in the House a motion was put for the appointment of a temporary ombudsman. I sat on a panel that put forward a name to No. 10 for the permanent position. What is the status of that name?

**The Prime Minister:** I will have to get back to you, I'm afraid, Will. I apologise.

Q73 **Mr Wragg:** I would be grateful, because the panel wrote to you in mid-January on this matter, and it is important. I will move on to civil service reform. The Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the autumn statement that the civil service will be capped at 488,000. It has continued to grow, though, and is currently on 502,750. Is the Government's policy still to reduce the size of the civil service?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. I alluded earlier to efficiency savings. Obviously, what the Chancellor said is the statement of policy, but more broadly I refer back to the earlier comments: what we have seen is a 5% decline in public sector productivity since before the pandemic. That is worth £20 billion. I think everyone should be focused on recovering pre-pandemic productivity and unlocking that money to reinvest in public services. That is good for the taxpayer, public service delivery and UK citizens. Obviously, headcount is one of the features of productivity, but as a general rule we should be striving for greater public sector productivity. The Chancellor has been driving this process.

Q74 **Mr Wragg:** Do you have a headcount figure that you would like to see?

**The Prime Minister:** As I said, I only have the overall public sector productivity number: 5%, worth about £20 billion. I have not got the headcount numbers to hand. But I just refer to whatever the Chancellor said on the matter, because he is giving it very close attention.

Q75 **Mr Wragg:** Thank you. What is your response to Lord Maude's recommendation that the Cabinet Secretary and head of the civil service roles be separated?

**The Prime Minister:** I think we are still in the process—and I am certainly in the process—of digesting all of his various recommendations, and we will no doubt respond at the appropriate time. I think there are some things that we are already doing, which I am sure we will touch on, in terms of things like training and other bits and bobs, but I cannot recall every single recommendation to hand.

Q76 **Mr Wragg:** Last year, when I asked you about your view of the



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characterisation of the civil service as a “blob” resisting Government policy, you stressed your faith in the competence and integrity of the civil servants you have worked with. Is that still the case?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, very much so, particularly as Prime Minister, as it was when I was Chancellor. The support I receive on a daily basis, then in No. 11 and the Treasury and now in No. 10, is superb and I am very grateful for it.

Q77 **Mr Wragg:** What are your thoughts on the comments of your predecessor, who said she was undermined by the “deep state”?

**The Prime Minister:** That is probably a question for her, rather than me.

Q78 **Mr Wragg:** I am keen to hear your view, Prime Minister. Is there a deep state? Are you part of it? Am I part of it?

**The Prime Minister:** That is probably a question for her. I probably wouldn't tell you if I was, would I?

**Mr Wragg:** No—

**The Prime Minister:** And we wouldn't tell anyone else either.

Q79 **Mr Wragg:** I wouldn't tell anybody else either, Sir Bernard, if I was. Is it not just a case of a few chaps getting overly excited after a good lunch at, say, the Garrick?

**The Prime Minister:** That is a question for her.

Q80 **Mr Wragg:** From one nice lunch venue to another, the House of Lords Appointments Commission has traditionally had the power to recommend non-party political candidates to appointment in the House of Lords—Cross Benchers—but HOLAC has not been able to make any recommendations since 2022. Are you going to allow HOLAC to recommend new Cross-Bench peers in this Parliament?

**The Prime Minister:** I am not sure that they haven't. I will happily look into that. I did not have any particular aversion to it in the past. My thought was that they had.

Q81 **Mr Wragg:** Okay. I think they are entitled to a few each year.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. I don't have any particular issue with that. Obviously, we have to decide the right time, alongside everything else, to make the final decision, but I don't have a principled objection to it. I will happily take that away.

Q82 **Mr Wragg:** On that issue of principle and further House of Lords appointments, are there any circumstances in which you would appoint an individual to the House of Lords against HOLAC's advice on the propriety of that appointment?

**The Prime Minister:** I think we talked about this last time I was here. That is not what I have done and not what I intend to do. Constitutionally and legally, of course, it is for the Prime Minister to make



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recommendations to the Sovereign on peers, and HOLAC is an advisory non-departmental public body. I think that is the right thing. Certainly, that is the advice that I have always followed hitherto.

**Mr Wragg:** Thank you, Prime Minister.

- Q83 **Chair:** Thank you very much indeed, Mr Wragg. I hope it is all right if we borrow a little more of your time, Prime Minister, because we have slightly extended. There are just two of us to go. The Liaison Sub-Committee is running an inquiry in the scrutiny of strategic thinking in Government. Sir Jeremy touched on one of the very big strategic decisions you made about how to manage the cross-departmental programme of the whole nuclear enterprise, spanning civil and military. You have made other big strategic decisions, such as on energy and HS2, which reflect deep strategic thinking. What were the processes that led to those decisions? Are you satisfied with them? Can they be, as Sir Jeremy suggested, better institutionalised across Government so that we see more of this kind of strategic thinking?

**The Prime Minister:** Thank you for that, Sir Bernard. I don't think there was any particular process that led to those; they are just examples of things that I was keen to do. What joins them is their focus on the long term, and I would put a few other things in there, such as the long-term workforce plan, which Steve raised earlier. That is not something that has been done before, probably because most people think they won't be around in 13 years when the consultants they are paying for to be trained will end up benefiting anybody. I have always tried to focus on the long term and what I think is right for the long term of the country, whether that is HS2, a different approach to net zero, the long-term workforce plan and what we are doing on smoking and vaping. Those are all examples of longer-term thinking, which is a good thing. It is not always easy to do in Government, but it is the right thing to do. As best as possible, trying to get people to focus on the long term is obviously a good thing.

- Q84 **Chair:** What do you think we learned from vital cross-departmental strategic leads, such as Contest or the vaccine taskforce, that we can use in other areas?

**The Prime Minister:** One of the learnings from the vaccine taskforce in particular is probably the benefit of having people outside Government come in. That is obviously very valuable. I am not sure how replicable the situation that the vaccine taskforce was designed to deal with is in the ordinary course of business. Certainly, having external people come in to focus on something was valuable.

We have replicated, to some extent, that model for the AI taskforce, which is slightly distinct from Government. We have been lucky to attract superb people like Ian Hogarth from industry, and they have done an excellent job. It is globally respected around the world, particularly in the US, where they are very keen to learn from us. Again, it has a very tightly defined, specific mandate. It is doing its thing. It has got delegated budgets. That has worked quite well. ARIA is another example of that. So, I think that





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those are the models where we have tried to replicate the vaccine taskforce model—as I said, in research at ARIA and in the AI taskforce—where it has worked, but those are quite specific areas.

Q85 **Chair:** Contest?

**The Prime Minister:** Probably the same. Again, given the importance of the issue, I think that people realise that, like the vaccine, there are certain issues that, because of their salience, probably attract the right amount of attention just by virtue of that.

**Chair:** What about net zero? Phillip Dunne.

Q86 **Philip Dunne:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, you have just mentioned net zero in response to Sir Bernard. That, to my mind, I think, is widely recognised to be the largest strategic endeavour of Government, as we seek to decarbonise the whole economy. It is the biggest thing that we have done since the industrial revolution—a multi-decade, massive, cross-party strategic programme. How important do you see political consensus being, in order to achieve such a big strategic shift across the country?

**The Prime Minister:** I think it is important, because I think that if you don't carry people with you, what you will do is ultimately turn people off the whole idea entirely, which would be bad, I personally think, and I think we all do. I have two young girls; I want to make sure that we leave them the environment in a better state than we found it, but we have got to do that in a pragmatic and proportionate and realistic way, as I said, otherwise people will turn off the whole idea.

I obviously made a speech and adjusted our policy on this last year, and I think that was the right thing to do. One of the areas that I highlighted was the fact that we have got an incredible track record—we have decarbonised faster than pretty much every other major economy. Because of that, we can have confidence in our targets and our plan and we can do things in a way that eases the burden on families, saving them £5,000, £10,000 or £15,000, and still hit our obligations, which are more ambitious, as I said, than in any other country, and that is the right approach.

I think that the other thing, which I know you have been in correspondence with the Secretary of State on, rightly, is around, I would say, the scrutiny that happens when we set these carbon budgets, and I think that—

**Philip Dunne:** Can I come on to that in a second?

**The Prime Minister:** Fine, well, that is an important part of—

**Philip Dunne:** Because you are going to answer all of my questions in one answer, and I have got three, so I would like to be able to pose them.

**The Prime Minister:** Fine, sorry.



**Q87 Philip Dunne:** You touched on your speech, and you characterised it as a pragmatic response to delivery of the programme. Some commentators have seen it as an attempt to introduce a sort of partisan dimension—to undermine the consensus that we have already got. How would you address that criticism?

**The Prime Minister:** I would say our track record is clear. We have decarbonised faster than any other country. Our targets for the future are also more ambitious, so we can feel very proud of what we are doing. This is not about watering down any targets, but I inherited plans which would have cost families £5,000, £10,000 or £15,000 to prematurely be changing equipment in their houses or switching out their cars before other countries were doing any of these things—installing expensive upgrades, changing diets and other things. I didn't think any of that was necessary or appropriate, and so we changed it. But we are still going to hit our targets. We are still going to be better than pretty much every other country in the world at this, but we are going to do so in a way that recognises the cost on ordinary families, and I think that is the right approach.

If it is partisan, so be it. If other people want to say, "No, no, we should rush headlong into this thing with no regard to the cost, and we have to get there faster than anyone else, even though we only account for 1% of emissions," then I will let them make the argument. That is fair enough, and I understand that other political parties have said that, but that is for them to justify. I think my approach—our approach—is the proportionate, pragmatic, realistic approach that will get us there but command broad support as we do, which is important.

**Philip Dunne:** Thank you. In your speech, as you have just said, you also touched on parliamentary scrutiny. You are right: we have been engaged with the Secretary of State, and I am very pleased to have received a constructive response from the Secretary of State for DESNZ this morning, ahead of this hearing, confirming many of the ideas that we put forward for improving parliamentary scrutiny above the 17 minutes for the sixth carbon budget, which you pointed out in your speech in September. I take it from that response that you endorse the idea that Parliament needs to get involved in the passage of the seventh carbon budget, which covers the years 2038 to 2042, in order to ensure that both the ambition and the methodology of the path to get there are properly scrutinised by Parliament.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes. Thank you to you and your Committee for the recommendations and suggestions. You will have seen that the Secretary of State has very much agreed with the sentiment of what you are saying. I will not get into the specific line-by-line, but the fundamental point is, as you mentioned, that last time we put in place legally binding targets on carbon reduction in this country, with far-reaching impacts on people, the economy and society, it was debated for 17 minutes in Parliament. It was voted through without any thought to what actually would be required to deliver those. I do not think that is right, and that is what we will change in the future.



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Your suggestions are very helpful for us formulating the right way to do that, but it is clear that when we discuss the seventh carbon budget, at the same time that everyone says, "Yes, we want to reduce carbon emissions," they are very clear about what that means, and we should all be clear-eyed about what it means. We should not just wish and will the ends without having a conversation about the means, and thanks to your engagement I think next time around when our country and Parliament do this, we will be the better off for it.

**Q88 Philip Dunne:** One final, very quick question, Sir Bernard. Yesterday there was another announcement by your DEFRA Secretary that the sustainable farming incentives should be limited to encourage food production. Does this reflect a recognition that food security is a public good?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and I made that point at the NFU conference when I spoke there. We need to increase British food production. We can do that, and that is why we want to make sure that our farming schemes incentivise that. Of course we want to protect the environment, but we cannot forget that the primary purpose of farming is to produce food.

**Q89 Philip Dunne:** So that is a message that you can send out to the tractor drivers that were surrounding Westminster yesterday.

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, and as I said, I have had very good conversations with many farmers at the NFU conference and later in Wales when I was there the week after that. The reforms that the Secretary of State set out earlier as well are all geared to increasing food security and food production in the UK. That is what we need to do; there are lots of opportunities to do that. We need to make sure that we protect agricultural use for that purpose, and that is again what the latest set of announcements continue to do.

**Q90 Chair:** Prime Minister, thank you. We have had a lot of evidence suggesting that in order to embed a strategic culture in Whitehall so that Ministers get much better, comprehensive strategic advice from civil servants, we need to re-establish a national school for government of some kind in order to teach strategic thinking and strategic decision-making and help to change the culture. How much do you agree with your two predecessors that this should actually be done?

**The Prime Minister:** Yes, I am actually open to the idea. Sorry, Bernard—are you talking about the physical location or just the general principle or both?

**Q91 Chair:** No other major civil service around the world does not have a physical location for teaching face to face. Using online and contractors is shown not to work.

**The Prime Minister:** But it is not the same. I am broadly supportive of that, and actually part of when I was contemplating how to put the Treasury or economic campus in Darlington was thinking about whether you could incorporate something like that into that facility at the same time. I am obviously very sympathetic to that. It is a question for



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resourcing and the next spending review, but again, on a point of principle, I very much welcome hearing Committees' recommendations on that so that it can be picked up in the next spending review. I think it is an eminently sensible and plausible idea.

- Q92 **Chair:** I am tempted to make another manifesto request. For Ministers and potential Ministers, unlike almost any other profession, we have very little ongoing professional development and training. Would it be a good idea if this institution was set up to train Ministers, would-be Ministers and would-be special advisers in the same way, so that everyone understands the same language?

**The Prime Minister:** There is already an established training programme for Ministers, which it is worth just remarking on. I think there are eight different training courses involved in it. Those courses are open to all Ministers, and on top of that, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority—the IPA—runs some very specific training for Ministers who are sponsoring major projects. There is also an induction programme now for new Ministers that did not exist previously. I think this was also picked up in some of the Francis Maude recommendations. I am very open to considering whether we have the right mechanisms in place, but it is worth just reflecting that, while people think there is nothing, there are actually various training modules in place and being used.

- Q93 **Chair:** Finally, it is widely understood that younger generations feel very disengaged from politics. They do not feel engaged in the strategic questions that will affect their futures. What do you think Parliament could do to address this, and how much would you consider following the example of Finland, in having a future generations committee that engages with the Government on these long-term questions? As the Cabinet Secretary asked, who is asking the questions about what our demographics will be like in 30 years' time, and who is suggesting that Parliament should be resourced to ask those questions?

**The Prime Minister:** Intergenerational fairness is obviously vitally important. That is why we have been talking about trying to consider the long-term implications of policies. Harriett's first question was all about debt, and that is ultimately an intergenerational question. Every £1 that we are borrowing today means ultimately higher taxes for our kids and our grandkids, which they will have to pay back. Making sure that you reduce the debt burden over time is an important part of ensuring that intergenerational fairness.

I have not thought through that specific thing, Bernard. I am not sure whether legislative mechanisms would quite do what you are wanting it to do. Obviously, resourcing of Committees and things is a question for Parliament, and not the Government. I do not disagree that we need to focus on intergenerational fairness as a point; I think that is important.

**Chair:** Select Committees would not exist if Margaret Thatcher had not had that in her manifesto. It is for the Leader of the House to propose that the House of Commons have those resources, but that is me making my



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point. I have no further questions. Thank you very much indeed, Prime Minister. We wish you and your family a good Easter break.

**The Prime Minister:** The same to all of you; thank you very much.

**Chair:** Thank you.