

Liaison Committee

Oral evidence from the Prime Minister, HC 1144

Wednesday 13 January 2021

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Sir Bernard Jenkin (Chair); Hilary Benn; Mr Clive Betts; Sir William Cash; Yvette Cooper; Philip Dunne; Robert Halfon; Meg Hillier; Simon Hoare; Jeremy Hunt; Darren Jones; Catherine McKinnell; Caroline Nokes; Stephen Timms; Tom Tugendhat; Pete Wishart.

Questions 1-103

Witness

[I](#): Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister.



Examination of witness

Witness: Boris Johnson MP.

Q1 **Chair:** I welcome everyone to this session of the Liaison Committee and thank the Prime Minister for joining us today. Prime Minister, we are doing our best to set a good example of compliance with the covid rules. Apart from you and me, everyone else is working from their own premises. This session is the December session that was held over until now, for your convenience, Prime Minister. I hope you can confirm that there will still be three 2021 sessions?

The Prime Minister: I can indeed confirm that, Sir Bernard, and I look forward very much to further such sessions this year.

Chair: The second part of today's session will concentrate on the UK post Brexit, but we start with the Government's response to covid. Jeremy Hunt.

Q2 **Jeremy Hunt:** Prime Minister, thank you for joining us at such a very busy time. It is obviously horrific right now on the NHS frontline. I wondered if we could just start by you updating us on what the situation is now in our hospitals. Specifically, in your judgment do you think we are going to have enough critical care beds—ICU beds—for those who need them in the next few weeks?

The Prime Minister: Thanks very much, Jeremy. You are absolutely right that the situation is very, very tough indeed in the NHS, and I think people should really go beyond the normal. We have paid a lot of tribute to NHS workers over the last few months—over the last year—but they now really are fighting very, very hard to contain this pandemic, after months and months in which they have really been working flat out. I think the strain is colossal.

There are about 32,000 covid in-patients, as you know. That is about 70% more than there were at the peak in April last year. The pressure is very considerable. If you ask me when we think that the ICU capacity is likely to be overtopped, I cannot give you a prediction for that. All I can say is that the risk is very substantial, and we have to keep the pressure off the NHS. The only way to do that is to follow the current lockdown. That is what I would urge everybody to do—stay at home; protect the NHS.

Q3 **Jeremy Hunt:** Yesterday, NERVTAG apparently discussed a dangerous new strain from Brazil, which has apparently escaped to Japan. Should we be introducing an immediate travel ban on flights from Brazil to reduce the risk of it getting here?

The Prime Minister: Yes, you are absolutely right: we are concerned about the new Brazilian variant. We already have tough measures, as you know, to protect this country from new infections coming in from abroad, and we are taking steps to do that in respect of the Brazilian variant. I think it is fair to say that there are lots of questions we still have about



that variant. We do not know, for instance, any more than we know whether the South African variant is vaccine resistant.

Q4 Jeremy Hunt: Thank you. I want to ask you a couple of questions about the long-term lessons, because we have been looking at that in our Committee, and then I will wrap up by asking about the vaccine roll-out.

One of the key pressures, as you know very well, has been just getting enough doctors and nurses to look after people. The Government have done very well to get an extra 14,000 nurses in the last year, but in truth we have never been very good at training enough doctors and nurses in the NHS. After the pandemic, would you consider a long-term reform involving getting a body like the ONS, or an independent body, to make projections about just how many doctors and nurses we are going to need in a decade or so's time, to make sure that we really are training enough?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think that is the kind of thing that we should be looking at, Jeremy. Just so that people know the figures, there are now almost 299,200 full-time-equivalent nurses. That is 13,300 more than last year. There are 122,400 doctors. That is 6,000 more than last year, but, as you rightly say, the demand particularly at the moment is enormous.

We are looking at making sure we have the right measures for the long term, to recruit, to encourage, to retain and to make sure that we train people in the right way. We are determined, as a Government, to fulfil our promise, for instance, not just to deliver 50,000 more nurses by the end of this Parliament, but also to give them confidence and encouragement by doing things to support them in their careers and retaining them.

Q5 Jeremy Hunt: Let me ask you, if I may, about social care. On the steps of Downing Street, you said, "I am announcing now—on the steps of Downing Street—that we will fix the crisis in social care once and for all with a clear plan." Given what has happened to finances in the last year, does that commitment still stand?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it does. The pandemic has highlighted the difficulties that the social care sector is in. It clearly needs reform and it needs improvement, but there is also the issue of people being forced to sell their homes to pay for their care. That is something that we want to address, and we will be bringing forward plans later this year.

Q6 Jeremy Hunt: The NHS has a 10-year plan, because of the need to do proper, long-term planning if you are really going to transform things. Should the social care sector also have a 10-year plan?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it should, or it should have a long-term plan. Clearly, if you are going to reform social care, you are also going to need younger people. Obviously, it is more difficult for older people, but you are going to need the younger generation to start thinking about the eventual cost of their social care. We need to start having that conversation with the public.

Q7 Jeremy Hunt: Thank you. Finally, could I move on to the vaccines



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programme? Most people are incredibly encouraged that we are doing better than any similar-sized country in the world, in terms of our roll out, with more than 2 million people jabbed to date. This is the biggest peacetime operation of our lifetimes—the most important for the country. Why are the public not allowed to know anything except the most basic information as to how many people have actually had the jab? For example, there are no plans to publish how many people have had the jab in each local authority area. People really want to know how many people have had it near them.

The Prime Minister: Actually, we want to be as transparent as we possibly can about how many we are vaccinating. You know the figures for the number of jabs delivered, or vaccination events, as I think they are called in the jargon. That is about 2.8 million, or it was this morning. Obviously, it is going up the whole time. That is 2.4 million people. You know the ambition to get to 12 million people in England by 15 February—15 million people across the whole of the UK.

I think you know a little bit about how we are doing it. We've got the Army, we've got pharmacists, we've got a huge NHS operation, we've got hospital sites and we've got mass vaccination centres. I think it is reasonable that as soon as we get good regional data, for instance, we should be sharing that as well. We are going to be publishing that as soon as possible. Later this week, we will be publishing the regional breakdowns.

I can tell you that some of the figures are very interesting. There are parts of the country where they have done incredibly well in, for instance, vaccinating the over-80s. We are well over 50% now in the north-east and Yorkshire; less good in some other parts of the country. We want to be clear about all that. The crucial thing is that we want the data about those who have been vaccinated in local authorities to be shared—it will happen by the end of this week—with public health directors in local authorities because, as we go forward, this vaccine programme is going to find that there are people that we need to reach, who we can only reach with the NHS working hand in glove with local government.

Q8 **Jeremy Hunt:** My mother—not that I want to reveal that she is over 80—had her vaccine this morning in Surrey, but I have no idea how many other people were vaccinated in Surrey. Could you look into whether we could release that data by local authority area? It would be very interesting.

Finally, one other bit of data that is very important is the wastage. Every person who is not vaccinated because of waste is potentially put in peril. Could we look at publishing wastage rates by vaccination centre, to encourage everyone to treat each vaccine as precious?

The Prime Minister: We will try and publish as much data as we can. There is a very important point about wastage. At this stage, when our big constraint is supply of the vaccine, we absolutely want to minimise waste. People say, "Why don't you get all of the 9,000 or maybe 12,000 community pharmacies to be doing this, because they are fantastic—they



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are wonderful people, they have clean premises and so on and so forth, and they could do it?" The trouble there—it is a very important point for people to understand—is that logistically you would have our teams going round dropping off supplies of vaccine in 12,000 or 9,000 outlets and then, at the end of each evening, you would have a proportion that were not used still in the fridge. When we are still constrained by supply, we don't want that happening at this stage. As we go forward with the roll-out and as we really dig into those groups that have not yet come forward and don't know how to do it, I think community pharmacies, which are trusted and well known, will play an important part in the roll-out.

On local authority publications, we will do whatever we can. At the moment, the plan is for regional breakdown. The regional breakdown is very interesting.

Q9 **Chair:** Thank you, Jeremy, and thank you, Prime Minister.

On the wastage front, my local hospital had targeted NHS workers standing by to use up any spare vaccine at the end of every session, even though they are not officially on the priority list. Other hospitals have not done that, and they have been wasting vaccine. Can we promote best practice?

The Prime Minister: Yes. It is perhaps also worth saying that there can be differences in the amount of vaccine vials, or the quantity of vaccine that is necessary, to vaccinate a given number of people, depending on the skill of the vaccinator. That is why in these early stages we really want to maximise the use of people who are very proficient in giving vaccinations.

Q10 **Chair:** We all understand, Prime Minister—the Committee has asked me to ask these questions—that there are limitations on the vaccine supply and there is an agreed schedule of delivery. What steps are the Government taking to increase the supply beyond the agreed schedule, so that we can accelerate the whole programme?

The Prime Minister: Sir Bernard, as you know, this Government have secured a bigger supply of vaccines both absolutely and per head than virtually any other country in the world, so we have a big, big stream of vaccines coming down the track. There is also a programme to accelerate the delivery of the Oxford vaccine. The remaining Pfizer vaccine is being brought forward, and the Moderna vaccine as well. We are doing everything we can to bring forward the manufacturing process as fast as we can so that we can start getting it into people's arms in the timeliest way.

Q11 **Chair:** It was reported to the Science and Technology Committee this morning that AstraZeneca had requested that their technicians and production workers should be prioritised for the vaccine so that they don't suffer the sickness rates they are suffering at the moment. That would seem important and critical to the vaccine programme.

The Prime Minister: Yes. You are making an excellent point. As the Committee knows, the JCVI has set up the rankings of nine groups. We



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are starting with the first four groups by 15 February. In general, we will leave the decisions about which groups should be prioritised to the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation—I am sure that is the right thing to do. But clearly, when it comes to the manufacture of the vaccines, there is a critical role for those workers, and that has to be taken into consideration.

- Q12 **Chair:** In terms of delivering the programme, the MoD confirmed yesterday that it could deploy up to an additional 10,000 people, if necessary. So far, only one third of the personnel on standby have been deployed. Can you confirm that that offer is available to Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland if they are getting behind with their programmes and they need that capacity?

The Prime Minister: Of course, and I can say that the armed services of the UK are on deployment throughout the UK, as they have been throughout the pandemic. There are plans to step up their involvement. The armed services are already embedded at virtually every level in the vaccine roll-out programme, but we will step that up as the distribution campaign accelerates. As I say, at the moment that is not the constraint.

- Q13 **Chair:** NHS England is recruiting new people, re-rolling NHS staff to the vaccination programme and, at the moment, refusing the offer of the MoD's trained-up vaccine quick reaction teams, which would seem to be a sensible use of resource at this particular moment.

The Prime Minister: That is not my information. I was in a long session yesterday with both the Army and the NHS. As you know, Brigadier Phil Prosser and others are integrated at the highest level, and the armed services are being of great use, but that will increase as the tempo grows.

- Q14 **Chair:** There is a very painful process for a local NHS team to get a MACA request through the NHS system, as we have discovered in Essex once already. Perhaps you could just take that one away.

The Prime Minister: I will certainly have a look at that.

- Q15 **Chair:** I am going to come to Clive Betts from the HCLG Committee in a moment. We know that local authorities should have been involved in the test and trace programme much earlier—that was a mistake—so why are NHS England officials, according to many of our colleagues, being instructed not to share information with partners about vaccine locations and things like that? That undermines trust and co-operation, when we should all be pulling together in this massive emergency.

The Prime Minister: You are absolutely right that it is vital that the NHS and local authorities collaborate in this. I think all colleagues will be familiar with the experience of local friction between the NHS and local authorities—in some cases, they will have come across that. It is vital that they work together, but also that the NHS shares data about who has been vaccinated and who has not. As I say, there will be groups that are hard to reach, particularly from the black and minority ethnic communities. Possibly we are seeing some evidence of that, and it is vital that we have strong local community engagement as we get towards the



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really high numbers. We need to find everybody who needs a vaccine and encourage them to take it.

Chair: Thank you. Clive Betts.

Q16 **Mr Betts:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. The National Audit Office has done a review of the national tracing system and has said that before the call centres were set up to track people who have covid and their contacts, there was no business case done and no value-for-money assessment. Has one been done now?

The Prime Minister: I think, Clive, that the business case for testing, tracking and tracing is overwhelming. It is to do with saving lives.

Q17 **Mr Betts:** The national system is successfully contacting about 60% of the people it is trying to contact, but when the ones they cannot contact—the 40%—are passed over to the local councils, they are contacting 75% or more of those people. That is a much higher ratio for much less cost. Wouldn't it make sense to transfer more of the responsibility and more of the resources to local councils and directors of public health?

The Prime Minister: Contrary, perhaps, to the widespread impression, local councils have been involved from the very beginning and they have done an outstanding job, but NHS Test and Trace overall have tested—I do not know whether the Committee is aware of this—56 million people, or perhaps I should say, to put it more accurately, that they have conducted 56 million tests. That is an astonishing number—I believe it is the highest in Europe. Although, clearly, it has been extremely difficult to control the disease by test and trace alone, it has played an important part. We would not know some of the vital things we do know about—for instance, the new variant or the South African variant—if we were not doing massive daily genomics thanks to NHS Test and Trace.

Q18 **Mr Betts:** Right, but the reality, Prime Minister, is that it is less successful at national level than it is at local level in actually contacting people, so I am asking for a switch of the programme in that regard. It is not that we should not be doing tracking and tracing, but that we could do it better at local level. You say that local authorities have been involved from the beginning, but that is not their impression. I want to come on now to the comments that you made to Jeremy Hunt and to the Chair about local authority involvement in the vaccine programme.

The *Local Government Chronicle* ran a story the other day, with the support of local council leaders and directors of public health, saying that there was a wall of silence in the NHS. They were getting no data about what was happening with regard to vaccinations in their area. They need that data in order, for example—you just referenced it—to contact particularly hard-to-reach groups or people in the BME community where take-up may be lower, and to get communications out there, but they do not know how many vaccines have been delivered in which parts of their area. Will that change as from next week?



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The Prime Minister: It will change this week. As I said to Sir Bernard earlier, or I think to Jeremy, by the end of this week I want public health directors in local government to know who has been vaccinated in their communities. It is going to be essential as we go forward that local authorities know who has been vaccinated and can lead the fight in their areas.

Q19 **Mr Betts:** That will be down to individual data, so that there can be an assessment, say, of clinically extremely vulnerable people who have and have not been vaccinated, and of care workers who have and have not been vaccinated. That detailed information will be available to councils and directors of public health?

The Prime Minister: That is exactly right.

Q20 **Mr Betts:** That is really helpful, Prime Minister. Is it now going to be the case that local authorities are going to be involved in the planning of the vaccine roll-out programme? They can help with identifying appropriate sites; they can help generally with communications; they can do an awful lot of things working in conjunction. In Sheffield, there are really good working relationships between the council, the CCG and the hospitals. Will that now be enabled to happen by the national health service at national level and putting blockages in the way of data-sharing be stopped?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it will. Obviously it may not be identical across the country, but the examples that I have been given, similar to the ones you quote, are of local authorities really pulling out all the stops to help the NHS to find the sites to get things going. You are making a very good point about data; we have to have that data properly shared. To repeat and clarify, what I have been assured is that local authorities will get data about all the people who have been vaccinated by the end of this week. That will obviously need to be continuously refreshed and updated.

Q21 **Mr Betts:** Of course it will. One final point, looking to the future, will information be available to local authorities and to the public about what is going to happen with regard to future sites and future roll-out? Just from my own experience, I was refused information the other day about which sites were going to be open in Sheffield—I was told that I had to go to the top of NHS England for that information to be released. Do we not need to take the public into our confidence and give them the information, so that they can have an awareness of what is happening in their area?

The Prime Minister: Yes, Clive. I think the issue there may be that we want to allow the system to make the decision about which sites are going to be used, working with local government and working with all the stakeholders together, before getting into a public debate, perhaps, or argument about it, but there will be a continual expansion, as you know. There are more than 1,000 primary care network operations going on, about 233 hospitals, as I said before, 200 pharmacies and 50 mass vaccination sites. Clearly, the exact location of the mass vaccination sites



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will be a subject of keen public interest and debate, and it is important to get it right.

Q22 **Mr Betts:** It is, but I think the presumption should be that as much information as possible should be made publicly available as quickly as possible.

The Prime Minister: I completely agree.

Q23 **Chair:** That seems to be a strong concern, particularly as the Public Accounts Committee learned that the assumption in your programme is that there needs to be a 75% take-up of the vaccine to hit the targets. Getting that 75% as the programme progresses is going to get harder and harder unless everybody co-operates and helps.

The Prime Minister: Sir Bernard, you have put your finger on the point. For the vaccine programme to be as successful as we want it to be, we must ensure that people are encouraged to come forward for testing. They have every reason to be confident and happy in doing so. We are seeing some very encouraging data showing that people are more and more enthusiastic about being vaccinated, rather than the reverse.

Q24 **Chair:** Just very briefly—one-word answer required—when will we know whether those vaccinated are safe to let out and cannot spread the virus? When will we know that the vaccine enables people to go back to their daily lives?

The Prime Minister: I can't tell you about transmission yet, but as soon as we have that data we will of course publish it.

Chair: Thank you. Robert Halfon.

Q25 **Robert Halfon:** Thank you, Prime Minister. Apart from directing, possibly to Specsavers, these food companies that have been supplying schools with less than proportionate food boxes, will you not just take these companies to task? Given that they have ripped off the taxpayer, will you make sure that the schools get a refund, and also look at the public guidance in terms of food for vulnerable children?

The Prime Minister: Thanks, Rob. You are right to be outraged by the images that we have seen. The companies in question—certainly the company responsible for the most notorious pictures and others—have been hauled over the coals and asked to explain how this has happened. They have apologised, reimbursed the schools concerned and pledged not to do it again.

I should stress that the images do not reflect the Government's guidance, which is for about double, if not more, the quantity of food for lunch packs for five days. It is vital that people understand that this Government is there to provide support and provide, as we have, an extra £170 million for the covid winter grant scheme, and £220 million for the holiday activities and food programme. We are now rolling out again the national free school meal voucher scheme. It is obviously up to schools to decide whether to use lunch packs or to use a voucher system. Most of them use



vouchers. About 75% are distributed through vouchers, so we have increased the value of the voucher as well.

- Q26 **Robert Halfon:** We know that school closures will potentially reduce the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their better-off peers by as much as 75%; that is according to a Department for Education official and the Education Endowment Foundation. We know that mental health problems among young people are on the rise, with the Royal College of Paediatrics reporting a 400% increase since the first lockdown in terms of eating disorders among young people, partly caused by school closures and social isolation. What specific assessment is the Government making of the impact of school closures on children's educational attainment and mental health to inform decision making? Will schools reopen again after the half-term? If it is clear that schools can reopen sooner if we get teachers and support staff up the priority list of vaccinations, is that not worth doing?

The Prime Minister: The priority is obviously to get schools open as soon as possible. Whether we can do that—or begin to do that—after the half-term break in the middle of February depends on a number of things. It depends on the success of the vaccination programme; it depends on us not finding that, for instance, the South African or Brazilian variants are vaccine-resistant; it depends on us not finding out something else about the disease that makes us recalculate. I should stress, by the way, that we have no evidence at present to think that those strains are vaccine-resistant—it is very important for the Committee to realise that. We have no evidence to think that they are vaccine-resistant.

That has to go well, and then the crucial thing is that the overall lockdown measures have to continue to work. What we are seeing today, as I speak to you, are some early signs of progress in restraining the growth of the virus, and some signs perhaps of flattening, of levelling off, in some parts, but it is far, far too early for us to say that that means that we can go into any kind of relaxation in the middle of February. We have to work very, very hard to achieve that. In the meantime, the tragedy for so many kids is that they will not get the education that they need. That is why we fought desperately to keep schools open for as long as we possibly could, and I know that that position was shared by many colleagues in Parliament. We did everything we could.

To answer Rob's question about support, you know about the £1 billion catch-up fund. We think the way to address differential learning is through all sorts of techniques, but we think one-to-one engagement—one-to-one tutorials—can be very valuable.

- Q27 **Robert Halfon:** The reason I ask about the impact assessment, particularly on educational attainment, is that the Institute for Fiscal Studies has said that the poorest students have spent less time learning than their richer peers, they have had fewer resources at home to learn effectively, and since September pupils in areas with lower GCSE attainment and higher levels of disadvantage have missed more days of school than others. We know that overall truancy rates almost doubled in



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autumn 2020. Of course, I welcome the £1 billion catch-up fund—I campaigned for it for many months—but given the extent of what is happening, and the potential damage being done to the younger generation, I am trying to understand what the education route map out of coronavirus is. You talked about a long-term plan for social care; surely we should have a long-term plan for education and skills.

Chair: I'm afraid it will have to be a quick answer, Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: We do indeed have a long-term plan, for both education and skills, and to tackle disadvantage in schools in particular, we have another £2.4 billion that disadvantaged pupils are receiving through the pupil premium. I have already mentioned the sums that we are spending on the holiday activities and food programme.

On skills, as you know, we have a massive programme—the lifetime skills guarantee—for everybody who is currently unable to access funding for post-18 and post-23 training. That is a huge gap in our provision that we are now filling, Rob, with the lifetime skills guarantee.

Chair: It would be good to have a good old-fashioned White Paper on that topic, Prime Minister.

Robert Halfon: We just have to be sure that we are not kicking away the education ladder of opportunity for our younger people.

Chair: Absolutely. We are running behind—the questions and answers have got longer—so I urge colleagues to ask short questions and then I can legitimately ask the Prime Minister to be brief in his answers. If his answers are too long, he will just have to stay longer. Thank you, Prime Minister. Let us move on to Catherine McKinnell for the Petitions Committee.

Q28 **Catherine McKinnell:** Thank you, Chair. Prime Minister, before I ask you about child food poverty and the e-petition launched by Marcus Rashford, I want first to ask you about one of the most popular e-petitions ever submitted to Parliament, which called for Donald Trump to be prevented from making a state visit to the UK in 2017. Given recent events, do you regret saying in 2018 that Donald Trump was worthy of a Nobel peace prize?

The Prime Minister: I am sorry, I am in favour of the Prime Minister of the UK having the best possible relationship with the President of the United States. I had an excellent conversation recently with President-elect Joe Biden.

Q29 **Catherine McKinnell:** Okay. On free school meals, I know that you have seen the shocking images of half a tomato, half a carrot and half a bag of tuna, as part of a 10-day food parcel, and I know that you have said that you will put that right. But why do children needing to eat keep taking the Government by surprise? Is the Prime Minister not ashamed at being schooled on feeding hungry children by Marcus Rashford?



The Prime Minister: I talked to Marcus Rashford today. I think he is doing an excellent job of pointing these issues out, and I said that to him. When you look at some of these images, they do not reflect the guidance. It is a scandal and a disgrace, as I have said, that some companies are trying to get away with the provision that they are offering. We have taken the steps that we have, and I want to see the companies that provide these lunch packs doing so properly. It is not good enough. You cannot assume that households have supplies of other ingredients to use to make the lunches—that is obvious. Clearly, the packages that were on offer were totally, woefully inadequate. That is why we have taken the steps that we have.

- Q30 **Catherine McKinnell:** One of the frustrations is the use of these private contracts and the profits that can be made by the middlemen when £15 rather than £5-worth of food should be delivered to children. The Government have handed out billions of pounds on failed covid contracts— money for unusable face masks, a failed test-and-trace app and covid testing kits that do not work—yet they do not seem to trust parents enough to give them the money directly, so that they can feed their children. Why won't the Government do this?

Boris Johnson: I am sure you would not want to inadvertently mislead anybody, but it is the decision of the schools whether to have vouchers or lunch packs. Clearly, as I said earlier, a majority of the schools—about 75%—use the vouchers. What happens sometimes is that the schools wish to continue to support their caterers and the arrangements they have made, and they think that lunch packs are a better way of doing it. We have seen some people—it is important to say that it is not all of them—and companies providing scandalously inadequate lunch packs. They have now agreed to correct it and to reimburse the schools for their failings.

- Q31 **Catherine McKinnell:** But direct payment to parents is not on offer for those families or those schools. Is it not time, more so, that normalising emergency food aid in modern Britain is deemed unacceptable and undignified? What is the Government's strategy for dealing with this, so that we do not keep descending into crisis?

Boris Johnson: Actually, what is not normal and is unprecedented is having to close schools, which we very much do not want to do, as a result of the pandemic. People have reasonably said that when kids are forced to stay at home because schools are closed, those who would normally be in receipt of free school meals should be helped, and that is what we are doing, and it is absolutely right that we do so.

- Q32 **Catherine McKinnell:** Prime Minister, I would say that it is not just about the closure of schools. We have a food poverty problem in this country. That is what Marcus Rashford is campaigning on. I urge the Government to publish a strategy for dealing with this and ensuring that every child can eat.

I wanted to ask one other question about hospitality. We have a petition in Parliament at the moment. The hospitality industry is a major employer in this country, not to mention the fact that it is the heart and



soul of many communities. They have suffered more than most from the covid disruption. Given that we spent two days debating in the summer whether or not a Scotch egg is a substantial meal, and dealing with the consequences of the ill-thought-out 10 pm curfew, would the Prime Minister agree to meet with petitioners who believe that it is time the Government have a dedicated Minister for hospitality, to fully understand the diverse nature of this sector and get things right for this industry through this crisis and beyond?

The Prime Minister: If I may say so, you are right to identify the particular troubles of the hospitality sector. They have been through a very, very difficult time. We are doing everything we can to support them. The Chancellor, the Business Secretary and I meet regularly with representatives of that sector. We have given them all the grants. There is the recent increase in grants, which you know about, with the £3,000 grant specifically for the hospitality sector, on top of the CBILS, the bounce-back loans and the furlough scheme, and many other forms of support.

The best thing for the hospitality sector is that we all work together to defeat the virus, in the way that I am absolutely certain we can, with disciplined action and the vaccine roll-out, and get them back on their feet. I am sure that is the best thing for them.

Q33 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, 800,000 people have lost their jobs since February last year and the Chancellor has said it is going to get worse. Why haven't you yet announced a national jobs and skills programme to match the scale of the problem?

The Prime Minister: There has been a huge programme announced—a £280 billion programme—to help people maintain their jobs and livelihoods throughout the pandemic. I mentioned to Rob the lifetime skills guarantee and what we are doing to help people who are moving, Darren. Catherine just mentioned the hospitality sector, which has come under huge pressure. There will be people looking for jobs in other sectors. The lifetime skills guarantee is there to help them. The £2 billion kickstart fund is there to help young people in particular.

Jobs, jobs, jobs are obviously our focus, but the way to deliver the jobs, jobs, jobs agenda, as you know, is jabs, jabs, jabs. The faster we can do the vaccine programme, the better the employment prospects for the whole country.

Q34 **Darren Jones:** Thank you, Prime Minister. You have committed to levelling up the country. This is about the long-term jobs picture. What does that really mean for people across the country? Are we to measure your success in levelling up by tracking, for example, employment figures and take-home pay?

The Prime Minister: That is an incredibly good question. If you look at the per capita GDP of the whole of the UK disaggregated and you look at different parts of the UK, you can see that certain parts, over the last 40 years, have been getting steadily richer and more successful at one rate,



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and other parts have been getting richer and more successful but at a slower rate. I think that is unfair. I think that there is talent and genius everywhere in this country, so by uniting and levelling up, with better infrastructure, with better education and with a focus on skills, and with high technology, we want to see progress everywhere and to unlock the talents of everybody in the country.

Q35 **Darren Jones:** The concern is that levelling up will become as vacuous as the big society, but we will no doubt track this over the coming years.

The Brexit-related delays at the border are obviously resulting in food shortages and increased prices, especially in Northern Ireland. Last year you told the trade body Manufacturing Northern Ireland that there would be no additional paperwork at the border post Brexit. Why did you say that?

The Prime Minister: Actually, the situation in Northern Ireland is that trade is flowing smoothly, as I understand it, and exporters are benefiting from the unfettered access between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I believe that things are flowing so smoothly from GB to NI, for instance, that many hauliers are now using that route rather than the Holyhead-Dublin route. I am not going to deny that there are teething problems, Darren, and issues that we need to sort out. There are changes involved, but the deal has been a great assistance to our businesses in smoothing those.

Q36 **Darren Jones:** Teething problems are normally short term, so I hope they get that fixed soon. My last question: I wrote to you yesterday to call for a cross-party commission to bring forward a new plan to eradicate child poverty, beyond party politics and election cycles. I am sure that we can all agree, on a cross-party basis, that in a country such as ours we ought to be able to eradicate child poverty. I am a Labour MP, Prime Minister, today offering to work with you, a Conservative Prime Minister, on that. Will you take up that call and set up a cross-party commission to eradicate child poverty?

The Prime Minister: Of course we share your ambition to eradicate child poverty, and we have reduced the number of households with poor children in them suffering from poverty. We are working in the teeth of the pandemic to minimise the impacts on the poorest households. That is why we have uprated universal credit in the way that we have—an extra £1,000. That is why we have increased local housing allowance—housing is such a huge proportion of families' costs—and increased the living wage by a record amount last year and again this year. These are very, very valuable things for families. We intend to continue with them, and we have discussed extensively what we are doing to support families in need of help with free school meals. I remind you that universal free school meals were proposed and were invented by the Conservative Government.

Darren Jones: That was an unfortunate answer, but thank you, Sir Bernard.

Q37 **Stephen Timms:** You have just mentioned the £20 a week increase in



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universal credit, which has meant that lots of people have been able to buy food at a supermarket rather than going to a food bank, but now they are worrying about the proposed benefit cut in April. Isn't it unfair leaving it until March before they find out whether that cut is going ahead?

The Prime Minister: By the way, I don't want to rule out working with Darren on eradicating poverty. I did not want to sound dismissive of your proposal; I will study it.

On your point about UC, Stephen, I take your point. What we want to see is jobs. We want to see people in employment. We want to see the economy bouncing back. I think most people in this country would rather see a focus on jobs and a growth in wages than focusing on welfare, but clearly we have to keep all these things under review.

Q38 **Stephen Timms:** Even with that increase in universal credit, there has been a huge surge of food bank demand during the pandemic. Do you agree that we ought to be seeing that reversed?

The Prime Minister: I think that people who help with food banks and set up food banks are doing a wonderful job and I thank them for it. Yes, in an ideal world people would be able to have absolute confidence in getting what they need from their weekly shop. That is why we are focusing so much on things like the living wage, increasing pay wherever we can, with increases in pay for 1 million key workers this year, and doing everything we can for the poorest and neediest. Don't forget that of the £280 billion that has been spent since the pandemic began on supporting jobs and livelihoods, the benefit has gone overwhelmingly to the poorest and neediest groups.

Q39 **Stephen Timms:** There are a lot of people still claiming the old-style benefits—jobseeker's allowance and employment and support allowance. Their circumstances are identical to people claiming universal credit. The legacy benefit rates were always the same as the UC rates, but they were not increased by £20 a week. What justification is there for paying them £20 a week less?

The Prime Minister: We want everybody to move on to universal credit. We think it is a successful system. I note with some anxiety that it is still the stated policy of the Labour party to abolish universal credit. I do not think that is the right way forward.

Q40 **Stephen Timms:** If you take people with severe disabilities, for example, they are not allowed to claim universal credit, yet their benefit has not been uprated in line with universal credit. Surely it should be. If the question about universal credit is resolved at the time of the Budget, will the question of those legacy benefit rates also be addressed at the same time?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to doing everything we can to address the needs of those on welfare. We believe strongly in universal credit. It is putting more money into the pockets of families across the



country, particularly with the £1,000 increase, but the best thing is to get people into employment. That is what we are working for.

- Q41 **Stephen Timms:** Can I raise one final area? We spoke at the Liaison Committee in May about hard-working, law-abiding families with no recourse to public funds. You made a point that I very much agreed with. You said that “people who have worked hard for this country, who live and work here, should have support of one kind or another”. I think that is absolutely right, but unfortunately that is not the current policy. In my area, it is one of the factors in the spread of the pandemic—people cannot stop working because they cannot claim social security, so they have to carry on working. Shouldn’t this NRPF condition at least be suspended for the duration of the pandemic?

The Prime Minister: I totally understand the logic of your argument, but the problem is that it is a very, very long-standing provision in this country that NRPF conditions should apply for those who, for instance, are here illegally or unlawfully, and I think that it would not be the right way forward to change that. What I think we also discussed, Stephen, was that just because people have their NRPF does not mean that they are not eligible for support of many kinds, provided through local councils or otherwise.

- Q42 **Stephen Timms:** No, but they are not able to claim universal credit, therefore forcing many people to carry on working. The current arrangements go back to 2012. The Education Department has been helpful, giving people access to free school meals. The Housing Department has accommodated rough sleepers with no recourse to public funds, at public expense. Is the Home Office still in a kind of Windrush mindset, and not picking up your point that people ought to get support?

The Prime Minister: I don’t agree with that. To go back to the point I was making earlier on NRPF people, I have massive sympathy for them, but they do have access to the coronavirus job retention scheme, to furlough, and to the funds that local authorities can make available to help people in particular hardship—the £7.2 billion of funding we have made available to local authorities. This country does not allow people to fall through the cracks, even if they are classified as NRPF. The point you make about UC is a valid one, but I think I have given what I hope are intelligible reasons for why we want to make a distinction between those who are eligible for UC and those who are NRPF.

Chair: Thank you, Stephen. We must move on.

- Q43 **Caroline Nokes:** Thank you, Prime Minister, specifically for making domestic abuse so central to your broadcast last week. It was really welcomed by the sector. But can I just ask what additional protections have been put in place to help victims of domestic abuse who have insecure immigration status?

The Prime Minister: Since the pandemic began, we have done what we can to encourage people who are the victims of domestic abuse to come forward. We have set up special helplines. We have been investing, as you



know, Caroline, in independent domestic violence advisers. Also, although the lockdown rules are very strict, as you know they do not apply to victims of domestic abuse because we do not think that we should stop people from seeking the help they need.

- Q44 **Caroline Nokes:** Indeed they don't, but are there any specific policies for victims who might be here on a tier 4 or 5 visa, or who might be entirely dependent upon their spouse's status? What specific programmes have been put in place to provide them with the support they need?

The Prime Minister: The normal support that any victim of domestic abuse has in this country. We do not tolerate domestic abuse and we want those who are responsible for it to be found out and punished.

- Q45 **Caroline Nokes:** There are some who have fallen through the cracks, and you just said you did not want anyone to fall through the cracks. Can I ask you about another group of people who have fallen through the cracks—namely, those reliant on British Sign Language for their interpretation of the covid lockdown rules, and those who might have learning difficulties? Given that the Home Secretary says the current lockdown rules are clear, and that the commissioner of the Metropolitan police says that it is preposterous that anyone could be unaware of the rules, why are we still not doing a better job of explaining to vulnerable people what those rules are?

The Prime Minister: I have now been asked a couple of times about sign language. There are obviously various logistical issues that need to be overcome, but I am going to take that away and see what we can do to increase sign language. What I can tell you is that the campaigns that we have—the normal TV broadcasts, for instance—are available and are provided in accessible formats and translations. We have multiple media channels that we use to help reach people. The "Stay at Home" poster, for instance, was produced with a voiceover and British Sign Language interpretation.

- Q46 **Chair:** Prime Minister, could you write us on that subject?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to do so.

- Q47 **Caroline Nokes:** On 12 October, you said that there had not been enough time to get a BSL interpreter for broadcast. There was not enough time, clearly, last week, and today you are still taking it away. I think it is absolutely shameful that we have not done better on this, when both the Welsh and Scottish Governments have.

I want to ask about access to healthcare during the pandemic. We know that more men than women have been affected by covid, but the evidence shows that it is women who are finding access to specific services difficult. I was contacted yesterday by a constituent who was told that her surgery is not currently doing smear tests. What is your response to her when she asks how long it is acceptable for her to have to wait to get her smear test?



The Prime Minister: Obviously, I sympathise very much with anybody who has had any service or treatment in the NHS delayed as a result of the pressure on the NHS. Sadly, that is what we are seeing. We are seeing delays in cancer, and we are seeing delays in smear tests and vital services that people need. That is a result of the increase in the numbers of covid patients, and that is why we have to work flat out to get the virus under control, reduce the current wave and give people the service that they need. What I would say to your constituent is that I am very sorry for the delay that she is experiencing.

Q48 **Caroline Nokes:** Women, especially BAME women, are disproportionately employed in insecure and low-paid work. What specific parts of the kickstart scheme or the apprenticeship scheme is the Government considering to put aside for BAME people, and indeed for women? They have been disproportionately affected economically by the pandemic.

The Prime Minister: I can't give you a specific proportion, Caroline.

Q49 **Caroline Nokes:** Can I ask a question on employment? Back in November, you made a pledge to make sure that there were more women in Parliament. Is the House of Lords included in Parliament, in your view, and why have we not seen appointments to the Lords increase the number of women? There, of course, you could make a direct difference.

The Prime Minister: We believe very much in increasing the numbers of women in every part of our Parliament, and I am thrilled that we now have more female PPSs than male PPSs. The numbers grow steadily. Parliament is unrecognisable from what it was like when I was elected, let alone when Bernard was elected, which was not actually that much earlier. Long may that change continue and accelerate.

You ask about the impact of covid on women. I would just like to point out that in fighting covid, we have had spectacular female leadership from Kate Bingham of the Vaccine Taskforce, Dido Harding of NHS Test and Trace and many others.

Q50 **Caroline Nokes:** Women in the Lords, in fact, Prime Minister, where you have failed to put in 50% women in either of the two rounds that you have had.

The Prime Minister: You point out a very important statistic, and we will do what we can to address it. It is not something that has so far been drawn to my attention, but thank you for doing so.

Chair: The 50:50 campaign is rather close to my heart, as you understand, Prime Minister, so that we get more women into Parliament.

We move on to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—a prominent woman in Parliament—Yvette Cooper.

Q51 **Yvette Cooper:** Thank you, Chair.



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Prime Minister, it is nearly four weeks since we were warned about the South Africa variant, but if I wanted to travel here from South Africa today, I could still get a flight via Dubai or Istanbul with no test before I left, no test during and no test on arrival. I could go straight on to the tube from Heathrow, and then on to a train to travel home across the country. You said that tough measures were being brought in to protect the country, but why on earth have you allowed this to happen legally for the past four weeks?

The Prime Minister: Sorry, did you say “illegally”?

Yvette Cooper: Legally—all that could happen legally. I could get that flight, not be tested, arrive in this country and go on to public transport. Why is that allowed?

The Prime Minister: The reason why we have wanted to have a balanced approach to our border policy is that, obviously, you need to make sure that you balance the threat to health with the threat to the economy. But passengers from all international destinations will now have to produce a negative test result before they arrive in England. Of course, we have gone further and provided additional protection for those coming from South Africa. I will look at the point about the route that you described.

Q52 **Yvette Cooper:** We know that direct flights are not enough. In the first wave, only 1% of cases into the country came from China; 63% came from France or Spain. The pre-travel tests that you refer to, Prime Minister, are very welcome, but other countries brought them in months ago and we are not bringing them in until Friday. Why did you not bring them in in November, when other countries did?

The Prime Minister: We have had measures at the border since 8 June last year. Actually, 3.5 million passengers have been spot checked in the past seven days alone. Some 30% of all arriving passengers have been checked, and a great deal of effort goes into checking the passenger locator forms that people are obliged to fill in.

Q53 **Yvette Cooper:** We heard this morning, Prime Minister, that those forms are checked simply to see if people have filled them in. We also heard that 90% of cases were not being checked and that there is even less follow-up when people return across the country, having travelled by public transport. You have been repeatedly warned about the weaknesses in the quarantine system, about which we heard experts say this morning that it might as well be voluntary, because so few checks are taking place. Why have you not strengthened that system?

The Prime Minister: We have, with respect, strengthened that system. Passengers arriving from all international locations are required to present a negative test before arriving in England.

Q54 **Yvette Cooper:** They will be from Friday but, once again, you could have introduced that testing system from Thursday, and you could also have in place testing again on arrival, rather than simply 72 hours beforehand. You could have stronger quarantine and stronger checks, as very many



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other countries do.

Let me press you on the Brazil issue. We were warned about the Brazil variant three days ago. We do not know yet whether that could undermine the vaccination programme, so why are you not taking immediate action on a precautionary basis?

The Prime Minister: We are, and we are putting in extra measures to ensure that people coming in from Brazil are checked, and, indeed, stopping people coming from Brazil.

Q55 **Yvette Cooper:** Are you? That is, then, a new announcement. You just told Jeremy Hunt earlier in this evidence session that you were still looking at this. When are you going to bring those new measures in place?

The Prime Minister: No, sorry, I said what we were looking at was the question of whether or not the Brazilian-variant was immune-resistant.

Q56 **Yvette Cooper:** So has a new travel ban been announced on flights from Brazil?

The Prime Minister: We are taking steps to ensure that we do not see the import of this new variant from Brazil.

Q57 **Yvette Cooper:** But, with respect, Prime Minister, what are those steps? Because as of a few hours ago I understood that it was still possible to get direct flights from Brazil and also—without any testing in place, as of today, Wednesday, three days after we heard about the Brazil variant and nearly four weeks after we heard about the South African variant—to arrive without any testing in place.

The Prime Minister: No. We are taking steps to stop the Brazil variant being imported into this country as we have taken steps to stop the South African variant being imported into this country as, indeed, the French took steps to stop the Kent variant being imported into France. That is what countries do.

Q58 **Yvette Cooper:** But, Prime Minister, we know that the French system is in place. We know that you have to have the PCR test before you arrive in France. As of today, four weeks after we knew about the South Africa variant, no test is required to enter the UK, and it won't be until Friday. As of today you can't tell me any additional measures that we have put in place. You just keep using the words "We are putting in place stronger measures"; but please tell me what they actually are, and I will be very reassured to hear what they actually are.

The Prime Minister: Well, you will have to show for all countries that you have got a negative test in order to come to this country.

Q59 **Yvette Cooper:** Okay. That is not until Friday. It is still months later than other countries have done so, and here's the problem, Prime Minister: We warned about the border measures back in—

The Prime Minister: No, sorry, from June we had a mandatory 10-day



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quarantine for people coming from countries not on the approved travel corridor list, as you know.

- Q60 **Yvette Cooper:** But, Prime Minister, as we heard in the Home Affairs Select Committee this morning, that quarantine system that you introduced in June is so much weaker than other countries'. People can still go directly on to public transport; 90% of cases are not checked even to see if they have filled in the forms and there is very little further follow-up, so that quarantine system, we heard this morning, is simply not working. The problem, Prime Minister, is this: you were warned in the spring about the need for border measures. You delayed then. You were warned again now, and we have still got delays in getting the kinds of border measures in place. We still haven't got the system sorted on South Africa and on the Brazil variant, and this is on top of the delays in dealing with lockdowns, dealing with schools, and so on. You give the impression each time that you just delay all of the difficult, uncomfortable decisions until the last possible minute, and when so many lives are at stake, Prime Minister, is this really the leadership that we need?

The Prime Minister: If I may say so, this country has led the world and indeed the whole of Europe in rolling out a vaccine, and one of the things that you don't often hear from commentators on your side of the political divide is that that is the case. I disagree strongly with what you said about the protections we have at UK borders. We are conducting huge quantities of checks. We insist on people going into quarantine when they arrive from non-travel-corridor areas. We are putting in measures to protect this country both against the South African variant and the Brazilian variant.

We will be continue to be very tough indeed. At the moment we have a pandemic that is being driven in large part by a new variant that seems to have originated, though obviously we can't be sure, in a mutation or several mutations in this country, and we are doing everything we can to bear down on that, but if you look at the achievement of this country in fighting the virus, I don't think you should neglect the speed of the roll-out of the vaccine programme so far.

- Q61 **Yvette Cooper:** Prime Minister, we desperately want the vaccine system to work. But that is why—

The Prime Minister: That is good—hold that thought.

Yvette Cooper: —if you find any international variant, please, please look again at the border measures.

Chair: Thank you, Ms Cooper. We are well behind now, I am afraid, but that was long questions and long answers. Hilary Benn, as quickly as we can, please. We are moving on to the section about Britain's place in the world post-Brexit.

- Q62 **Hilary Benn:** Prime Minister, in December 2019, you said that there was "no question" of there being checks on goods going from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Do you remember saying that?



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The Prime Minister: I do, and indeed, thanks to the deal that we have, trade is flowing so smoothly—as I said in answer to an earlier question—between Great Britain and Northern Ireland that it is now the preferred route of hauliers.

Q63 **Hilary Benn:** Well, if it is going so smoothly, Prime Minister, why have we seen some empty shelves in supermarkets in Northern Ireland? Why has the Northern Ireland Agriculture Minister warned that a range of frozen and chilled foods could be unavailable after the temporary grace period ends? And why did the big supermarkets write to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster this week to call for urgent intervention to prevent further disruption if it is all going so well?

The Prime Minister: Well, if you listen to what the supermarkets are actually saying today, I believe that Andrew Opie of the Retail Association said that supply was pretty much back to normal for supermarkets in Northern Ireland.

Q64 **Hilary Benn:** Let's take the three-month grace period that ends at the end of March, during which the supermarkets do not have to provide export health certificates for all the food and agrifood products they are transporting into Northern Ireland. They are warning about what happens if that is not extended. Now, you can give us a simple reassurance if that is possible today. Can you guarantee to both supermarkets and shoppers in Northern Ireland that the grace period will be extended after the end of March?

The Prime Minister: What I can certainly guarantee is that if there are serious problems in victualling or supplying supermarkets in Northern Ireland because of some piece of bureaucracy that is misapplied, then we will simply exercise article 16 of the protocol, because it is absurd that there should be such difficulties. We will make sure that supplies continue. It goes without saying that any difficulties that remain will naturally fall away anyway, because the people of Northern Ireland have to vote to retain the protocol in four years' time.

Q65 **Hilary Benn:** Prime Minister, it is not misapplied bureaucracy; it is the very essence of the Northern Ireland protocol which you negotiated.

Turning to something else you said many times: you have referred to the UK gaining control of our waters. Why is it that some of the Scottish fishing fleet is currently tied up rather than out fishing?

The Prime Minister: Well, I understand very much the frustrations of the fishing community and Scottish fishermen and women who are facing what I believe are temporary frustrations. In so far as there are delays caused by a variety of problems, we will compensate those fishing businesses, but there is a massive opportunity for Scotland and the whole of the UK with the increase in quota that we get from the deal: 25% before the end of the transition period—hundreds of thousands of tonnes more fish—and the ability to fish all the fish in Scottish waters from the end of that period.

Q66 **Hilary Benn:** So are you telling us today that you think those difficulties—they cannot get their product to market in time—are only



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temporary? Is that what you are saying?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I believe that is right.

Q67 **Hilary Benn:** Right, but is it not the case that red tape, costs and bureaucracy were the inevitable consequence of the trade agreement that you have negotiated with the EU? One freight expert has described a mountain of red tape brought in on 1 January. Is that not the consequence of leaving the single market and the customs union? This is just a fact, is it not?

The Prime Minister: If I may say so, Mr Benn, that is not compatible with what we are seeing with the volumes of traffic at the moment from GB to NI. As I say, I think one of the extraordinary things about 1 January was that it did not produce the disruption that people claimed that it would. I do not doubt that there will be problems, and businesses must prepare for change. Things will be different and you have to get the right forms. You have to be conscious of the certificates that you need, but I believe that all that can be readily done and overall, as I say, the traffic at the moment is smooth. There are, as far as I know, no queues, and we will address all issues as fast as we can.

Q68 **Hilary Benn:** Thank you. Just one final very brief question. Is it true that the UK rejected an offer from the European Union during the negotiations for a 90-day visa-free period for UK musicians who wanted to go and tour in Europe?

The Prime Minister: No, that is not true. My understanding is that we—

Q69 **Hilary Benn:** So it was not offered.

The Prime Minister: No. We wanted to have reciprocal rights for musicians to tour, but before everybody worries about this I should stress that what we have is the right for UK musicians to go and play in other European countries—in EU countries—for 90 out of 180 days.

Hilary Benn: Thank you.

Chair: Thank you, Mr Benn. Admirably brief, both of you.

Q70 **Pete Wishart:** Can I start on a note of agreement? I am pretty sure that you and I, Prime Minister, are both democrats and we both believe that in a parliamentary democracy a majority should be respected. Therefore, can you tell me if a majority of the Scottish people want their country to be an independent nation, how do they democratically achieve that objective?

The Prime Minister: Pete, let me tell you that what I think they should do is hold a referendum, such as the one that was held in 2014, and when they say to the people of that country and, indeed, all of the UK that that is a once-in-a-generation event, which is what they said, they should, in a democratic spirit, honour that pledge.

Q71 **Pete Wishart:** Can we unpack just a couple of these things because, again, that is just an utter load of rubbish? There was nothing in any of



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the legal text about “once in a generation”. There are two legal texts: the Edinburgh agreement and the Smith commission. There is no mention whatsoever of “once in a generation”. If we want to use rhetorical flourishes, Prime Minister, I think that you said that if there was a Brexit extension you would be dead in a ditch. Well, you are sitting in front of us and that ditch is still unoccupied. Once again, if the Scottish people want to achieve independence, how is that democratically achieved? What is the answer?

The Prime Minister: Pete, with great respect, I have given you my answer. As far as I can see, the Brexit extension has come and gone. We are out of the EU. Scottish fishing businesses have access to unparalleled marine wealth in the course of the next few years. I hope they exploit it. I hope that the SNP is not so deranged as to hand back control of our fisheries to the EU. I remember distinctly Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon saying that it was a once-in-a-generation event. Did you not hear them say that?

Pete Wishart: I have just answered that. There wasn’t any legal text about “once in a generation”. You are not answering the question. Are you seriously saying that democracy in Scotland does not matter and a majority should not be respected? I can only think of one other world leader who would deny democracy like that, and he is currently sitting in the White House. Are you seriously saying to the Scottish people that their democracy does not count and you will ignore it?

The Prime Minister: I think you need to ask yourself whether you are seriously saying that right now, in the middle of a pandemic, the people of Scotland, the UK or anywhere think it is sensible to have a referendum on a constitutional issue when we are trying, as we discussed earlier, to get the pandemic down and to generate the millions of jobs that we are going to need over the next few years to allow this whole country to bounce back together. I think that is what the people of this country want to focus on.

I think it is incredible that the Scottish National party is focusing on a referendum. You can’t say what you want this referendum to discuss. You can’t say what the prospectus is for the destruction of the United Kingdom. Do you want to scrap the Army, scrap the pound, scrap the Queen, scrap the bomb—what is it? You can’t say what your agenda is. All you can say is that you want to break up the UK in some way. I think that the people of this country want to focus on fighting covid and getting on with building back better together.

Q72 **Pete Wishart:** I have a very elegant solution for that, Prime Minister. Let us have a referendum—not now, because there is a pandemic, but in the first part of our next Scottish parliamentary term, let us have a referendum. You put that case to the Scottish people, and we will put the case for why we believe that Scotland should be an independent nation, and let the people decide. That is what the Scottish people want. There are 17 opinion polls now showing that a majority in Scotland want an independence referendum. You know, Prime Minister, I know and



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everybody watching this knows that a referendum is coming. Why on earth don't we just get on with it? Why don't we have this referendum and let the Scottish people choose? If your global Brexit Britain is so wonderful, they will vote for that. If they agree with us that we should be an independent nation, they will vote for that. Why can't we just get on and do it?

The Prime Minister: Because we had a referendum on the issue in 2014, which senior members of your party—perhaps not you—said was a once-in-a-generation event. It was on that basis that people voted in the way that they did, very substantially, to keep our wonderful Union together. I think people want to focus on fighting the pandemic. By the way, one of the weirdest things I have heard in the last couple of days is that the Scottish nationalist party is so averse—

Pete Wishart: Scottish National party, Prime Minister. You are continually being told off about that.

The Prime Minister: The Scottish National party is so averse to anything that comes from England that I am told that you will not even use the words "Oxford vaccine". Perhaps you would like to say something in favour of the Oxford vaccine.

Q73 **Pete Wishart:** I tell you what I will say to you, Prime Minister. Your response to these questions demonstrates the pitiful state that the Scottish Conservatives are in just now. You are prepared to deny us democracy, and you mention rubbish about Oxford vaccines. What the Scottish people want is a say in their future. They hear you saying that you are not prepared to give them that. I don't even know why you are bothering standing in the next Scottish elections. Surely, you know continuing to say no to Scotland is unsustainable and there will be another referendum.

The Prime Minister: I think what people across this country, in Scotland and elsewhere, want is for us to focus on their needs. From where I sit, I see the Scottish National party—whether you are nationalist or not is a matter for you, but I would say by any definition of that word that you were—failing on crime, failing on education and failing on tax, with nothing to say except that you want to break up the United Kingdom. That's all you have to say, and what you won't say is what the purpose of the referendum is. You won't say whether you want to keep the pound, what will happen to pensions, what will happen to the diplomatic service, the security services, the military or the monarchy. You won't say anything about that; all you will say is that you want a referendum. You had one in 2014 and the result was decisive, as I think SNP leaders said in 2014.

Q74 **Pete Wishart:** Let's have that referendum and let the people decide.

The Prime Minister: On what?

Q75 **Pete Wishart:** On the future of Scotland. The Scottish people want to be an independent nation. Let them decide.



The Prime Minister: I think you have to explain what you mean by that.

- Q76 **Pete Wishart:** It is quite simple, Prime Minister. You put a proposition for the Union, and we will put a proposition for independence. We will let the Scottish people decide. Whatever outcome they decide on is what will happen. It is very straightforward. You did it with Brexit. If you can have your democracy on Brexit, why can the Scottish people not have their democracy about their constitutional future?

The Prime Minister: Anyway, I think what people want to focus on now is addressing this pandemic. The last thing this country needs is to wrap itself into years of constitutional wrangling on a prospectus that, from that account, is very, very unclear.

Chair: Moving on. Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Chair, Simon Hoare.

- Q77 **Simon Hoare:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. There was huge relief when the protocol was agreed and signed off. Talk of invoking article 16 should be, I suggest, avoided at all cost. It would do huge damage to the Good Friday agreement, as you are aware, and to the relationship between our country and the United States. It does seem to us, and certainly in the evidence that we have taken in the Committee, that there needs to be a significant piece of work across agencies of Government, including, but not in totality, the Northern Ireland Office, the Northern Ireland Executive, the Treasury, HMRC, DEFRA, BEIS, the Cabinet Office, DFT and the Republic, to make sure that exporters to Northern Ireland know the rules, because they want to conform to them. You are right to say that trade is starting to get back to a degree of normalcy, but we need a huge education campaign among GB-based businesses so that they know what it is they need to do, both in the grace period and afterwards. What assurance can you give us that the Joint Committee is going to use the grace period, between now and 31 March, to ensure all of the creases are ironed out, rather than having a cliff edge at the end of March where we see some of the current disruption continuing unnecessarily?

The Prime Minister: Thanks very much, Simon, and thanks for what you said about the operation of the protocol. As I said to an earlier question, I think it is inevitable that there are going to be teething problems when you have a change as substantial as the one we have just had. The UK now controls its borders and its laws, we can do free trade deals around the world, we control our waters, we have substantial sums of cash now available that we did not have before, and we need to get on and make the most of it. We also need to make sure we minimise the impacts on business, so the Trader Support Service is going to be ramped up. I am told that since 1 January 95% of the online declarations that you have to make are completed and processed within 15 minutes. As I say, the volumes remain significantly higher going GB-NI than on GB-Ireland routes. That may change as we go forward and further pressures emerge, but we will do our best to iron them all out.

- Q78 **Simon Hoare:** Certainly our understanding is that capacity at the ports in GB and Northern Ireland is sufficient and that there is plenty of capacity



and infrastructure there. It is just there is a lack of confidence, if you will, between British businesses exporting to NI which is leading a lot of people to say, "We won't bother," and, "We want to see greater clarity." That does need to be addressed very quickly. I hope that the Joint Committee will proactively and energetically pull together all those agencies of Government to make sure that our exporters have the best opportunities. The risk has to be, does it not, that producers in the Republic will say, "Let's trade north-south far more " and that would be a disadvantage to GB-based business.

The Prime Minister: Completely right. That is why it is so important, for instance, that we sort out the business of chilled meats and that the great British banger gets through in the way that it should and will. All these problems individually, I believe, are capable of speedy resolution.

Q79 **Simon Hoare:** Can I take you back to your previous Department, the Foreign Office? You will be aware of the FCO-commissioned report by William Shawcross into Gaddafi-enabled IRA terrorism. The report was submitted to the Foreign Office many months ago, and silence has been the response of the FCO. There are continuing talks within the United Nations about campaigns to defrost, if you will, frozen Libyan assets, some of which are held in the UK. Will you ask the Foreign Secretary to get a wiggle on, to publish the Shawcross report and to set out how the Government are going to respond to this very important issue, which has dragged on—I am sure you will agree—for far too long?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to William Shawcross for what he has done and the effort that he gone to in solving a very, very difficult problem—the potential for compensation from Libyan funds for victims of IRA terrorism who were injured or killed as a result of Semtex or other weapons supplied by Libya. There are many, many great difficulties with trying to get a satisfactory solution. It has proved extremely difficult to draw the right net, or to decide who exactly might be eligible for these funds—there is a great deal of controversy surrounding that. It is also extremely difficult to find a way, given the current precarious situation in Libya, of extracting the funds. Jeremy, my successor as Foreign Secretary, will know very well that Libya is basically a totally divided state at the moment.

There are some faint signs of progress but, until we have a Government that we can work with in Libya, it is difficult to make progress on unfreezing assets or any of the other things that you described. William Shawcross's work is valuable. I think it is very, very important—particularly important for people and families in Northern Ireland—but I'm afraid we are some way off having the result that we might hope for.

I have to be honest with you, Simon: it will be very, very tough to get any equitable solution out of this disaster. Other countries, many years ago, particularly the United States, were able to get compensation for the victims of Libyan terrorism in a way that the British state did not. We have been trying to rectify what I think was an omission. It is proving extremely difficult.



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Chair: Prime Minister, we are pushing past 5 o'clock. We would be extremely grateful if you can give us a little more time.

The Prime Minister: Very happy to do so.

Chair: Sir William Cash, Tom Tugendhat, Philip Dunne and some quick-fire questions at the end.

Q80 **Sir William Cash:** Good afternoon, Prime Minister. To start off with, you led us through the past year—from early December 2019—from parliamentary paralysis to a position in which we not only had a general election, which had a massive majority for the Conservative party, but were taken out of EU jurisdiction and the European Court of Justice, reasserting our sovereignty in a very important way for the future of this country.

We heard today, both in Prime Minister's questions and in the urgent question put to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, a lot of discussion, understandably, regarding the question of the Northern Ireland protocol. It is an immensely important issue, but I think you have already indicated that there are some challenges and that they are being met. What Andrew Opie said today, and what the director of the CBI in Northern Ireland said on the "Today" programme this morning, all indicated that although there are challenges and some difficulties in relation to all these questions in the Northern Ireland protocol, actually, given the fact that we are in the process of covid, there are a number of very significant responses to those challenges going on. Could you enlarge on that a bit so that people can get a better idea of, for example, how we are going to improve transparency in the Joint Committee, which of course is primarily the responsibility of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster? In the European Scrutiny Committee, we are working flat out on all these things, and we just want to be quite sure, not only that we are going to meet the challenges, but that we are also going to have the transparency within that Committee to make sure we can ask the right questions and get the right answers.

The Prime Minister: Thanks very much, Bill, and thanks for everything you have done to make this possible. I think the situation in GB-NI trade, as I was discussing just now with Simon, is far better than some people had perhaps expected. Things are much smoother. There are some problems. In the interests of transparency, we have sorted out sales of second-hand vehicles now with the compensation scheme for second-hand cars sold in Northern Ireland, so they do not pay additional VAT. We have solved that one.

We have got one on seed potatoes, as opposed to ware potatoes. As you know, there are sanitary and phytosanitary issues about the export of seed potatoes from this country to the EU. We are solving that, although the export of seed potatoes from the UK to the EU is very, very small. I think we export as many seed potatoes to the whole of the EU as we export to Egypt.



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There is the question of pet passports, but I believe we have a way of solving that. There is the chilled meats issue, which I have already referred to, and one or two others. They are by and large small, soluble questions that, one by one, we are addressing. Maroš Šefčovič and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster have done a fantastic job in the Joint Committee of addressing them and building that confidence in NI-GB and GB-NI trade. It is incredibly light touch, in so far as we have to do any checks at all, and it is working well.

The key point is that if there are further problems, or if the EU or our partners insist on an interpretation of the protocol that we think is unfair or unnecessary, article 16 of course exists to address that. The whole thing falls away unless the people of Northern Ireland actually vote to continue with the arrangements.

In the meantime, Northern Ireland is part of the UK customs territory and does free trade deals with us around the world, and there is unfettered access for NI goods to GB and for GB to NI, with the very small caveats that I have entered, which we are now working to reduce the whole time. I believe that businesses both north and south of the border in Ireland, but also businesses east-west, can be full of confidence about the future. I think Northern Ireland has a massive opportunity to exploit the advantages it has.

Q81 Sir William Cash: Thank you very much. If I might just finish my point by saying that there are obviously some challenges. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster made that clear this morning, you said it in Prime Minister's questions, and you have said it again now. I don't think I have anything further to add at this stage, because we are running short of time. I think the Chairman would probably be quite glad if we can move on to the next person.

The Prime Minister: Thank you. I gave a long answer about seed potatoes. There are a few other issues, but we will fix them.

Q82 Chair: And hopefully they can be fixed through the Joint Committee, rather than resorting to article 16.

The Prime Minister: Yes. That is the last resort.

Chair: Thank you. I now call the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Tom Tugendhat.

Q83 Tom Tugendhat: Thank you. Prime Minister, Philip Dunne will no doubt cover COP26, so leaving the environment aside, what are your priorities for the G7 that we are hosting this year?

The Prime Minister: Building back better together. If you look at the pandemic, I think that it caught the international system totally unprepared in all sorts of ways, and we need to work together on preparing for pandemics in the future. Yvette and I were talking about borders and quarantine. There is no international consensus about how this should operate. Everybody took a different approach. There is no international consensus about how to dispense vaccines. There are no



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agreements about lockdown measures or PPE. The global system basically failed to match the demands of the time. It was a *sauve qui peut* environment. We want to build back. We want to work together, and one of the things we are looking at is the possibility of a treaty on pandemics. We are working together to create jobs, jobs, jobs for our electorates across the whole of the G7 area. That will be a key focus, and global free trade will clearly be important. Thinking about China will be important in how we as the G7 respond to the challenges posed by China and many other issues.

- Q84 **Tom Tugendhat:** May I push you on the China element? You have said in the past that your mattress will monitor your nightmares. Given how much data is flowing east, and the fact that the Politburo in Beijing has updated Ricardo and Smith by adding data to one of the factors of production, will you commit to putting privacy on the agenda of the G7, to protect British people from intrusions into their privacy?

The Prime Minister: I want to stress that when I talk about the challenges of China, it is important—I know you lead the China Research Group in Parliament—that we should be vigilant. Dom Raab gave a terrific speech about the Uyghurs and what is happening there. I think the policy there is completely right, and we have to be very vigilant about what is happening with our critical national infrastructure and about the protection of our data and our cyber-space. We are taking more measures to do that, but I do not want this country or this Government to lurch into a position of unthinking Sinophobia. I do not believe that would be right for the UK. I think there is a balance to be struck.

- Q85 **Tom Tugendhat:** I think everybody supports you on that, but you will remember that just after the war, our country was one of many that set up the general agreement on tariffs and trade to resist and stop the encroachment of the Comintern—the Soviet bloc. Would you commit to looking at creating a general agreement on data in order for democracies to share the ability to harvest large amounts of data and to work with it in a way that respects the privacy and freedoms of free peoples?

The Prime Minister: We are looking at all that kind of thing, particularly on data, in the context of not just the G7 but the D10. If you add Australia, India and South Korea to the G7, you have some of the major democratic countries of the world coming together. Issues about privacy and data are certainly ones that we want to explore together, as well as technological issues.

- Q86 **Tom Tugendhat:** Prime Minister, you have demonstrated the use of social media in the UK quite effectively. Are you comfortable with the fact that a US company controls how you communicate with your electorate, or do you think that the media rules that affect ownership of newspapers and TV stations should also affect your ability to communicate with your 3 million followers?

The Prime Minister: I think there's a real debate to be had about the status of the big internet companies and whether they should be identified as mere platforms or as publishers, because when you start



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editorialising, you are in a different world. That is why we are bringing forward, as you know, our White Paper on online harms, because it is time we had a frank conversation about the boundaries that we want to be set and the role of these companies in what they choose to publish and what they choose not to publish.

- Q87 **Tom Tugendhat:** I am interested to hear that you appear to agree with Chancellor Merkel on elements of concern. Do you also agree with her on the European investment treaty that has just been signed? Do you also agree with the Chinese Government that the mass sterilisation of Uyghur Muslims is a form of gender empowerment?

The Prime Minister: On your first point about the EU-China deal, it is obviously something that we will be studying—I think it is very important. I want a world in which we are able to have good relations with China and are able to interact freely with China. We speak frankly to China.

On the Uyghurs, I am with the point that was made by the Foreign Secretary—I support what Dom Raab had to say. But speaking frankly and calling out human rights abuses should not stop us from having a productive relationship where that is possible, and I think that is what the British people want us to seek.

- Q88 **Tom Tugendhat:** One last question, if I may. Huawei's Chinese employees have either been recalled to China or been forced to leave the company when they have been expatriates based in Europe and have married a European. This is the action normally seen for people working for a Government or an intelligence agency. Does this confirm the concerns that many of us have had that Huawei isn't really a free company but is actually just a branch of the Ministry of State Security and a branch of the Chinese state?

The Prime Minister: The decisions that we have had to take about our critical national infrastructure obviously reflect concerns that I think you and I share about the potential for the Chinese state to get inside parts of our systems—our internet systems, our security networks—that we wouldn't want to see. So we have had to take some tough decisions and some technologically difficult decisions—and some expensive decisions, I might say.

The challenge for us as the west, and as the D10, or indeed the G7, is really to come up with the technological alternatives. I think it is one thing to say, "Well, we're going to exclude x or y company", but what we really want to see is us, as liberal democracies, working together to produce the alternative. And that applies not just to technology but to our relations with Africa and many other parts of the world.

Tom Tugendhat: There you go—you are selling the general agreement on data back to me. Thank you, Prime Minister.

Chair: Very good. Now we turn to the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, Philip Dunne.

- Q89 **Philip Dunne:** Thank you, Sir Bernard. Prime Minister, as Tom has just



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mentioned, I will touch on COP26 and also on greening the recovery, and I believe Darren Jones may want to come in on the back of the COP26 questions, if there is time.

In November, we will be hosting the largest international conference ever held in this country, on the most important topic of this century. It is a real opportunity for you to showcase Global Britain leading the world in responding to climate change. You appointed a full-time president this month, which reflects a call that I made last year, so that is very welcome. Alok Sharma keeps his seat in the Cabinet, without portfolio.

You may remember when you were Mayor of London that Jeremy Hunt, who was then Minister for the Olympics, answered questions in the House on UK preparations for London 2012. Will the COP26 president be subject to similar scrutiny from Members on his preparations for the Glasgow summit?

The Prime Minister: Indeed.

Chair: That was straightforward.

Q90 **Philip Dunne:** Excellent. You also acknowledged in PMQs today that good scrutiny makes for good Government. At present, the only parliamentarians to be included in the UK delegation to COP26 are Ministers. As head of the UK delegation, will you demonstrate the importance of proper scrutiny by inviting Chairs and possibly members of the relevant Select Committees to join the UK delegation to Glasgow?

The Prime Minister: Philip, I will take that away and look at it. Are you volunteering?

Q91 **Philip Dunne:** Yes, and I am sure Darren is, too, and there may be others.

The Prime Minister: Okay. Let me then give you a warm welcome, in the sense that I am sure that your contributions and Darren's contribution will be very useful to what the UK has to say at COP. I do not necessarily wish to allocate places on this or that committee or delegation right now.

Q92 **Philip Dunne:** Okay. Finally on COP, there are also, as you know, large numbers of climate change activist groups springing up right across the country to see what their local community can do. It would be really helpful, I think, to spreading the message and developing the best practice ideas, not just for this country but across the world, if there could be a forum for those groups to provide input ahead of COP26. Would you be prepared to encourage Alok Sharma to facilitate that?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I want there to be the widest possible engagement with NGOs of all kinds, with civil society—everybody who has a stake in this. I see no reason why there shouldn't be a real festival of ideas in the run-up to COP. I know that Alok and his team are very keen on that, and we will see whether it is feasible in Glasgow in November to have some kind of a fringe. I think the appetite will be huge and we will have to work out how to manage it.

Philip Dunne: That is fantastic. That sounds like two yeses.



Chair: Can I just bring in Darren Jones at that point?

Philip Dunne: Can I come back with my other question afterwards?

Chair: Yes, certainly.

Q93 **Darren Jones:** Prime Minister, my Committee is leading the parliamentary scrutiny of the delivery of COP26. Many have called, as we have just heard, for an Olympic games-style energy from you personally as Prime Minister to ensure that the UK's leadership of COP26 is as successful as the French leadership of COP25. Are you personally interested in COP? If so, what is it that you personally want to secure as Britain's headline achievement of running COP26?

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Darren. There are two things. Personally, I am becoming more and more obsessed with what we can do, because, for me, to get back to the point I was making to Tom Tugendhat about bouncing back from covid, the green agenda and the whole green industrial revolution is not just a load of green nonsense, as people sometimes seem to suggest, with extra costs for businesses and for families. If you do it right, it is the opportunity to generate hundreds of thousands of jobs for this country. We discussed that earlier. Your first question was, "What about a charter for jobs?" This is a charter for jobs—literally hundreds of thousands of jobs in wind technology, in batteries, in low-carbon campaigns of all kinds.

In getting to net zero by 2050, which is the no. 1 objective of COP, and getting the world to agree to that, we have the opportunity to turbocharge our economy at the same time and to drive jobs of all kinds. That is where I come at it.

There is a second thing, which is biodiversity. It is an absolute tragedy today that we are massacring the species of our planet. We have lost about 500 in the last century. We are losing them at an absolutely unconscionable rate. We are losing habitat. Human beings are engulfing and destroying the natural world. We won't get the climate in balance again—we won't solve climate change—until we address our relationship with the natural world. That is in addition to net zero by 2050, and that is a big goal.

Since I was last before this Committee, lots of countries that we thought would be difficult have been coming forward with commitments to net zero. The year has scarcely begun and we are seeing an enormous amount of progress, but the second thing I want to see is on biodiversity. I want to see the world committing in the way we did at Kyoto. They committed to these Aichi targets, if you remember, to protect habitats and species. We want to give meaning to that now. We want countries to commit solidly and formally to stopping the destruction of animals and wildlife, habitat and forests.

Q94 **Darren Jones:** To be precise, Prime Minister, biodiversity is COP15, chaired by China—



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The Prime Minister: I understand that, but we intend to follow up. The coming package will be great, but we intend to use COP26 to stress the importance of biodiversity as well.

Q95 **Darren Jones:** Very good. You said you want to get every country in the world to agree to net zero by 2050. That is your ambition.

The Prime Minister: At the moment, countries accounting for about 62% of the population of the world have made a pledge to net zero, which is great. China, as you know, is going for net zero by 2060, which is the biggest development since I last appeared before your Committee, but other countries are now coming through with net zero by 2050. It is actually very exciting to see the way that a global consensus is starting to build. The role of the UK presidency of COP is to get as many countries as possible to share in that. Even before COP has begun—before our presidency began—we are starting to see progress in that direction.

Q96 **Chair:** Thank you, Mr Jones. Is there a possibility that we will have a non-fossil fuel treaty?

The Prime Minister: The Kyoto protocol on climate change was intended to reduce fossil fuel output. That is the whole point of it and of the Paris agreement of 2015. That is what we are trying to do.

Chair: Back to Philip Dunne.

Q97 **Philip Dunne:** Prime Minister, I was very interested in what you were saying about biodiversity. Our Committee was discussing this with the ministerial team this morning. We have not met one of the Aichi 10-year targets, so we are looking to make proper progress in the next 10 years.

I want to make one quick point about greening the recovery. Part of the flagship programme introduced in the summer—partly to help meet net zero targets, but also to support jobs—was the green homes grant scheme. We have been looking at this. The tragedy is that the short-term nature of this scheme means, regrettably, that it is having precisely the opposite effect to what was intended, with firms of builders and installers informing my Committee that it has led to them laying off staff.

I have a couple of examples. One award-winning company had a full order book before the grant was announced, but now, without a single voucher having been issued to them, they have lost every order they had and have laid off three of their installation teams, which take years to train. Another one had 48 applications; only five were approved in three months and they are also firing people.

The 12-month extension is helpful, but it is nothing like enough for companies to invest in staff. Can you use the Budget in March to get the green homes grant scheme sorted out, so that it will provide long-term security to the industry, and to help invest in green jobs and energy efficiency, which millions of homes need?

Boris Johnson: We will do our best. I think the green jobs opportunity from retrofitting is potentially huge. You have to ensure that the schemes that are being sold and the greening of homes that people are buying



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actually works and delivers for them the saving that they are promised. Sadly, not all of these retrofitting schemes and installation schemes have been ideal for the consumer. Some of them have been brilliant, but you have to ensure that they really work. We will certainly be doing that.

Q98 **Chair:** Now that we are out of the scope of the EU VAT directives, we could zero-rate all these products for VAT.

Boris Johnson: Sir Bernard, you are right.

Q99 **Chair:** Thank you very much Prime Minister. There are a few quick-fire closing questions from other Committees. One is from the International Trade Committee, which wants a ministerial witness to give evidence to their Committee about free ports, but both the lead Departments—Treasury and International Trade—say it should be the other one. Which Department should it be?

Boris Johnson: It should be the Treasury or MHCLG.

Q100 **Chair:** Could you make sure that one of them attends?

Boris Johnson: I will make sure that the Committee gets somebody to interrogate.

Q101 **Chair:** If you could, please make sure that that happens. They have been waiting a long time. The Defence Committee would like confirmation that the integrated review will be announced in mid-February.

Boris Johnson: Hold your horses there: it will not be as soon as that.

Chair: That is what he rather suspected.

Boris Johnson: It is a little bit premature.

Q102 **Chair:** And there is great concern about the procurement programme. It is like trying to get a quart out of a pint pot getting all those joint strike fighters delivered inside the budget, and that has to be settled. The uncertainty is creating a lot of difficulty.

Finally, PACAC would like me to ask about the civil service, which you yourself have said has been sorely tested throughout both Brexit and covid. If we are to avoid these difficulties in the future, I commend the lecture my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster gave at Ditchley last summer, where he committed the Government to a “properly-resourced campus for training those in Government.” Is that now Government policy, and how will it be delivered?

Boris Johnson: Yes, it is. Obviously, there used to be an operation at Sunningdale. We are looking at having a campus. It might be that we fund it with the military and do something at Sandhurst, where, as you know, there are fantastic facilities. But it is my strong feeling, as I think it may be yours as well, Sir Bernard, that we have an amazing civil service. They have done an amazing job, actually, throughout this incredibly difficult time. But formal training—I am not necessarily saying that we want to



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have our own École Nationale d'Administration, but there is a merit in training for our civil servants and we are certainly looking at that.

Q103 **Chair:** When do you think an announcement might be made?

The Prime Minister: As soon as there is something for you properly to scrutinise.

Chair: Thank you, Prime Minister, for that commitment that at least it will happen one day. Thank you very much for giving us all this extra time. You have been very generous. Thank you to my colleagues for being so disciplined.

The Prime Minister: Thank you.